

American Protestant Awakening

Summary: The 18th century brought a series of religious revivals to the American colonies. Preachers traveled through Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist communities, speaking to large crowds, urging renewed piety and personal conversions, and infusing American Protestantism with a lasting individualistic spirit.

Early English Christian settlers at first built colonies in isolation from one another, but by the early 18th century they increasingly shared a range of experiences: they were Protestant and British; the Spanish and French were common rivals and enemies; and they all looked to heroic forebears whose great piety had led them to pioneer the Atlantic crossing to carve out Christian societies in the wilderness. They also shared increasing prosperity as the colonies became more integrated into an Atlantic economy and the colonists explored a frontier that, however menacing, beckoned with new lands to clear and cultivate.

By the 18th century, the colonies had also experienced a history of religious competition and decline, as churches struggled to maintain the zeal of their founders in a climate increasingly marked by religious indifference and the spirit of compromise. In New England, where cycles of waxing and waning piety threatened the mission of the envisioned Christian society, ministers often preached “jeremiads,” sermons in the dire tone of the prophet Jeremiah, that chastised colonists and called them back to true piety.

In the 1730s and 1740s, a series of local revivals in different colonies were fanned into an intercolonial religious movement called the Great Awakening. Preachers like Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and the Englishman George Whitefield (1714-1770) preached an emotional message of “awakening” to Christ and personal conversion. As colonists aggressively began to penetrate the frontier, the Great Awakening, with its passionate itinerant revivalists and new constituencies, helped revitalize and reshape the colonial religious heritage. It also generated religious controversy as conflict over the nature of true religion divided many communities. The Awakening played an important role in giving an individualistic and democratic cast to revivalist religion, a cast that would subsequently come to dominate American Protestantism.

This new pietism was interdenominational in the sense that its spirit infused Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists alike. The intercolonial dimension of the Awakening also played an important political role by leading people up and down the Atlantic seacoast to consider themselves as a single emotional community. The sense of a common American identity that resulted from the Awakening proved crucial to the growth of the spirit of revolution as tensions with Britain increased later in the century.