

No Lords, Spiritual or Temporal: The First Great Awakening and the American Revolution

An Online Professional Development Seminar

Timothy H. Breen

National Humanities Center Fellow
1983-84; 1995-96

William Smith Mason Professor of American History
Northwestern University

AMERICA *in* CLASS[®]
from the National Humanities Center

We will begin promptly on the hour.

The silence you hear is normal.

If you do not hear anything when the images change, e-mail Caryn Koplik
ckoplik@nationalhumanitiescenter.org
for assistance.

GOALS

- To deepen understanding of the First Great Awakening and the role it played in the life of the American colonies
- To provide fresh primary resources and instructional approaches for use with students
- To enable you to make historical judgments about the Awakening's influence on the American Revolution

FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- Topic is shortchanged in most American history textbooks.
- How did the ideas of the First Great Awakening influence the founders of the United States?
- What is the connection between the First Great Awakening and political activism?
- How did the First Great Awakening change the religious culture of the colonies, including the role of ministers?

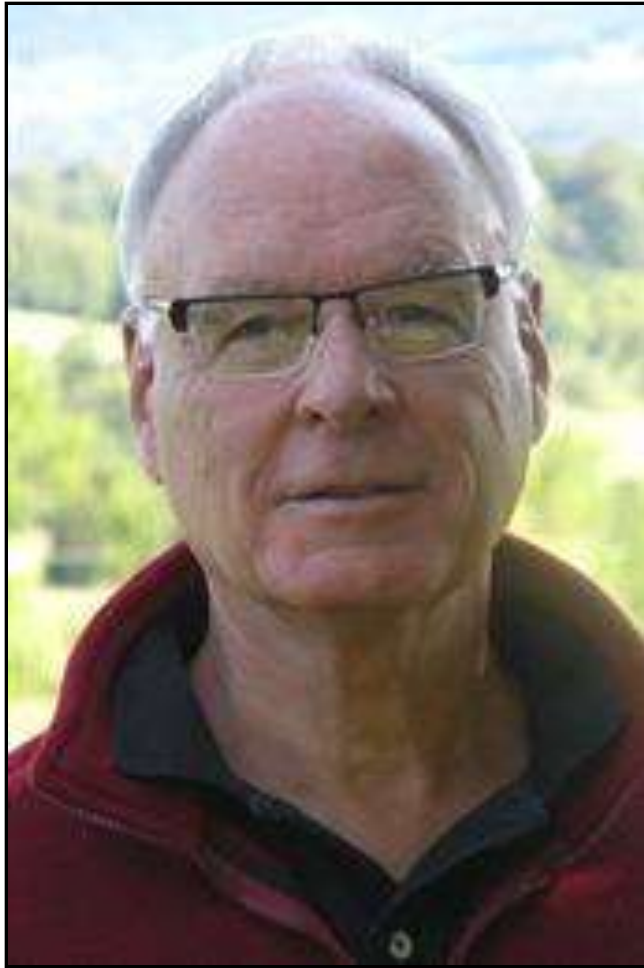
FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- How can we teach the First Great Awakening without raising God questions that are difficult, if not impossible, to address in class?
- What is the difference between the First Great Awakening (1730s-1770s) and the Second Great Awakening (early to mid-1800s)?
- Is the Great Awakening best understood as a movement toward equality that so characterized the Early Republic?
- Did the Great Awakening influence the political content of backcountry preaching as the Revolution approached?

Framing Questions

- Does the First Great Awakening lead to new forms of political participation?
- How did the First Great Awakening and the new evangelicalism it spawned transform the religious culture of ordinary men and women?
- How did George Whitfield and other evangelists create a new religious culture?



Timothy H. Breen

William Smith Mason
Professor of American History
Northwestern University
National Humanities Center Fellow
1983-84; 1995-96

*American Insurgents, American Patriots:
The Revolution of the People*
2010

*Marketplace of Revolution:
How Consumer Politics Shaped American
Independence*
2004

How did George Whitefield and other evangelists create a new religious culture in eighteenth century America?

- Introduced new forms of preaching that stressed emotion
- Abandoned formal theology
- Practiced itinerant preaching

George Whitefield, *Journals*, 1740

George Whitefield (1714-1770)

- born Gloucester, England
- evinced a talent for acting at an early age
- educated at Pembroke College, Oxford, where he became very religious
- ordained Anglican priest
- became parish priest in Savannah, Georgia, 1738
- returned to England, 1739
- dissented from the Church of England, established Methodist conference
- returned to America in 1740
- preached from New England to Charleston



George Whitefield, *Journals*, 1740

Sunday, May 11. Preached to about fifteen thousand people in the morning. Went twice to church, and heard myself taken to task by the Commissary, who preached these words: “I bear them record, they have zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.” I could have wished he had considered the next words: “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God.”

Discussion Questions

Why did the commissary criticize Whitefield?

What is the meaning here of “knowledge” and “righteousness”?

George Whitefield, *Journals*, 1740

The poor people were much concerned at my bidding them farewell; and, after I had taken my leave, many came to my lodgings, sorrowing that they were to see my face no more for a long season. Near fifty negroes came to give me thanks for what God had done to their souls.

Discussion Question

Why might Whitefield have had a powerful impact on “poor people”?

George Whitefield, *Journals*, 1740

Religion is all the talk; and, I think I can say, the Lord Jesus hath gotten Himself the victory of many hearts. I have scarce had time to eat bread from morning to evening; some one or other was generally applying to me under deep soul-concern, and others continually pressing upon me to baptise their infants. I did comply with as many as I could, but I was obliged sometimes to say, “The Lord sent me not to baptise, but to preach the Gospel.”

Discussion Question

Why was baptism so important to the colonists who flocked to hear Whitefield?

George Whitefield, *Journals*, 1740

Great numbers of the inhabitants would have built me immediately a very large church, if I would have consented; but the Lord, I am persuaded, would have His Gospel preached in the fields; and building a church would, I fear, insensibly lead the people into bigotry, and make them place the Church again, as they have done for a long time, in the church walls.

Discussion Question

Why did Whitefield fear a church built in his honor?

“The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole”

Nathan Cole (1711-1783)

- farmer and carpenter in Kensington, Connecticut
- author of "Spiritual Travels"
- heard George Whitefield preach at Middletown on October 23, 1740
- organized Separatist church in Kensington, 1750
- joined Separatist congregation in Middletown, 1764
- became a Baptist in 1778

“The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole”

Now it pleased God to send Mr Whitefield into this land; and my hearing of his preaching at Philadelphia, like one of the Old apostles, and many thousands flocking to hear him preach the Gospel, and great numbers were converted to Christ, I felt the Spirit of God drawing me by conviction; I longed to see and hear him, and wished he would come this way.

Discussion Question

How would an ordinary farmer such as Cole have heard of Whitefield’s preaching at Philadelphia?

“The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole”

We went down in the Stream but heard no man speak a word all the way for 3 miles but everyone pressing forward in great haste and when we got to Middletown old meeting house there was a great Multitude *it was said to be 3 or 4000* of people Assembled together;...

Discussion Question

Is “3 or 4000” a lot of people at this time?

“The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole”

When I saw Mr Whitfield come upon the Scaffold he Lookt almost angelical; a young, Slim, slender, youth before some thousands of people with a bold undaunted Countenance, and my hearing how God was with him every where as he came along it Solemnized my mind; and put me into a trembling fear before he began to preach; for he looked as if he was Cloathed with authority from the Great God; *and a sweet sollome solemnity sat upon his brow* And my hearing him preach, gave me a heart wound; By Gods blessing: my old Foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me; then I was convinced of the doctrine of Election: and went right to quarrelling with God about it; because that all I could do would not save me; and he had directed from Eternity who should be saved and who not.

Discussion Question

How much of Whitefield’s success might be traced to his earlier acting career?

“The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole”

It pleased God to bring on my Convictions more and more, and I was loaded with the guilt of Sin, I saw I as undone for ever; I carried Such a weight of Sin in my breast or mind, that it seemed to me as if I should sink into the ground every step; and I kept all to my self as much as I could; I went month after month mourning and begging for mercy, I tryed every way I could think to help my self but all ways failed:— Poor me it took away *most* all my Comfort of eating, drinking, Sleeping, or working.

Discussion Question

If the new birth brings a sense of salvation, then why is Cole continually so anxious?

Charles Chauncy, *A Letter to Mr. George Wishart*, 1742

Charles Chauncy (1705-1787)

- born into elite Boston family
- Congregational clergyman in Boston
- minister of the First Church, Boston, 1727-1787
- influential clergyman in New England
- distrusted emotionalism and opposed the revivalist preaching of the First Great Awakening
- sided with Patriots during the American Revolution



Charles Chauncy

The Minds of People in the Part of the World, had been greatly preposset in Favour of Mr. *Whitefield*, from the Accounts transmitted of him, from time to time, as a *Wonder of Piety, a Man of God*, so as *no one was like him*: Accordingly, when he came to *Town*, about two Years since, he was received as though he had been an *Angel of God*; yea, *a God come down in the Likeness of Man*. He was strangely flocked after by all Sorts of Persons, and much admired by the *Vulgar*, both *great and small*.

Discussion Question

What is the meaning of Chauncy's claim "No one was like him"?

‘Tis scarce imaginable what Excesses and Extravagancies People were running into, and even encouraged in; being told such Things were Arguments of the *extraordinary Presence of the Holy Ghost* with them. The same Houses of Worship were scarce emptied Night nor Day for a Week together, and unheard of Instances of supposed Religion were carried on in them.

Discussion Question

For a critic of the new evangelicalism, what would count as “Excesses and Extravagancies”?

Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*

In 1739 arriv'd among us from Ireland the Rev. Mr. Whitefield, who had made himself remarkable there as an itinerant preacher. He was at first permitted to preach in some of our churches; but the clergy, taking a dislike to him, soon refused him their pulpits, and he was obliged to preach in the fields. The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous,...

Discussion Question

What is an itinerant preacher?

Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*

I happened soon after to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably that I emptied my pocket....

Discussion Question

What were Franklin's religious beliefs?

Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*

He had a loud and clear voice, and articulated his words and sentences so perfectly that he might be heard and understood at a great distance, especially as his auditors, however numerous, observed the most exact silence. He preached one evening from the top of the courthouse steps, which are in the middle of Market Street, and on the west side of Second Street, which crosses it at right angles. Both streets were filled with his hearers to a considerable distance. Being among the hindmost in Market Street, I had the curiosity to learn how far he could be heard, by retiring backward down the street toward the river; and I found his voice distinct till I came near Front Street, when some noise in that street obscured it. Imagining then a semicircle, of which my distance should be the radius, and that it were filled with auditors, to each of whom I allowed two square feet, I computed that he might well be heard by more than thirty thousand. This reconciled me to the newspaper accounts of his having preached to twenty-five thousand people in the fields, and to the ancient histories of generals haranguing whole armies, of which I had sometimes doubted.

Discussion Question

Can we believe the claims about the power of Whitefield's voice?

“The Life and Times of the Rev. Jesse Lee”

Jesse Lee (1758-1816)

- Born in Prince Georges County, VA
- Methodist clergyman
- Established Methodism throughout New England
- Appointed presiding elder of the south district of Virginia in 1801
- Wrote *A Short Account of the Life and Death of the Rev. John Lee* (1805) and a *History of Methodism in America* (1807)
- Chaplain, US House of Representatives, 1812-14
- Chaplain, US Senate, 1814-15

“The Life and Times of the Rev. Jesse Lee”

The Sergeant soon came round with the guns, and offered one to me, but I would not take it. Then the Lieutenant brought me one, but I refused to take it. He said I should go under guard. He then went to the Colonel, and coming back, brought a gun and set it down against me. I told him he had as well take it away, or it would fall down. He then took me with him and delivered me to the guard.

Discussion Question

If Lee was not a Tory, why would he refuse to take up arms?

“The Life and Times of the Rev. Jesse Lee”

Sunday, 30th. —As soon as it was light, I was up, and began to sing; some hundreds of people assembled and joined with me, and we made the plantation ring with the songs of Zion. We then kneeled down and prayed; and, while I was praying, my soul was happy in God; and I wept much and prayed loud, and many of the poor soldiers also wept. I do not think I ever felt more willing to suffer for the sake of religion, than I did at that time.

Discussion Question

If Lee would not fight, why did the soldiers flock to hear him preach?

“The Life and Times of the Rev. Jesse Lee”

After I had been speaking awhile, it began to rain, and we were under the necessity of going into the house, where I resumed my discourse. I was enabled to speak plainly and without fear, and I wept while endeavoring to declare my message. Many of the people, officers as well as men, were bathed in tears before I was done. *That meeting afforded me an ample reward for all my trouble.* I felt my heart humble before God, and was truly thankful to him for the grace communicated to my soul. I had no doubt but that all things would work for my good.

“The Life and Times of the Rev. Jesse Lee”

On Sunday, the 13th of August, the army remained in their encampment; and, in the afternoon, Mr. Lee again preached to the soldiers, from Isaiah iii. 10, 11. “Many of the hearers were very solemn, and some of them wept freely under the preaching of the word.” In these efforts to bring his fellow-soldiers to the knowledge of salvation, he found many to oppose, and but few to encourage him.

Discussion Question

The new religion seems to have radically affected huge numbers of Americans on the eve of the Revolution.

What do you think might be the connection between evangelical religion and the Revolution?

Final slide.

Thank You