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George Whitefield From the time of the Reformation, scholars and philosophers in Europe debated important issues of theology and faith. The Reformation had made a big impact on society because it explored views beyond that of the Catholic Church. One of the core beliefs of the Reformation was that scripture should be the guide for one's life. Central to that belief is that the final interpretation of Scripture is one's own interpretation, not a church father's or anyone else. Still another core belief of Protestantism is that God's covenant (that is, the mutual promises between God and one who believes in him) is based on the consent of that individual. Diverse Protestant groups were gaining membership as various groups tried to define what they felt was the truest form of Christianity. One of these groups was the Puritans. A group of radical Puritans who called themselves "Pilgrims" came to the New World to begin a radical new society that revolved around their beliefs. In fact, groups seeking to promote their own interpretation of Christian morality started all of the first settlements in New England. There were some differences, but basic Protestant convictions guided behavior in most colonies and formed the glue for early colonial society. By the beginning of the 18th century, however, this fiery religious spirit died down. The descendants of the initial settlers began to generate wealth. Communities flourished and the sense of distinct religious identity diminished. Christian belief was under attack as more rational thinking became popular. In Europe, the Enlightenment was flourishing and a belief called Deism was becoming popular. Deism is a religious philosophy that a Supreme Being created the universe, but that any religious truth can be proven through reason. It focuses on the observation of the natural world, without the need for faith or organized religion. Beliefs about religion were starting to change again. Then came the "Great Awakening." The First Great Awakening was a period when spirituality and religious devotion were revived. This feeling swept through the American colonies between the 1730s and 1770s. The revival of Protestant beliefs was part of a much broader movement that was taking place in England, Scotland, and Germany at that time. Many different preachers spoke the message that being truly religious meant repenting (confessing sins) and devoting oneself to God. The movement was popular in Europe, but even more popular in the American colonies. Tens of thousands of non-religious colonists were converted to Protestant beliefs. This had a huge impact on church attendance, homes, workplaces, entertainment, and colleges. In New England, Reverend Jonathan Edwards preached about the need to repent and be converted. People flocked to listen to him, and many consider Edwards to be America's most important and original theologian. He was also a major leader in colonial life. Edwards went on to become the third president of Princeton University. Early graduates of Princeton were important leaders including James Madison, and Aaron Burr, who famously dueled Alexander Hamilton and was Thomas Jefferson's Vice President. In the Middle Colonies, Gilbert Tennent was an early leader in the Awakening. His father William was a Presbyterian minister who started the famous religious school known as Log College. Their graduates would help to develop Princeton. Interestingly, the Awakening was a reaction against rationalism, but it also led to the founding of a number of colleges. Many universities other than Princeton were founded then, including Brown, Dartmouth, and Rutgers. George Whitefield George Whitefield, however, was the most electrifying figure of the era. Whitefield was an Anglican priest who lost favor in England. After he was expelled from preaching in England, he began to preach in the farmers' fields to crowds of thousands. When he came to the American colonies, he brought the same energy with him. Whitefield was an actor by training, and he delivered emotional sermons where he would shout, weep, and tremble as he spoke of God. Colonists gathered by the thousands to hear him speak. He travelled from New England to Georgia and is considered by many to be the founder of the evangelical movement in America. He was so loved by his followers that during the Revolutionary War, his body was dug up so that soldiers could take scraps of his clothing. They believed that if they did this, God would watch over them. Whitefield converted slaves and some Native Americans to Christianity. Even Benjamin Franklin, who was a religious skeptic, became Whitefield's good friend and printed many of his sermons. Franklin once emptied his coin purse after hearing him speak in Philadelphia. The First Great Awakening divided many American colonists. On the one hand, it was an experience that created unity between the colonies. It led to a shared awareness of being American because it was the first major, "national" event that all the colonies experienced. On the other hand, it also caused division between New Lights, who embraced it, and Old Lights, who preferred old-fashioned ways. It also split the Presbyterian denomination in half. Because there were conflicts and divisions, the movement was in decline by the mid-1740s. Fortunately, the more unifying effects remained for decades. And despite the conflict, one surprising result was greater religious tolerance. With so many new denominations, it was clear that no one religion would dominate any region. The spirit of the First Great Awakening helped to encourage the Revolutionary spirit. Many things had changed, and many powers shifted. Before, ministers were almost treated like aristocrats. Most new ministers connected with common people. They were not always ordained, and sometimes showed less (not more) respect for those above their social class. Most of all, the new denominations of Christianity were much more democratic. The overall message was one of greater equality. So the First Great Awakening paved the way for independence and the Constitution. Speaking about spiritual equality encouraged colonists to think more about the need for democracy in both church and state. The reformation principal that God's covenant with has church was based on voluntary consent and that his covenant is a participatory relationship would be expanded into political philosophy and general feelings about authority. As Locke and other great thinkers of this era had suggested, the people became seen as leaders, not the monarchs and aristocrats. These ideas would take time to take hold, and tolerance would continue to be a challenge. But soon enough, the Founding Fathers would be able to put this all in writing, and the war would rage. "The Great Awakening" went viral.... People like Whitefield and Edwards were like rock stars. Why do you think the Great Awakening went viral? SKILL: AnalyzeStudying about the Great Awakening has put many students to sleep. Give two good reasons why they might want to stay awake! SKILLS: Analyze, Create What accounted for the tremendous appeal of the Great Awakening to colonists in the later half of the 1700s and who were some of the leaders of that movement? What was the connection between colonists making important choices about fundamental religious beliefs and loyalties and making important choices about basic political beliefs and loyalties? What were some of the major consequences of the Great Awakening that impacted the philosophical convictions of colonists? Share copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. 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This image shows the frontispiece of Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, A Sermon Preached at Enfield, July 8, 1741 by Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was an evangelical preacher who led a Protestant revival in New England. This was his most famous sermon, the text of which was repeated often and distorted during the eighteenth century. The British Atlantic experienced an outburst of Protestant revivalism known as the First Great Awakening (A Second Great Awakening would take place in the 1800s.) During the First Great Awakening, evangelists came from the ranks of several Protestant denominations: Congregationalists, Anglicans (members of the Church of England), and Presbyterians. They rejected what appeared to be sterile, formal modes of worship in favor of a vigorous emotional religiosity. Whereas Martin Luther and John Calvin had preached a doctrine of predestination and close reading of scripture, new evangelical ministers spread a message of personal and experiential faith that rose above mere book learning. Individuals could bring about their own salvation by accepting Christ, an especially welcome message for those who had felt excluded by traditional, more institutionally sanctioned Protestantism: women, the young, and people at the lower end of the social spectrum.The Great Awakening caused a split between those who followed the evangelical message (the New Lights) and those who rejected it (the Old Lights). The elite ministers in British America were firmly Old Lights, and they censured this disruptive new revivalism. Indeed, the revivals did sometimes lead to chaotic excesses. In one notorious incident in 1743, an influential New Light minister named James Davenport urged his listeners to burn books. The next day, he told them to burn their clothes as a sign of their casting off the sinful trappings of the world. He then took off his own pants and threw them into the fire, but a woman saved them and tossed them back to Davenport, telling him he had gone too far.Another outburst of Protestant revivalism began in New Jersey, led by a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church named Theodorus Frelinghuysen. Frelinghuysens example inspired other ministers, including Gilbert Tennent, a Presbyterian. Tennent helped to spark a Presbyterian revival in the Middle Colonies (Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey), in part by founding a seminary to train other evangelical clergymen. New Lights also founded colleges in Rhode Island and New Hampshire that would later become Brown University and Dartmouth College.In Northampton, Massachusetts, Jonathan Edwards led still another explosion of religious fervor. Edwards's best-known sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, used powerful word imagery to describe the terrors of hell and the possibilities of avoiding damnation by personal conversion. One passage reads: The wrath of God burns against them [sinners], their damnation dont slumber, the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them, the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit hath opened her mouth under them. Edwards's revival spread along the Connecticut River Valley, and news of the event spread rapidly through the frequent reprinting of his famous sermon.The foremost evangelical leader of the Great Awakening was an Anglican minister named George Whitefield. Like many evangelical ministers, Whitefield was itinerant, traveling the countryside instead of having his own church and congregation. Between 1739 and 1740, he electrified colonial listeners with his brilliant oratory.According to Whitefield, the only type of faith that pleased God was heartfelt. The established churches only encouraged apathy. The Christian World is dead asleep, Whitefield explained. Nothing but a loud voice can awaken them out of it. He would be that voice. Whitefield was a former actor with a dramatic style of preaching and a simple message. Thundering against sin and for Jesus Christ, Whitefield invited everyone to be born again. It worked. Through the 1730s he traveled from New York to South Carolina converting ordinary men, women and children. I have seen upwards of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, wrote a socialite in Philadelphia, broken only by an occasional half suppressed sob. A farmer recorded the powerful impact this rhetoric could have: 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. The number of people trying to hear Whitefields message were so large that he preached in the meadows at the edges of cities. Contemporaries regularly testified to crowds in the thousands, and in one case, over 20,000 in Philadelphia. Whitefield and the other itinerant preachers had achieved what Edwards could notmacking the revivals popular. Not everyone embraced George Whitefield and other New Lights. Many established Old Lights decried the way the new evangelical religions appealed to peoples passions, rather than to traditional religious values. The two illustrations below present two very different visions of George Whitefield.Figure 2. In the 1774 portrait of George Whitefield by engraver Elisha Gallaudet (a), Whitefield appears with a gentle expression on his face. Although his hands are raised in exultation or entreaty, he does not look particularly roused or rousing. In the 1763 British political cartoon to the right, Dr. Squintums Exaltation or the Reformation (b), Whitefields hands are raised in a similar position, but there the similarities end.Compare the two images above. On the left is an illustration for Whitefields memoirs, while on the right is a cartoon satirizing the circus-like atmosphere that his preaching seemed to attract (Dr. Squintum was a nickname for Whitefield, who was cross-eyed). How do these two artists portray the same man? What emotions are the illustration for his memoirs intended to evoke? What details can you find in the cartoon that indicate the artists distaste for the preacher? The Great Awakening saw the rise of several Protestant denominations, including Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists (who emphasized adult baptism of converted Christians rather than infant baptism). These new churches gained converts and competed with older Protestant groups like Anglicans (members of the Church of England), Congregationalists (the heirs of Puritanism in America), and Quakers. The influence of these older Protestant groups, such as the New England Congregationalists, declined because of the Great Awakening. Nonetheless, the Great Awakening touched the lives of thousands on both sides of the Atlantic and provided a democratizing, shared experience in the eighteenth-century British Empire.By the 1760s, the religious revivals had petered out; however, they left a profound impact on America. Leaders like Edwards and Whitefield encouraged individuals to question the world around them. This idea reformed religion in America and created a language of individualism that promised to change everything else. If you challenged the church, what other authority figures might you question?The Great Awakening provided a language of individualism, reinforced in print culture, which reappeared in the call for independence. While pre-revolutionary America had profoundly oligarchical qualities, the groundwork was laid for a more republican society. However, society did not transform easily overnight. It would take intense, often physical, conflict to change colonial life. This video summarizes the revivals associated with the Great Awakening. You can view the transcript for The Great Awakening here (opens in new window).First Great Awakeningan eighteenth-century Protestant revival that emphasized individual, experiential faith over church doctrine and the close study of scriptureGreat Awakening, religious revival in the British American colonies mainly between about 1720 and the 1740s. It was a part of the religious ferment that swept western Europe in the latter part of the 17th century and early 18th century, referred to as Pietism and Quietism in continental Europe among Protestants and Roman Catholics and as Evangelicalism in England under the leadership of John Wesley (170391). The Puritan fervour of the American colonies waned toward the end of the 17th century, but the Great Awakening, under the leadership of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and others, served to revitalize religion in the region.The Great Awakening represented a reaction against the increasing secularization of society and against the corporate and materialistic nature of the principal churches of American society. A number of conditions in the colonies contributed to the revival: an arid rationalism in New England, formalism in liturgical practices, as among the Dutch Reformed in the Middle Colonies, and the neglect of pastoral supervision in the South. The revival took place primarily among the Dutch Reformed, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and some Anglicans, almost all of whom were Calvinists. By making conversion the initial step on the road to salvation and by opening the conversion experience to all who recognized their own sinfulness, the ministers of the Great Awakening, some intentionally and others unwittingly, democratized Calvinist theology. The Great Awakening has been seen, therefore, as a development toward an evangelical Calvinism. Indeed, the evangelical styles of religious worship promoted by the revival helped make the religious doctrines of many of the insurgent church denominationsparticularly those of the Baptists and the Methodistsmore accessible to a wider cross section of the American population.The revival preachers emphasized the terrors of the law to sinners, the unmerited grace of God, and the new birth in Jesus Christ. They frequently sought to inspire in their listeners a fear of the consequences of their sinful lives and a respect for the omnipotence of God. This sense of the ferocity of God was often tempered by the implied promise that a rejection of worldliness and a return to faith would result in a return to grace and an avoidance of the horrible punishments of an angry God. There was a certain contradictory quality about Great Awakening theology, however. Predestination, one of the principal tenets of the Calvinist theology of most of the ministers of the Great Awakening, was ultimately incompatible with the promise that humans could, by a voluntary act of faith, achieve salvation by their own efforts. United States: From a city on a hill to the Great Awakening One of the great figures of the movement was George Whitefield, an Anglican priest who was influenced by John Wesley but was himself a Calvinist. Visiting America in 173940, he preached up and down the colonies to vast crowds in open fields, because no church building would hold the throngs he attracted. Although he gained many converts, he was attacked, as were other revival clergy, for criticizing the religious experience of others, for stimulating emotional excesses and dangerous religious delusions, and for breaking into and preaching in settled parishes without proper invitation by ecclesiastical authorities.Jonathan Edwards was the great academician and apologist of the Great Awakening. A Congregational pastor at Northampton, Massachusetts, he preached justification by faith alone with remarkable effectiveness. He also attempted to redefine the psychology of religious experience and to help those involved in the revival to discern what were true works of the Holy Spirit. Although the call for a return to complete faith and the emphasis on the omnipotence of God can be seen as the very antithesis of Enlightenment thought, which called for a greater questioning of faith and a diminishing role for God in the daily affairs of humankind, Edwards explicitly drew on the thought of men such as John Locke and Isaac Newton in an attempt to make religion rational. His chief opponent was Charles Chauncy, a liberal pastor of the First Church in Boston who wrote and preached against the revival, which he considered an outbreak of extravagant emotion.The Great Awakening stemmed the tide of Enlightenment rationalism among a great many people in the colonies. One of its results was division within denominations for some members supported the revival and others rejected it. The revival stimulated the growth of several educational institutions, including Princeton, Brown, and Rutgers universities and Dartmouth College. The increase of dissent from the established churches during this period led to a broader toleration of religious diversity, and the democratization of the religious experience fed the fervour that resulted in the American Revolution.Edwards maintained that the Holy Spirit withdrew from Northampton in the 1740s, and some supporters found that the revival came to an end in that decade. A revival known as the Second Great Awakening began in New England in the 1790s. Generally less emotional than the Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening led to the founding of colleges and seminaries and to the organization of mission societies. Kentucky was also influenced by a revival during this period. The custom of camp-meeting revivals developed out of the Kentucky revival and was an influence on the American frontier during the 19th century.The First Great Awakening was the most significant religious movement of the Colonial Era, sparking an increase in Protestant denominations, including Methodists and Baptists, as well as the establishment of educational institutions like Princeton, Brown, Dartmouth, and Rutgers. It also fueled the ideology of the American Revolution by emphasizing the power of the individual over the power of the clergymen or monarchs.The First Great Awakening unfolded in the American colonies during the 18th century, from the 1730s through the 1760s, although some historians feel it continued into the 1770s. It grew out of the Enlightenment's emphasis on rationalism, scientific investigation, and thought, which challenged the old authoritarian ideologies of the Puritans and Anglicans.The movement was led by influential men like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. It challenged the old ideas that monarchs and clergy were the ones responsible for interpreting God's will and passing it along to the people. Instead, the First Great Awakening focused on an individuals ability to have a personal connection with God, allowing them the freedom to interpret the Bible.The First Great Awakening led to a division in religious denominations as New Lights embraced new ideas about religion, and broke away from the Old Lights. However, it also created a sense of shared identity among denominations that bridged divisions and encouraged a shared experience of faith where the people were in control. As a result, they believed they had the right to dictate to their leaders the clergy and politicians what they wanted and what was best for them.Despite the rise in the number of Protestant denominations and the spread of religious freedom, there was still fear and distrust of Catholicism. Americans considered the French Catholics living in Canada to be their enemies, and that idea continued through the French and Indian War. It was heightened when Parliament passed the Quebec Act, which is often considered part of the Intolerable Acts.However, by the time of the American Revolutionary War, American sentiment shifted and the First Continental Congress and Second Continental Congress attempted and failed to convince Quebec to become the 14th Colony.This illustration depicts George Whitefield. Image Source: New York Public Library Digital Collections.1. The First Great Awakening was a Protestant religious revival that occurred in the American Colonies during the 18th century. It was the first movement that was shared in all the colonies, helping transform colonial society and establishing a common American identity.2. It was a response to the growing influence of the Enlightenment and the emphasis on reason and rationalism, which led to the idea that a persons destiny was not pre-ordained by God Predestination or controlled by churches and monarchs.3. The movement went away from traditional Calvinist ideas that God only provided salvation to an elected group, such as the Puritans, and challenged the idea that the Pope or the King of England stood between the individual and God.4. The movement brought about a renewed interest in Christianity, resulting in increased church attendance and conversions.5. Prominent leaders of the First Great Awakening included George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards.6. Whitefield was an Anglican minister from Britain who traveled throughout the American Colonies, attracting people with his passionate sermons. Whitefield went on speaking tours from the late 1730s until he died in 1770. It is estimated that Whitefield drew as many as 30,000 people at the height of his popularity. Whitefield was inspired by John Wesley, a Methodist evangelist who traveled through Europe, speaking outdoors to large groups of people.7. Edwards emphasized human sinfulness and divine judgment in his sermons, including Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, as he encouraged people to repent and ask God to save them.8. The Great Awakening led to the formation of New Lights (embracing revivalist ideas) and Old Lights (adhering to traditional practices) within religious communities.9. The First Great Awakening had a significant impact on the growth of religious denominations, including Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, leading to a decrease in the popularity and power of the New England Congregationalists (Puritans), Quakers, and Anglicans.10. The movement contributed to the founding of several educational institutions, such as Princeton, Brown, Dartmouth, and Rutgers universities.11. The printing press made the ideology of the First Great Awakening more accessible to the common people, which allowed it to spread and gain acceptance.12. The term Great Awakening was not used until the 1830s, during the so-called Second Great Awakening.The First Great Awakening was influenced by several factors that grew out of the Enlightenment, including advances in navigation tools, the printing press, and vaccination against diseases. The scientific work of Sir Isaac Newton, along with the writing of John Locke, also played an important role in explaining how the world worked. These advancements and changes challenged traditional beliefs, which were perpetuated by the clergymen and monarchs. 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