

*'Enthusiasm for Liberty':
The Great Awakening as the
Key to the Revolution*

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THERE ARE VERY severe challenges facing the historian who tries to deal with the question of religion and the Revolution. In the first place most contemporary accounts state emphatically that during the Revolution the people were so busy fighting for independence and survival that the churches were almost deserted. In the second place the literature of the Revolutionary Era is concerned almost entirely with questions of politics. In the third place most of the prominent leaders of the new nation, the so-called Founding Fathers, were not very religious men, at least in the sense of being devout or orthodox believers in Christianity.

One can, of course, talk about the importance of freedom of conscience as one of the inalienable rights of man or about the separation of church and state, but these did not loom very large among the causes of the Revolution since neither king nor Parliament took much interest in them. It would be hard work to prove that the remote possibility of sending a bishop to head the Anglican churches in America was a central issue in the decision of the colonists to seek independence.

No one doubts that the Americans were basically a very religious people. The First Great Awakening in the 1730s

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(which we associate with the preaching of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Theodore Frelinghuysen, Samuel Davies, and Gilbert Tennent) and the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century (which we associate with the frontier camp meetings) prove that. It can also be shown that American patriots (with the possible exception of Thomas Jefferson) intended to create, and did so, not a secular nation but a Christian nation (with paid chaplains for Congress and the military, tax exemption for all church property, and 'In God We Trust' on our coinage). But the intransigent problem continues to plague us when we seek precisely for any implicit or overt religious aspects of the Revolution.

One way to solve this puzzle is to define religion in such a broad way as to describe the Revolution itself as a quasi-religious movement. Gordon Wood has already done this, and I find his argument very helpful.¹ But there is another strategy which I am convinced is equally important and which I shall utilize here. That is to demonstrate that the roots of the Revolution as a political movement were so deeply imbedded in the soil of the First Great Awakening forty years earlier that it can be truly said that the Revolution was the natural outgrowth of that profound and widespread religious movement.²

The anthropologist Kenelm Burridge has said, 'All religions are basically concerned with power. . . . Religions are concerned with the systematic ordering of different kinds of power': the power of God over life and death, disease and health; the power of the parent over the child or the husband over the wife; the power of the law over the criminal or the state over the citizen. 'No religious movement,' Burridge

¹ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969), esp. chap. 3.

² This approach has been given massive documentation by Alan Heimert in *Religion and the American Mind* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), and while I do not agree in all respects with Heimert's arguments, the analysis set forth here owes much to his insights. See esp. chap. 9.

argues, 'lacks a political ideology.'³ That is to say, no religious movement can avoid having some assumptions about the right and wrong ways in which power and authority can be used. What we call 'politics' is really our agreement as groups or nations as to how we wish to enforce a particular code of behavior (which is assumed to be godly) upon those who dissent from it.

If we accept this broad anthropological definition of religion, we can begin to understand why the Great Awakening of 1735 to 1765 was so important, and why it had such a profound impact upon the Revolution. During this generation the British colonists revised in very drastic ways their conception of how God's power should and would operate in North America—and, by extension, how it ought to operate everywhere in the world. In the end the Founding Fathers were fighting, as they said, not just for the rights of Englishmen but for the rights of mankind. As Gordon Wood has argued, the world view or cultural ideology which emerged from that reorientation was 'republicanism,' for which the signers of the Declaration of Independence were willing to sacrifice their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

John Adams spoke very much in anthropological terms when he said in 1818 that the Revolution really preceded the battles of Lexington and Concord: 'The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations. This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments and affections of the people was the real American revolution.' Americans believed so strongly that republicanism was God's will that they staked their lives on it. But the belief preceded the war.⁴

Our rationalist Founding Fathers were shrewd and coura-

³ Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth* (New York, 1969), pp. 5, 7.

⁴ Quoted in Clinton Rossiter, *The First American Revolution* (New York, 1953), pp. 4-5.

geous men, yet I am convinced that the Revolution would never have occurred had it been left to the deists and rationalists. Their cool, judicious, scientific arguments for republicanism did not carry enough weight with the average man to lead him into rebellion. Of course the fact that political 'science,' articulated by the learned, was on the side of rebellion did not hurt the Revolutionary cause. But the impetus for revolt came from non-scientific sources, and one of the most important of these was pietistic religion. Jonathan Edwards understood better than most deists the wellsprings of human action: 'our people do not so much need to have their heads stored as to have their hearts touched.'⁵ The colonists were, on the whole, committed to a belief in the mysterious and miraculous power of God. They did not deny the existence of natural law, and they were not opposed to scientific study of God's universe. But they did not believe that the deists' description of God was more valid than the Biblical description. Most of them were horrified in 1794 when Thomas Paine openly attacked the validity of revelation. The knowledge historians have about the deistic views of Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and Washington was not known to the people of their day, for these men wisely confined their heterodoxy to their private correspondence.

If we are to understand the connection between religion and the Revolution therefore, we must understand not only its political ideology but also the religious ideology of that large body of patriots who devoutly believed in the Bible and who claimed to have equally firm inductive or experimental truth to back their claims. In particular we must examine the ideology of evangelical Calvinists who constituted the vast majority of the Congregationalists in New England, the Dutch and German Reformed in the Middle Colonies, and the Pres-

⁵ Quoted in Clarence C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800* (New Haven, 1962), p. 18. Goen's work, like Heimert's, is essential to understanding the relation between religion and the Revolution.

byterians and Baptists everywhere. Since Calvinism was deplored by the deists as the most perverse enemy of rationalism, the historian has the difficult task of explaining how these two dissimilar philosophical outlooks finally came to agree that revolution and republicanism were the will of God. What, in other words, did Jonathan Edwards and Thomas Jefferson, the two outstanding intellectual figures of the century, have in common? What did Benjamin Franklin and Gilbert Tennent, the two most influential leaders in the Middle Colonies, share in their beliefs and values?

While leading scholars in recent years have concluded that the Revolution can best be understood as a kind of secular revival, they do not refer simply to the patriotic fervor of the Revolutionists when they use the term 'revival.' Alan Heimert speaks of 'the evangelical Revolutionary impulse, like that of the Great Awakening.' Gordon Wood describes the Revolution as 'republican regeneration.' Sidney Mead invokes the description of the United States of America as 'the nation with the soul of a church.'⁶ What they mean is that the spirit of '76 was not really very different from the spirit of the religious Awakening forty years earlier. The Revolution was a movement permeated with religious dedication, impelled by millennial faith, and fought with the conviction that its outcome was foreordained by the will of God. The great bulk of American patriots believed that God was on the side of his chosen people in this battle and that the king and Parliament were on the side of the devil.

Let us turn then to a closer look at the Great Awakening. On the surface it does not seem to have any direct relationship to the intensely political aspects of the Revolution. In fact, it is almost devoid of overt political statements. None of the revivalists attacked the king or Parliament. None of them

⁶ Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, p. 481; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, p. 118; Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York, 1975), pp. 48-77.

urged independence or even resistance to royal authority (as the proto-Unitarian Jonathan Mayhew did in these years). The revivalists were concerned simply and solely with converting individual sinners into children of God. They preached that men were innately depraved, born in sin, and bound to roast in hell, unless they received the grace of God in their hearts. Their revival sermons, of which Edwards's 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' is the most famous, stressed the fact that the colonists had fallen away from the faith of their fathers, that they had become engrossed in greedy money-making and litigious quarreling, that they were more concerned with success in this world than with eternal life in the next. And they found thousands upon thousands of people in every colony and of every denomination who were willing to cry out in anguish, 'Yes, I have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; I am a sinner and deserve hellfire. Oh, what must I do to be saved?' And the revivalists told them to repent, to ask forgiveness, and to pray for the mercy of God upon their wicked hearts.

While all of this seems a far cry from the political rationalism of 1776, there is a connection. Or, more accurately, there are a series of connections which, with the help of a more anthropological perspective on the role of religion and culture, we can find at work in the Awakening. One of these, as I have already suggested, was a new conception of God's power and how it worked in sustaining social order and morality. Another was a new conception of ecclesiastical order or the organization of church life. A third was a new perception of the role of the ministry in persuading man to adopt the ways of God. A fourth was a new understanding of how God intended to redeem mankind and the special role of Americans in that divine mission. A fifth was a new definition of the relationship between church and state. And a sixth was a new understanding of true virtue and humanitarianism toward all poor and oppressed people—including black slaves and American Indians.

All of these together added up to a new optimistic self-confidence, a new assurance of the importance of the individual vis à vis the authorities in society, and a new sense of intercolonial unity stronger than the ties to the hub of the empire in London. If we can understand this transformation in thought and feeling, in 'principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections', we will see more clearly than we have how direct and immediate a role religion played in the making of the Revolution.

We have unfortunately come to think of the American Revolution as such a conservative movement (compared, say, to the French, Russian, Chinese, or Cuban) that we forget how radical and fanatical it seemed at the time, especially to those who lived by more traditional values in Europe. Even Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington, being well-educated, thoughtful rationalists, were very abstract in their arguments, utilizing legalistic, constitutional, or historical precedents rather than feelings or sentiments. But a conservative Lutheran minister in Philadelphia in 1775 described the Revolution as a spontaneous radical outburst from the bottom up:

Throughout the whole country great preparations are making for the war, and almost every person is under arms. The ardor manifested in these melancholy circumstances is indescribable. If a hundred men are required [for a military company], many more immediately offer, and are dissatisfied when they are not accepted. I know of no similar case in history. Neighborhoods, concerning which it would have been expected that years would be required to induce them voluntarily to take up arms, became strongly inclined for war as soon as the battle of Lexington was known. Quakers and Mennonites take part in the military exercises, and in great numbers renounce their former religious principles. The hoarse din of war is hourly heard in our streets. The present disturbances inflict no small injury on religion [i.e., regular church and parish activities]. Everybody is constantly on the alert, anxious, like the ancient Athenians, to hear the news, and, amid the mass of news, the hearts of men are, Alas, closed against the Good Word of God.

The Lord is chastening the people, but they do not feel it. . . . In the American army there are many clergymen, who serve both as chaplains and as officers. I know two, one of whom is a colonel, and the other a captain. The whole country is in perfect enthusiasm for liberty. . . . Would to God that men would become as zealous and unanimous in asserting their spiritual liberty, as they are in vindicating their political freedom.⁷

The Great Awakening and the Revolution clearly link in this concept of 'enthusiasm for liberty.' 'Enthusiasm' was in the eighteenth century a religious term. It comes from a Greek word meaning 'inspired' or 'filled with the spirit of God.'⁸ To some theologians it meant a person 'possessed by a spirit' which might in fact be from the devil rather than God. During the seventeenth century a person who refused to obey the powers that be and who claimed to have a message from God to dissent from the prevailing orthodox behavior or doctrine was considered 'an enthusiast.' Among those accused of this fanaticism were Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, the Quakers, the early Baptists, and those accused of witchcraft in Salem in 1691. The Puritans would not tolerate such people within their social order and these enthusiasts were either banished, jailed, or hanged. During the Great Awakening many ministers who went from place to place preaching repentance and salvation were considered 'enthusiasts,' and in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Virginia some of these were jailed. One of them, the Reverend James Davenport, was declared non compos mentis in 1742 and banished from Connecticut and Massachusetts. The Reverend Samuel Finley, who later became the first president of Princeton College, was banished from Connecticut in 1742 as an enthusiast who created disorder in the churches and disturbed the peace of the community. Connecticut passed a law in 1742

⁷ Quoted in Edward F. Humphrey, *Nationalism and Religion in America 1774-1789* (Boston, 1924), pp. 18-19.

⁸ See David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm and the Great Awakening* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969).

entitled 'An Act for Regulating Abuses and Correcting Disorders in Ecclesiastical Affairs' in a fruitless effort to quell revivalistic enthusiasm.⁹

It seems clear that the same kind of enthusiasm which led zealous pietists to risk jail and banishment during the Awakening was at work among the enthusiasts for liberty in 1775. But what we need to know precisely is what did the religious principles of the Awakening have in common with the political principles of the Revolution? Why did Quakers and Mennonites feel in 1775 that they must give up their pacifistic ideal and fight for independence? Why did clergymen enlist as soldiers as well as chaplains? Why did Baptists, who had so often turned to the king for help against Congregationalist persecution in New England, or Presbyterians, who had turned to the king for assistance against Anglican persecution in Virginia, decide in 1775 that they should fight for the patriot cause against the king?

We live in such a secular age and worship so faithfully at the feet of science that it is difficult for us to comprehend our pious forefathers as easily as our rationalist forefathers. It is hard to realize that in many respects the scientific rationalists in 1776 were inherently more conservative, less revolutionary, and less egalitarian than the evangelical Calvinists. The rationalist takes the world as it is and seeks to accommodate himself to its exigencies. The pietist, having come face to face with God, sees the world as it ought to be and yearns to change it. The rationalist pursues happiness prudently; he respects the earthly trappings of status, prestige, power, wealth, and learning. The pietist, having experienced miraculously a different order of reality, is apt to be imprudent, daring, rash, and careless of the status symbols of this world; he finds temporal goods and honors paltry and unsatisfying

⁹ For the efforts to suppress 'the enthusiasts' of the Great Awakening see W. G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971) 1:360-98, and Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Durham, N.C., 1930).

when measured on the scale of eternal bliss. While the rationalist acts with caution and balance, the pietist is ready at any moment to squander his money, his time, his energy, to help create a new and better order of happiness. He has awakened to the infinite possibilities of the human spirit, and he trusts the power of God to prevail against all odds.¹⁰

For the same reason the pietist is more egalitarian than the rationalist. He sees the same spiritual power in the souls of all men. While the rationalist ostensibly believes in equality—because all men are born with the power of reason and are consequently educable—he also knows that all men have different human potentials. They differ in innate intelligence, talent, strength, and will and are bound to rise or fall in the world by virtue of their birth, education, wealth, or social rank. Common sense, as the rationalist understands it, dictates that the world will be best governed by the educated, the sophisticated, the aristocracy of talent.¹¹ The pietist, however, sees that even the educated and wellborn are blind to the fundamental truth of divine power which guides the universe. The meanest and poorest of the converted saints of God therefore have more vision, wisdom, and insight than the best educated and most sophisticated rationalist. It is upon this rock that a republic must be founded—the rock of true virtue inherent in every human soul; the God-given insight of conscience is more important to a nation governed by the common people than the ability through reason to fathom the natural laws of science.

¹⁰ The differences in epistemology which led to these social differences between evangelicals and rationalists is treated more fully in Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, pp. 42–49.

¹¹ Consider, for example, this statement by the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew (the proto-Unitarian whose *Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission* in 1750 is often cited as evidence of the radicalism of religious liberals): 'It is not intended in this assertion that all men have equal abilities for judging what is true and right. . . . Those of the lower class can get but a little ways in their inquiries into the natural and moral constitution of the world.' Quoted in Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, p. 47. It is of course well known that Jefferson and Adams believed in rule by the *aristoi* or 'natural aristocracy.'

The central feature of the great revivals of the 1730s and 1740s was the experience of individual conversion. New Light ministers (Whitefield, Edwards, Davies, Tennent, Frelinghuysen) told their congregations that men and women did not gain favor or forgiveness from God simply by learning or by conforming to the man-made creeds of a church or to the prevailing moral standards of their community. God demanded a higher standard of spiritual commitment than that. He demanded total submission to his will, complete repentance for sins and utter obedience to his commands. And for a variety of reasons multitudes of Americans felt the need for such forgiveness and submission.

Historians have now shown pretty convincingly that Americans in the early years of the eighteenth century were very uncertain of their relationship to God as well as of their relations with one another.¹² The original zeal of the earlier generations of pious settlers, struggling to win a beachhead on the stern frontier along the coast, had worn thin. In all the colonies the people were badly divided over questions of mercantile and land development. Times were prosperous. There were many opportunities to grow rich. Neighbor began to vie with neighbor, merchant with merchant, in aggressive, competitive ways, scrambling to make the most of the New World's fabulous resources. Normally decent people began to cut moral corners, to abuse their offices, to slight their social responsibilities in order to engage in sharp dealing for private profit. This in turn produced an increasing number of lawsuits over alleged frauds or violations of contract. Town meetings became bitter, quarrelsome affairs and frequently one part of a town or county petitioned the legislature to settle problems which the local judicial or political system could not. Parish

¹² See especially Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970); and Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town the First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York, 1970).

ministers were unable to appeal effectively to conscience, moral law, or communal harmony to reconcile angry factions within their congregations and were themselves often at odds with their parishioners over salaries or religious taxes. The poor began to accuse the rich of oppression and to attack the learned clergy for siding with the upper class against the common interest. Though few acknowledged it, increasing social and economic tensions produced increasing guilt feelings and pangs of conscience. People seemed to have lost that close relationship with God and each other which had marked the earlier generations of settlers.

Looking back, the historian can see these anxieties as part of the growing pains of the colonies as they adjusted to the New World environment and began to abandon the old ways they had known in Europe. As towns matured and land became scarce and expensive, the old patriarchal relationships and community spirit gave way to change and migration. The rapid expansion of seaports and market towns and the growing size of the population and its rapid movement westward in search of cheaper land and greater opportunities could not help but affect the institutional structure—the concept of familial loyalty, the ties of friendship, the covenant of the church, and the respect for the parish minister. As these institutional constraints failed to preserve order, the more devout churchgoers began to lose faith in the authority of the church and the state. Somehow the old system seemed to be breaking down. The old ways of acting and believing, sharing and trusting no longer carried authority. The institutions of the old corporate social order were suffering what the sociologists call a crisis of cultural legitimacy. But no one knew what to do about it.

In this uneasy state of affairs the emergence of revival ministers preaching a doctrine of immediate repentance from sin and immediate conversion to God aroused an inordinate amount of attention after 1735. Pious people were anxious to

know why God was angry with them and seemed to have departed from their midst. They wanted to regain their standing in God's good graces. When the Reverend George Whitefield arrived from England in 1739, he had already established a reputation as a successful revivalist in the old country. Americans found his style of preaching strikingly different from what they had been hearing in their local parish churches. Many were caught up in the enthusiasm aroused by this twenty-three-year-old evangelist as he traveled from town to town along the whole Atlantic coast of North America. Even Benjamin Franklin, who went to hear him with considerable skepticism in Philadelphia, was so excited by his words that he emptied his pockets into the collection plate.¹³ Jonathan Edwards's wife in Massachusetts said that it is 'wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience. . . . I have seen upwards of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob.'¹⁴ One ordinary farmer in Connecticut who saddled his horse, hoisted his wife up behind him, and rode madly into town to hear Whitefield said that when the preacher mounted the platform erected for him on the village green, 'He lookt almost angellical, a young, slim, slender youth before some thousands of people & with a bold, undaunted countenance, & my hearing how god was with him everywhere as he came along, it solumnized my mind & put me in a trembling fear before he began to preach, for he looked as if he was Cloathed with Authority from the great god.'¹⁵ Americans believed in God, in heaven and hell, in damnation, and in miracles. Their suppressed guilt and anxiety were overwhelmed when they were persuaded that Whitefield was a prophet of God, a man sent as God's messenger to arouse a sinful people from their

¹³ Franklin's famous confrontation with Whitefield's eloquence is quoted in Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm*, pp. 34-37.

¹⁴ Quoted in J. M. Bumsted and J. E. Van de Wetering, eds., *What Must I Do to be Saved?* (Hinsdale, Ill., 1976), p. 75.

¹⁵ Nathan Cole, quoted *ibid.*, p. 74.

wicked ways. And not only did God raise up Whitefield, but he raised up a host of other eloquent young revivalists to call the people back to the ways of God.

In describing the kinds of feelings which swept over them in these revival meetings or in retrospect afterwards, most converts agreed that what struck them most forcefully was not God's anger but his concern, his interest in helping them to mend their ways. The revivalists preached hellfire for the wicked but they also promised rewards to the repentant. 'Of what then should you be afraid?', said Whitefield to the sincere believer. 'What shall separate you henceforward from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No. I am persuaded neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come . . . shall be able to separate you from the love of God.'¹⁶ What joy there was to think that God their father, who had been so angry with them, cared enough to send grace into their hearts and promise thereafter to love and cherish them as his prodigal sons. Let me quote a typical conversion experience by a young man of good family in Connecticut who in later years became one of the foremost advocates of religious liberty in the colonies, Isaac Backus:

On August 29, 1741, as I was mowing in the field alone . . . it appeared clear to me then that I had tried every way that possibly I could [for salvation] and if I perished forever I could do no more—and the justice of God shined so clear before my eyes in condemning such a guilty Rebel that I could say no more—but fell at his feet. I saw that I was in his hands and he had a right to do with me just as he pleased. . . . And just in that critical moment God, who caused the light to shine out of darkness—shined into

¹⁶ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 78. The belief that revivalists in this Awakening concentrated wholly upon terrifying sinners into salvation by hellfire and damnation sermons would be appropriately modified if students would read more carefully the last six paragraphs of Edwards's *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, in which he stresses 'the extraordinary opportunity' offered by God who 'has flung the door of mercy wide open and stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to sinners' to enter in.

my heart with such a discovery of that glorious righteousness which fully satisfied the law that I had broke, and of the infinite fulness that there is in Christ to satisfy the wants of such a helpless creature as I was. . . . that my whole heart was attracted and drawn after God.¹⁷

Backus said he felt that God's new light had shone down from heaven upon him 'as if there was not another person in the world for it to shine upon.' God, in short, was speaking to individuals directly. He was expressing directly his personal concern with each and every person as an individual, not as a member of a community or a church or a parish but as a man who was wholly responsible for his own salvation and who would have no one to blame but himself if he did not answer God's call and obey his commands. God did not commune with his people through a general covenant which was passed on by birthright membership from father to son. God's power operated, so the New Light of this Awakening taught, through the heart and commitment of each individual. And once the individual committed himself and became regenerated or re-born as a son of God, he need not thereafter look to any other authority for guidance.

What this kind of conversion experience seemed to be telling Americans as it swept over the colonies was that God does not work through kings and bishops, through a learned clergy or an upper class of the rich and wellborn, but through the people themselves. Out of the death of the old covenanted ideal of the corporate community was born the new republican ideal of government by consent. Richard Bushman has summed it up precisely in his book *From Puritan to Yankee*: 'As, in the expanding economy of the eighteenth century, merchants and farmers felt free to pursue wealth with an

¹⁷ Quoted in Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm*, p. 44. For a somewhat different version see also W. G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston, 1967), pp. 14-15. Backus had not yet heard Whitefield but he had heard equally enthusiastic revival preaching by James Davenport, Benjamin Pomeroy, and Eleazar Wheelock.

avidity dangerously close to avarice, the energies released exerted irresistible pressure against traditional bounds. When the Great Awakening added its measure of opposition the old institutions began to crumble. By 1765, while the structure still stood, the most perceptive leaders were looking for new methods of ordering society in an age when human loyalties would be forthcoming voluntarily or not at all.¹⁸ It was fortunate perhaps that after 1765 the king and Parliament began to tighten imperial control over the colonies, for in doing so it allowed the new force unleashed by the Awakening to turn against this outside, alien foe rather than against the internal authorities in the colonies. The guilt which had been internalized prior to 1735 and which had caused such turmoil during the Awakening was projected outward after 1765 upon a common enemy.¹⁹ New Light religion absorbed social anxiety and private guilt into a political reformation which, the colonists told themselves, was as much for the purification of old England as for the reformation of new America. While the old structure still stood in 1765, as Bushman says, by 1775 the new wine burst out of the old bottles. Religious and political regeneration merged in a triumphant effort to realize the rising glory of God in America.

In addition to changing American social and ecclesiastical institutions the Awakening brought about a very critical turning point in American theology. As a result of the Awakening American pietists came to believe that they had a special role to play in God's providential plan for the redemption of mankind. By 1765 the whole significance of millennialism had been transformed in America. Prior to the Awakening theologians in America had universally preached that the millennium would occur only when Christ returned to earth to set

¹⁸ Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, p. x.

¹⁹ For a psychological analysis of Revolutionary rhetoric in terms of a revolt of the colonists against their 'father' the king (*Pater Patriae*), see Edwin G. Burrows and Michael Wallace, 'The American Revolution: The Ideology and Psychology of National Liberation,' *Perspectives in American History* 6(1972):167-306.

right the wicked ways of this world. The second coming had to precede the millennium because men themselves were too wicked ever to create a perfect social and moral order. Increase Mather had been so fearful of the barbarous influence of the frontier environment that he predicted 'that in the glorious times promised to the Church on Earth, America will be Hell.' But by 1745 the glorious showers of blessing spread by God throughout the colonies had caused a far different and more optimistic interpretation to arise. American theologians began to argue that perhaps God meant to convert all the people of America and then to enlist them to help prepare the way for Christ's return by creating a perfect social order in the New World. No less a theologian than Jonathan Edwards expounded this new postmillennial optimism in a series of sermons in 1742. Christ will not return to earth before the millennium, he said, but after it. What was more, the New Jerusalem would not be accomplished all at once 'by some miracle' but will be 'gradually brought to pass' through the work of man. 'It is not unlikely that this work of God's Spirit [the Awakening], so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or at least a prelude of that glorious work of God so often foretold in Scripture which, in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind. . . . We cannot reasonably think otherwise than that the beginning of this great work of God must be near. And there are many things that make it probable that this work will begin in America.'²⁰ In this postmillennial view of American destiny it was manifest that Americans were the successors of the Jewish nation, the chosen people of God, God's New Israel. As such they had a

²⁰ Quoted in Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), p. 55. See also Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, pp. 62-73, and C. C. Goen, 'Jonathan Edwards: A New Departure in Eschatology,' *Church History* 28(1959):25-40. It is significant that Jefferson and most other rationalists and deists continued to believe in a cyclical theory of history and thus lacked that faith in linear progress from Adam's fall to God's ultimate redemption of mankind which has been so central to American culture since 1740. See Stow Persons, 'The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth-Century America,' *American Quarterly* 6(1954):147-63.

mission to serve as the avant-garde of God's millennial kingdom on earth.

As this opinion spread after 1742 throughout the colonies, many came to believe that Americans could not effectively fulfill this mission so long as they were tied to a corrupt, oppressive, and tyrannical monarch and Parliament in England. In the years 1765 to 1775 those imbued with this new light God had shed during the Awakening became convinced that God was trying to show them how much more important it was to adhere to his higher laws than to the man-made laws of Parliament. Regardless of a man's denomination, this post-millennial optimism influenced many colonists to believe in 1775 that God had ordained, planned, and guided the British colonies to that moment when they must take their destiny into their own hands. Only in a purified and perfect republican social order, which guaranteed political and religious liberty to all men, could their mission to the world be accomplished. Thereafter the rights of Englishmen became the inalienable rights of mankind and the Americans felt obliged to bring the blessings of liberty to the rest of the world.

The 'New Light movement,' as the Awakening came to be called, also was as dramatic a turning point in American social theory as it was in American theology. The 'New World' had never attracted many of the hereditary aristocracy of England or Europe because they were generally well enough off where they were. But those who immigrated to the New World (the nonconformist safety valve of the Old World) nevertheless carried with them in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries their Old World belief that society should be clearly differentiated into social ranks and orders. The Puritan leaders had levied heavy fines upon those of the lower orders in Massachusetts Bay who, upon acquiring money, sought to dress themselves in the kinds of finery which distinguished the upper from the lower orders. Even the Quaker William Penn said that his religious egalitarianism was never intended to

break down the distinctions between the various social levels ordained by God.

But when the crisis of institutional authority began in the colonies in the 1730s and when the old hierarchical, corporate order seemed unable to provide harmony and leadership, the common folk began to have serious doubts about its validity. The efforts of the 'authorities' to oppose the religious enthusiasm of the Great Awakening only contributed, as Bushman says, to the downfall of the old order. The upper orders in church and state insisted that the revivalists were fanatical demagogues causing disorder in the parishes and invading the rights and privileges of the settled parish ministers; by causing schisms in the churches and disputes over religious taxes they were undermining the laws. So itinerant preachers were fined, jailed, and banished, and when their converts accused the parish ministers of being enemies to God and opponents of his divine outpouring of grace, many of them were put in jail for refusing any longer to pay taxes to support such sad-duces and pharisees. In Anglican Virginia the Baptists were regularly jailed and mobbed right up until 1775 on the grounds that their revivals disturbed the civil peace and their churches were not properly licensed by the state.²¹

The Awakening also produced bitter quarrels and schisms in the Middle Colonies where there was no established church system but where conservative ministers in the Dutch Reformed and Presbyterian churches opposed the fervent religious enthusiasm of the revival.²² It is significant that even George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent (though not Jonathan Edwards) encouraged pious converts to leave their

²¹ See Robert B. Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond, Va., 1810), Lewis Peyton Little, *Imprisoned Preachers and Religious Liberty in Virginia* (Lynchburg, Va., 1938), and for a remarkable analysis of the democratic and socially revolutionary aspects of the Baptist movement see Rhys Isaac, 'Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765-1775,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser. 31 (1974):345-68.

²² See C. H. Maxson, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Chicago, 1935), and L. J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1949).

parish churches and go to hear New Light preaching if their parish ministers were not converted and therefore could not support God's work. Over 125 parishes in New England were split between New Lights and Old Lights by the 1750s and many more such schisms took place in the middle and southern colonies.

These decisions, made by thousands upon thousands of individuals, thinking and acting entirely upon their own responsibility and risking their livelihood, their status, and the welfare of their families, constitute the religious foreshadowing of the political decisions taken in 1775 for or against separation from the empire. The New Light nonconformists would not contribute in person or in purse to the continued support of corrupt religious institutions which opposed God's law, denied the freedom of conscience of individuals, and utilized the power of the state to oppress those who did God's will. These dissenters from the established order in parishes and counties across the colonies were taken to jail, fined, or had their household goods sold at auction by the local sheriff for engaging in civil disobedience to the powers that be. But they chose to obey God rather than man.²³ Having done so once, they were fortified to do so again after 1765 in protest against the injustices of the Stamp Act, the Coercive Acts, the Admiralty laws, and the tea tax. Something crucial happened in the Awakening: in that great religious upheaval the colonists learned to judge for themselves and to act out of their own consciences. By 1776 it had become axiomatic that 'disobedience to tyrants is obedience to God.'

Fortunately for the Christian churches in the colonies the great majority of their ministers eventually came to agree with the New Lights. They concluded that the Great Awak-

²³ Civil disobedience as an aspect of New Light resistance to the standing order is discussed in McLoughlin, *New England Dissent* 1:360-477, and in Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism*, pp. 258-96.

ening was truly a work of God. Hence America was spared that anticlericalism which wreaked such havoc in the French and Russian revolutions where the clergy allied themselves with the old order. By 1765 the New Lights had come to predominate in most of the Protestant denominations and even had strongly influenced the young Catholic churches in the colonies. Only, as might be expected, in a hierarchy where church appointments derived directly from the secular authority of the king, that is, in the Anglican Church, did the parish priests side with the *ancien régime*.

The Awakening also helped the colonies to develop a new kind of intercolonial unity. Some historians have seen this unity deriving essentially from the interdenominational concert among non-Anglican ministers after 1760 to oppose the appointment of an Anglican bishop for the colonies. Actually intercolonial unity preceded rather than followed this plan for 'Christian Union' (as Ezra Stiles called it). The true basis for intercolonial unity lay in the system of itinerant preaching which played so important a part in spreading the New Light revival spirit after 1735. Itinerant preachers of all denominations, lay and clerical, followed Whitefield's example and toured from one colony to another gathering converts for their particular denominations or for all denominations. As the dissenting churches grew in number, the itinerants helped to unite them throughout the colonies. From these informal ties came the formal nationalization of the major Protestant denominations. Out of seeming disunity emerged a new order of union. The Revolutionary motto, '*e pluribus unum*,' had its practical beginning in the religious unity of the New Light preachers. Although each particular Christian persuasion devoutly believed that its way of faith and practice was the one true way prescribed by God, all of them agreed that God's truth would prevail through religious freedom and did not need coercive uniformity. Voluntarism in belief meant voluntarism in church organization. Men, women, and children

were responsible under God for individually choosing their way to eternity; the state could not do it for them.

This was one common ground which the pietists in 1775 held in common with Thomas Jefferson. He too believed that truth would prevail in the free marketplace of ideas, though for him that truth was of a very different order.²⁴

Less attention has been paid to the equally important fact that the itinerant revivalism of the generation of the Awakening fostered a new system of mass communication in America. Much has been made of the importance of colonial newspapers in spreading the word of republican ideology. Professor Harry Stout has recently noted that we must give equal attention to the role of itinerant preachers in spreading the word of God's New Light ideology which was its spiritual counterpart.²⁵ When Stout argues that itinerancy must be studied in terms of Marshall McLuhan's axiom that 'the medium is the message,' he does not mean to denigrate the religious or doctrinal content of the New Light preachers. He does mean that itinerants conveyed a message of free and voluntary individual choice in religious affairs simply by offering their message in village squares or private homes as an alternative to the official word from the parish, tax-supported, church. But equally as important was the way in which the itinerants preached that message of free choice. Not being cloaked with the authority of the state or with the familiarity of the local community, the itinerant spoke simply as one individual to another; he spoke outside of any temporal or territorial location. And in doing so he freed Americans forever from the Old World view that religious stability relied on having roots in a fixed

²⁴ For a comparison of the liberal and evangelical approach to 'truth' and their different reasons for supporting religious liberty and separation of church and state see W. G. McLoughlin, 'Isaac Backus and the Separation of Church and State,' *American Historical Review* 73 (1968):1392-1413.

²⁵ For this important insight into the significance of itinerancy I am indebted to Harry S. Stout of the University of Connecticut for letting me see in advance of publication his paper entitled 'Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the Revolution,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser. 34 (Oct. 1977).

place or parish. Itinerant preaching freed the individual to travel where he would by assuring him that wherever he went the word of God through divinely ordained messengers would reach him. And since itinerant preachers played down doctrinal and ecclesiastical differences in order to lay stress upon individual repentance and conversion, mobile Americans could rest assured that whatever denominational exhorter followed them to the frontier or from rural farm to coastal city the essential spiritual message he would hear would be the same: repent, throw yourself on God's mercy, and he will save and protect you personally by sending his spirit to dwell in your heart wherever you may roam or whatever community you may temporarily reside in.

At the same time, the itinerant, who frequently lacked any formal education and almost never had a college education, spoke to other men as equals. Not only did he eschew the parish church but he stood on the same ground as the people to whom he spoke; he lived at their level and spoke in their language. Itinerancy democratized America's religion before the Revolution democratized its government. In preaching, the itinerant did not, because he knew he could not, order or command his hearers to conform. He was clothed only with spiritual authority and his power was based solely on his ability to persuade the individual listener to act upon his own free will. People who were rebellious against parental authority, or that of town fathers or legislators or royal governors or Parliament or their royal father in Buckingham Palace, could nevertheless accept attacks upon their sins and salvation for their guilt from an equal who had experienced the same psychological and spiritual problems. The message of the itinerant always began with a personal testimony of his own rebellion and search for forgiveness: 'I was once a sinner like you, probably even worse; I was once in anguish over my inability to commune with my father in heaven or to obey my fathers on earth; but in the depths of my fear and self-hatred

I turned to God and he had mercy upon me and transformed me into a new man. Today I stand before you not only free but happy; and I have come to offer you freely the same salvation.' Words like these, spoken in language the common man understood, and spoken from the sincerity of the heart by persons who knew whereof they spoke from their own personal experience, created a wholly new religious orientation in American life. Out of the Awakening came an individualized, non-theological, voluntary, and migratory ecclesiastical order perfectly suited to the needs of a people who had to shake off the institutional restrictions of an Old World order if they were ever to spread across the New World continent.

Stout's analysis confirms the earlier conclusions of Sidney Mead, who said in *The Lively Experiment*, 'The revivals demonstrated the spectacular effectiveness of persuasion alone to churches rapidly being shorn of coercive power.' 'The revivalists stressed religious experience and results—namely conversion—more than correctness of belief, adherence to creedal statements and proper observances of traditional forms.'²⁶

Much has been made by social historians of the fact that the Enlightenment ushered in an era of concern for the benevolent care of the poor, the sick, the orphan, and the criminal. Philanthropic effort seemed to go hand-in-hand with the belief that science was teaching men better ways to heal and to rehabilitate those who had previously been considered inveterate sinners or children of the devil. Yet we can also credit the Great Awakening with a very similar impulse toward humanitarian reform. Jonathan Edwards defined true Christian virtue in 1756 as 'disinterested benevolence to Being in general.' Edwards's pupil Samuel Hopkins interpreted disinterested benevolence to mean devout Christian concern for the care and freedom of our fellow human beings. In 1773 Hopkins joined with Ezra Stiles (a minister who had not been overly friendly toward the New Light movement) in attacking the

²⁶ Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment* (New York, 1963), p. 31.

slave trade.²⁷ And that same year some New Light Baptists in Boston, joined by others in the remote town of Ashfield, issued public broadsides against slavery itself.²⁸ Here again we can see how the rationalists and pietists, starting from different parts of the republican-Christian world view, had arrived by 1775 at very similar positions. Jefferson, for his part, wrote into the Declaration of Independence a clause justifying rebellion on the grounds that George III had forced slavery upon his colonies.

Finally we can note that John Adams, though a Unitarian, and the Reverend John Witherspoon, a New Light Presbyterian, shared the same concern for the importance of public virtue in the new republic. Adams spoke of the United States of America as a 'Christian Sparta'—a nation whose citizens should be as willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of their country as the Spartans at Thermopylae and at the same time as dedicated to God as the Christians who were thrown to the lions by the Emperor Nero.²⁹ Witherspoon, who served in the Continental Congress while at the same time remaining president of the New Light college in Princeton, New Jersey, said, 'In free States where the body of the people have the supreme power properly in their own hands and must be ultimately resorted to on all great matters if there be a general corruption of manners there can be nothing but confusion. So true is this that civil liberty cannot long be preserved without virtue. A monarchy may subsist for ages, and be better or worse under a good or bad prince; but a republic once equally poised must either preserve its virtue or lose its liberty.'³⁰ Adams and Witherspoon, the rationalist and the pietist, represent the two sides of the Revolutionary coin, the connection between the Awakening and the Revolution. The Enlight-

²⁷ See Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, pp. 275-76.

²⁸ See McLoughlin, *New England Dissent* 2:766-68.

²⁹ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, p. 118.

³⁰ Quoted in V. L. Collins, *President Witherspoon* (Princeton, 1925)2:128.

ened rationalist provided Americans with a theory of political science which stated that it was a natural law that government must be by the consent of the governed, that it must preserve inalienable natural rights, that it must have checks and balances, but that it must depend ultimately upon the willingness of the individual citizen to sacrifice his own comfort and welfare for the good of the commonwealth. The pietist provided Americans with a religious ideology which said that God's power inhered essentially in the free and voluntary consent of the individual, that Americans were God's chosen people, that true virtue required disinterested benevolence toward all mankind, and that without total commitment to God's higher law as expressed in his holy word no nation could save itself from corruption and tyranny.

Searching for a single exposition of this two-sided coin, I finally chose, as a fitting conclusion for this essay, the poem of Philip Freneau entitled 'The Rising Glory of America.' Written in 1771, the year Freneau graduated from Princeton where he was a pupil of Witherspoon and a classmate of James Madison, the poem contains a remarkable fusion of the New Light and the republican ideologies. Freneau, it will be remembered, enlisted in Washington's army five years after writing this poem and in later years, after staking his life on the cause, he became a newspaper editor in support of Jefferson's candidacy for the Presidency. Though more accurately identified as a rationalist than a pietist, Freneau speaks in this pre-Revolutionary poem with very strong religious imagery. For him, as for most patriots, the Revolution was not a secular nor even a political movement; it was an act of God. 'Republicanism,' as Gordon Wood has written, 'meant more for Americans than simply the elimination of a king and the institution of an elective system. It added a moral dimension, a utopian depth to the political separation from England, a depth that involved the very character of their society.' This moral dimension is clearly evident in Freneau's poem:

Here independent power shall hold her sway,
And public virtue warm the patriot breast:
No traces shall remain of tyranny,
And laws, a pattern to the world beside,
Be here enacted first. . . .
A new Jerusalem, sent down from heaven,
Shall grace our happy earth—perhaps this land,
Whose ample breast shall then receive, tho' late,
Myriads of saints, with their immortal King,
To live and reign on earth a thousand years,
Thence call'd *Millennium*. . . .
. . . A Canaan here,
Another Canaan shall excel the old. . . .
Such days the world,
And such AMERICA, thou first shalt have,
When ages yet to come, have run their round,
And future years of bliss alone remain.³¹

If Freneau spoke for his fellow patriots, and we have every reason to think he did, the Revolution can be described as the political revitalization of a people whose religious regeneration began in the Great Awakening. Regeneration or cultural rebirth was the key which unlocked the door to the new household of the republic.

³¹ Philip Freneau, *Poems on Various Subjects* (London, 1861), pp. 50-51.

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