

## 18th Century Colonial America: Religion

### The Great Awakening

The crowd was enthralled. All felt the growing anticipation as they looked toward the stage. People had traveled from miles around—but this was no rock concert. The crowd had gathered to hear preacher George Whitefield. “Now it pleased God to send Mr Whitfield into this land; and my hearing of his preaching at Philadelphia, like one of the Old [apostles], and many thousands flocking after him to hear 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,” said Connecticut farmer Nathan Cole. “Then one morning all on a [Sudden], around 8 or 9 oClock there came a messenger & said Mr Whitfeld [sic] . . . is to preach at Middletown this morning at ten oClock, I was in my field at Work, I dropt my tool that I had in my hand and ran home to my wife telling her to make ready quickly to goo [sic] and hear Mr Whitfeld [sic] preach.”

Cole was not the only one excited. In fact, a religious revival called the Great Awakening was taking place throughout the colonies and had actually spread to the colonies from Great Britain and Ireland. In the words of one Puritan leader, it was one of those “special Seasons wherein God doth in a remarkable Manner revive Religion among his People.”

Preachers like Whitefield drew thousands. But, like rock stars often are today, Whitefield was controversial. One critic labeled him a “Pedlar in Divinity.” Another warned “that his practice is disorderly and fertile of disorder; that his whole doctrine is, and his success must be, diabolical; so that people ought to avoid him, from duty to God.”

Many accused Whitefield of being irresponsible, that his outspokenness about the evils of slavery promoted insurrections. Nevertheless, the people who flocked to hear Whitefield were enthralled by his charisma. Even Benjamin Franklin was impressed: “I perceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me,” Franklin recalled. “[A]s he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the copper. 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 wholly into the collector’s dish, gold and all!”

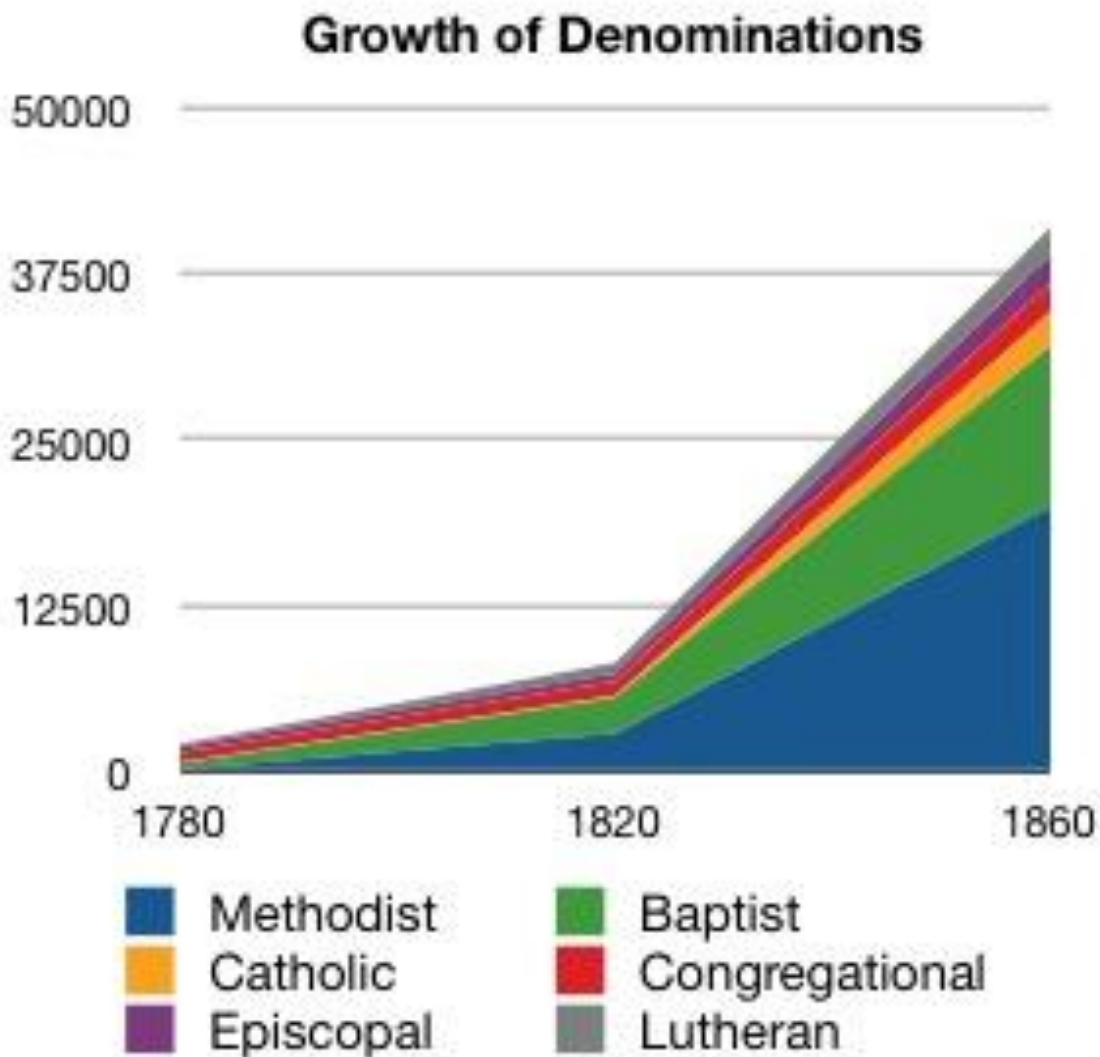
If Whitefield and other preachers of the Great Awakening were as persuasive as Franklin claims, what was the impact of such Great Awakening in the colonies? In part, given the distinctive state of affairs in the colonies, it suggested to people that they had the personal ability to change their lives through their own free will. Also, the Great Awakening preached spiritual equality, and included women, African Americans and the poor — and the power of making choices, though the impact of that, as we’ll see, might not have been so great. Plus it was an anti-authoritarian force led by unorthodox preachers and people not attached to an established church.

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### Accounts of Great Awakening Preaching

"I came to a church crowded with people; the church-yard was full likewise, and a number of people were even mounted on ladders, looking in at the windows. . . When I got into the church I saw this pious man exhorting the people with the greatest fervour and earnestness, and sweating as much as I ever did while in slavery on Montserrat beach. I was very much struck and impressed with this . . ."

Olaudah Equiano (former slave), on observing a Whitefield sermon in Philadelphia, 1766



After the Great Awakening, a number of new denominations formed throughout America.

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A painting of Whitefield giving a sermon. Note the variety of people in attendance.

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Religious Diversity in the British Colonies, 1750



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Est. number of Various religious adherents (1775)

- Congregationalist: 575,000(NE)
- Anglican: 500,000 (NY, South)
- Presbyterian: 410,000 (frontier)
- Lutheran: 200,000 (PA)
- Dutch Reformed: 75,000 (NY/NJ)
- Quakers: 40,000 (PA, DE)
- Catholic: 25,000 (MD)

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Dr. Alexander Hamilton, 1744- Maryland physician travelling in Pennsylvania

Friday, June 8th [1744; Pennsylvania]. . . I dined at a tavern with a very mixed company of different nations and religions. There were Scots, English, Dutch, Germans, and Irish; there were Roman Catholics, Churchmen, Presbyterians, Quakers, Newlightmen, Methodists, Seventhdaymen, Moravians, Anabaptists, and one Jew. The whole company consisted of twenty-five, planted round an oblong table, in a great hall well stocked with flies... The prevailing topic was politics, and conjectures of a French war... They touched a little upon religion, and high words arose among some of the sectaries [members of different religious sects], but their blood was not hot enough to quarrel, or, to speak in the canting phrase, their zeal wanted fervency.

Rev. Ezra Stiles, Connecticut, 1760 Congregationalist clergyman

Providence has planted the British America with a variety of sects, which will unavoidably become a mutual balance upon one another. Their temporary collisions... will subside in harmony and union, not by the destruction of either, but in the friendly cohabitation of all. . . The sects cannot destroy one another: all attempts this way will be fruitless – they may affect a temporary disturbance, but cannot produce a dissolution – each one subserves the mutual security of all.