

The Great Awakening

When he was asked, “How do you gather a crowd?” John Wesley (1703- 1791), an evangelical field preacher, replied, “I set myself on fire and people come to watch me burn.”

A couple of weeks ago on the Brian Lehrer Show, the WNYC radio program, Brian was talking with Michael Kinsley, founder of *Slate* and a former host of CNN’s *Crossfire*, about people of faith. Both men said that they themselves were not religious, and they didn’t understand how a person who was religious could also be tolerant. If you really believe your own religion is true, then doesn’t everybody else go to hell?

A member of this fellowship told me recently about a conversation he had with a Mormon woman about our fellowship. He explained that we don’t have a single creed or shared dogma because everyone in the congregation is free to develop their own spiritual beliefs. “How do you keep from arguing?” she asked.

Religious pluralism is a fact of contemporary life, and especially of life in these United States, one of the most religiously pluralistic nations in the world. We all know people

who practice religions different from ours. And what is our true opinion about those people and their religions? How deep and far does your acceptance go?

The world needs urgently to solve the question of how people of different faiths can get along, and we Unitarian Universalists have much to learn about this challenge. It's been said that we have a lot of respect for and interest in the "exotic" religions such as Buddhism and are much less comfortable with Christianity. We're happy to learn about the Hindu God Krishna or even about Mohammed, the founder of Islam; just don't mention Jesus.

This morning I invite you to look at religious pluralism and your own religious tolerance through the lens of a pivotal event in American history. The First Great Awakening was a mass Christian revival involving thousands of people in Great Britain and the North American colonies in the generation immediately preceding the American Revolution, from about 1730 to 1760. Moved by the powerful preaching of evangelical ministers, the faithful and the unchurched came together and recommitted themselves to God, often in huge revival meetings

which were held out of doors when no building was big enough to accommodate the crowds who came to hear the preachers and witness the conversions they inspired.

Gatherings to hear enthusiastic preaching are still called revivals. The word suggests a recovery from near death. These religious experiences are said to wake you up, bring you back to life, offer you a second chance, a new birth, a rebirth, so that people who experience conversion at revivals may say they have been born again. The word *awakening* suggests that the people have been asleep.

According to the Rev. Colin Dye, a contemporary British cleric, “Revival is a season of...visitation from God...acting through powerful manifestations of His presence, strengthening the Church and awakening the world...Many features of revival...flow out of the New Testament experience of God: conviction of sin, many conversions, powerful spiritual encounters, revelations of God, great assurances of salvation, spiritual fervor, and some kind of lasting legacy for the Church and society at large” (Goll, “Revival in the Church,” www.prayerstorm.com).

Mainstream popular culture gives us the evangelical preacher in caricature. Surely the coverage of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright in the past few months has emphasized his emotionalism and his emphatic preaching style. The way that Wright's work has been politicized is beyond the focus of this sermon—but his presentation of self and the coverage he has received is consistent with the image of charismatic preachers in our media.

In film, for example, you may remember Elmer Gantry, the tormented tent- revival preacher created by Burt Lancaster, who won an Academy Award in 1960 for his portrayal. Or Robert Duvall's God- drunk character Sonny in *The Apostle* in 1997. Last year in the movie *There Will Be Blood*, a young charismatic preacher named Eli Sunday, played by Paul Dano, was the nemesis of Daniel Plainview, the Daniel Day- Lewis character. All of these preachers were wild men, corrupt and hypocritical and crazy.

Unitarian Universalists are a pretty staid lot. We are, at least, unaccustomed to the kinds of religious passions aroused in a revival. Our worship services and our preaching are quite

subdued by comparison. We are more a people of the head than a people of the heart. We demand intellectual rigor and rational thought. The conversion experience in a revival meeting is the experience of being overcome by religious fervor, and often it is expressed in terms of surrender, giving in, giving up to God. These feelings are uncommon among us UU's and uncomfortable for many of us.

The theology of the conversion experience contradicts our Unitarian Universalist heritage, which insists that a loving God would never condemn anyone to eternal suffering in hell. The focus of evangelical Christianity on the promise of eternal rest in heaven is at odds with our UU emphasis on this world, not the next world. Many of us do not believe in heaven or in sin or even in God.

What happened in Northampton, Massachusetts almost two hundred years ago may seem foreign and irrelevant to us. It is easy—and cheap—to disparage it. The impulse to do so may contain an element of fear, the same fear that pundits are exploiting in their coverage of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

Yet something in all of us also responds to the idea of conversion—and, of course, almost everyone in this room is a convert. Remember the day you signed the book? Like almost all of us, the people who joined the congregation this morning came from some other religious place, made a decision to become a part of this faith community, and now have made a public declaration of that decision. They have converted to Unitarian Universalism.

Scholars have found that the mass revivals in the British North American colonies in the first half of the eighteenth century were essential to the development of our national character and laid the groundwork for the American Revolution and the separation of church and state. “Our Revolution came after the First Great Awakening on American soil had made the thirteen colonies into a cohesive unit (*e pluribus unum*), had given them a sense of unique nationality, and had inspired them with the belief that they were, ‘and of right ought to be,’ a free and independent people” (William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 1).

To appreciate these claims, let's go back to the beginning of Christianity and trace the development of religious pluralism and religious tolerance over the last two thousand years. The Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313, a year after he converted, and he made it the state religion of the Holy Roman Empire. For more than a thousand years, the Catholic Church was the only Christian church in the West, and all other religions were discouraged. No pluralism and no tolerance.

The Protestant Reformation, which began in Germany with Martin Luther in 1517, broke the monopoly of the Catholic Church. Before Luther, all the principalities and princes in the Western world—Britain and Europe—professed one religion, Roman Catholicism. Catholic priests and bishops and popes had become powerful players in the geopolitics of the day. The people were taxed by the church and by whoever was their sovereign to pay for the support of priest and prince along with their armies. No one had any choice.

The Reformation introduced religious pluralism. A hundred years after Luther, different European states had

adopted different religions, so the Germans were Lutheran and the Swiss were Calvinist and the Spanish were Catholic. Still no separation of church and state—the people were still taxed to pay for the support of the established state church. If you lived in Germany in a state whose prince was a Lutheran, either you were a Lutheran or you were persecuted or you moved.

The Jews were tolerated in some place, often isolated, persecuted and executed in other places, driven out, forcibly converted, and in some places forced to wear the Star of David. Religious tolerance was almost unheard of.

A notable exception was the Edict of Toleration enacted in 1568 in the Transylvanian city of Torda, by King John Sigismund, the king of Hungary. Sigismund was urged by Francis David, his Unitarian minister, to reject the establishment of a national religion and permit several different religions to practice freely.

Thus, Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unitarians were granted official recognition while Jews, Muslims, and the majority Eastern Orthodox were tolerated.

The religious tolerance supported by the Edict was short-lived. Sigismund lost his throne and his successor rescinded the Edict. Francis David died in prison, accused of heresy because he questioned the divinity of Jesus. So, it was one brief shining moment, way before its time.

The Reformation started roughly two hundred years before the First Great Awakening. A hundred years later, in 1620, the Pilgrim colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts was founded by radical Separatist Puritans who sailed from Holland on the *Mayflower*.

These Protestant Puritans were fleeing from religious persecution in their homeland. England was ruled by kings who were both the head of the nation and the head of the Church of England, having separated from the Roman Catholic Church when Henry VIII was denied his divorce by the Pope. So in England there was no pluralism and no tolerance. The Church of England was organized into parishes, which paid taxes to the king to support the church. Dissenters were not tolerated.

Religion and government were viewed as intrinsically connected by the Puritans so, for example, the *Mayflower* Compact called for the colony to be self-governed by majority rule of the male church members in the group. When the Massachusetts Bay Colony was established in 1630, John Winthrop, the leader of this band of Puritans, envisioned their city on a hill as a model civil and religious society, a Bible commonwealth guided by English law with the people in covenant with God and each other.

The Puritans were Calvinists. They believed in prior election, meaning that God had determined before time who among them would be saved and go to heaven. All members of the society must live a moral life or the whole community will suffer God's wrath. Each of their churches was autonomous and supported by the people of the parish, who were taxed to pay the minister and keep up the meetinghouse. Massachusetts was the last colony to give up the established church in 1833.

A hundred years after the first Puritans came to New England, people began to experience the conversion experiences that we now call the First Great Awakening. This

mass movement challenged the Puritan Calvinists in several ways. First, it was egalitarian and democratic. God's grace was available to all, not just the elect, not just the members of the church, not just the pious. During the Awakening, anyone and everyone could be moved by the Spirit.

Conversion is an emotional rather than a rational experience. Revivalists did not think their way to a new resolve; they were swept away by their feelings, set on fire, and transformed in a single day. As Jonathan Edwards noted in his letter to Rev. Prince, some who claimed conversion later were found to be backsliding, while others were permanently changed.

Unlike Edwards, many established preachers opposed the revivalists. Charles Chauncy was the minister of the First Church in Boston, and a leader in the liberal theological movement that prepared the way for Unitarianism, which emerged a hundred years later. Chauncy, "a serious and scholarly man, given neither to great emotion nor large ambition," was appalled by the Great Awakening. According to David Robinson, the UU historian, "few opposed the intense

revival...with [his] tenacity and vehemence” (*The Unitarians and the Universalists* 9). Chauncy’s opposition coalesced in a set of ideas that became the basis for Unitarianism: “a commitment to logic and reason in theology, a biblicalism that was strict but demanded critical and historical analysis, and an overriding concern for moral aspiration as the focal point of the Christian religion” (*ibid.*). The emphasis in Unitarianism on human improvement through character development can be traced to an aversion to the claims of the revivalists that they were saved by a sudden emotional experience. Thus our heritage speaks of “salvation by character.”

Worship in an eighteenth- century New England Puritan meetinghouse was a solemn and staid affair with a silent congregation sitting quietly to hear the words from the Bible and the wisdom from the minister. Obedience to authority and conformity to community standards were expected of the pious in these traditional Puritan churches.

In contrast, revival conversion is intensely personal, often inspired by preaching but experienced by each individual in her or his own way. In a revival meeting, individuals came to

their own experience of God without any mediation. The individualism that is such a strong piece of our national character was encouraged by the idea that anyone could come to God and be saved.

By the end of the Great Awakening, religious pluralism was a fact in the North American colonies, and the separation of church and state was assured. The monopoly of the single established churches was beginning to break up. Although nine of the thirteen colonies still had state-supported churches, their days were numbered.

According to Christine Heyrman, professor of History at the University of Delaware, as a result of the Great Awakening the colonies were “sharply polarized along religious lines. Anglicans and Quakers gained new members among those who disapproved of the revival’s excesses, while the Baptists (and, in the 1770’s, the Methodists) made even more handsome gains from the ranks of radical evangelical converts. The largest single group of churchgoing Americans remained within the Congregationalist [Puritan] and Presbyterian denominations, but they were divided internally between

advocates and opponents of the Awakening, known respectively as “New Lights and “Old Lights.”...In colonies where one denomination received state support, other churches lobbied the legislatures for disestablishment, an end to the favored status of Congregationalism in Connecticut and of Anglicanism in the southern colonies” (“The First Great Awakening,” 1. nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve)

The First Great Awakening was a nationwide phenomenon long before the colonies were a nation. It reached beyond the boundaries of the individual colonies and provided a unifying experience for many people throughout the land. In this way, again, the revivals prepared the way for the revolution to come.

Francis David, the sixteenth- century Unitarian minister who advocated for religious tolerance in Transylvania, wrote, “In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation. You do not need to think alike to love alike” (*SLT* # 566).

And the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was the greatest evangelical preacher of the twentieth century, said, “We may all have come in different ships, but we’re in the same boat now...We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.”

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