

## Volume XXII - (2021)

### **The First Great, or not so Great, Awakening and What it Means for Today**

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*Journal of Unification Studies Vol. 22, 2021 - Pages 153-163*

What we now call the American “Great Awakenings” are embedded in the history of the country, unique to America, and they have undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping the fabric of this nation. But did the First Great Awakening actually play a pivotal role in leading up to the War of Independence and the birth of the country? Was it the first inter-colonial event? Did it really have the effect of forging the hearts of the people to go to war against the greatest empire of its time? Would the Revolution have taken place and would America have the values it has now, had it not been for the First Great Awakening?

#### **The Great Awakening Rebuffed**

The First Great Awakening left an indelible mark on the development of America. With roots stretching back to the Christian Reformation of the 1500’s, the Great Awakening swept the young colonies with the fires of evangelical fervor. The revival shook the very foundations of colonial society. Following in its wake was a rebirth of reformed philosophy and theology that planted the seeds of self-government and political autonomy in the fertile soil of the Americas. By 1776, that seed had blossomed into a vibrant revolutionary movement that questioned the very fabric of Old-World society.<sup>[1]</sup>

This account by Kory Ray Quirion in “The First Great Awakening: Revival and the Birth of a Nation” expresses the traditional interpretation of events. Conversely, Jonathan Butler’s article, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction,” challenges some of the most entrenched ideas about the period of revivalism called the Great Awakening. While others before him had undermined aspects of the traditional interpretation, Butler sets out to deconstruct the “Great Awakening” model itself:

The label “The Great Awakening” distorts the extent, nature, and cohesion of the revivals that did exist in the eighteenth-century colonies, encourages unwarranted claims for their effects on colonial society, and exaggerates their influence on the coming and character of the American Revolution.<sup>[2]</sup>

Butler challenges nearly every historian of note who had written about eighteenth century revivalism. Countering histories that dramatically described a movement that swept through all the British mainland colonies, Butler exposes some inconvenient and inconsistent facts about chronology, geography, and demography. For instance, in New England the revival spirit was dying out by 1745, whereas in Virginia revivalism not start until the 1750s. He contends revivals did not even touch half of the colonies, and even in some where revivals did occur, they had no effect on the majority of the population, such as in Pennsylvania where the Quakers, Germans, Baptists ignored them. He thereby questions whether the “Great Awakening” was really the first inter-colonial event or movement.

In addition according to Butler, there is little evidence that the revivals brought about a significant change in structure of authority in society and in the churches. As he puts it, “Tumult should not be confused with democracy. Social class, education, and wealth remained as important after 1730 in choosing town and church officers as they had been before 1730.”<sup>[3]</sup> He goes on to point out that there was little evidence that the revivals forged an inter-colonial unity or even that those groups affected by the revivals played any unique role in anti-British protest or the coming of the Revolution.

Butler further argues the itinerant preachers did not really successfully challenge the established churches’ authority, and that Jonathan Edwards’s influence was not felt until an entire century later. He also argues against the notion that new modes of communication (itinerant preachers and printed tracts) brought about the spread of egalitarian ideas throughout the colonies.

Most significantly, Butler points out that eighteenth century contemporaries never used the term “Great Awakening” when describing the revivals, as they were taking place as separate and isolated events. It was only some hundred years later that Joseph Tracy coined the term “Great Awakening” while trying to make sense of the events of the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>[4]</sup> He therefore concludes, “Historians should abandon the term ‘the Great Awakening,’ because it distorts the character of eighteenth-century religious life and misinterprets its relationship to pre-revolutionary American society and politics.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Historian Thomas Kidd, in “The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America,” also struggles to define a clear beginning and end to the Great Awakening. According to him the revival spirit continued during the 1760s in Virginia and even sporadically in the 1780s. He writes, there “was simply no clear break” between the First Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening in the nineteenth century: “There was, really, no Second Great Awakening, but rather a long-term turn toward Baptist and Methodist piety from the American Revolution to the Civil War.”<sup>[6]</sup>

Kidd also points out that key figures of the Revolution and leading figures of the new nation were not revivalist. As he noted, “Few of the most recognizable Founding Fathers were evangelicals. Virginia’s Patrick Henry was one of the only Founding Fathers directly influenced by the Great Awakening.”<sup>[7]</sup> Kidd goes so far as to agree with Butler’s conclusion that “the link between the revivals and the American Revolution is virtually nonexistent.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Butler and Kidd expose some significant provocative facts that challenge the more traditional view. And it is certainly true, history is not as simple as it appears. Perhaps the connection is not as black and white as it has seemed. But possibly while looking for direct cause and effect relationships between the revivals and the revolution, Butler and Kidd may overlook subtler and indirect influences of revivalism on pre-revolutionary American thought and life.

## The Great Awakening Defended

Instead of getting caught up in details of whether this affected that, it is helpful to consider the broader approach of William McLoughlin in “‘Enthusiasm for Liberty’: The Great Awakening as the Key to the Revolution.” He quotes the anthropologist Kenelm Burridge who states that “no religious movement lacks a political ideology” and that all religions are basically concerned with how power is wielded. McLoughlin writes:

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...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.<sup>[9]</sup>

McLoughlin makes the point that “the impetus for revolt came from non-scientific sources, and one of the most important of these was pietistic religion.”<sup>[10]</sup> He doubts whether the rationalism of the Enlightenment alone would have moved the people to Revolution. Great preachers like Jonathan Edwards were filled with postmillennial optimism. Many Americans, as a result of the revivals, now saw themselves as God’s new Israel with a mission to prepare the way for the kingdom. According to McLoughlin,

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... Regardless of a man's denomination, this postmillennial 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.<sup>[11]</sup>

McLoughlin describes how, through the revivals, a profound change took place in the hearts of the colonists, and a new found sense of identity was generated by the Great Awakening. He lists the following outcomes:

- A new conception of God's power and how it worked in sustaining social order and morality.
- A new conception of ecclesiastical order or the organization of church life.
- A new perception of the role of the ministry in persuading man to adopt the ways of God.
- A new understanding of how God intended to redeem mankind and the special role of Americans in that divine mission.
- A new definition of the relationship between church and state.
- A new understanding of true virtue and humanitarianism toward all poor and oppressed people—including black slaves and American Indians.

For McLoughlin, “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 inter-colonial unity stronger than the ties to the hub of the empire in London.” He notes, “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.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Pietism provided colonists with a religious ideology which understood that God's power is best exercised in the free and voluntary consent of the individual, that Americans were a chosen people, and that they had a destiny, and a responsibility to create a Godly and principled nation that would be free from corruption and tyranny. McLoughlin concludes,

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.<sup>[13]</sup>

Most historians agree that colonial newspapers played a big role in spreading the word of republican ideology throughout the colonies. With what spirit were they infused? Even Kidd acknowledges, “[T]here was an evangelical-inflected mode of persuasion that characterized many of the great Patriot tracts and speeches, including the non-evangelical Tom Paine’s ‘Common Sense’ and Henry’s ‘Liberty or Death’ oration.”<sup>[14]</sup> It seems that despite efforts to separate the Great Awakening and the American Revolution, they are deeply intertwined. The spirit and theological revival of the Awakening infused the minds and hearts of those who brought about the Revolution. This is what prepared the founding generation for the sacrifices and trials required for revolution and nation building.

In this regard, Quirion concludes:

The seed of the Awakening produced many kinds of fruit. First, the theology of the First Great Awakening had a direct impact on the American War for Independence. The founding generation’s aversion to tyranny and their theory of resistance to such tyranny was a product of the Awakenings reformed theology. Second, reformed theology and philosophy further influenced the creation of America’s republican form of government and its civil institutions...The convergence of revival and revolution created a spiritual fervor amongst the population. With the belief that God’s providential hand was at the tiller of history, America charged forward toward freedom and liberty that Winthrop’s “City on a Hill” might forever be established as a beacon and a symbol to all the world.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Lessons Learned

In *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*, Kidd offers a comprehensive account of the role religion played during this transformative period. He argues that the most significant contribution Christianity made was its theological reinforcement of existing republicanism and natural rights philosophy. He uses examples of dissenting sects such as the Presbyterians and Baptists finding common ground with less devout men like Jefferson or Madison on the importance of God-given rights. He also points out how devotees of ancient republicanism could seek common ground with Calvinists on the threat of human corruption and the need for virtue. Both deists and orthodox could speak about how God is working in the destiny of nations. This consensus, built in the decades leading up to the Revolution, is what Kidd calls “civil spirituality.”<sup>[16]</sup>

History is not a simple series of consequential events, like a science experiment. Rather, the timing was right, the people were ready, many circumstances came into play, and the revivals of the eighteenth century provided the catalyst to bring together the previously separated colonies. In this sense the Great Awakening served as a melting pot for people of diverse backgrounds and faiths to forge a common understanding of how they wanted to live. This common vision is what moved their hearts to action. A few were so committed to the cause that they were willing to risk their lives for it. This spark ignited the Revolution and spread quickly since enough people had been animated by the vision.

Historical interpretation is not a simple matter. Kidd concludes wisely that we should be careful to draw hasty conclusions, from whichever side of the “Christian America” debate we stand. Events are not always unequivocal and believers and secularists should consider all sides of the story.

Interpretation depends on what lens we utilize to look at history. We can choose to look objectively, scientifically at facts and look for connections. The analysis will be correct, but may be missing something. Think of an analogy to the ocean. We can look at the surface, at how the waves are moving. But there are the deep ocean currents that are invisible to the eye that are moving the waters, even affecting the climate. By looking solely at the objects on the surface we may be missing a subtler spiritual feature, underlying it, a providence running through history, whether recognized or not.

John Adams, in correspondence of 1818, wrote of the events that led up to the Revolution:

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.<sup>[17]</sup>

Adams also testified to Rev. Jonathan Mayhew as the “morning gun of the Revolution.” In 1750, the twenty-nine-year-old pastor of the West (Congregational) Church of Boston delivered a sermon entitled “A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers,”<sup>[18]</sup> an exegetical study of Romans 13. This was promptly mass printed and resulted in a motto for the American Revolution, “Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.” Adams said anyone who wishes to understand the “principles and feelings that produced the Revolution” should read Mayhew’s sermon. He claimed that “everyone in the colonies” had read the Discourse, and he himself at the age of fourteen had done so repeatedly until “the Substance of it was incorporated into my Nature and indelibly engraved on my Memory.”<sup>[19]</sup>

It is good to remember that such ministers were among the best educated men of their time, well-educated not only in Scripture, but also in politics, science and philosophy. Based on this, it could be argued that the American Revolution was launched from the pulpits. Such a sermon as the Discourse provides a bridge between the radical Puritan past and the American Revolutionary future.

Historians will continue to debate the Great Awakenings based on the lens they use. But there is a moment described by Thomas Kidd which cannot be denied. It was in 1775. Some Continental Army troops had stopped in Newburyport, Massachusetts, where the “Great Itinerant” evangelist Whitefield’s body was buried (he had died in 1770). The officers went to the church, religiously dug up and opened Whitefield’s tomb, and took remaining pieces of his clothing. They cut them into pieces, and passed them out among the soldiers. Kidd writes “For these soldiers, what Whitefield preached was what they fought for: the spirit of Christ and of liberty.”<sup>[20]</sup>

The spiritual revolution preceded the actual revolution, just as a century later a division in the churches preceded the Civil War in the country. Protestant denominations (Episcopal, Methodist, Baptists, and Presbyterian) all divided North and South prior to the nation being torn apart by war. Believers (and skeptics) should pay close attention to how God and the spirit are working in the religious world. We have considered how the First Great Awakening gave form to the nation and sustained it through its tumultuous birth. Now let us consider how it could be a force within the country during times of transition today.

## A Unification Addendum

According to the *Exposition of Divine Principle*, in the process of building a righteous world there will be three renaissances, three reformations and three industrial revolutions, that is how the providence unfolds.<sup>[21]</sup> Based on this teaching, many Unificationists have been expecting, and working towards a Third Great Awakening in America.

In a landmark speech, “Christianity in Crisis,” delivered in 1973, Rev. Moon spoke of the serious and desperate need for a new Great Awakening:

The time has come for the American people to be awakened. Because of the noble beginning of this country, God sent His blessing and promise. The sacrificial devotion of your ancestors was the foundation for God’s blessing. If you betray your ancestors, if you betray God, there is only one way for America to go. It will go to destruction. Since America was built on the pillars of faith in God, if God is moved out of American life, your nation will be without support. Your decline will be rapid.

I have initiated a new youth movement for the salvation of America. This is a new Pilgrim movement... These young people are working to rekindle America’s spirit. America has a great tradition. All you have to do is revive it... The new Pilgrim movement has come—not for America alone, but for the world. In other words, the movement for world salvation must begin in this country.<sup>[22]</sup>

That was the motivation with which Rev. and Mrs. Moon invested the next forty years in this country, i.e., to bring about the much-needed revival of Christianity which had become powerless to counter global communism and the breakdown in moral values. Even while facing major setbacks, this remained their focus. When Rev Moon was unjustly incarcerated in Danbury Federal Correctional Institution, he sent a message on the very first morning stating, “Share these words with the members: ignite the signal fire for Christianity according to the call of God.”<sup>[23]</sup>

Unificationists believe that if America is headed in the right direction, it can be a beacon of light and steer the world. But it is understood that America can only be the bearer of blessings to the world as long as the spirit Christianity is alive and united. “Christianity in Crisis” was delivered fifty years ago, and the message is just as relevant and critical then as it is today. Over the last five decades the Unification movement has worked tirelessly to empower Christianity and has poured immeasurable resources into conventions, conferences, rallies and publications towards this end.

Unificationists contend the *Divine Principle* is the key Christianity is missing. It has been said that the kindling is dry and ready, and all that is needed is a spark. Since Rev. Moon's ascension to the spirit world in 2012, Mrs. Moon has boldly and gracefully continued the mission. She has faced resistance and opposition, more from inside the movement than from outside. But due to her unchanging heart and steadfast approach, waters are beginning to part: ministers who persecuted Rev. Moon are opening their hearts and offering support. Well established Christian leaders, such as Bishop Noel Jones, the senior pastor of the City of Refuge megachurch, Los Angeles, are affectionately addressing her as the "Mother of Peace" and testifying to her.

In addition, perhaps for the first time, children of the Unificationists, the second generation, are excited about the mission of sharing the message with Christianity. Just two years ago the Young Clergy Leadership Coalition (YCLC) was created, and with the spirit of being "chosen" to be a blessing to the world, Unification young people are eagerly outreaching and engaging in fellowship with their Christian brothers and sisters.

In addition, a "Heavenly USA" team is serving as a bridge for young Unificationists to learn about and become involved in the vision of serving and igniting the youth of Christianity. By attending Christian church services, studying the Bible, and building relationships with Christian pastors, the Heavenly USA team has left an impact on many communities visited, creating a strong desire to maintain connection and collaboration between Christianity and the Unificationist movement.<sup>[24]</sup>

Today, world news may seem bleak. America, caught up in constant political turmoil and division, seems to be more than ever losing its place as the respected leader of the free and democratic world. A battle is waging over the very soul of this country and narratives are being pushed to even rewrite the origins and history of the United States.

All may seem lost when looking only at the surface... but it is a truism that great changes begin from a small group of committed people. The American Revolution was launched from the pulpits, and, as this study maintains, it was a spiritual shift that brought about change in the political and societal spheres. Unificationists on the cutting edge of recent developments believe they are finally seeing the first signs in America of a long awaited Third Great Awakening of Christianity.

## Notes

[1] Kory Ray Thomas Quirion, "The First Great Awakening: Revival and the Birth of a Nation," Bound Away: The Liberty University Journal of History, June 2016. <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/ljh/vol1/iss2/3/>. Accessed October 4, 2021

[2] Jonathan Butler, "Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction," Journal of American History 69:2 (September 1982). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1893821?refreqid=excelsior%3Ada9832e58877561f55cefcf4e3354f62>. Accessed October 4, 2021.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Joseph Tracy, The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield (Boston: Charles Tappan, 1842). [https://www.google.com/books/edition/The\\_Great\\_Awakening/RxZkYTXHc5gC?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Great_Awakening/RxZkYTXHc5gC?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover). Accessed October 4, 2021.

[5] Butler, "Enthusiasm Described and Decried."

[6] Thomas S. Kidd, The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300158465/great-awakening>

[7] Thomas Kidd, "'American Demagogue' Review: Preaching Revolution," Wall Street Journal, October 29, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/american-demagogue-review-preaching-revolution-11572389299>. Accessed October 4, 2021.

[8] Kidd, The Great Awakening.

[9] William G. McLoughlin, "'Enthusiasm for Liberty': The Great Awakening as the Key to the Revolution," Paper delivered May 3, 1977, at the Worcester Art Museum in conjunction with the American Antiquarian Society exhibition "Wellsprings of a Nation: America before 1801." <https://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44539310.pdf>. Accessed October 4, 2021.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Kidd, "'American Demagogue' Review: Preaching Revolution."

[15] Quirion, "The First Great Awakening."

- [16] Thomas Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (Basic Books, 2012). <https://www.basicbooks.com/titles/thomas-s-kidd/god-of-liberty/9780465028900/>. Accessed October 4, 2021.
- [17] Letters from John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, 1818. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6854>. Accessed October 4, 2021.
- [18] Jonathan Mayhews, “A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers,” Sermon given in 1750. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=etas>. Accessed October 4, 2021.
- [19] Letters from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 1818. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6933>. Accessed October 4, 2021.
- [20] Kidd, “‘American Demagogue’ Review: Preaching Revolution.”
- [21] *Exposition of the Divine Principle* (HSA-UWC, 1996), p 364.
- [22] Sun Myung Moon, “Christianity in Crisis,” speech delivered on October 1, 1973. <http://www.tparents.org/moon-talks/sunmyungmoon73/SunMyungMoon-731001.htm>. Accessed October 4, 2021.
- [23] Hak Ja Han Moon, *Mother of Peace, A Memoir* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Times Global Media Group, 2020), p. 150.
- [24] Heavenly USA (est. 2018) is a branch of Generation Peace Academy, which is the youth leadership program of the Unification Church.