

First Great Awakening

The religious ferment or revival that emerged in the English colonies in America during the second quarter of the 18th century. The Awakening is sometimes dated as occurring between 1739 and 1742.

The religious revival in the English colonies in America was part of a larger movement that swept all Western Europe. Among Protestants on the Continent and in England the movement was known as Pietism or Evangelicalism; among Roman Catholics it was known as Quietism. Those who experienced the revival often described it as a conversion and expressed it by emotional manifestations such as weeping, fainting, and physical gyrations.

In America as in Europe, the Great Awakening had multiple causes. From the theological point of view it was a reaction against the attempt in the Age of Reason to reduce Christian doctrine to rationalistic explanations. The Awakening moved in the direction of an Evangelical Calvinism. It also had roots in reactions against clergymen who neglected their pastoral duties and made the liturgy unduly formal.

Leaders of the Revival in America

While there had been seasons of spiritual renewal before the time of the Awakening, the first signs are usually traced to the preaching of the Dutch Reformed immigrant Theodorus Frelinghuysen in the Raritan Valley of New Jersey. Frelinghuysen preached warnings against the Dutch merchants who took their religion for granted, using it primarily to preserve their traditions in an English environment. His reputation spread, and his fervor was emulated by Gilbert Tennent, who led the Presbyterian Awakening in the Middle Colonies. In New England, Jonathan Edwards became the most brilliant spokesman for the movement, while in the Southern colonies it was begun by laymen and then organized by the eloquent Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies. The symbol of the Great Awakening was the English preacher George Whitefield, who visited most of the colonies in 1739-1740, showing that the religious fervor had an intercolonial character.

Effects of the Awakening

The Awakening preachers worked for a "New Birth." In doing so, they succeeded in shaking the established religious and political patterns of the colonies. The Awakening led to ecclesiastical divisions (for example, Old Side and New Side Presbyterians, Old Light and New Light Congregationalists) and to a sharpening of the differences between those who defined religion rationalistically and those who defined it in terms of religious experiences. With the growth of dissenting groups came a wider toleration of religious differences.

The Great Awakening was a democratic movement in the sense that it democratized the Christian experience (it insisted that all should have the religious experience), and in that it stirred impulses for independence among the colonists. It also tended to lessen somewhat strong denominational adherence. The Great Awakening ended, according to participants, in the 1740s. In another sense, it never stopped among the Baptists and the Methodists.

Second Great Awakening

In the late 1820s and 1830s a religious revival called the Second Great Awakening (a reference to a similar revival that had swept the colonies in the previous century) had a strong impact on antebellum American religion and reform. It grew partly out of evangelical opposition to the deism associated with the French Revolution and gathered strength in 1826, when Charles Grandison Finney, a charismatic lawyer-turned-itinerant preacher, conducted a revival in Utica, New York. Finney argued against the belief that a Calvinist God controlled the destiny of human beings. He told congregations throughout the northern United States that they were "moral free agents" who could obtain salvation through their own efforts—but, he admonished, they must hurry because time was short.

Finney achieved his greatest success in New York State's "burned-over district," especially in the winter of 1830-1831 in Rochester, where prayer meetings were crowded almost every night, and conversions and confessions of sin were frequent. Finney and other preachers, such as Theodore Weld, tried to be entertaining and to appeal to the average citizen. Their approach and the new techniques of evangelizing—protracted meetings, community wide campaigns, the "anxious bench" for those wrestling with the decision to convert, testimony meetings for the converted—worked: in 1831, for example, church membership grew nationally by 100,000.

The Second Great Awakening had effects that extended beyond American Protestantism. The period has been called a "shopkeeper's millennium" because budding capitalists used church membership and the admonition to work and avoid sin as a means of instilling discipline in workers accustomed to being independent artisans. And by spreading the belief that "heaven on earth" was possible, the revival movement inspired or contributed to many secular reform movements, including sabbatarianism, temperance, abolition, antidueling, moral reform, public education, philanthropic endeavors, and utopian socialism. It especially appealed to women, many of who were encouraged to become missionaries and lay preachers.