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The Journal of American History, Volume 69, Issue 2 (Sep., 1982), 305-325.

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Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction

Jon Butler

In the last half century, the Great Awakening has assumed a major role in explaining the political and social evolution of prerevolutionary American society. Historians have argued, variously, that the Awakening severed intellectual and philosophical connections between America and Europe (Perry Miller), that it was a major vehicle of early lower-class protest (John C. Miller, Rhys Isaac, and Gary B. Nash), that it was a means by which New England Puritans became Yankees (Richard L. Bushman), that it was the first "inter-colonial movement" to stir "the people of several colonies on a matter of common emotional concern" (Richard Hofstadter following William Warren Sweet), or that it involved "a rebirth of the localistic impulse" (Kenneth Lockridge).¹

American historians also have increasingly linked the Awakening directly to the Revolution. Alan Heimert has tagged it as the source of a Calvinist political ideology that irretrievably shaped eighteenth-century American society and the Revolution it produced. Harry S. Stout has argued that the Awakening stimulated a new system of mass communications that increased the colonists' political awareness and reduced their deference to elite groups prior to the Revolution. Isaac and Nash have described the Awakening as the source of a simpler, non-Calvinist protest rhetoric that reinforced revolutionary ideology in disparate places, among them Virginia and the northern

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¹ Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, 1956), 153-66; Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, 1967), 183-232; John C. Miller, "Religion, Finance, and Democracy in Massachusetts," *New England Quarterly*, 6 (March 1933), 29-58; Rhys Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765-1775," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 31 (July 1974), 345-68; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 161-80, 192-98, 243-69; Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1979), 204-27; Richard Hofstadter, *America at 1750: A Social Portrait* (New York, 1973), 217; William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (New York, 1950), 138, 172; Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Settlement and Unsettling in Early America: The Crisis of Political Legitimacy before the Revolution* (New York, 1981), 43-44.

port cities. William G. McLoughlin has even claimed that the Great Awakening was nothing less than "the Key to the American Revolution."²

These claims for the significance of the Great Awakening come from more than specialists in the colonial period. They are a ubiquitous feature of American history survey texts, where the increased emphasis on social history has made these claims especially useful in interpreting early American society to twentieth-century students. Virtually all texts treat the Great Awakening as a major watershed in the maturation of prerevolutionary American society. *The Great Republic* terms the Awakening "the greatest event in the history of religion in eighteenth-century America." *The National Experience* argues that the Awakening brought "religious experiences to thousands of people in every rank of society" and in every region. *The Essentials of American History* stresses how the Awakening "aroused a spirit of humanitarianism," "encouraged the notion of equal rights," and "stimulated feelings of democracy" even if its gains in church membership proved episodic. These texts and others describe the weakened position of the clergy produced by the Awakening as symptomatic of growing disrespect for all forms of authority in the colonies and as an important catalyst, even cause, of the American Revolution. The effect of these claims is astonishing. Buttressed by the standard lecture on the Awakening tucked into most survey courses, American undergraduates have been well trained to remember the Great Awakening because their instructors and texts have invested it with such significance.³

Does the Great Awakening warrant such enthusiasm? Its puzzling historiography suggests one caution. The Awakening has received surprisingly little systematic study and lacks even one comprehensive general history. The two studies, by Heimert and Cedric B. Cowing, that might qualify as general histories actually are deeply centered in New England. They venture into the middle and southern colonies only occasionally and concentrate on intellectual themes to the exclusion of social history. The remaining studies are

² Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, 1966); Harry S. Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 34 (Oct. 1977), 519-41; Rhys Isaac, "Dramatizing the Ideology of the Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776," *ibid.*, 33 (July 1976), 357-85; Rhys Isaac, "Preachers and Patriots: Popular Culture and the Revolution in Virginia," in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb, Ill., 1976), 125-56; William G. McLoughlin, "'Enthusiasm for Liberty': The Great Awakening as the Key to the Revolution," in Jack P. Greene and William G. McLoughlin, *Preachers and Politicians: Two Essays on the Origins of the American Revolution* (Worcester, Mass., 1977), 47-73; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 345, 350, 384.

³ Bernard Bailyn et al., *The Great Republic: A History of the American People* (2 vols., Lexington, Mass., 1981), I, 137-41; John M. Blum et al., *The National Experience: A History of the United States* (2 vols., New York, 1973), I, 63-65; Richard N. Current et al., *The Essentials of American History* (New York, 1980), 27-28. For examples from other textbooks, see Edwin C. Rozwenc and Thomas Bender, *The Making of American Society* (New York, 1978), 128-30; Mary Beth Norton et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States* (Boston, 1982), 80-82; Henry F. Bedford and Trevor Colbourn, *The Americans: A Brief History to 1877* (New York, 1980), 36-37; Arthur S. Link et al., *The American People: A History* (2 vols., Arlington Heights, Ill., 1981), I, 134-35; Robert Kelley, *The Shaping of the American Past* (2 vols., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1982), I, 83-85; John A. Garraty, *The American Nation: A History of the United States to 1871* (New York, 1979), 46-47.

thoroughly regional, as in the case of books by Bushman, Edwin Scott Gaustad, Charles Hartshorn Maxson, Dietmar Rothermund, and Wesley M. Gewehr, or are local, as with the spate of articles on New England towns and Jonathan Edwards or Isaac's articles and book on Virginia.⁴ The result is that the general character of the Great Awakening lacks sustained, comprehensive study even while it benefits from thorough local examinations. The relationship between the Revolution and the Awakening is described in an equally peculiar manner. Heimert's seminal 1966 study, despite fair and unfair criticism, has become that kind of influential work whose awesome reputation apparently discourages further pursuit of its subject. Instead, historians frequently allude to the positive relationship between the Awakening and the Revolution without probing the matter in a fresh, systematic way.⁵

The gap between the enthusiasm of historians for the social and political significance of the Great Awakening and its slim, peculiar historiography raises two important issues. First, contemporaries never homogenized the eighteenth-century colonial religious revivals by labeling them "the Great Awakening." Although such words appear in Edwards's *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, Edwards used them alternately with other phrases, such as "general awakening," "great alteration," and "flourishing of religion," only to describe the Northampton revivals of 1734-1735. He never capitalized them or gave them other special emphasis and never used the phrase "the Great Awakening" to evaluate all the prerevolutionary revivals. Rather, the first person to do so was the nineteenth-century historian and antiquarian Joseph Tracy, who used Edwards's otherwise unexceptional words as the title of his famous 1842 book, *The Great Awakening*. Tellingly, however, Tracy's creation did not find immediate favor among American historians.

⁴ Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*; Cedric B. Cowing, *The Great Awakening and the American Revolution: Colonial Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 1971); Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 183-220; Edwin Scott Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York, 1957); Charles Hartshorn Maxson, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Chicago, 1920); Dietmar Rothermund, *The Layman's Progress: Religious and Political Experience in Colonial Pennsylvania, 1740-1770* (Philadelphia, 1961); Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Durham, N.C., 1930); John W. Jeffries, "The Separation in the Canterbury Congregational Church: Religion, Family, and Politics in a Connecticut Town," *New England Quarterly*, 52 (Dec. 1979), 522-49; J. M. Bumsted, "Religion, Finance, and Democracy in Massachusetts: The Town of Norton as a Case Study," *Journal of American History*, 57 (March 1971), 817-31; James Walsh, "The Great Awakening in the First Congregational Church of Woodbury, Connecticut," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 28 (Oct. 1971), 543-62; Gerald F. Moran, "Conditions of Religious Conversion in the First Society of Norwich, Connecticut, 1718-1744," *Journal of Social History*, 5 (Spring 1972), 331-43; Robert Sklar, "The Great Awakening and Colonial Politics: Connecticut's Revolution in the Minds of Men," *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*, 28 (July 1963), 81-95; Martin E. Lodge, "The Crisis of the Churches in the Middle Colonies, 1720-1750," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 95 (April 1971), 195-220; Herman Harmelink III, "Another Look at Frelinghuysen and His 'Awakening,'" *Church History*, 37 (Dec. 1968), 423-38. For a superb guide to the vast bibliography of Jonathan Edwards studies, see Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill, 1981), 371-79.

⁵ See, for example, Patricia Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth-Century Northampton* (New York, 1979), 194. For exceptions to this pattern, see Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*; Cowing, *Great Awakening*; McLoughlin, "Enthusiasm for Liberty," 47-73.

Charles Hodge discussed the Presbyterian revivals in his *Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church* without describing them as part of a "Great Awakening," while the influential Robert Baird refused even to treat the eighteenth-century revivals as discrete and important events, much less label them "the Great Awakening." Baird all but ignored these revivals in the chronological segments of his *Religion in America* and mentioned them elsewhere only by way of explaining the intellectual origins of the Unitarian movement, whose early leaders opposed revivals. Thus, not until the last half of the nineteenth century did "the Great Awakening" become a familiar feature of the American historical landscape.⁶

Second, this particular label ought to be viewed with suspicion, not because a historian created it—historians legitimately make sense of the minutiae of the past by utilizing such devices—but because the label itself does serious injustice to the minutiae it orders. 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. If "the Great Awakening" is not quite an American Donation of Constantine, its appeal to historians seeking to explain the shaping and character of prerevolutionary American society gives it a political and intellectual power whose very subtlety requires a close inspection of its claims to truth.

How do historians describe "the Great Awakening"? Three points seem especially common. First, all but a few describe it as a Calvinist religious revival in which converts acknowledged their sinfulness without expecting salvation. These colonial converts thereby distinguished themselves from Englishmen caught up in contemporary Methodist revivals and from Americans involved in the so-called Second Great Awakening of the early national period, both of which imbibed Arminian principles that allowed humans to believe they might effect their own salvation in ways that John

⁶ Charles Hodge, *Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1851), II, 2–122; Robert Baird, *Religion in America, or an Account of the Origins, Progress, Relation to the State, and Present Condition of the Evangelical Churches in the United States* (New York, 1844), 273–75. Edwards used numerous phrases and labels to describe the revivals in Northampton in *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*. Among them are "general awakening," "great awakenings," "very general awakening," "great alteration," "revival of religion," "flourishing of religion," "a very great awakening," "awakenings," "legal awakenings," "first awakenings," "awakenings and encouragements," and "God's works." Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, in *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven, 1972), 145, 150, 153, 155, 156, 160, 162, 163, 164, 167, 168, 210. In none of these instances did Edwards use these phrases to describe religious revivals in all or most of the colonies. This is true as well of his writing in *Some Thoughts concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1743), in his preface to Joseph Bellamy's *True Religion Delineated* (1750), and in letters describing revivals written between 1741 and 1751. *Great Awakening*, ed. Goen, 289–530, 533–66, 569–72. Although Joseph Tracy entitled his book *The Great Awakening*, he seldom used the label in the text. Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield* (Boston, 1842), 1, 35, 119, 223, 413, 431.

Calvin discounted.⁷ Second, historians emphasize the breadth and suddenness of the Awakening and frequently employ hurricane metaphors to reinforce the point. Thus, many of them describe how in the 1740s the Awakening "swept" across the mainland colonies, leaving only England's Caribbean colonies untouched.⁸ Third, most historians argue that this spiritual hurricane affected all facets of prerevolutionary society. Here they adopt Edwards's description of the 1736 Northampton revival as one that touched "all sorts, sober and vicious, high and low, rich and poor, wise and unwise," but apply it to all the colonies. Indeed, some historians go farther and view the Great Awakening as a veritable social and political revolution itself. Writing in the late 1960s, Bushman could only wonder at its power: "We inevitably will underestimate the effect of the Awakening on eighteenth-century society if we compare it to revivals today. The Awakening was more like the civil rights demonstrations, the campus disturbances, and the urban riots of the 1960s combined. All together these may approach, though certainly not surpass, the Awakening in their impact on national life."⁹

No one would seriously question the existence of "the Great Awakening" if historians only described it as a short-lived Calvinist revival in New England during the early 1740s. Whether stimulated by Edwards, James Davenport, or the British itinerant George Whitefield, the New England revivals between 1740 and 1745 obviously were Calvinist ones. Their sponsors vigorously criticized the soft-core Arminianism that had reputedly overtaken New England Congregationalism, and they stimulated the ritual renewal of a century-old society by reintroducing colonists to the theology of distinguished seventeenth-century Puritan clergymen, especially Thomas Shepard and Solomon Stoddard.¹⁰

Yet, Calvinism never dominated the eighteenth-century religious revivals homogenized under the label "the Great Awakening." The revivals in the middle colonies flowed from especially disparate and international sources. John B. Frantz's recent traversal of the German revivals there demonstrates that they took root in Lutheranism, German Reformed Calvinism (different from the New England variety), and Pietism (however one wants to define it). Maxson stressed the mysticism, Pietism, Rosicrucianism, and Freemasonry

⁷ *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745*, ed. Richard L. Bushman (New York, 1970), xii; Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, viii, 3-4. J. M. Bumsted dissents from this formulation by stressing the influence of Pietism in the Awakening, as does Charles Hartshorn Maxson. J. M. Bumsted, *The Great Awakening: The Beginnings of Evangelical Pietism in America* (Waltham, Mass., 1970), 1-3; Maxson, *Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies*, 1-10.

⁸ *Great Awakening*, ed. Bushman, xi; Darrett B. Rutman, *The Great Awakening: Event and Exegesis* (New York, 1970), 1-8; *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, ed. Alan Heimert and Perry Miller (Indianapolis, 1967), xiii-xvi; James A. Henretta, *The Evolution of American Society, 1700-1815* (Lexington, Mass., 1973), 131-38; David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm and the Great Awakening* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969), 3.

⁹ Edwards, *Faithful Narrative*, 157; *Great Awakening*, ed. Bushman, xi.

¹⁰ Gaustad, *Great Awakening in New England*, 7-9, 97, 107, 134-40; Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 4, 38-58.

rampant in these colonies among both German and English settlers. In an often overlooked observation, Maxson noted that the Tennents' backing for revivals was deeply linked to a mystical experience surrounding the near death of John Tennent and that both John Tennent and William Tennent, Jr., were mystics as well as Calvinists. The revivals among English colonists in Virginia also reveal eclectic roots. Presbyterians brought Calvinism into the colony for the first time since the 1650s, but Arminianism underwrote the powerful Methodist awakening in the colony and soon crept into the ranks of the colony's Baptists as well.¹¹

"The Great Awakening" also is difficult to date. Seldom has an "event" of such magnitude had such amorphous beginnings and endings. In New England, historians agree, the revivals flourished principally between 1740 and 1743 and had largely ended by 1745, although a few scattered outbreaks of revivalism occurred there in the next decades. Establishing the beginning of the revivals has proved more difficult, however. Most historians settle for the year 1740 because it marks Whitefield's first appearance in New England. But everyone acknowledges that earlier revivals underwrote Whitefield's enthusiastic reception there and involved remarkable numbers of colonists. Edwards counted thirty-two towns caught up in revivals in 1734-1735 and noted that his own grandfather, Stoddard, had conducted no less than five "harvests" in Northampton before that, the earliest in the 1690s. Yet revivals in Virginia, the site of the most sustained such events in the southern colonies, did not emerge in significant numbers until the 1750s and did not peak until the 1760s. At the same time, they also continued into the revolutionary and early national periods in ways that make them difficult to separate from their predecessors.¹²

Yet even if one were to argue that "the Great Awakening" persisted through most of the eighteenth century, it is obvious that revivals "swept" only some of the mainland colonies. They occurred in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Virginia with some frequency at least at some points between 1740 and 1770. But New Hampshire, Maryland, and Georgia witnessed few revivals in the same years, and revivals were only occasionally important in New York, Delaware, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The revivals also touched only certain segments of the population in the colonies where they occurred. The best example of the phenomenon is Pennsylvania. The revivals there had a sustained effect among English settlers

¹¹ Gaustad, *Great Awakening in New England*, 111; Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards*, 184-88; John B. Frantz, "The Awakening of Religion among the German Settlers in the Middle Colonies," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 33 (April 1976), 266-88; Gewehr, *Great Awakening in Virginia*, 254; Maxson, *Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies*, 1-10, 28, 32. For an outstanding account of the complex causes that led some middle-colony Presbyterians to oppose revivals, see Elizabeth I. Nybakken, "New Light on the Old Side: Irish Influences in Colonial Presbyterianism," *Journal of American History*, 68 (March 1982), 813-32.

¹² Paul R. Lucas, *Valley of Discord: Church and Society along the Connecticut River, 1636-1725* (Hanover, N. H., 1976), 199-202; Gaustad, *Great Awakening in New England*, 16-20; Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972), 314-29; Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore, 1980), 254.

only in Presbyterian churches where many of the laity and clergy also opposed them. The Baptists, who were so important to the New England revivals, paid little attention to them until the 1760s, and the colony's taciturn Quakers watched them in perplexed silence. Not even Germans imbibed them universally. At the same time that Benjamin Franklin was emptying his pockets in response to the preaching of Whitefield in Philadelphia—or at least claiming to do so—the residents of Germantown were steadily leaving their churches, and Stephanie Grauman Wolf reports that they remained steadfast in their indifference to Christianity at least until the 1780s.¹³

Whitefield's revivals also exchanged notoriety for substance. Colonists responded to him as a charismatic performer, and he actually fell victim to the Billy Graham syndrome of modern times: his visits, however exciting, produced few permanent changes in local religious patterns. For example, his appearances in Charleston led to his well-known confrontation with Anglican Commissary Alexander Garden and to the suicide two years later of a distraught follower named Anne LeBrasseur. Yet they produced no new congregations in Charleston and had no documented effect on the general patterns of religious adherence elsewhere in the colony. The same was true in Philadelphia and New York City despite the fact that Whitefield preached to enormous crowds in both places. Only Bostonians responded differently. Supporters organized in the late 1740s a new "awakened" congregation that reputedly met with considerable initial success, and opponents adopted a defensive posture exemplified in the writings of Charles Chauncy that profoundly affected New England intellectual life for two decades.¹⁴

Historians also exaggerate the cohesion of leadership in the revivals. They have accomplished this, in part, by overstressing the importance of Whitefield and Edwards. Whitefield's early charismatic influence later faded so that his appearances in the 1750s and 1760s had less impact even among evangelicals than they had in the 1740s. In addition, Whitefield's "leadership" was ethereal, at best, even before 1750. His principal early importance was to serve as a personal model of evangelical enterprise for ministers wishing to promote their own revivals of religion. Because he did little to organize and coordinate

¹³ For brief treatments of the revivals in colonies where their impact was actually minimal, see William Howland Kenney III, "Alexander Garden and George Whitefield: The Significance of Revivalism in South Carolina, 1738-1741," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 71 (June 1970), 1-16; and David T. Morgan, Jr., "The Great Awakening in North Carolina, 1740-1775: The Baptist Phase," *North Carolina Historical Review*, 45 (July 1968), 264-83. Maxson has little to say about the revivals in New York. Maxson, *Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies*, 47-50, 59-60, 65-66, 82, 88-89, 114-15, 119-23. On George Whitefield's slim crowds in New York, see Martin E. Lodge, "The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1964), 185-86. For comments on the oddities of the revivals in Pennsylvania and Germantown, see Jon Butler, *Power, Authority, and the Origins of American Denominational Order: The English Churches in the Delaware Valley, 1680-1730* (Philadelphia, 1978), 52, 77; and Stephanie Grauman Wolf, *Urban Village: Population, Community, and Family Structure in Germantown, Pennsylvania, 1683-1800* (Princeton, 1976), 228-42.

¹⁴ Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 51, 119, 160; Kenney, "Alexander Garden and George Whitefield," 1-16.

integrated colonial revivals, he also failed to exercise significant authority over the ministers he inspired.¹⁵

The case against Edwards's leadership of the revivals is even clearer. Edwards defended the New England revivals from attack. But, like Whitefield, he never organized and coordinated revivals throughout the colonies or even throughout New England. Since most of his major works were not printed in his lifetime, even his intellectual leadership in American theology occurred in the century after his death. Whitefield's lack of knowledge about Edwards on his first tour of America in 1739-1740 is especially telling on this point. Edwards's name does not appear in Whitefield's journal prior to the latter's visit to Northampton in 1740, and Whitefield did not make the visit until Edwards had invited him to do so. Whitefield certainly knew of Edwards and the 1734-1735 Northampton revival but associated the town mainly with the pastorate of Edwards's grandfather Stoddard. As Whitefield described the visit in his journal: "After a little refreshment, we crossed the ferry to Northampton, where no less than three hundred souls were saved about five years ago. Their pastor's name is Edwards, successor and grandson to the great Stoddard, whose memory will be always precious to my soul, and whose books entitled 'A Guide to Christ,' and 'Safety of Appearing in Christ's Righteousness,' I would recommend to all."¹⁶

What were the effects of the prerevolutionary revivals of religion? The claims for their religious and secular impact need pruning too. One area of concern involves the relationship between the revivals and the rise of the Dissenting denominations in the colonies. Denomination building was intimately linked to the revivals in New England. There, as C. C. Goen has demonstrated, the revivals of the 1740s stimulated formation of over two hundred new congregations and several new denominations. This was accomplished mainly through a negative process called "Separatism," which split existing Congregationalist and Baptist churches along prorevival and antirevival lines. But Separatism was of no special consequence in increasing the number of Dissenters farther south. Presbyterians, Baptists, and, later, Methodists gained strength from former Anglicans who left their state-supported churches, but they won far more recruits among colonists who claimed no previous congregational membership.¹⁷

¹⁵ Gaustad, *Great Awakening in New England*, 25-28; Maxson, *Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies*, 40-53, 104-11; Gewehr, *Great Awakening in Virginia*, 7-8, 16; *Great Awakening*, ed. Bushman, 19-38; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 204-20. Alan Heimert, however, notes that Whitefield's role "was very much a symbolic one." Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 36.

¹⁶ *George Whitefield's Journals* (London, 1960), 476. Edwards's invitation to Whitefield is described in *Great Awakening*, ed. Goen, 48. For discussions of Edwards's influence see Charles Anghoff, ed., *Jonathan Edwards: His Life and Influence*, (Rutherford, N.J., 1975); and Joseph A. Conforti, "Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity: Theology, Ethics, and Social Reform in Eighteenth-Century New England," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 34 (Oct. 1977), 572-89.

¹⁷ This is the thesis of C. C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800: Strict Congregationalists and Separate Baptists in the Great Awakening* (New Haven, 1962). A "separation" did occur among Presbyterians in Philadelphia. See Maxson, *Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies*, 77.

Still, two points are important in assessing the importance of revivals to the expansion of the Dissenting denominations in the colonies. First, revivalism never was the key to the expansion of the colonial churches. Presbyterianism expanded as rapidly in the middle colonies between 1710 and 1740 as between 1740 and 1770. Revivalism scarcely produced the remarkable growth that the Church of England experienced in the eighteenth century unless, of course, it won the favor of colonists who opposed revivals as fiercely as did its leaders. Gaustad estimates that between 1700 and 1780 Anglican congregations expanded from about one hundred to four hundred, and Bruce E. Steiner has outlined extraordinary Anglican growth in the Dissenting colony of Connecticut although most historians describe the colony as being thoroughly absorbed by the revivals and "Separatism."¹⁸

Second, the expansion of the leading evangelical denominations, Presbyterians and Baptists, can be traced to many causes, not just revivalism or "the Great Awakening." The growth of the colonial population from fewer than three hundred thousand in 1700 to over two million in 1770 made the expansion of even the most modestly active denominations highly likely. This was especially true because so many new colonists did not settle in established communities but in new communities that lacked religious institutions. As Timothy L. Smith has written of seventeenth-century settlements, the new eighteenth-century settlements welcomed congregations as much for the social functions they performed as for their religious functions. Some of the denominations reaped the legacy of Old World religious ties among new colonists, and others benefited from local anti-Anglican sentiment, especially in the Virginia and Carolina backcountry. As a result, evangelical organizers formed many congregations in the middle and southern colonies without resorting to revivals at all. The first Presbyterian congregation in Hanover County, Virginia, organized by Samuel Blair and William Tennent, Jr., in 1746, rested on an indigenous lay critique of Anglican theology that had turned residents to the works of Martin Luther, and after the campaign by Blair and Tennent, the congregation allied itself with the Presbyterian denomination rather than with simple revivalism.¹⁹

¹⁸ On Presbyterian expansion before 1740, see Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia, 1949), 15-52; and Butler, *Power, Authority, and the Origins of American Denominational Order*, 43-52. On Anglican growth, see Edwin Scott Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York, 1976), 3-4; Bruce E. Steiner, "New England Anglicanism: A Genteel Faith?" *William and Mary Quarterly*, 27 (Jan. 1970), 122-35; and Bruce E. Steiner, "Anglican Officeholding in Pre-Revolutionary Connecticut: The Parameters of New England Community," *ibid.*, 31 (July 1974), 369-406.

¹⁹ Timothy L. Smith, "Congregation, State, and Denomination: The Forming of the American Religious Structure," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 25 (April 1968), 155-76. Although many American historians infer that denominational growth stemmed from revivalism and a commitment to evangelicalism, the evidence does not allow them to say that the organization of each new congregation stemmed from a local revival. For example, the controversies in Hanover County, Virginia, clearly centered on doctrinal issues rather than revivalism. Gewehr, *Great Awakening in Virginia*, 3-39.

The revivals democratized relations between ministers and the laity only in minimal ways. A significant number of New England ministers changed their preaching styles as a result of the 1740 revivals. Heimert quotes Isaac Backus on the willingness of evangelicals to use sermons to "insinuate themselves into the affections' of the people" and notes how opponents of the revivals like Chauncy nonetheless struggled to incorporate emotion and "sentiment" into their sermons after 1740. Yet revivalists and evangelicals continued to draw sharp distinctions between the rights of ministers and the duties of the laity. Edwards did so in a careful, sophisticated way in *Some Thoughts concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*. Although he noted that "disputing, jangling, and contention" surrounded "lay exhorting," he agreed that "some exhorting is a Christian duty." But he quickly moved to a strong defense of ministerial prerogatives, which he introduced with the proposition that "the Common people in exhorting one another ought not to clothe themselves with the like authority, with that which is proper for ministers." Gilbert Tennent was less cautious. In his 1740 sermon *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*, he bitterly attacked "Pharisee-shepherds" and "Pharisee-teachers" whose preaching was frequently as "unedifying" as their personal lives. But Gilbert Tennent never attacked the ministry itself. Rather, he argued for the necessity of a *converted* ministry precisely because he believed that only preaching brought men and women to Christ and that only ordained ministers could preach. Thus, in both 1742 and 1757, he thundered against lay preachers. They were "of dreadful consequence to the Church's peace and soundness in principle. . . . [F]or Ignorant Young Converts to take upon them authoritatively to Instruct and Exhort publickly tends to introduce the greatest Errors and the greatest anarchy and confusion."²⁰

The 1740 revival among Presbyterians in New Londonderry, Pennsylvania, demonstrates well how ministers shepherded the laity into a revival and how the laity followed rather than led. It was Blair, the congregation's minister, who first criticized "dead Formality in Religion" and brought the congregation's members under "deep convictions" of their "natural unregenerate state." Blair stimulated "soul exercises" in the laity that included crying and shaking, but he also set limits for these exercises. He exhorted them to "moderate and bound their passions" so that the revival would not be destroyed by its own methods. Above this din, Blair remained a commanding, judgmental figure who stimulated the laity's hopes for salvation but remained "very cautious of expressing to People my Judgment of the Goodness of their States, excepting where I had pretty clear Evidences from them, of their being savingly changed."²¹

²⁰ Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 206. See also *ibid.*, 206-17; Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, in *Great Awakening*, ed. Goen, 279-383, 401-05, 483-89; Gilbert Tennent, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*, in *Great Awakening*, ed. Heimert and Miller, 90, 97; Rothermund, *Layman's Progress*, 160; Maxson, *Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies*, 146. Harry S. Stout drew my attention to the impact of the revivals on sermon styles.

²¹ Samuel Blair, *A Short and Faithful Narrative of the Late Remarkable Revival of Religion in the Congregation of New-Londonderry*, in *Great Awakening*, ed. Bushman, 71-77.

Did itinerants challenge this ministerial hegemony? McLoughlin has framed such an argument in exceptionally strong terms. He has argued that the itinerant significantly changed the early American social and religious landscape because he usually lacked formal education, "spoke to other men as equals" in a traditionally deferential society, "eschew[ed] the parish church," refused to "order or command his hearers to conform," and was "clothed only with spiritual authority [so that] his power was based solely on his ability to persuade the individual listener to act upon his own free will."²²

Actually, itinerancy produced few changes in colonial American society and religion and is frequently misunderstood. Although some itinerants lacked institutionally based formal educations, none are known to have been illiterate. The most famous itinerant of the century, Whitefield, took an Oxford degree in 1736, and the most infamous, Davenport, stood at the top of his class at Yale in 1732. Itinerants usually bypassed the local church only when its minister opposed them; when the minister was hospitable the itinerants preached in the church building. One reason itinerants eschewed the coercive instruments of the state was that they never possessed them before the Revolution. But after the Revolution the denominations they represented sought and received special favors from the new state governments, especially concerning incorporation, and won the passage of coercive legislation regarding morality and outlawing blasphemy. Finally, itinerants seldom ventured into the colonial countryside "clothed only with spiritual authority." Instead, itinerants acknowledged the continuing importance of deference and hierarchy in colonial society by stressing denominational approbation for their work. Virtually all of them wore the protective shield of ordination—the major exceptions are a few laymen who itinerated in New England in the early 1740s and about whom virtually nothing is known—and nearly all of them could point to denominational sponsorship. Even Virginia's aggressive Samuel Davies defended himself to the Bishop of London, Gov. William Gooch, and the sometimes suspicious backcountry settlers to whom he preached by pointing to his ordination and sponsorship by the Presbytery of New Castle. Only Davenport ventured into the countryside with little more than the spirit (and his Yale degree) to protect him. But only Davenport was judged by a court to have been mentally unstable.²³

In this context, it is not surprising that the eighteenth-century revivals of religion failed to bring significant new power—democracy—to the laity in the

²² McLoughlin, "Enthusiasm for Liberty," 69.

²³ *Ibid.* Two historians have taken James Davenport seriously, although both point out that he lacks a full study. See Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England*, 19–27; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 208–20. Whitefield preached in established, tax-supported churches when he got the chance, as happened at Northampton during his visit to Edwards in 1740. See *Great Awakening*, ed. Goen, 48–49. On itinerant preachers and their use of existing pulpits in Virginia, see Gewehr, *Great Awakening in Virginia*, 69–72. The evangelical demand for coercive legislation from the individual states on matters of morality and blasphemy after 1783 is described in William G. McLoughlin, "The Role of Religion in the Revolution: Liberty of Conscience and Cultural Cohesion in the New Nation," in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed. Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (Chapel Hill, 1973), 197–255.

congregations. Although Gilbert Tennent argued that the laity had an obligation to abandon unconverted, unedifying ministers in favor of converted ones, it is not possible to demonstrate that the revivals increased the traditional powers that laymen previously possessed or brought them new ones. Congregations throughout the colonies had long exercised considerable power over their ministers through their effective control of church spending and fund raising as well as through the laity's ability simply to stop attending church services at all. As examples, witness alone the well-known seventeenth-century disputes between ministers and their listeners in Sudbury and Salem Village in Massachusetts and the complaints against ministers brought by the laity to the Presbytery of Philadelphia between 1706 and 1740. Yet, although the revivals should have increased this lay willingness to complain about ministerial failings, no historian ever has demonstrated systematically that this ever happened.²⁴

Nor did the revivals change the structure of authority within the denominations. New England Congregationalists retained the right of individual congregations to fire ministers, as when Northampton dismissed Edwards in 1750. But in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these congregations seldom acted alone. Instead, they nearly always consulted extensively with committees of ordained ministers when firing as well as when hiring ministers. In the middle colonies, however, neither the prorevival Synod of New York nor the antirevival Synod of Philadelphia tolerated such independence in congregations whether in theory or in practice. In both synods, unhappy congregations had to convince special committees appointed by the synods and composed exclusively of ministers that the performance of a fellow cleric was sufficiently dismal to warrant his dismissal. Congregations that acted independently in such matters quickly found themselves censured, and they usually lost the aid of both synods in finding and installing new ministers.²⁵

Did the revivals stir lower-class discontent, increase participation in politics, and promote democracy in society generally if not in the congregations? Even in New England the answer is, at best, equivocal. Historians have laid to rest John C. Miller's powerfully stated argument of the 1930s that the revivals were, in good part, lower-class protests against dominant town elites. The revivals indeed complicated local politics because they introduced new sources of potential and real conflict into the towns. New England towns accustomed to containing tensions inside a single congregation before 1730 sometimes had to deal with tensions within and between as many as three or four congregations after 1730. Of course, not all of these religious groups were produced by the revivals, and, as Michael Zuckerman has pointed out, some

²⁴ Sumner Chilton Powell, *Puritan Village: The Formation of a New England Town* (Middletown, Conn., 1963), 116-32; Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, 1974), 60-79.

²⁵ J. William T. Youngs, *God's Messengers: Religious Leadership in Colonial New England, 1700-1750* (Baltimore, 1976), 53-55, 74; Butler, *Power, Authority, and the Origins of American Denominational Order*, 57-58.

towns never tolerated the new dissidents and used the "warning out" system to eject them. Still, even where it existed, 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, and Edward M. Cook, Jr., notes that after 1730 most new revival congregations blended into the old order: "dissenters [took] their place in town affairs once they stopped threatening the community and symbolically became loyal members of it."²⁶

Recently, however, the specter of lower-class political agitation rampaging through other colonies disguised as revivals of religion has been raised in Nash's massive study of the northern colonial port cities and in Isaac's work on prerevolutionary Virginia. But in direct if quite different ways, both historians demonstrate the numerous difficulties of linking lower-class protest and political radicalism with "the Great Awakening." Nash notes that the link between lower-class political protest and revivalism was strongest in Boston. There, a popular party closely associated with the revivals attacked the city's propertied elite through the election process while the revivals prospered in the early 1740s. But the unfortunate lack of even a single tax list for the period and the lack of records from either the political dissidents or the revival congregations make it impossible to describe the social composition of either group with precision, much less establish firm patterns of inter-relatedness. As a result, historians are forced to accept the nightmares of the antirevivalist Chauncy and the fulminations of the *Boston Evening Post* as accurate descriptions of all the agitators' religious and political principles.²⁷

Yet Nash also carefully points out the minimal political impact of the revivals in New York City and Philadelphia even at the height of "the Great Awakening." The New York City revivals simply did not continue in a sustained fashion after the departure of Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent and, at best, were only loosely connected to the city's equally erratic popular political tumults of the 1740s. This link between revivals and popular political tumult is even weaker in Philadelphia where Nash argues pointedly that the revivals produced no popular political upheaval at all. Indeed, as Nash puts it, enthusiastic religion "remained a cohesive, socially stabilizing force" in the Quaker city. In fact, Nash's findings fit well with other recent studies debunking the extent and influence of the revivals in rural parts of the middle colonies. Herman Harmelink III has argued that Theodore Jacob Frelinghuysen's famed Raritan Valley "awakening" of the 1720s was no revival at all but a bitter personal quarrel that Frelinghuysen dressed in revival garb to justify his own petulant behavior. And as we have noted already, Wolf has cautioned against overenthusiastic evaluations of German involvement in Penn-

²⁶ Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 196-232; Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1970), 140, 224; Edward M. Cook, Jr., *The Fathers of the Towns: Leadership and Community Structure in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Baltimore, 1976), 140-41; Miller, "Religion, Finance, and Democracy," 29-58.

²⁷ Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 204-19; Gaustad, *Great Awakening in New England*, 80-101; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*.

sylvania's prerevolutionary revivals. Unfortunately, the records of all the New Jersey and Pennsylvania Presbyterian congregations that underwent revivals before 1760 are only fragmentary and have so far prevented historians from pursuing the careful studies of communities in the middle colonies that are now so common for New England.²⁸

Isaac's recent work on Virginia demonstrates that the Baptist revival movement there in the 1760s and 1770s shattered the old Anglican-aristocratic alliance so thoroughly that its political importance hardly can be questioned. But two points are especially significant in assessing the relationship of Isaac's work to the problem of "the Great Awakening." First, Isaac nowhere argues that the Virginia revivals demonstrate either the power or even the existence of a broadly based revival movement in the prerevolutionary colonies. Indeed, as he describes the process, Virginia's Baptists succeeded out of a nearly unique ability to confront a political and religious aristocracy that also was virtually unique in the colonies. Second, we do not yet know how democratic and egalitarian these Baptists were within their own ranks. For example, we do not know if poor, uneducated Baptists became elders and preachers as frequently as did richer, better-educated Baptists. Nor do we know how judiciously Baptists governed non-Baptists in the southside and backcountry counties where they were strong but where many settlers eschewed any denominational affiliation.²⁹

Certainly Virginia Baptists flunked the slavery test. Slavery was the colony's most coercive institution, and the Baptist fight against religious persecution there led some early revivalists like John Leland to attack slavery because it exemplified the evils of aristocratic coercion in that society. Thus, the Virginia Baptist General Committee, a denominational body of uncertain composition, condemned slavery as "contrary to the word of God" in 1785. But James David Essig notes that only a single Baptist congregation honored this condemnation and that the General Committee moved away from its own stand in 1793 by arguing that the slavery question should be answered by the legislature rather than by congregations. As a result, in 1796, the one Virginia Baptist association in which the slavery subject was raised refused to discuss it on the grounds that its "only business is to give advice to the Churches respecting religious matters."³⁰

Nor did other revivalists improve this antislavery record. Whitefield complained bitterly that Americans badly mistreated slaves. He preached to blacks and at his death won Phyllis Wheatley's appreciation in a commemorative

²⁸ Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 219-21; Harmelink, "Another Look at Frelinghuysen and his 'Awakening,'" 423-38. In contrast to the case in New England, in New Jersey and Pennsylvania not a single Presbyterian congregation possesses a full set of church records for the years 1720-1760, and the fragmentary records that have survived seldom have been published, although most of the latter are available in their original form or in copies at the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.

²⁹ Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 181-269.

³⁰ James David Essig, "A Very Wintry Season: Virginia Baptists and Slavery, 1785-1797," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 88 (April 1980), 170-85.

poem. But in the case of apparent radicals like Hugh Bryan and Jonathan Bryan of South Carolina, Whitefield seems largely to have reinforced existing urges to educate and free slaves; certainly he never risked his own charismatic appeal in a campaign to destroy the institution. Likewise, Davenport's radicalism did not prevent him from owning a newly imported slave girl named Flora in the 1740s. And if he became frustrated with her, his dissatisfaction did not rest on the knowledge that she symbolized the gap between the revivals and morality but stemmed from her inability to "give but a broken account" of a religious experience she underwent after hearing a sermon by Eleazer Wheelock. She was "so new a negro" she could not describe it. In fact, it was Anglicans active in the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts and in the Bray Associates, not colonial revivalists or even Quakers, who developed the first significant programs to ease the burden of slavery for captured Africans in America, although they too failed to understand that American slavery brooked no significant compromise with charity.³¹

What, then, of the relationship between the revivals and the American Revolution? Obviously, the revivals provided little focus for intercolonial unity in the way some historians have described. They appeared too erratically in too few colonies under too many different auspices to make such generalizations appropriate. The eighteenth-century colonial wars are more appropriate candidates for the honor. They raised significant legislative opposition to the crown in many colonies and cost many colonists their lives, especially in the last and most "successful" contest, the French and Indian War. Nor is it possible to demonstrate that specific congregations and denominations associated with the revivals originated anti-British protest that became uniquely important to the Revolution. Nathan O. Hatch has noted that Andrew Crosswell's revivalist congregation in Boston had all but collapsed by 1770, and no historian ever has demonstrated that similar congregations elsewhere served as isolated cells of anti-British protest. The connection is equally difficult to make with denominations. Connecticut New Lights and Pennsylvania Presby-

³¹ Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (London, 1970), 495-509; Frank J. Klingberg, *An Appraisal of the Negro in Colonial South Carolina: A Study in Americanization* (Washington, 1941), 27-54, 101-22; John C. Van Horn, "'Pious Designs': The American Correspondence of the Associates of Dr. Bray, 1731-1775" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1979), 56-100, 197; James Davenport to Eleazer Wheelock, July 9, 1740, American Colonial Clergy section, Gratz Collection (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia). The erratic Quaker path to humanitarian relief for slaves is traced in Sydney V. James, *A People among Peoples: Quaker Benevolence in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, 1963), 103-40. Various aspects of Anglican relief are described in Frank J. Klingberg, *Anglican Humanitarianism in Colonial New York* (Philadelphia, 1940), 130-40; Klingberg, *Appraisal of the Negro*, 1-54; and Sheldon S. Cohen, "Elias Neau, Instructor to New York's Slaves," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, 55 (Jan. 1971), 7-27. Paradoxically, Elie Neau was a French Protestant whose work with slaves stemmed from new forms of piety and religious enthusiasm created by the expulsion of Protestants from France in 1685. See Emile G. Leonard, "La piété de l' 'eglise des galleres' sous Louis XIV," in *Melanges offerts à M. Paul-E. Martin* (Geneva, Switzerland, 1961), 97-111; and Jon Butler, ed., "Les 'Hymnes ou cantiques sacrez' d'Elie Neau: Un nouveau manuscrit du 'grand mystique des galères,'" *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français*, 124 (July-Sept. 1978), 416-23.

terians played important roles in the colonial protests, but their activity does not, in itself, link revivals to the Revolution in any important way. First, the revivals in both places occurred a quarter of a century before the Revolution began. Second, neither group expanded in the 1740s or sustained its membership later exclusively because of the revivals. Third, the British probably angered laymen of both groups because the latter were important politicians rather than because they were New Lights and Presbyterians. Or, put another way, they were political leaders who happened to be New Lights and Presbyterians rather than Presbyterians and New Lights who happened to be politicians.³²

This is not to say that colonial revivalism did not reinforce anti-British protest in some way. Heimert has argued that the Calvinism of the revivals "provided pre-Revolutionary America with a radical, even democratic, social and political ideology" and contained millennialist themes that bore equally dangerous implications for British rule. But the secret to the success of anti-British and revolutionary protests lay in the expanse of their ideological foundations. Millennialism was indeed important to the American revolutionaries because, as Hatch has argued, it crossed Old Light-New Light boundaries, while Bernard Bailyn has demonstrated in his capsule biographies of the New England clergymen Andrew Eliot, Jonathan Mayhew, and Stephen Johnson that both Calvinism and theological liberalism produced positive responses on questions of democracy and the Revolution. And, of course, some historians still argue for the importance of the secular Enlightenment in shaping revolutionary ideology, whether it be in the thought of John Locke, John Trenchard, and Thomas Gordon, or in newfound Scottish philosophers.³³

Some historians have argued that the eighteenth-century revivals had a more subtle, yet still profound, effect on the colonies in fostering a new system of mass communications among settlers. Stout has written that itinerancy and extemporaneous preaching—but specifically not the intellectual content of the sermons preached—stimulated social and political egalitarianism in the colonies. They created a "spirit of liberty" that tore at traditional social and political deference and fitted Americans superbly for the contests of the 1760s and 1770s. Here again problems of timing and effect intrude. The political ramifications of extemporaneous sermons delivered by itinerant or resident preachers were unclear at best and were delayed for as long as twenty-five years. Moreover, the Revolution they presumably underwrote made only the

³² Nathan O. Hatch, "New Lights and the Revolution in Rural New England," *Reviews in American History*, 8 (Sept. 1980), 323; Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 346-47; James H. Hutson, *Pennsylvania Politics, 1746-1770: The Movement for Royal Government and Its Consequences* (Princeton, 1972), 100-02, 211-13, 240-43.

³³ Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, viii; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, 1977); Carl L. Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York, 1922); Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, N.Y., 1978); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1967), 55-93; Bernard Bailyn, "Religion and Revolution: Three Biographical Studies," *Perspectives in American History*, 4 (1970), 83-169.

most modest contributions to social egalitarianism and democracy, of which they probably were not the sole cause.³⁴

Yet the real Achilles heel of Stout's interpretation may center on the extent of extemporaneous preaching itself. Stout—and McLoughlin, who has echoed him—did not study the frequency of extemporaneous preaching in the revivals. They built their argument on the assumption that it was the key to the revivals and the dominant mode of revival preaching, just as revival critics claimed. This may not be the case, however. As used in the eighteenth century, the term "extempore preaching" did not mean preaching without preparation. Rather, it meant preaching without a written text or notes in a way that, according to Stout, allowed the minister greater flexibility in shaping his subject and communicating with his audience. Although extemporaneous preaching was notorious at the height of the 1740 revivals, not all revival ministers engaged in the practice. Edwards probably never gave extemporaneous sermons despite the fact that he relaxed his sermon style after 1740. Gilbert Tennent, who appears to have preached extemporaneously through about 1743, apparently reduced this practice in the next decade. In 1762, Gilbert Tennent opposed the appointment of a man who preached extemporaneously as an assistant minister in Tennent's Philadelphia congregation, and he attacked extemporaneous preaching in an important but unpublished treatise he wrote in the same year. In the surviving draft of this document, Gilbert Tennent argued that ministers who favored extemporaneous preaching frequently overstressed emotion and that, ideally, ministers ought to mix their preaching styles by preaching with notes "in the morning to inform the mind" and by preaching extemporaneously "in the afternoon to affect the Heart." But in an observation obviously meant to deflate proponents of extemporaneous preaching, he also commented that in his own experience "the Difference between the two modes of preaching with or without notes is So Small, that if you Shutt your eyes or Sit where you don't See the Speaker, you will be often at a Loss to Distinguish which mode is used."³⁵

The caution of Edwards and Gilbert Tennent in eschewing or abandoning extemporaneous preaching and the fact that nearly all reports about its frequency come from revival critics raise important questions about its real influence in the colonies. Did Whitefield, for example, memorize texts, speak from brief notes, or simply begin preaching without previously having given the sermon

³⁴ Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," 519-41.

³⁵ *Ibid.*; McLoughlin, "Enthusiasm for Liberty," 47-73; Gilbert Tennent, "Thoughts on Extempore Preaching," 1762 (Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia); Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards*, 82-88; Maxson, *Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies*, 86. Maxson is the only historian who appears to have noticed Gilbert Tennent's manuscript and its significance. The manuscript itself actually contains drafts of two different statements. One is an attack on extemporaneous preaching, which was written in response to Roderick Mackenzie, *Reading No Preaching* (Philadelphia, 1761). The other is Tennent's defense of his refusal to accept George Duffield as his assistant in Philadelphia in 1762. For the latter, see Trinterud, *Forming of an American Tradition*, 160-61.

extended thought? Did other ministers speak extemporaneously on some occasions but revert, on others, to reading their sermons or delivering them from extensive notes? And between 1730 and 1770 did ministers adopt or abandon extemporaneous preaching in different denominations at different times? Since we do not yet have the answers to these questions, generalizations about the political implications of extemporaneous preaching in the revivals are premature.

What, then, ought we to say about the revivals of religion in prerevolutionary America? The most important suggestion is the most drastic. Historians should abandon the term "the Great Awakening" because it distorts the character of eighteenth-century American religious life and misinterprets its relationship to prerevolutionary American society and politics. In religion it is a *deus ex machina* that falsely homogenizes the heterogeneous; in politics it falsely unites the colonies in slick preparation for the Revolution. Instead, a four-part model of the eighteenth-century colonial revivals will highlight their common features, underscore important differences, and help us assess their real significance.

First, with one exception, the prerevolutionary revivals should be understood primarily as regional events that occurred in only half the colonies. Revivals occurred intermittently in New England between 1690 and 1745 but became especially common between 1735 and 1745. They were uniformly Calvinist and produced more significant local political ramifications—even if they did not democratize New England—than other colonial revivals except those in Virginia. Revivals in the middle colonies occurred primarily between 1740 and 1760. They had remarkably eclectic theological origins, bypassed large numbers of settlers, were especially weak in New York, and produced few demonstrable political and social changes. Revivals in the southern colonies did not occur in significant numbers until the 1750s, when they were limited largely to Virginia, missed Maryland almost entirely, and did not occur with any regularity in the Carolinas until well after 1760. Virginia's Baptist revivalists stimulated major political and social changes in the colony, but the secular importance of the other revivals has been exaggerated. A fourth set of revivals, and the exception to the regional pattern outlined here, accompanied the preaching tours of the Anglican itinerant Whitefield. These tours frequently intersected with the regional revivals in progress at different times in New England, the middle colonies, and some parts of the southern colonies, but even then the fit was imperfect. Whitefield's tours produced some changes in ministerial speaking styles but few permanent alterations in institutional patterns of religion, although his personal charisma supported no less than seven tours of the colonies between 1740 and his death in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1770.³⁶

³⁶ Heimert is sensitive both to the slippages in Whitefield's popularity and to his continuing symbolic importance in at least some quarters. Thus, he reports the bizarre occasion in 1775 during which military officers preparing to attack Canada accompanied the minister Samuel Spring into Whitefield's tomb at Newburyport, Massachusetts, "took the lid from Whitefield's coffin, removed Whitefield's collar and wrist bands, cut them in small pieces, and divided them among the officers." Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 483.

Second, the prerevolutionary revivals occurred in the colonial backwaters of Western society where they were part of a long-term pattern of erratic movements for spiritual renewal and revival that had long characterized Western Christianity and Protestantism since its birth two centuries earlier. Thus, their theological origins were international and diverse rather than narrowly Calvinist and uniquely American. Calvinism was important in some revivals, but Arminianism and Pietism supported others. This theological heterogeneity also makes it impossible to isolate a single overwhelmingly important cause of the revivals. Instead, they appear to have arisen when three circumstances were present—internal demands for renewal in different international Christian communities, charismatic preachers, and special, often unique, local circumstances that made communities receptive to elevated religious rhetoric.³⁷

Third, the revivals had modest effects on colonial religion. This is not to say that they were "conservative" because they did not always uphold the traditional religious order. But they were never radical, whatever their critics claimed. For example, the revivals reinforced ministerial rather than lay authority even as they altered some clergymen's perceptions of their tasks and methods. They also stimulated the demand for organization, order, and authority in the evangelical denominations. Presbyterian "New Lights" repudiated the conservative Synod of Philadelphia because its discipline was too weak, not too strong, and demanded tougher standards for ordination and subsequent service. After 1760, when Presbyterians and Baptists utilized revivalism as part of their campaigns for denominational expansion, they only increased their stress on central denominational organization and authority.³⁸

Indeed, the best test of the benign character of the revivals is to take up the challenge of contemporaries who linked them to outbreaks of "enthusiasm" in Europe. In making these charges, the two leading antirevivalists in the colonies, Garden of Charleston and Chauncy of Boston, specifically compared the colonial revivals with those of the infamous "French Prophets" of London, exiled Huguenots who were active in the city between 1706 and about 1730. The French Prophets predicted the downfall of English politicians, raised followers from the dead, and used women extensively as leaders to prophesy and preach. By comparison, the American revivalists were indeed "conservative." They prophesied only about the millennium, not about local politicians, and described only the necessity, not the certainty, of salvation. What is most important is that they eschewed radical change in the position of

³⁷ The best discussion of revivalism and enthusiasm in Western religion is Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (New York, 1961). The eighteenth-century revivals in Europe and America lack a modern general history. Maxson attempted to place the Pennsylvania revivals in an international perspective but was handicapped by the lack of parallel scholarly studies. Maxson, *Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies*, 1-10, 80-83, 112-31.

³⁸ Trinterud, *Forming of an American Tradition*, 122-34; Sandra Rennie, "The Role of the Preacher: Index to the Consolidation of the Baptist Movement in Virginia from 1760 to 1790," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 88 (Oct. 1980), 430-41. See also Nybakken, "New Light on the Old Side," 813-32.

women in the churches. True, women experienced dramatic conversions, some of the earliest being described vividly by Edwards. But, they preached only irregularly, rarely prophesied, and certainly never led congregations, denominations, or sects in a way that could remotely approach their status among the French Prophets.³⁹

Fourth, the link between the revivals and the American Revolution is virtually nonexistent. The relationship between prerevolutionary political change and the revivals is weak everywhere except in Virginia, where the Baptist revivals indeed shattered the exclusive, century-old Anglican hold on organized religious activity and politics in the colony. But, their importance to the Revolution is weakened by the fact that so many members of Virginia's Anglican aristocracy also led the Revolution. In other colonies the revivals furnished little revolutionary rhetoric, including even millennialist thought, that was not available from other sources and provided no unique organizational mechanisms for anti-British protest activity. They may have been of some importance in helping colonists make moral judgments about eighteenth-century English politics, though colonists unconnected to the revivals made these judgments as well.⁴⁰

In the main, then, the revivals of religion in eighteenth-century America emerge as nearly perfect mirrors of a regionalized, provincial society. They arose erratically in different times and places across a century from the 1690s down to the time of the Revolution. Calvinism underlay some of them, Pietism and Arminianism others. Their leadership was local and, at best, regional, and they helped reinforce—but were not the key to—the proliferation and expansion of still-regional Protestant denominations in the colonies. As such, they created no intercolonial religious institutions and fostered no significant experiential unity in the colonies. Their social and political effects were minimal and usually local, although they could traumatize communities in which they upset, if only temporarily, familiar patterns of worship and social behavior. But the congregations they occasionally produced usually

³⁹ The best-known pieces linking the French Prophets with the colonial revivalists are Alexander Garden, *Take Heed How Ye Hear* (Charleston, S.C., 1741); and *The Wonderful Narrative; Or, a Faithful Account of the French Prophets, Their Agitations, Extasies, and Inspirations* (Boston, 1742). Charles Chauncy has long been considered the author of the latter. Like other revivalists, Edwards was sometimes forced to acknowledge the accusations, although he never dealt with them forcefully. See Edwards, *Some Thoughts concerning the Present Revival*, 313, 330, 341. The most authoritative modern treatment of the Prophets is Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets: The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth-Century England* (Berkeley, 1980). Women's participation in the eighteenth-century revivals, as well as in organized religion in the colonies, should be distinguished from their leadership. The religious group in which women exercised some leadership roles most consistently was uninvolved in the revivals—the Quakers. See Mary Maples Dunn, "Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Colonial Period," *American Quarterly*, 30 (Winter 1978), 582–601; Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston, 1980), 97, 129–33, 140–41; Barbara L. Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn., 1981), 11–44.

⁴⁰ Bernard Bailyn has demonstrated how thoroughly the issue of morality in British politics transcended organized religion and revivalism. Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 55–93.

blended into the traditional social system, and the revivals abated without shattering its structure. Thus, the revivals of religion in prerevolutionary America seldom became proto-revolutionary, and they failed to change the timing, causes, or effects of the Revolution in any significant way.

Of course, it is awkward to write about the eighteenth-century revivals of religion in America as erratic, heterogeneous, and politically benign. All of us have walked too long in the company of Tracy's "Great Awakening" to make our journey into the colonial past without it anything but frightening. But as Chauncy wrote of the Whitefield revivals, perhaps now it is time for historians "to see that Things have been carried too far, and that the Hazard is great . . . lest we should be over-run with *Enthusiasm*."⁴¹

⁴¹ Charles Chauncy, *A Letter from a Gentleman in Boston, to Mr. George Wishart, in Great Awakening*, ed. Bushman, 121.