

Was the Great Awakening a Key to the American Revolution?

YES: Patricia U. Bonomi, from *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (Oxford University Press, 1986)

NO: Jon Butler, from "Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction," *Journal of American History* (September 1982)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Professor of history Patricia U. Bonomi asserts that the Great Awakening, by fostering challenges to established authority and by encouraging people to act on individual conscience, represented a rehearsal for the colonists' political assault on English rule that began in the 1760s.

NO: Professor of American history Jon Butler challenges the validity of the term *Great Awakening* and argues that a link between the eighteenth-century colonial religious revivals and the American Revolution was virtually nonexistent.

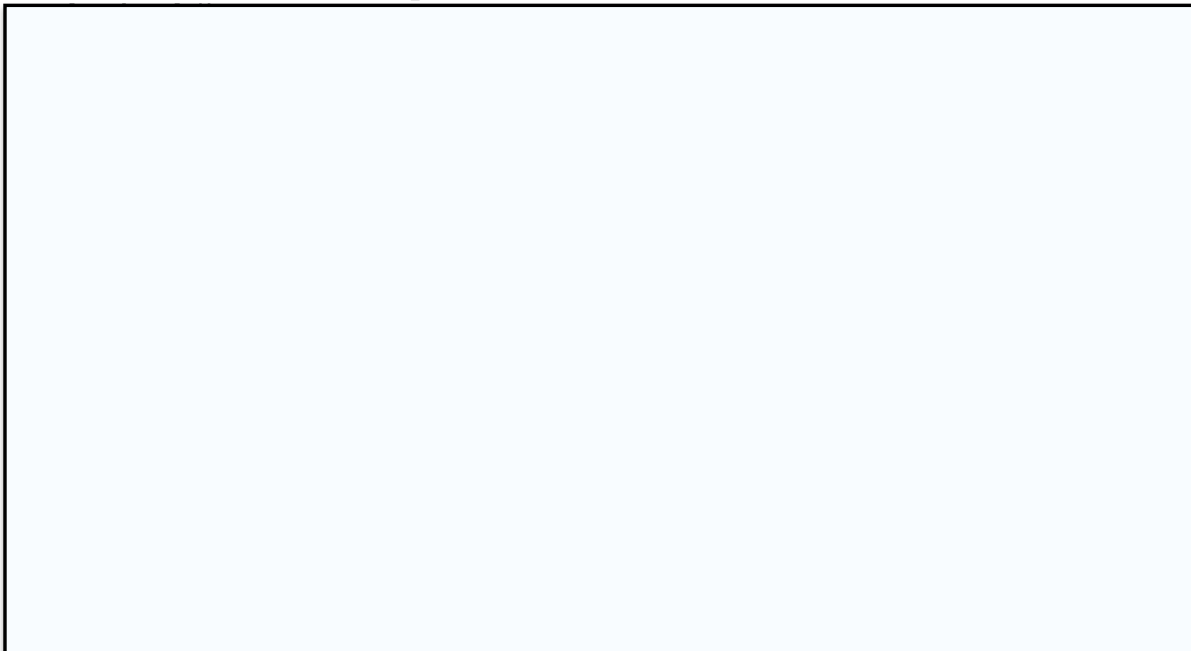
Although generations of American schoolchildren have been taught that the British colonies in North America were founded by persons fleeing religious persecution in England, the truth is that many of those early settlers were motivated by other factors, some of which had little to do with theological preferences. To be sure, the Pilgrims and Puritans of New England sought to escape the proscriptions established by the Church of England. Many New Englanders, however, did not adhere to the precepts of Calvinism and were therefore viewed as outsiders. The Quakers who populated Pennsylvania were mostly fugitives from New England, where they had been victims of religious persecution. But to apply religious motivations to the earliest settlers of Virginia, South Carolina, or Georgia is to engage in a serious misreading of the historical record. Even in New England the religious mission of (the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony) John Winthrop's "city upon a hill" began to erode as the colonial settlements matured and stabilized.

Although religion was a central element in the lives of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europeans who migrated to the New World, prolif-

eration of religious sects and denominations, emphasis upon material gain in all parts of the colonies, and the predominance of reason over emotion that is associated with the Deists of the Enlightenment period all contributed to a gradual but obvious movement of the colonists away from the church and clerical authority. William Bradford (the second governor of Plymouth Colony), for example, expressed grave concern that many Plymouth residents were following a path of perfidy, and William Penn (the founder of Pennsylvania) was certain that the "holy experiment" of the Quakers had failed. Colonial clergy, fearful that a fall from grace was in progress, issued calls for a revival of religious fervor. Therefore, the spirit of revivalism that spread through the colonies in the 1730s and 1740s was an answer to these clerical prayers.

The episode known as the First Great Awakening coincided with the Pietistic movement in Europe and England and was carried forward by dynamic preachers such as Gilbert Tennant, Theodore Frelinghuysen, and George Whitefield. They promoted a religion of the heart, not of the head, in order to produce a spiritual rebirth. Although the degree to which the Great Awakening influenced the colonies is disputed, several consequences can be firmly established. The revivals, for example, reinvigorated American Protestantism. Many new congregations were organized as a result of irreparable schisms between "Old Lights" and "New Lights." Skepticism about the desirability of an educated clergy sparked a strong strain of anti-intellectualism. Also, the emphasis on conversion was a message to which virtually everyone could respond, regardless of age, sex, or social status.

For some historians, the implications of the Great Awakening extended beyond the religious sphere into the realm of politics and were incorporated into the American Revolution. To what extent is the argument suggesting a relationship between religion and revolution valid?



"THE HOSANNAS OF THE MULTITUDE": THE GREAT AWAKENING IN AMERICA

The Great Awakening—that intense period of revivalist tumult from about 1739 to 1745—is one of the most arresting subjects of American history. The eighteenth century, and the latter part of the seventeenth, were of course punctuated with religious episodes that seemed to erupt without warning and draw entire communities into a vortex of religious conversions and agitations of soul. Yet those episodes tended not to spread beyond the individual churches or towns in which they originated. By the third decade of the eighteenth century, however, a number of currents were converging to prepare the way for an unprecedented burst of religious fervor and controversy.

The two major streams of thought shaping western religious belief in the eighteenth century—Enlightenment rationalism and Continental pietism—were by the 1720s reaching increasing numbers of Americans through the world of print, transatlantic learned societies, and such recently arrived spokesmen as the Anglican moderate George Berkeley, on the one side, and the Dutch Reformed pietist Theodore Frelinghuysen, on the other. By the 1730s, American clergymen influenced by the spiritual intensity and emotional warmth of Reformed pietism were vigorously asserting that religion was being corrupted by secular forces; in their view a conversion experience that touched the heart was the only road to salvation. The rationalists demurred, preferring a faith tempered by “an enlightened Mind . . . not raised Affections.” This contest between reason and innate grace was in one sense as old as Christianity itself.

Excerpted from *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* by Patricia U. Bonomi. Copyright © 1986 by Patricia U. Bonomi. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc. Notes omitted.

tions than any other single event in colonial experience to that time. . . .

MINORITY RIGHTS AND DIVIDED SOVEREIGNTY: THE GREAT AWAKENING AS A RADICAL MODEL

Adding to currents of religious unease in the early eighteenth century were a number of other developments: an accelerating pace of commercial growth; land shortages as well as land opportunities; the unprecedented diversity of eighteenth-century immigration; and a rapid climb in total population. Population growth now created dense settlements in some rural as well as urban areas, facilitating mass public gatherings. Moreover, the proliferation of churches and sects, intensifying denominational rivalries, and smallpox and earthquake alarms that filled meetinghouses to overflowing all contributed to a sense of quickening in church life.

Into this volatile and expectant environment came some of the most charismatic and combative personalities of the age. And as the electricity of a Tennent crackled, and the thunder of a Whitefield rolled, a storm broke that, in the opinion of many, would forever alter American society. The Great Awakening created conditions uniquely favorable to social and political, as well as religious, reform by piercing the facade of civility and deference that governed provincial life to usher in a new age of contentiousness. By promoting church separations and urging their followers to make choices that had political as well as religious implications, the Awakeners wrought permanent changes in public practices and attitudes. Before it subsided, the revival had unsettled the lives of more Americans and disrupted more institu-

Religion has always been considered a likely agent of radicalism. Nor is there reason to doubt that the tremendous stir of the Great Awakening altered the social and political equilibrium of colonial life. Just as the revival marked a significant divide in popular thought and practice, so too it would supply the most pertinent and usable model for radical activists in the years that lay ahead. Many features of the Awakening foreshadowed what was to come.

Since the Awakeners began as an insurgent minority in every church, they could advance their religious ideology only by overturning the orthodox majority, or, when that failed, by withdrawing from or bringing down the institutional structures that sheltered orthodoxy and fortified its authority. For such work they required allies, and owing to the importance of the laity in colonial church life, as well as shifting values in eighteenth-century provincial society at large, the revivalists found their allies among the people. Together they launched a mass movement that made bold assaults on established forms of church government and traditional assumptions about deference and social order. Evangelical preachers constantly exhorted their followers not to shrink from painful choices between alternative religious doctrines, and urged them to act on those decisions by separating from unregenerate churches. The separatists constructed parallel—in the eyes of some, “extra-legal”—organiza-

tions to compete with those from which they had seceded. Impelled to justify their opposition, the revivalists developed novel arguments defending the rights of minorities, and they increasingly characterized the authority against which they were rebelling as illegitimate, even tyrannical.

In all these actions the dissidents and their followers cut through the still powerful proscriptions against opposition to settled authority, and they did so not only in theory but in practice. The institutional disruptions and church separations of the Great Awakening thus provided a kind of "practice model" which enabled the provincials to "rehearse"—though unwittingly—a number of the situations, and the arguments appropriate to them, that would reappear with the political crisis of the 1760s and 1770s.

A CENTRAL ISSUE SEPARATING SUPPORTERS of the revival from its opponents concerned the divisibility, or as some argued the indivisibility, of ecclesiastical authority. The question was warmly debated at the time of the Presbyterian schism. Old Side Presbyterians shared a corporate view of church government; that is, once decisions had been approved by the central synod, all members were expected to abide by its rulings. Did any "Society . . . [ever] incorporate themselves under any Form of Government," asked one Old Side, without submitting to its authority "whether they approved of these Rules or not?" The minority must also accede to the decisions agreed upon by the majority. Yet the revivalists claimed the liberty "to question and judge all, and refuse[d] Subjection to every proper Judicature." Worse yet, the New Sides encouraged contentions and divisions within congregations, though it was "the Duty

of Ministers to crush such Factions." Rather than promoting schisms, the Old Sides admonished, preachers should teach their flocks to "love God, love your Neighbour, [and] obey them that have Rule over you." Where divisions were threatened in New England, ministers and elders accused the insurgents of "disorderly Walking, Contrary to the Gospel" and church covenant.

But the Awakeners were not listening. Their heated brains had raced beyond the old clichés about corporate solidarity that traditionally governed institutional and social relationships. No longer was conscience to be sacrificed for outward appearances of unity. "Pray must we leave off every Duty, that is the Occasion of Contention or Division?" asked Gilbert Tennent. "Surely, it cannot be reasonably suppos'd, that we are exhorted, to a Unity in any Thing that is wicked, or inconsistent with the . . . greater Good of our poor Souls." The Reverend Samuel Finley was even more direct—and certainly more modern—in exhorting his followers to "make a Party for Jesus Christ. . . . [though the] Commotion rends the Church; divides Congregations and Families; [and] sets People at Variance." New England separatists were fond of quoting 2 *Corinthians* 6:14–17—"Be ye not unequally yoked together with Unbelievers. . . . Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate."

As evangelical factions formed in congregations throughout the Middle Colonies and New England, leaders of the revival were pressed ever harder to justify their divisive behavior. In an age when factionalism was widely denounced as destructive of the larger common good, the revivalists were on slippery ground. Their primary experience—and everyone else's—was with political fac-

tions, but these always carried a taint of impropriety, if not of positive corruption, and strictures against them were so strong that no systematic theory of parties emerged during the eighteenth century. In the religious sphere, on the other hand, the situation was not so clear. Religious factions had a long and almost respectable history in the eighteenth-century mind, making it easier to justify divisions over questions of eternal truth. Thus, beginning in the 1740s and continuing into the next decade, Presbyterian and Congregational separatists constructed a defense that stressed the rights of minorities against majorities, and of individuals against the whole, in matters of conscience.

From the 1740s on, the separating brethren grew in number until thousands of Congregationalists throughout the North joined Presbyterian thousands in the Middle Colonies in open rebellion against the "spiritual Tyranny" of traditional church authority.

"WHO IS UPON GOD'S SIDE?"

As the Great Awakening broke down social cohesion in America, it simultaneously elevated the individual. During the more communal seventeenth

century, colonists had rarely conceived of themselves apart from a larger collectivity—the family, the congregation, or the town. But the eighteenth-century revival penetrated and shattered that unitary cosmos by directing its message to the individual. In exhorting their followers to make personal decisions for God, and then to act on those decisions regardless of their effect on the larger society, the revivalists gave sanction to a new dynamic in human relationships.

Gilbert Tennent's "terrible and searching" sermons made it difficult for any person to submerge his or her identity in the group. "Awake then, *you sluggish Souls . . . Wretched Sinners!* isn't there one Soul among you that will be perswaded to awake this day? . . . Not one Lidia open her Heart to hear the Word of Christ?" Once awakened, moreover, the individual had to face wrenching decisions. Was his minister in a state of grace? Should he seek greater edification elsewhere? A person was not like a stone, "without Choice, Sense, and Taste." So Tennent thundered: "Let all the Followers of the Lamb stand up and act for GOD against all opposers: Who is upon GOD's Side? who?" Samuel Finley was no less explicit: "I look upon all Neutres, as Enemies, in Affairs of Religion. Away with your carnal Prudence! And either follow *God or Baal. He that is not actually with us, is against us. . . .*" Thus were parishioners exhorted to act in support of their decisions, though "your Neighbours growl against you, and reproach you."

This last notion captures vividly the new spirit of defiant individualism that was one of the most radical manifestations of the Awakening. No longer were consensual values to prevail over individual ones, at least in matters concerning the soul. Now private judgment and intuitive under-

standing had equal if not superior claim on the conscience. In a word, decision making had been internalized.

Contrasted with this consensual mode, religious conversions of the revivalist era were individualistic and egocentric. Some clergymen even warned potential converts that it was a "dangerous Sin" to place explicit faith in the judgment of others, "neglecting Self-Examination." Upon feeling the requisite stirrings and warmings, one often struggled alone toward grace, or gained assurance in a rapturous moment

of soul-flooding light. In many churches, including Jonathan Edwards's Congregational meeting at Northampton, it was by 1735 no longer "the Custom . . . [for new members] to make a credible Relation of their inward Experience the Ground of Admission." Instead, the converted went about "*themselves* publishing their own experiences from time to time and from place to place, on all occasions and before all companies . . . [in] common *conversation*." As thousands of provincials experienced conversions at the height of the Awakening, even the ministers found it impossible to examine each case, and the burden of decision fell ever more directly on the lay men and women. The most radical New Lights denied all sense of commonalty, asserting the "absolute Necessity for every Person to act singly . . . as if there was not another human Creature upon Earth."

Jonathan Edwards, of course, finally rejected the "promiscuous admission" of new members and sought to restore the covenant bonds that sweetly knit members together in a visible church, precipitating a crisis with his Northampton congregation that ended in his dismissal in 1750. By the late 1740s, Edwards had concluded that the conversion experience should be "under the direction of *skilful guides* [and proceed] with great seriousness, preparation and prayer . . . in [God's] house, and in the presence of his people." But by mid-century such a step seemed regressive to many provincials, who for a decade now had been told from pulpits across the land that the individual, standing alone in the sight of God, was the primary vessel of salvation. Did not the law of Christ specifically forbid people "to judge one another?" asked Edwards's New Light critic, Solomon Williams of Connecticut. And might not Edwards's "skilful Guides di-

rect every Man, Woman and Child, what Experiences to relate, and what to omit, what are fit to be published, and what not?" Only God could see into the heart, and neither ministers nor congregations should interpose themselves between the individual and his Creator.

To be sure, separatist Presbyterians and Congregationalists formed new societies of believers that in a number of cases reproduced the covenanted communities of old. But from the viewpoint of radicalism the essential thing is that they did so only after breaking sharply from a tradition of fraternity and consensus that had governed church life for generations. If such a departure seemed bold in the 1740s it would shortly come to lose its novelty. Once having taken part in the dismantling of old institutions and the shaping of new ones, Americans at every social level would find themselves less hesitant to do it again.

THE GREAT AWAKENING, AS RICHARD Hofstadter put it, was "the first major intercolonial crisis of the mind and spirit" in eighteenth-century America. No previous occurrence in colonial history compared with it in scale or consequences. True, the floodtide of evangelical fervor soon subsided, but nothing could quite restore the old cultural landscape. The unitary ideal of the seventeenth century continued to be eroded in the post-Awakening years by further church separations. Moreover, as the Reverend William Shurtleff noted in 1745, the "dividing Spirit is not confin'd to those that are Friends" of the revival. Nor was it confined to the religious sphere. That "dividing Spirit" would be manifested everywhere after mid-century in the proliferation of religious and political factions.

THE GREAT AWAKENING AS INTERPRETATIVE FICTION

How do historians describe "the Great Awakening"? Three points seem especially common. First, all but a few describe it as a Calvinist religious revival in which converts acknowledged their sinfulness without expecting salvation. These colonial converts thereby distinguished themselves from Englishmen caught up in contemporary Methodist revivals and from Americans involved in the so-called Second Great Awakening of the early national period, both of which imbibed Arminian principles that allowed humans to believe they might effect their own salvation in ways that John Calvin discounted. Second, historians emphasize the breadth and suddenness of the Awakening and frequently employ hurricane metaphors to reinforce the point. Thus, many of them describe how in the 1740s the Awakening "swept" across the mainland colonies, leaving only England's Caribbean colonies untouched. Third, most historians argue that this spiritual hurricane affected all facets of prerevolutionary society. Here they adopt [Jonathan] Edwards's description of the 1736 Northampton revival as one that touched "all sorts, sober and vicious, high and low, rich and poor, wise and unwise," but apply it to all the colonies. Indeed, some historians go farther and view the Great Awakening as a veritable social and political revolution itself. Writing in the late 1960s, [Richard] Bushman could only wonder at its power: "We inevitably will underestimate the effect of the Awakening on eighteenth-century society if we compare it to revivals today. The Awakening was more like the civil rights demonstrations, the campus disturbances, and the urban riots of the 1960s combined. All together these may approach, though certainly not surpass, the Awakening in their impact on national life."

No one would seriously question the existence of "the Great Awakening" if historians only described it as a short-lived Calvinist revival in New England during the early 1740s. Whether stimulated by Edwards, James Davenport, or the British itinerant George Whitefield, the New England revivals between 1740 and 1745 obviously were Calvinist ones. Their sponsors vigorously criticized the soft-core Arminianism that had reputedly

From Jon Butler, "Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction," *Journal of American History*, vol. 69 (September 1982). Copyright © 1982 by The Organization of American Historians. Reprinted by permission.

overtaken New England Congregationalism, and they stimulated the ritual renewal of a century-old society by reintroducing colonists to the theology of distinguished seventeenth-century Puritan clergymen, especially Thomas Shepard and Solomon Stoddard.

Yet, Calvinism never dominated the eighteenth-century religious revivals homogenized under the label "the Great Awakening." The revivals in the middle colonies flowed from especially disparate and international sources. . . . The revivals among English colonists in Virginia also reveal eclectic roots. Presbyterians brought Calvinism into the colony for the first time since the 1650s, but Arminianism underwrote the powerful Methodist awakening in the colony and soon crept into the ranks of the colony's Baptists as well.

"The Great Awakening" also is difficult to date. Seldom has an "event" of such magnitude had such amorphous beginnings and endings. In New England, historians agree, the revivals flourished principally between 1740 and 1743 and largely ended by 1745, although a few scattered outbreaks of revivalism occurred there in the next decades. Establishing the beginning of the revivals has proved more difficult, however. Most historians settle for the year 1740 because it marks Whitefield's first appearance in New England. But everyone acknowledges that earlier revivals underwrote Whitefield's enthusiastic reception there and involved remarkable numbers of colonists. Edwards counted thirty-two towns caught up in revivals in 1734-1735 and noted that his own grandfather, Stoddard, had conducted no less than five "harvests" in Northampton before that, the earliest in the 1690s. Yet revivals in Virginia, the site of the most sustained

such events in the southern colonies, did not emerge in significant numbers until the 1750s and did not peak until the 1760s. At the same time, they also continued into the revolutionary and early national periods in ways that make them difficult to separate from their predecessors.

Yet even if one were to argue that "the Great Awakening" persisted through most of the eighteenth century, it is obvious that revivals "swept" only some of the mainland colonies. They occurred in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Virginia with some frequency at least at some points between 1740 and 1770. But New Hampshire, Maryland, and Georgia witnessed few revivals in the same years, and revivals were only occasionally important in New York, Delaware, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The revivals also touched only certain segments of the population in the colonies where they occurred. The best example of the phenomenon is Pennsylvania. The revivals there had a sustained effect among English settlers only in Presbyterian churches where many of the laity and clergy also opposed them. The Baptists, who were so important to the New England revivals, paid little attention to them until the 1760s, and the colony's taciturn Quakers watched them in perplexed silence. Not even Germans imbibed them universally. At the same time that Benjamin Franklin was emptying his pockets in response to the preaching of Whitefield in Philadelphia—or at least claiming to do so—the residents of Germantown were steadily leaving their churches, and Stephanie Grauman Wolf reports that they remained steadfast in their indifference to Christianity at least until the 1780s. . . .

Historians also exaggerate the cohesion of leadership in the revivals. They have accomplished this, in part, by overstressing the importance of Whitefield and Edwards. Whitefield's early charismatic influence later faded so that his appearances in the 1750s and 1760s had less impact even among evangelicals than they had in the 1740s. In addition, Whitefield's "leadership" was ethereal, at best, even before 1750. His principal early importance was to serve as a personal model of evangelical enterprise for ministers wishing to promote their own revivals of religion. Because he did little to organize and coordinate integrated colonial revivals, he also failed to exercise significant authority over the ministers he inspired.

The case against Edwards's leadership of the revivals is even clearer. Edwards defended the New England revivals from attack. But, like Whitefield, he never organized and coordinated revivals throughout the colonies or even throughout New England. Since most of his major works were not printed in his lifetime, even his intellectual leadership in American theology occurred in the century after his death. Whitefield's lack of knowledge about Edwards on his first tour of America in 1739-1740 is especially telling on this point. Edwards's name does not appear in Whitefield's journal prior to the latter's visit to Northampton in 1740, and Whitefield did not make the visit until Edwards had invited him to do so. Whitefield certainly knew of Edwards and the 1734-1735 Northampton revival but associated the town mainly with the pastorate of Edwards's grandfather Stoddard. As Whitefield described the visit in his journal: "After a little refreshment, we crossed the ferry to Northampton, where no less than three hundred souls

were saved about five years ago. Their pastor's name is Edwards, successor and grandson to the great Stoddard, whose memory will be always precious to my soul, and whose books entitled 'A Guide to Christ,' and 'Safety of Appearing in Christ's Righteousness,' I would recommend to all."

What were the effects of the prerevolutionary revivals of religion? The claims for their religious and secular impact need pruning too. One area of concern involves the relationship between the revivals and the rise of the Dissenting denominations in the colonies. Denomination building was intimately linked to the revivals in New England. There, as C. C. Goen has demonstrated, the revivals of the 1740s stimulated formation of over two hundred new congregations and several new denominations. This was accomplished mainly through a negative process called "Separatism," which split existing Congregationalist and Baptist churches along prorevival and anti-revival lines. But Separatism was of no special consequence in increasing the number of Dissenters farther south. Presbyterians, Baptists, and, later, Methodists gained strength from former Anglicans who left their state-supported churches, but they won far more recruits among colonists who claimed no previous congressional membership.

Still, two points are important in assessing the importance of revivals to the expansion of the Dissenting denominations in the colonies. First, revivalism never was the key to the expansion of the colonial churches. Presbyterianism expanded as rapidly in the middle colonies between 1710 and 1740 as between 1740 and 1770. Revivalism scarcely produced the remarkable growth that the Church of England experienced in the eighteenth

century unless, of course, it won the favor of colonists who opposed revivals as fiercely as did its leaders. [Edwin] Gaustad estimates that between 1700 and 1780 Anglican congregations expanded from about one hundred to four hundred, and Bruce E. Steiner has outlined extraordinary Anglican growth in the Dissenting colony of Connecticut although most historians describe the colony as being thoroughly absorbed by the revivals and "Separatism."

Second, the expansion of the leading evangelical denominations, Presbyterians and Baptists, can be traced to many causes, not just revivalism or "the Great Awakening." The growth of the colonial population from fewer than three hundred thousand in 1700 to over two million in 1770 made the expansion of even the most modestly active denominations highly likely. This was especially true because so many new colonists did not settle in established communities but in new communities that lacked religious institutions.

The revivals democratized relations between ministers and the laity only in minimal ways. A significant number of New England ministers changed their preaching styles as a result of the 1740 revivals. [Alan] Heimert quotes Isaac Backus on the willingness of evangelicals to use sermons to "insinuate themselves into the affections' of the people" and notes how opponents of the revivals like [Charles] Chauncy nonetheless struggled to incorporate emotion and "sentiment" into their sermons after 1740. Yet revivalists and evangelicals continued to draw sharp distinctions between the rights of ministers and the duties of the laity.

In this context, it is not surprising that the eighteenth-century revivals of religion failed to bring significant new power—democracy—to the laity in the congregations. Although Gilbert Tennent argued that the laity had an obligation to abandon unconverted, unedifying ministers in favor of converted ones, it is not possible to demonstrate that the revivals increased the traditional powers that laymen previously possessed or brought them new ones. Congregations throughout the colonies had long exercised considerable power over their ministers

through their effective control of church spending and fund raising as well as through the laity's ability simply to stop attending church services at all. As examples, witness alone the well-known seventeenth-century disputes between ministers and their listeners in Sudbury and Salem Village in Massachusetts and the complaints against ministers brought by the laity to the Presbytery of Philadelphia between 1706 and 1740. Yet, although the revivals should have increased this lay willingness to complain about ministerial failings, no historian ever has demonstrated systematically that this ever happened. . . .

What, then, of the relationship between the revivals and the American Revolution? Obviously, the revivals provided little focus for intercolonial unity in the way some historians have described. They appeared too erratically in too few colonies under too many different auspices to make such generalizations appropriate. The eighteenth-century colonial wars are more appropriate candidates for the honor. They raised significant legislative opposition to the crown in many colonies and cost many colonists their lives, especially in the last and most "successful" contest, the French and Indian War. Nor is it possible to demonstrate that specific congregations and denominations associated with the revivals originated anti-British protest that became uniquely important to the Revolution. Nathan O. Hatch has noted that Andrew Crosswell's revivalist congregation in Boston had all but collapsed by 1770, and no historian ever has demonstrated that similar congregations elsewhere served as isolated cells of anti-British protest. The connection is equally difficult to make with denominations. Connecticut New Lights and Pennsylvania Presby-

terians played important roles in the colonial protests, but their activity does not, in itself, link revivals to the Revolution in any important way. First, the revivals in both places occurred a quarter of a century before the Revolution began. Second, neither group expanded in the 1740s or sustained its membership later exclusively because of the revivals. Third, the British probably angered laymen of both groups because the latter were important politicians rather than because they were New Lights and Presbyterians. Or, put another way, they were political leaders who happened to be New Lights and Presbyterians rather than Presbyterians and New Lights who happened to be politicians.

Some historians have argued that the eighteenth-century revivals had a more subtle, yet still profound, effect on the colonies in fostering a new system of mass communications among settlers. Stout has written that itinerancy and extemporaneous preaching—but specifically not the intellectual content of the sermons reached—stimulated social and political egalitarianism in the colonies. They created a “spirit of liberty” that tore at traditional social and political deference and fitted Americans superbly for the contests of the 1760s and 1770s. Here again problems of timing and effect intrude. The political ramifications of extemporaneous sermons delivered by itinerant or resident preachers were unclear at best and were delayed for as long as twenty-five years. Moreover, the Revolution they presumably underwrote made only the most modest contributions to social egalitarianism and democracy, of which they probably were not the sole cause.

What, then, ought we to say about the revivals of religion in prerevolutionary America? The most important suggestion is the most drastic. Historians should abandon the term "the Great Awakening" because it distorts the character of eighteenth-century American religious life and misinterprets its relationship to prerevolutionary American society and politics. In religion it is a *deus ex machina* that falsely homogenizes the heterogeneous; in politics it falsely unites the colonies in slick preparation for the Revolution. Instead, a four-part model of the eighteenth-century colonial revivals will highlight their common features, underscore important differences, and help us assess their real significance.

First, with one exception, the prerevolutionary revivals should be understood primarily as regional events that occurred in only half the colonies.

Second, the prerevolutionary revivals occurred in the colonial backwaters of Western society where they were part of a long-term pattern of erratic movements for spiritual renewal and revival that had long characterized Western Christianity and Protestantism since its birth two centuries earlier. Thus, their theological origins were international and diverse rather than narrowly Calvinist and uniquely American.

tant cause of the revivals. Instead, they appear to have arisen when three circumstances were present—internal demands for renewal in different international Christian communities, charismatic preachers, and special, often unique, local circumstances that made communities receptive to elevated religious rhetoric.

Third, the revivals had modest effects on colonial religion. This is not to say that they were “conservative” because they did not always uphold the traditional religious order. But they were never radical, whatever their critics claimed. For example, the revivals reinforced ministerial rather than lay authority even as they altered some clergymen’s perceptions of their tasks and methods. They also stimulated the demand for organization, order, and authority in the evangelical denominations.

Fourth, the link between the revivals and the American Revolution is virtually nonexistent. The relationship between prerevolutionary political change and the revivals is weak everywhere except in Virginia, where the Baptist revivals indeed shattered the exclusive, century-old Anglican hold on organized religious activity and politics in the colony. But, their importance to the Revolution is weakened by the fact that so many members of Virginia’s Anglican aristocracy also led the Revolution. In other colonies the revivals furnished little revolutionary rhetoric, including even millennialist thought, that was not available from other sources and provided no unique organizational mechanisms for anti-British protest activity. They may have been of some importance in helping colonists make moral judgments about eighteenth-century English politics, though colonists unconnected to the revivals made these judgments as well.

In the main, then, the revivals of religion in eighteenth-century America emerge as nearly perfect mirrors of a

regionalized, provincial society. They arose erratically in different times and places across a century from the 1690s down to the time of the Revolution. Calvinism underlay some of them, Pietism and Arminianism others. Their leadership was local and, at best, regional, and they helped reinforce—but were not the key to—the proliferation and expansion of still-regional Protestant denominations in the colonies. As such, they created no intercolonial religious institutions and fostered no significant experiential unity in the colonies. Their social and political effects were minimal and usually local, although they could traumatize communities in which they upset, if only temporarily, familiar patterns of worship and social behavior. But the congregations they occasionally produced usually blended

into the traditional social system, and the revivals abated without shattering its structure. Thus, the revivals of religion in prerevolutionary America seldom became proto-revolutionary, and they failed to change the timing, causes, or effects of the Revolution in any significant way.

