

First Great Awakening

Led by Jonathan Edwards and others, the First Great Awakening centered on New England in the first half of the 18th century and was a response to the ongoing narrative regarding decline and renewal of religious conviction in America. Puritans came to the New World a century before the First Awakening in order to establish “a city on a hill.”ⁱ In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Puritan leaders governed social and religious life by strict, biblical standards and had little tolerance for dissent. Because of their adherence to biblical standards, education became a central priority in New England so that ministers and lay people could be trained to study scripture. Universities such as Harvard and Yale were established and produced Calvinist ministers such as Samuel Willard and Jonathan Edwards. With the guarantee of salvation for the “elect” and waning interest in “conversion narratives,” Puritan leaders sensed a decline in religious fervor.ⁱⁱ This “decline” led to heightened paranoia and exclusivity, culminating in the New England witch trials of the late 17th century. In response to declining Christian fervor, Jonathan Edwards and others decried the essential nature of “affections” and emotional response to Christian salvation. “[Christian faith] involved deep feeling, new direction, transformed life.”ⁱⁱⁱ This emphasis on the affections led to heightened revivalist spirit in the liturgy and ideology of New England Congregationalism and an eventual split of New England churches into the “New Light” churches who favored Christian affection and the “Old Light” churches who opposed it.^{iv} The First Great Awakening, while focused in New England, set the stage for future revivalist movements in the Midwest and South. George Whitefield, another figure of the First Awakening, led bands of untrained, itinerant ministers into these other regions, where they ultimately became the catalyst for Baptist and Methodist expansion in the second half of the 18th century and beyond—setting the stage for the Second Great Awakening.

Cane Ridge Revival

The Cane Ridge Revival of Kentucky was the birthplace of the Disciples of Christ and typified the camp meeting, revivalist nature of the Second Great Awakening. The formation of universities and public education in New England, as well as intellectual currents from Europe, gave rise to “Enlightenment Rationalism” in the US, which became a major force of opposition to establishment religion in the infancy of the nation.^v Voluntarism of the early 19th century combined with westward expanding US boundaries generated new organizations in response to the “declining” religious conviction of American society including the American Bible Society, the American Sunday School Union and the American Tract Society.^{vi} Denominational schools organized by voluntarists became hotbeds of revivalist fervor during the Second Great Awakening. Charles Finney of Oberlin College became a figurehead of the Second Awakening and typified the collusion of religious emotionalism generated by the First Great Awakening and the voluntarist spirit of the century following.^{vii} Finney and the revivals of the Second Awakening “stressed the importance of individual response to Christian proclamations... Under the pressures of voluntarism... churches had to persuade and recruit, win and enlist vast multitudes to their own fellowships and budgets. Revivalism proved a most valued technique.”^{viii} At these revivals, lay people, women, and some African Americans found new opportunities for religious authority because of the emphasis on personal religious experience and its authentication by means of testimony. The strengthening of the Baptist and Methodist denominations into established institutions gave rise to increased segregation within congregations spawned from these revivals, and other groups like Alexander Campbell’s “Disciples of Christ” became more resistant to the “flags” of denominationalism.^{ix} Ultimately, the Second Awakening solidified denominationalism and evangelicalism in the South and Midwest, all the while strengthening the Enlightenment rationalist spirit of New England.

Modernist/Fundamentalist Controversy

As voluntarism developed throughout the 19th century, generating a variety of Christian social-service agencies, rationalist thought became a dominant theological force in New England through the work of Emerson, Dewey and others. Both movements drew on the “progress narrative” prevalent in American religion, traceable back to the Puritans’ “city on a hill.” Urbanization and immigration produced significant poverty in the US, voluntarist groups increased global mission efforts, and social service increasingly became the focus of established American denominations. Many American Christians became concerned that “the gospel” was being lost by “modernist/liberal” Christians’ focus on social service. Increased emphasis on scientific, rational means of biblical studies and theological inquiry further undermined doctrine these “fundamentalists” held to be the primary, non-negotiable tenets of the Christian faith. “Protestants debated both the future and the past: the future with respect to the Second Coming of Christ, the past with respect to biblical history and command.”^x The Second Coming, while not one of the five fundamentals, came to represent the larger insistence by fundamentals on the inerrancy of scripture. It also became a litmus test by which modernists were identified and refuted; modernist/liberal theologians were far more likely to speak of Christ’s return in spiritual terms or not at all—something fundamentalists could not tolerate.^{xi} Harry Fosdick became a vocal representative of the modernist position, and Presbyterian minister Gresham Machen refuted Fosdick, claiming that modernists were changing the basic “grammar” of Christianity from indicative to imperative.^{xii} By the start of the 20th century, the controversy reached its heights and spawn the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942.^{xiii} Neo-modernists like Reinhold Niebuhr rejected their forbearers’ “naïve optimism,” producing theologies more focused on the tendency towards social evil. Liberation theologies draw on neo-modernist theology, while fundamentalism later generated the Megachurch.

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- ⁱ Gaustad and Schmidt, 53.
ⁱⁱ Ibid., 56-57.
ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., 59.
^{iv} Ibid., 61.
^v Ibid., 140.
^{vi} Ibid., 142.
^{vii} Ibid., 145.
^{viii} Ibid., 145.
^{ix} Ibid., 155-156.
^x Ibid., 305.
^{xi} Ibid., 308.
^{xii} Dr. Morris Davis, Lecture 04/22/08
^{xiii} Ibid. 317.