Religion and the American Revolution

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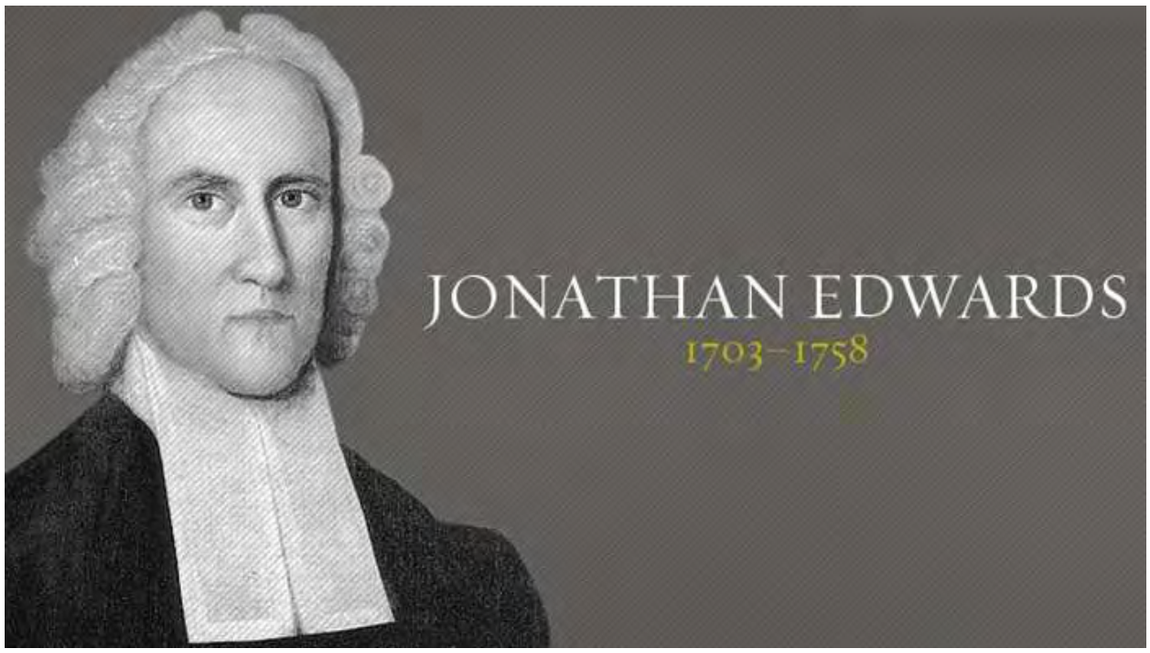


John Adams observed the events of the 1770's were the culmination of a longer process:

> *What do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American war? 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...*
> *John Adams Letter to Hezekiah Niles (1818)*

The colonists, over the preceding century and a half, had had to become more and more independent of the mother country in order to meet the challenges of the new land.

The growing self-reliance of the colonists and their readiness to go their own way were brought about by the confluence of many factors and forces over that century and a half, some geographic, some political, some economic, some religious. Most history books limit the religious dimension to the search for religious liberty which brought many colonists to this country from various European oppressions. But the American Revolutionary experience cannot be fully understood without the factor referred to by John Adams: "a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations."

The sense of duty, obligation and obedience upon which all government rests is essentially a by-product of religion (even among those who are not themselves "religious"), since it provides legitimation of governmental authority by answering the basic questions of human identity: who are we? Why are we here? What is right for us to do? Who shall lead us and whom shall we obey?

The Promised Land

The change which took place during a century and a half of colonial development is apparent in a comparison between the Mayflower Compact and the Declaration of Independence. In 1620 the Pilgrims characterized themselves as "loyal servants of our dread sovereign Lord, King James." One hundred and fifty-six years later, the colonists could announce: "A prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant is unfit to be the ruler of a free people."

That change was brought about not only by the bitter experiences of the latter decades with the Hanoverian kings and their royal governors but by the interpretation of that experience in its spiritual significance propounded from a thousand pulpits by what James Otis called "the Black Regiment" of the (dissenting) clergy. They changed the people's understanding of their earthly allegiance.

They suggested the image of a wicked Pharaoh in England trying to hinder the Children of Israel in their "errand into the wilderness," their mission in the Promised Land.

The "colonial clergy addressing large, regular audiences from positions of great prestige was a major force in arousing the spirit of independence after 1761," according to Sydney E. Ahlstrom (*A Religious History of the American People*).

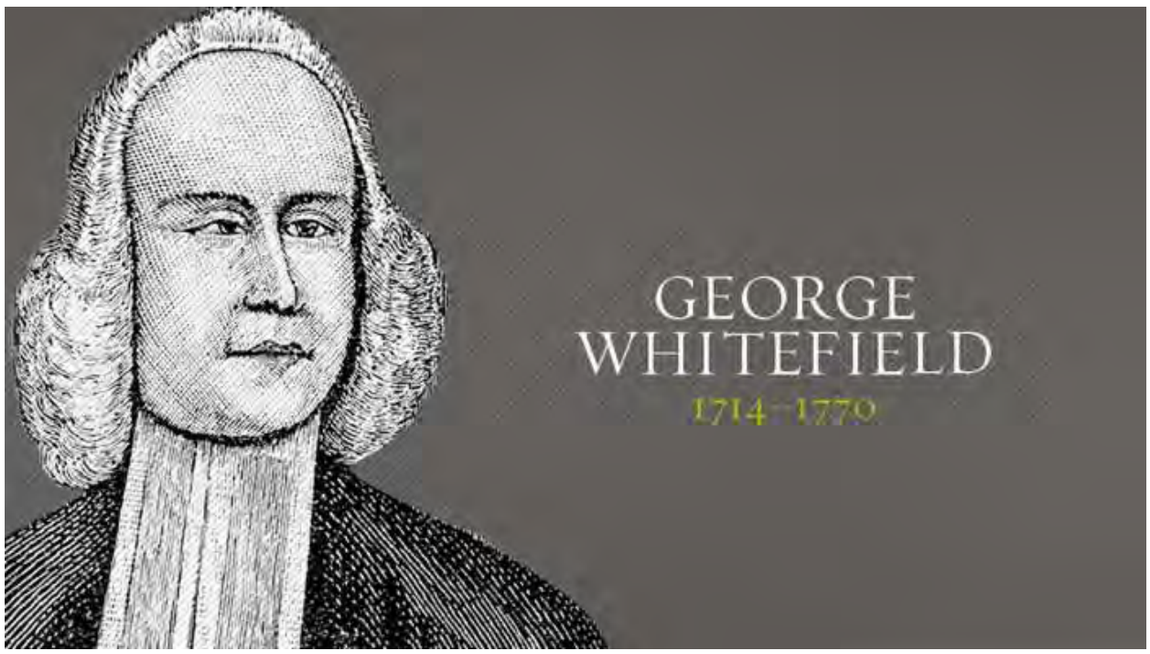
Two developments that aided that change were: the Great Awakening of 1730-1750 and the struggle against the establishment of an Anglican bishop in this country.

Something happened in this country between 1735 and 1750 that changed the mood and outlook of the

inhabitants in a subtle but important way. It was a watershed in the evolution of the American nation.

A new self-awareness, a new confidence, a new depth of experience, a consciousness of purpose, a willingness to question European precedents and norms, began to be felt as a result in part of strong religious currents which flowed through the colonies.

First there was a spiritual revival in 1734 among the Dutch Reformed people of the Raritan Valley around New Brunswick, led by Theodorus Frelinghuysen. The same quickening was seen in the work of William Tennent and his sons, Gilbert, William and John, Presbyterian preachers trained by their father in his "Log College" at Neshaminy, Pennsylvania. They and other young graduates preached the necessity of a definite experience of salvation which could be felt by the true Christian, and led many to a new depth of conviction.



The Great Awakening

About the same time, in Northampton, Mass., a similar freshening of religion occurred in the congregation of Jonathan Edwards, who was later viewed as the "father of the Great Awakening." Though his preaching was the same careful and intellectual fare that he had previously offered, in 1734 it began to bear fruit among his hearers.

From Northampton this flood of unrest in spiritual things spread through the middle of Massachusetts and down into Connecticut. But it was only a prelude to the main tide of the "Great Awakening," which flooded the colonies in the early 1740's with the arrival of George Whitefield. He was an evangelistic young Anglican preacher who made numerous tours of this country, preaching to thousands, converting many and inspiring numerous American ministers to appeal for similar conversions.

The impact which Whitefield had on ordinary people is recounted by a Connecticut farmer named Nathan Cole:

> *On a sudden, in the morning about 8 or 9 of the clock there came a messenger and said Mr. Whitefield preached at Hartford and Wethersfield yesterday and is to preach at Middletown this morning at ten of the dock. I was in my field at work. I dropped my tool that I had in my hand and ran home to my wife, telling her to make ready quickly to go hear Dr. Whitefield preach at Middletown, then ran to my pasture for my horse with all my might, fearing that I should be too late. Having my horse, I with my wife soon mounted the horse and went forward as fast as I thought the horse could bear; and when my horse got much out of breath, I would get down and put my wife on the saddle and bid her ride as fast as she could and not stop or slack for me except I bade her, and so I did several times to favor my horse. We improved every moment to get along as if we were fleeing for our lives, all the while fearing we should be too late to hear the sermon, for we had twelve miles to ride double in little more than an hour... And when we came within about half a mile or a mile of the road that comes down from Hartford, Wethersfield, and Stepney to Middletown, on high land I saw before me a cloud of fog arising. I first thought it came from the great river, but as I came nearer the road I heard a noise of horses' feet coming down the road, and this cloud was a cloud of dust made by the horses' feet. It arose some rods into the air over the tops of hills and trees; and when I came within about twenty rods of the road, I could see men and horses slipping along in the cloud like shadows, and as I drew nearer it seemed like a steady stream of horses and their riders, scarcely a horse more than his length behind another all of a lather and foam with sweat, their breath rolling out of their nostrils every jump. Every horse seemed to go with all his might to carry his rider to hear news from heaven for the saving of souls. It made me tremble to see the sight, how the world was in a struggle....We went down in the steam but heard no man speak a word off the way for 3 miles but every one pressing forward in great haste; and when we got to Middletown old meeting house, there was a great multitude, it*

was said to be 3 or 4,000 of people, assembled together.

We dismounted and shook off our dust, and the ministers were then coming to the meeting house. I turned and looked towards the Great River and saw the ferry boats running swift backward and forward bringing over loads of people, and the oars rowed nimble and quick. Everything, men, horses, and boots seemed to be struggling for life. The land and banks over the river looked black with people and horses; all along the 12 miles I saw no man at work in his field, but all seemed to be gone. When I saw Mr. Whitefield come upon the scaffold, he looked almost angelical; a young, slim, slender youth, before some thousands of people with a bold undaunted countenance.

And my hearing how God was with him everywhere as he come along, it solemnized my mind and put me into o trembling fear before he began to preach; for he looked as if he was clothed with authority from the Great God, and a sweet solemn solemnity sat upon his brow, and my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound. By God's blessing, my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me.

There were many such people in the colonies for whom religion had been little more than a rumor about what the "respectable" people, the leading citizens, did in their churches in the cities and towns. Contrary to later pious myths, most of the population were not church members at that time; many of them had come to this country from the slums, the impoverished villages, even the jails, of Europe as indentured servants, selling their labor for a period of years in return for their passage to the New World. After their indenture had been served, many headed for the wilderness to clear a few acres of their own, far from the settled regions where everything belonged to somebody else.

Wilderness Preaching

These were the people who needed religion most and whom the more staid and stolid churches did not reach -- until they became "respectable" and didn't need religion as intensely. But the evangelists of the Great Awakening -- "New Side" Presbyterians, "New Light" Congregationalists, Baptists, and a few Lutherans and Anglicans went out into the wilderness and brought to these people a kind of religion they could feel and understand. Acknowledging that the "Great Awakening" was an important development in the religious life of the American people, what did it contribute to the American Revolution?

• The Great Awakening also contributed to the inter-relationship and growing unity of the Colonies. Traveling evangelists like Gilbert Tennent and George Whitefield went from one colony to another, preaching under the auspices of various denominations. Jonathan Edwards appealed to people of all colonies and denominations to join together in prayer for the revival; his call for union across sectarian lines foreshadowed later calls for unity among the colonists in resisting the oppressions of England.

• The Great Awakening helped to knit together the isolated and outlying farmsteads of the frontier into the fabric of new communities, attracting people like Farmer Cole and his wife to assemble with neighbors they otherwise might not see for months at a time, if at all, and to find in their assembling a new and shared experience as Americans that did not derive from their European background or their status as British subjects.

• The Great Awakening gave to the "common people" a sense of their ability to achieve things on their own initiative without having to depend upon constituted authorities in the Eastern seaboard cities or in England.

To summarize, the Great Awakening enabled the "common people" to discover that they were the best judges of their own condition, and did not have to rely on distant authorities to tell them what was best for them. The center of gravity had shifted from the past to the present, from the princes and prelates of the Old World to the yeomen of the New.

That shift came about because of the immediacy and authenticity of their own religious experience; they no longer had to rely upon others for the most important element of their identity and self-awareness: God had shown it directly to themselves.

"One of the major consequences of the Great Awakening was an undermining of the religious establishments," points out Robert Handy in A Christian America.

An American Bishop?

Many American colonists were furious over the persistent efforts by some Anglicans to have a Bishop of the Church of England appointed to the colonies. Since only bishops could ordain ministers, any young American wishing to be ordained an Anglican priest had to make the long and dangerous trip to England, on which, between 1726 and 1766, ten out of fifty-one died en route. A need was also felt by some for closer supervision of Anglican clergymen in the colonies.

Today it may seem strange that such a reasonable proposal should have excited such protracted outrage and controversy, but it did -- and with some reason. Bishops of the Church of England were blamed for much of the religious oppression which many of the American colonists had fled.

Bishops of the Established Church were powerful public officials, as many of the colonists remembered from persecution in England at their hands. They sat in the House of Lords. The Bishop of London (in whose jurisdiction the American colonies lay) was a member of the Board of Lords of Trade and Plantations, which commissioned and instructed the royal governors of the colonies.

Ecclesiastical courts administered laws pertaining to marriage, legitimacy, guardianship and inheritance.

The bishops administered vast church properties as well as jealously guarding the taxation which supported the church and the appointments to "livings" which were a prominent form of political patronage, especially for younger sons of the nobility.

Anglican spokesmen made many attempts to explain that the bishop they wanted would have no secular powers, but they were not always believed, and with some reason. One of the most plausible proposals was drafted by Samuel Johnson, who sent a copy to the Archbishop of Canterbury with a covering letter that contained hopes that were not exclusively religious:

> *It is of the utmost importance for the best good of the colony that the Church be propagated and if possible supported (by taxation); and if at the same time their charters (from the King) were demolished and they could be reduced under the management of a wise and good governor and council appointed by the King. I believe they would in a little time grow a good sort of people and it would be one of the best of all the provinces.*

No Lords

About the same time (1764), Governor Francis Bernard of Massachusetts had begun to propose the creation of a colonial "Nobility appointed by the King for life," a temporal aristocracy to lend stability to the otherwise turbulent rabble. From such proposals as these derived the determination of the colonists that they would not submit to the rule of any heredity or royally-appointed "lords," whether "spiritual" or "temporal."

During the same period of time, a rapprochement was attained by the Presbyterians and Congregationalists of the middle and northern colonies. By 1768, a "Christian Union" had been formed among the dissenting groups to oppose the designs of the Church of England, which augmented the continuing correspondence and cooperation among the leaders of non-Anglican interests and their friends and allies in England.

> *When the colonial opposition to royal authority, which numbered in its ranks so many dissenting ministers, found itself maneuvered into the forming of a revolutionary organization, it did not indulge in miraculous improvisation. It took the tried-and-proved ecclesiastical organization of the Nonconformist churches and adapted it to secular affairs with great though hardly surprising success.*

The revolutionary "committees of correspondence" evolved partly as a result of these Christian collaborative efforts of dissent. John Adams later insisted that "the apprehension of Episcopacy contributed... as much as any other cause, to arouse the attention not only of the inquiring mind, but of the common people, and urge them to close thinking on the constitutional authority of parliament over the colonies." And indeed, in time, the warning of James I came true in America: "No Bishop, no King!"

After the Revolutionary War was over, there was little difficulty in organizing an independent American counterpart of the Church of England. No criticism was voiced when it elected two of its members to the episcopacy, William White and Samuel Seabury, since they were not "monarchical" bishops with secular powers such as the colonists had feared. The religious controversy of the eighteenth century over bishops, however, provided a kind of "dry run" for the American revolutionary period by identifying concerns over the relationships between church and state, by affirming religious and civil liberty, and by establishing the right and value of dissent.