

THE GREAT AWAKENING AND THE ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS VOLUNTARISM

Puritans believed in religion as an inward experience which illuminated outward behavior rather than as a set of outward behaviors which led towards salvation. At the core of Puritanism was the individual and his or her convictions; these, in turn, became the basis for the gathering of congregations as communities of believers.

The intense spiritual individualism of Puritanism coexisted uneasily with the corporatist social and political institutions which leaders like Winthrop sought to impose on it. Within a few years of the settlement of Massachusetts Bay, dissenters like Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams were already challenging the authority of ministers and of the State in the name of liberty of conscience and the spiritual sovereignty of the individual.

Winthrop and his allies succeeded in maintaining the authority of the ministers and magistrates. But the cost involved shifting evidence of worthiness for admission to full church membership from the believer's ability to testify to an inward experience of grace to more external legalistic criteria. This was part of a broader devolution of New England Puritanism towards rigid patterns of state-enforced orthodoxy.

These tendencies were reinforced by generational phenomena: the founders of Puritanism who had had to struggle against Anglican oppression had been sure of their convictions; their children and grandchildren, raised in New England where Congregationalism was the only orthodoxy, found it less and less easy to ascertain valid evidence for religious conviction. In the Puritan commonwealth, these were no small matters, since church membership was closely tied to eligibility for community leadership, shares in the division of common lands, and other important political, economic, and social concerns.

One of the legalistic solutions to the problem of church membership was to deny baptism to the children of those who were not church members. But this led to a situation in which there were greater and greater numbers of non-communicants. To remedy this, the authorities in the 1660s devised the "Half-Way Covenant," which permitted children whose grandparents were members of the church, but whose parents were not, to be baptized, though not received into full membership. While this

did not entitle those so admitted to receive communion, it did grant them the right to vote in town elections.

By the early years of the eighteenth century, New England Puritanism was weakened. Its political power had been diminished by the suspension of Massachusetts' colonial charter and its replacement by a royal governor who took his orders from Whitehall, not from the Puritan ministers and magistrates. The old order was further upset by the challenges from other denominations: although the Puritans had been able to suppress the Quakers and others they deemed to be heretical, they could not treat Anglicans so casually -- especially because the urban elite of merchants, lawyers, and others seeking advancement by currying the favor of the governor and his London masters, were turning increasingly to Anglicanism. The Anglicans, moreover, were beginning to spread their doctrines more broadly through the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.

Congregationalism was also internally weakened by the exclusion of the majority of citizens from full membership in the churches, which had come increasingly under the domination of small groups of families who controlled the major political offices, the distribution of land, and church affairs. The political changes represented by the institutional of royal government were part of a broader economic policy -- mercantilism -- through which the British government hoped to stimulate economic development in its colonies. The increasing importance and profitability of trade encouraged the rise of new wealth and new aspirants to leadership on both town and provincial level. But these new men found their ambitions blocked by entrenched elites whose power was entwined with the constitution of the churches.

Finally, even the Congregational ministry began to doubt established doctrines, particularly those which restricted church membership. There was simply too much in the scriptures that pointed towards Christ's message as universal. Samuel Wigglesworth (1688-1768) gave voice to these yearnings as early as 1733, when he urged

Let us not labour to build up a *Shell*, to form a meer *Carcase of Godliness*, by furnishing our Auditors with *Moral Virtues*, only, void of *Internal Vital Principles*; but *Travail in Birth* with them until *Christ be formed in them*, and they are become holy in Heart, as well as blameless of Life. . . .

Our Reasoning with them must tend to persuade them to be *Real and Altogether*, not *Almost Christians*, and therefore we must not heal their wounded Consciences slightly; but wisely suffer *Convictions* to ripen into true *Conversion*; That that may pass from *Death* to *Life* in good Earnest, and not deceive themselves with vain hopes, and impose upon the Word with their *Name* that they *Live*. . . .

Wigglesworth's call for his colleagues to create "Real and Altogether, not Almost Christians" helped to set off a religious revival -- the Great Awakening -- which not only transformed American Protestantism and reaffirmed the conception of the spiritual sovereignty of the individual and the church as a voluntary gathering of believers, but, more broadly, affirmed both the right and the obligation of individuals to challenge the authority of political, economic, and social institutions.

In a very real way, the Awakening was an essential preparation for the American Revolution. More than this, it oriented New England Protestantism towards collective action through popularly-based voluntary associations. For some, this meant challenges to "unGodly" ministers -- and protracted struggles for the control of congregations. For others, it led to splitting away from the established tax-supported church altogether and the formation of congregations supported by the voluntary contributions of their members.

Although not its most prominent preacher (that credit goes to the itinerant British evangelist George Whitfield) or the most outspoken (that palm goes to New Jersey's fiery Gilbert Tennant), Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), who spent virtually all of his career in western Massachusetts, is the leader who we generally think of when we think of the Great Awakening. This identification is due to Edwards' extraordinary chronicles of the progress of the revival and his ambitious efforts both to frame it out as an historical event and to relate its methods and purposes to the mainstream of Enlightenment philosophy. Although rejected by the ecclesiastical establishment of his own time, his reputation grew as those influenced by the Awakening assumed leadership of American political and religious life. His works were republished in the nineteenth century and had a major influence on the Second Great Awakening.

Edwards, the son of a prosperous Hartford merchant, graduated from Yale in 1720, staying on for several years as a tutor while studying for the ministry. There he became familiar with the work of Enlightenment thinkers like Newton and Locke, as well as the ancient classics and Puritan theology. Events at Yale during this period reflected the broader ferment in New England protestantism. In 1725, the College's Rector and three of its six tutors defected to the Anglican Church, after publicly challenging many of Puritanisms' central doctrines. Edwards and others, however, responded to the crisis not by rejecting Puritanism, but by seeking within it for sources of renewed vitality.

In 1727, Edwards settled in Northampton, Massachusetts, where his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, had been minister for more than fifty years. Edwards revivalism, which began in 1733, built on theological foundations laid by his grandfather. Challenging the ecclesiastical establishment, Stoddard had made baptism and communion available to any and all who could give witness to their experience of grace. These practices gave Edwards a mandate to devise methods of preaching that would drive parishioners towards such an experience. Within six months of his first efforts, more than three hundred were admitted to the church. Through his published writings, his reputation spread throughout the colonies.

Despite the establishment's attacks on the leaders of the Awakening, Edwards remained in Northampton until 1748, when a conflict with his congregation led to his dismissal. Although offered parishes in Virginia and in Scotland, Edwards chose to become a missionary to the Housatonic Indians in the frontier settlement of Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Here, while preaching to the natives and defending them from the depredations of white traders, he wrote his most important works, including his 1754 treatise on the freedom of the will, which gave him an international reputation. In 1757, he was offered the presidency of newly founded College of New Jersey (Princeton), which had been established by New Jersey Calvinists. He died in Princeton in 1758.

Despite his isolated situation, Edwards influence was widespread and profound. As important as his writings were his the many young men who studied for the the ministry with him, who kept his ideas alive and aggressively transformed them into institutional forms. Of these Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), known for his early advocacy of American independence, pioneering opposition to slavery, and energetic

encouragement of missionary work, led the way in linking evangelical protestantism to social and political activism. "Hopkinsonianism," which carried forward many of Edwards' ideas, was the conceptual keystone of the Second Great Awakening, which would serve as the most important single force in spreading ideas about philanthropy and voluntarism in nineteenth century America.

Jonathan Edwards, "Narrative of Surprising Conversions" (1736)

The town of Northampton is of about eighty-two years standing, and has now about two hundred families; which mostly dwell more compactly together than any town of such a bigness in these parts of the country; which probably has been an occasion that both our corruptions and reformations have been from time to time, the more swiftly propagated, from one to another, through the town. Take the town in general, and so far as I can judge, they are as rational and understanding a people as most I have been acquainted with: many of them have been noted for religion, and particularly, have been remarkable for their distinct knowledge in things that relate to heart religion, and Christian experience, and their great regards thereto.

. . . Just after my grandfather's death, it seemed to be a time of extraordinary dullness in religion: licentiousness for some years greatly prevailed among the youth of the town; they were many of them very much addicted to night walking, and frequenting the tavern, and lewd practices, wherein some by their example exceedingly corrupted others. It was their manner very frequently to get together in conventions of both sexes, for mirth and jollity, which they called frolicks; they would often spend the greater part of the night in them, without any regard to order in the families they belonged to: and indeed family government did too much fail in the town. It was become very customary with many of our young people to be indecent in their carriage at meeting. . . . There had also long prevailed in the town a spirit of contention between two parties, into which they had for many years been divided, by which was maintained a jealousy one of the other, and they were prepared to oppose one another in all public affairs.

But . . . there began to be a sensible amendment of these evils; the young people showed more of a disposition to hearken to counsel, and by degrees left off their frolicking, and grew observably more decent in their attendance on the public worship, and there were more that manifested a religious concern than there used to be.

At the latter end of the year 1733, there appeared a very unusual flexibleness, and yielding to advice, in our young people. It had been too long their manner to make the evening after the Sabbath, and after our public lecture, to be especially the times of their mirth, and company keeping. But a sermon was now preached on the Sabbath before the lecture, to show the evil tendency of the practice, and to persuade them to reform it; and it was urged on heads of families, that it should be a thing agreed upon among them, to govern their families, and keep their children at home, at these times;--and withal it was more privately moved, that they should meet together the next day, in their several neighborhoods, to know each other's minds: which was accordingly done, and the motion complied with throughout the town. But

parents found little or no occasion for the exercise of government in the case; the young people declared themselves convinced by what they had heard from the pulpit, and were willing of themselves to comply with the counsel that had been given: and it was immediately, and, I suppose, almost universally complied with; and there was a thorough reformation of these disorders thenceforward, which has continued ever since.

Presently after this, there began to appear a remarkable religious concern at a little village belonging to the congregation, called Pascommuck, where a few families were settled, at about three miles distance from the main body of the town. At this place a number of persons seemed to be savingly wrought upon. In the April following, anno 1734, there happened a very sudden and awful death of a young man in the bloom of his youth. . . . This was followed with another death of a young married woman, who had been considerably exercised in mind, about the salvation of her soul. . . . This seemed much to contribute to the solemnizing of the spirits of many young persons; and there began evidently to appear more of a religious concern on people's minds.

In the fall of the year, I proposed it to the young people, that they should agree among themselves to spend the evenings after lectures, in social religion, and to that end to divide themselves into several companies to meet in various parts of the town; which was accordingly done, and those meetings have been since continued, and the example imitated by elder people. . . .

About this time began the great noise that was in this part of the country, about Arminianism, which seemed to appear with a very threatening aspect upon the interest of religion here. [Arminianism was the doctrine that good works were a sufficient basis for salvation and, as such, attacked the heart of Puritan beliefs about salvation through faith alone]. The friends of vital piety trembled for fear of the issue. . . . Many who looked on themselves as in a Christless condition seemed to be awakened by it, with fear that God was about to withdraw from the land, and that we should be given up to heterodoxy, and corrupt principles, and that then their opportunity for obtaining salvation would be past; and many who were brought a little to doubt about the truth of the doctrines they had hitherto been taught, seemed to have a kind of trembling fear with their doubts, lest they should be led into by-paths, to their eternal undoing; and they seemed with much concern and engagedness of mind to inquire what was indeed the way in which they must come to be accepted with God. . . .

Presently upon this, a great and earnest concern about the great things of religion, and the eternal world, became universal in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees, and all ages; the noise amongst the dry bones waxed louder and louder: all other talk but about spiritual and eternal things was soon thrown by; all the conversation in all companies, and upon all occasions, was upon these things only, unless so much as was necessary for people carrying on their ordinary secular business. . . .

But though the people did not ordinarily neglect their worldly business, yet there was then the reverse of what commonly is: religion was with all sorts of great concern, and the world was a thing only by the by. The only thing in their view was to get the kingdom of heaven, and every one appeared pressing into it: the engagedness of their hearts in this great concern could not be hid; it appeared in their very countenances. It was a dreadful thing amongst us to be out of Christ, in danger every day of dropping into hell; and what persons' minds were intent upon was to escape for their lives, and to *fly from the wrath to come*. All would eagerly lay hold of opportunities for their souls; and were wont very often to meet together in private houses for religious purposes: and such meetings, when appointed, were wont greatly to be thronged.

. . . This work of God, as it was carried on, and the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration in the town; so that in the spring and summer following, anno 1735, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor so full of joy; and yet so full of distress as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation's being brought unto them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives. *The goings of God were then seen in his sanctuary, God's day was a delight, and his tabernacles were amiable*. Our public assemblies were then beautiful; the congregation was alive in God's service, every one earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer intent to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, other with joy and love, other with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors. . . .

The Awakening spread, first from town to town in New England, then throughout the colonies, largely through the agency of itinerant preachers like the fiery Gilbert Tennant and the eloquent George Whitfield. When Whitfield preached in

Middletown, Connecticut in October of 1740, some 4,000 people --a larger gathering than the entire population of any settlement in the colony -- assembled to hear him. When he preached in Philadelphia even the skeptical Benjamin Franklin was moved:

I happened . . . to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my pocket and handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As he proceeded, I began to soften and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all. . . . (Franklin 1961, 118).

In the meantime, everywhere the revival spread, it sowed dissention, as the spiritually reborn joined forces against the "unconverted ministry." The Old Guard fought back. The faculty of Harvard College denounced Whitfield, the itinerants, and the Awakening generally as "tending very much to the entire Destruction of the Order of these Churches of Christ, which our Fathers have taken such Care and Pains to settle" (Testimony 1744, 341). The Connecticut legislature banned itineracy and the still-powerful Old Light clergy moved to purge the New Lights from their pulpits.

In the midst of the struggle, Edwards strove to make sense of the extraordinary events and to issue what amounted to an appeal for support from the clergy, from believers, and, most particularly, from the wealthy, whose support he evidently felt might make a crucial difference in the outcome of the crisis.

At the beginning of the Awakening, Edwards had thought that faith would be enough to carry the day. By 1742, he had begun to recognize its broader revolutionary implications and all that implied in terms of financial and political support. "The Revival of Religion in New England," contains an eloquent -- and in many ways prescient -- section on the responsibilities of wealth and its role in the process of reform.

Jonathan Edwards, "The Revival of Religion in New England" (1742)

Rich men have a talent in their hands, in the disposal and improvement of which, they might very much promote such a work as this, if they were so disposed. They are far beyond others under advantage to do good, and lay up for themselves treasures in heaven. What a thousand

pities is it, that for want of a heart, they commonly have no share at all there, but heaven is peopled mostly with the poor of this world? One would think that our rich men, that call themselves Christians, might devise some notable things to do with their money, to advance the kingdom of their professed Redeemer, and the prosperity of the souls of men, at this time of such extraordinary advantage for it. It seems to me, that in this age, most of us have but very narrow, penurious notions of Christianity, as its respects the disposal of our temporal goods.

The primitive Christians had not such notions: they were trained up by the apostles in another way. God has greatly distinguished some of the inhabitants of New England from others, in the abundance that he has given them of the good things of this life. If they could now be persuaded to lay out some considerable part of that which God has given them for the honor of God, and lay it up in heaven, instead of spending it for their own honor, or laying it up for their posterity, they would not repent of it afterwards. How liberally did the heads of the tribes contribute to their wealth, at the setting up [of] the tabernacle, though it was in a barren wilderness! These are the days of the erecting the tabernacle of God amongst us. We have a particular account how the goldsmiths and merchants helped to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, Neh. iii, 32. The days are coming spoken of in Scripture, and I believe not very far off, when the sons of Zion shall come from far, bringing their silver and their gold with them, unto the name of the Lord their God, and to the Holy One of Israel; and when the merchants of the earth shall trade for Christ, more than for themselves, and their merchandise and hire shall be holiness to the Lord, and shall not be treasured, or laid up for posterity, but shall be for them that dwell before the Lord, to eat sufficiently, and for durable clothing; and when the ships of Tarshish shall bring the wealth of the distant parts of the earth, to the place of God's sanctuary, and to make the place of his feet glorious; and the abundance of the sea shall be converted to the use of God's church, and she shall suck the milk of the Gentiles, and suck the breasts of kings. The days are coming, when the great and rich men of the world shall bring their honor and glory into the church, and shall, as it were, strip themselves, to spread their garments under Christ's feet, as he enters triumphantly into Jerusalem; and when those that will not so shall have no glory, and their silver and gold shall be cankered, and their garments moth eaten; for the saints shall then inherit the earth, and they shall reign on earth, and those that honor God he will honor, and those that despise him shall be lightly esteemed.

If some of our rich men would give one quarter of their estates to promote this work, they would act a little as if they were designed for the kingdom of heaven, and a little as rich men will act by and by, that shall be partakers of the spiritual wealth and glories of that kingdom.

Great things might be done for the advancement of the kingdom of Christ, at this day, by those that have ability, by establishing funds, for the support and propagation of religion; by supporting some that are eminently qualified with gifts and grace, in preaching the gospel in certain parts of the country, that are more destitute of the means of grace; in searching out children, of promising abilities, and their hearts full of love to Christ, but of poor families (as doubtless there are such now in the land), and bringing them up for the ministry; and in distributing books, that are remarkably fitted to promote vital religion, and have a tendency to advance this work; or if they would only bear the trouble, expense, and loss of sending such books into various parts of the land, to be sold, it might be an occasion that ten times so many of those books should be bought, or otherwise would be; and in establishing and supporting schools, in poor towns and villages; which might be done on such a foundation, as not only to bring up children in common learning, but also might very much tend to their conviction and conversion, and being trained up in vital piety; and doubtless something might be done this way, in old towns, and more populous places, that might have a great tendency to the flourishing of religion in the rising generation.

Edwards concluded his essay by considering some of the external effects of the revival, as well as the best means for promoting it. His ideas about the need for large-scale philanthropic support, charitable enterprises, education, tract, and missionary societies, as well as evangelical newspapers, anticipated by nearly a century the methods that would ultimately constitute the organizational infrastructure of the great evangelical movement of the Ante Bellum era (Foster 1961; Hall 1982).

. . . External acts of worship in words and gestures, and outward forms, are of little use, but as signs of something else, or as they are a profession of inward worship: they are not so properly showing our religion by our deeds; for they are only a showing [of] our religion by words, or an outward profession. But he that shows religion in the other sort of duties, shows it is something more than a profession of words, he shows it in deeds. And though deeds may be hypocritical, as well as words; yet in themselves they are of greater importance, for they are much more profitable to ourselves and our neighbor. We cannot express our love to God, by doing any thing that is profitable to God; God would therefore have us do it in those things that are profitable to our neighbors, whom he has constituted his receivers; our goodness extends not to God, but to our fellow Christians. . . .

God's people, at such a time as this, ought especially to abound in deeds of charity, or alms giving. We generally, in these days, seem to fall far below the true spirit and practice of Christianity, with regard to this duty, and seem to have but little notion of it, so far as I can understand the New Testament. At a time when God is so liberal of spiritual things, we ought not to be strait-handed towards him, and sparing of our temporal things. . . . So far as I can judge by the Scripture, there is no external duty whatsoever, by which persons will be so much in the way, not only of receiving temporal benefits, but also spiritual blessings, the influences of God's holy Spirit in the heart, in divine discoveries, and spiritual consolations. I think it would be unreasonable to understand those promises, made to this duty, in the 58th chapter of Isaiah, in a sense exclusive of spiritual discoveries of comforts. Isa. lviii. 7, &c. "Is not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out, to thy house? When thou seest the naked that thou cover him, and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall they light break forth as the morning, and thy health shall spring forth speedily, and thy righteousness shall go before thee, and the glory of the Lord shall be thy rear-ward; then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Her I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the pointing forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; and if thou draw out thy shoulder to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday; and the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones; and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not."

. . . Some may possibly object that for persons to do deeds of charity, in hope of obtaining spiritual blessings and comforts in this way, would seem to show a self-righteous spirit, as though they would offer something to God to purchase these favors. But if this be a good objection, it may be made against every duty whatsoever. All eternal duties of the first table will be excluded by it, as well as those of the second. First table duties have as direct a tendency to raise self-righteous persons' expectations of receiving something from God, on the account of them, as second table duties; and on some accounts more, for those duties are more immediately offered *to God*, and therefore persons are more ready to expect something *from God* for them. But no duty is to be neglected for fear of making a righteousness of it. . . .

One thing more I would mention, which, if God should still carry on this work, would tend much to promote it, and that is, that a history should be published once a month, or once a fortnight, of the progress of it, by one of the ministers of Boston, who are near the press, and are most conveniently situated, to receive accounts from all parts. It has been found by experience, that the tidings of remarkable effects of the power and grace of God in any place, tend greatly

to awaken and engage the minds of persons, in other places. It is a great pity, therefore, but that some means should be used, for the most speedy, most extensive and certain giving information of such things, and that the country be not left, only to the slow, partial and doubtful information, and false representations of common report.

Thus I have (I hope, by the help of God) finished what I proposed. I have taken the more pains in it, because it appears to me, that now God is giving us the most happy season to attempt a universal reformation, that ever was given in New England. And it is a thousand pities, that we should fail of that which would be so glorious, for want of being sensible in what way God expects we should seek it. If it should please God to bless any means for convincing the country of His hand in the work, and bringing them fully and freely to acknowledge His glorious power and grace in it, and engage with one heart and would, and by due methods, to endeavor to promote it, it would be a dispensation of divine Providence, that would have a most glorious aspect, happily signifying the approach of great and glorious things to the church of God, and justly causing us to hope that Christ would speedily come, to set up his kingdom of light, holiness, peace and joy on earth, as is foretold in his word.--Amen: even so come LORD JESUS!

Source: The Works of Jonathan Edwards, edited by Perry Miller, 6 volumes, (New Haven, 1957-80).

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