

THE GREAT AWAKENING AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 1775 Benedict Arnold assembled troops from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island to capture Quebec and to gain French Canadian support for the War of Independence. Before the gathered army embarked from Newburyport, Massachusetts, on September 19, their young chaplain, Samuel Spring, preached a rousing sermon to the recruits. Newburyport was that place where, exhausted by his constant revival tours in America, George Withfield, one of the most significant figures of the Great Awakening, died and was buried in 1770. After the chaplain finished his sermon, he performed a ritual that he never could forget. Along with some of the officers, he descended to Whitefield's tomb. Then they took the lid of the tomb, removed the deceased preacher's collar and wristbands, cut them in small pieces, and distributed them among the officers. The "talismans" did not prove efficient: the colonial forces suffered a disastrous defeat at Quebec and after five years Benedict Arnold betrayed the cause of independence for £6,315 and a brigadier's commission in the British Army.¹

Although the above mentioned story represents an intriguing connection between the two most significant events of American history during the 1700s, there are not only scattered incidents that link the Great Awakening and the Revolution. Many scholars have seen more substantial connections,² however, the evaluation of the Great Awakening's influence on the American Revolution shifts between extremes. On the one side, there is Alan Heimert's *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* from 1966, and those scholars who echo his opinion, such as McLoughlin who states: „As I see it, the Great Awakening /.../ was really the beginning of America's identity as a nation – the starting point of

¹ HEIMERT, Alan: *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1966, 483.

² NOLL, Mark A.–HATCH, Nathan O.–MARSDEN, George M.: *The Search for Christian America*, Colorado Springs, Helmers & Howard, 1989, 49.

Revolution.”³ On the other side, there are scholars who do not want to exaggerate, or even deny, the relationship between the two movements, such as Jon Butler who contends: “the link between the revivals and the American revolution is virtually nonexistent.”⁴

The goal of this paper is not to resolve this almost 40-year-long debate, but to present examples of the impact, that the Great Awakening had on the American society, and how it prepared the way for the American Revolution.

Firstly, two extreme viewpoints of the relationship between the Awakening and the Revolution will be discussed, then the Great Awakening’s primarily role in the forming of American identity will be presented. After the revival’s contribution to the transformation of the social understanding of the eighteenth-century America will be discussed, the revivalist millennialism’s effect on the revolutionary mind will be examined.

II. THE GREAT AWAKENING AND THE REVOLUTION AS A DEBATED ISSUE

The relationship of the Great Awakening to the American Revolution has always been problematic and therefore is a widely debated question. As Nathan O. Hatch adds: “no single issue in all American history has attracted more talent than that of linking the Great Awakening and the Revolution.”⁵ The core of the debate is that every scholar, who turns to the two most significant events of the 18th century American History, senses that there should be a relationship between them, but it is not at all clear what it is or what it ought to be.

One of the boldest efforts to link religion, including the Great Awakening, and the Revolution was that of Alan Heimert in 1966.⁶ Heimert attempted to follow out the lines of the relationship’s development in a systematic way. In order to do this he has read virtually everything published by clergymen during the examined period – and “read with the hope of determining not merely what was said but

³ McLOUGHLIN, William G: “The Role of Religion in the Revolution”. in Stephen G. Kurtz–James H. Hutson (ed.): *Essays on the American Revolution*, Williamsburg–Chapel Hill–New York, Institute of Early American History and Culture–The University of North Carolina Press–W.W. Norton & Company, 1973, 198.

⁴ BUTLER, Jon: “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction”. *Journal of American History*, LXIX, 1982/September. 324.

⁵ HATCH, Nathan O.: *The Democratization of American Christianity*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1989, 221.

⁶ HEIMERT, Alan: *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1966.

what was *meant*.⁷ His method – reading beyond the lines – and what he found generated many critiques, such as that of Edmund S. Morgan: The world “he finds beyond the lines is so far beyond, so wrenched from context, and so at odds with empirical evidence, that his world, to this reviewer at least, partakes more of fantasy than history.”⁸

The world that Heimert found was a world divided between the elitist, legal-minded “liberals” and the populist, emotion-laden evangelicals. The liberals included all opponents of the Great Awakening, such as Old Light Congregationalists, Old Side Presbyterians, and almost all Anglicans. Opposed to them stood the promoters and contributors of the Great Awakening. Identified by Heimert as Calvinists, evangelicals, or dissenters, the New Light and New Divinity Congregationalists, the friends and followers of Jonathan Edwards, the New Side Presbyterians, and Baptists belonged to this second group. Though the rational liberals were reluctant to participate in the Revolution, in Heimert’s view, this second group became the real force behind the revolutionary changes: “they provided Americans with a radical, even democratic, social and political ideology – one that resembled more the communalism of Rousseau than it did the individualism of Locke.”⁹

Heimert’s radical division between the reluctant “liberals” and the evangelicals, as the protagonists of the Revolution, generated a lot of criticism. Indeed, this separation seems to be too simple, too detached from the complicated world of real people and contradicts the easily verifiable fact that most of the political and intellectual leaders of the Revolution were rational liberals who did not cultivate close contact with the Great Awakening.

Although, they cannot on any account be considered as atheists or deists, most of the Founding Fathers were not very enthusiastic about religion, and certainly not about the religious enthusiasm of the revivals. For example, Benjamin Franklin was “intimately acquainted” with George Whitefield, whose tracts, sermons and journals were printed by him, and yet, he still remained restrained toward the enthusiastic revivalist movement. As he summarized his relationship with George Whitefield: “He [George Whitefield] used, indeed, sometimes to pray for my conversion but never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard. Ours was a mere

⁷ HEIMERT: *ibid.* 11.

⁸ MORGAN, Edmund S.: “Review of Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution by Alan Heimert”. *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXIV, 1967. 459.

⁹ WOOD, Gordon S.: “Religion and the American Revolution”. in Harry S. Stout – D. G. Hart (ed.): *New Directions in American Religious History*, New York & Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, 177.

civil friendship, sincere on both sides, and lasted to his death.”¹⁰ George Washington was a frequent churchgoer, owning a pew, but his voluminous papers included no mention of Jesus Christ and he scarcely ever referred to God as anything but “the Great disposer of events,” “the Great Author of every public and private good,” or the “benign Parent of the Human Race;” and even John Adams, who considered himself a sturdy Puritan, thought that the argument for Christ’s divinity was an “awful blasphemy” in the Age of Enlightenment.¹¹ Many of the revolutionary leaders, such as Thomas Jefferson, viewed passionate Christianity as the enemy of that which they valued – the dispassionate inquiry of reason into the workings of nature – and considered religious enthusiasm a kind of madness.¹² But despite of all their rationalism and liberalism they were anything but reluctant supporters of the revolutionary cause, as Heimert states.

On the other hand, those who were involved in the Great Awakening were not always ardent supporters of the Revolution. Consider for example, Joseph Bellamy, one of Jonathan Edwards’s closest friends, who, during the War of Independence, was a minister in Litchfield County, Connecticut. Although Bellamy effectively helped those who fought in the War and was generally sympathetic with the cause, he also continued to insist that the most important thing, regardless of how the course of political and military events went, was the salvation of the individual. “My desire and prayer to God is, that my son Jonathan may be saved. And then, whatever happens to America or to you, this year or next, you will be happy forever.”¹³ No doubt Bellamy was a patriot, but for him the most important goal still remained in the awakening of the souls, even during the political and wartime turmoil.

Samuel Hopkins was another close friend of Edwards and one of the promoters of the Great Awakening. Although he supported the revolutionary cause more energetically than Bellamy, he also strongly criticized different aspects of the Revolution on the basis of his awakened faith. The practice of slavery made him especially anxious. “Behold the *sons of liberty*, oppressing and tyrannizing over many thousands of poor blacks, who have as good a claim to liberty as themselves.”¹⁴ This kind of critical patriotism was unusual during the struggle for Independence,

¹⁰ NOLL, M. A.–HATCH, N. O.–MARSDEN, G. M.–WELLS, D. F.–WOODBRIDGE, J. D. (ed.): *Eerdmans’ Handbook to Christianity in America*, Grand Rapids, William C. Eerdmans, 1983, 111.

¹¹ WITHAM, Larry: *A City Upon a Hill – How Sermons Changed the Course of American History*, New York, HarperOne, 2007, 75.

¹² WOOD: *ibid.* 174.

¹³ NOLL (1989): 57.

¹⁴ HOPKINS, Samuel: *A Dialogue, Concerning the Slavery of the Africans*, Norwich, Judah P. Spooner, 1776, 30., quoted in NOLL, Mark A.: “From the Great Awakening to the War of Independence: Christian Values in the American Revolution”. *Christian Scholar’s Review*, XII, 1983/February. 106.

although there were other followers of Edwards and the legacy of the Awakening, such as Jacob Green in New Jersey, Levi Hart in Connecticut or the Baptist Isaac Backus, who continued to be much more interested in the salvation of souls than in the defense of the colonies' threatened rights. However, they were sympathetic to the cause of national liberty, and they did not let the revolutionary patriotism overwhelm their Christian commitment.¹⁵

In addition, there were many leading Old Light ministers, who, in Heimert's view, were supposed to be reluctant to the independence movement, but on the contrary were also sympathetic with the revolutionary efforts. Examples of these ministers are Jonathan Mayhew, who wrote opposing "unlimited submission" to British imperialism as soon as 1750, and Charles Chauncy who was troubled about the Stamp Act and encouraged support for the "sons of liberty."¹⁶

These examples show that the real situation was much too complicated to divide the society of the era into only two sharply distinguished camps: the reluctant liberals and the revolutionary evangelicals.

As opposed to those scholars, who – such as Heimert and his followers – suggest a direct and casual link between the Great Awakening and the Revolution, Jon Butler denies any straightforward connection between the two, and even doubts that there was such a phenomenon as the "Great Awakening," which he refers to as an "interpretive fiction."

Butler argues that the contemporaries never referred to the eighteenth-century colonial religious revivals by labeling them "The Great Awakening."¹⁷ When Jonathan Edwards described the 1734-1735 Northampton revivals in his *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, he used the "great awakening" expression, but he used it alternately with other phrases, such as "general awakening," "great alteration," and "flourishing of religion." Not even Jonathan Edwards, who is frequently called as the Theologian of the Great Awakening, used this term to evaluate the religious revivals of his day. The collective name of the variegated religious revivals of the mid-1700s owes its origins to the nineteenth-century historian Joseph Tracy, who gave it as a title to his 1842 book, *The Great Awakening*. Nevertheless, "not until the last half of the nineteenth century did 'the Great Awakening' become a familiar feature of the American historical landscape."¹⁸

What Butler emphasizes with the relatively late appearing and proliferation of the term "Great Awakening" is that the contemporaries did not consider the

¹⁵ NOLL (1989): 58.

¹⁶ MCKENNA, George: *The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2007, 64; 383.

¹⁷ BUTLER: *ibid.* 307.

¹⁸ BUTLER: *ibid.* 308.

revivals of their day as a homogeneous and coherent movement. In his view, the phenomenon of the Great Awakening is nothing else than an “interpretive fiction,” the product of later ages, which magnified the importance of a “short lived Calvinist revival in New England during the early 1740s.”¹⁹ In his view, “The label ‘the Great Awakening’ distorts the extent, nature, and cohesion of the revivals that did exist in the eighteenth-century colonies, encourages unwarranted claims for their effects on colonial society, and exaggerates their influence on the coming character of the American Revolution.”²⁰

Instead of one, “Great,” homogeneous event, Butler emphasizes the heterogeneity and variegation of the mid-1700s revivals, which appeared among members of different denominations, emerged from different theological backgrounds, and were driven by a variety of local leaders. Moreover, these local and fragmented “awakenings” were less antiauthoritarian and less democratic than it was thought and were not easily related to the Revolution.²¹

Butler’s “iconoclastic” counterargument seems to be too strong, but his observation is important for the right evaluation of the Great Awakening’s relationship to the Revolution. Not in any case should it be thought that the Great Awakening *caused* the Revolution, as if Jonathan Edwards had written the Declaration of Independence or as if the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy could have been derived from the “The Life and Diary of David Brainerd.” But it seems obvious that in one way or another, the Great Awakening helped to prepare the American society and culture for the Revolution. However, this revivalist contribution was of course not direct or intentional. As was shown by the example of Jonathan Edwards’ close friends, the primary goal of the Awakening and its promoters was to encourage conversions, not to involve politics. They were not trying to change the political order deliberately, to provoke rebellion or to create a radical ideology; they were simply trying to save souls. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that they contributed to those new social and cultural circumstances out of which the Revolution arose.²²

In the following part of this essay, some of those phenomena through which the Awakening transformed the American identity, society, politics and culture will be discussed.

¹⁹ BUTLER: *ibid.* 309.

²⁰ BUTLER: *ibid.* 308.

²¹ WOOD: *ibid.* 180.

²² WOOD: *ibid.* 181.

III. THE GREAT AWAKENING AS AN INTERCOLONIAL EVENT

“The religious turmoil ... was in fact ‘great and general,’ ... it knew no boundaries, social or geographical, ... it was both urban and rural, and ... it reached both lower and upper classes.”²³

Edwin Scott Gaustad’s statement is representative of those scholars who recognize the “greatness” of the 1730s-40s religious revivals in that they touched so many regions, as well as so many aspects of the colonial life.²⁴ Although the reputation of Jonathan Edwards and the almost ceaseless preaching tours of George Whitefield made New England the “theological nerve center” of the revivals, it cannot be considered only a northeastern affair; the middle and southern colonies were also affected. There were more than two dozen revivals in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and in New York, between 1739 and 1745.²⁵ While not in such great measure as in the North, revivals were present in Maryland, Georgia, North and South Carolina as well.²⁶

The religious revivals extended beyond denominational and even ethnic borders. In Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island most of the revivals happened among Congregationalists, largely Presbyterian and Scottish, with some German and Dutch participation. In later years there were Baptists and Methodists among the participants, and while some were strict Calvinists, others (Methodist in particular) tended toward Arminianism.²⁷

This series of revivals animated large numbers of people who believed them to be the work of God, because they experienced the same spiritual change and claimed that their lives had been changed because of them. Therefore, these revivals were the *first common experience* that the colonies scattered up and down the Eastern Coast of North America ever had.²⁸ The religious inflammation that spread through all of the colonies resulted in “America’s first truly national event”, which bound together many diverse interests among the thirteen colonies and provided a thread of unity that ran throughout the group.²⁹ The phenomenon of the Awakening was a highly debated issue from Maine to Georgia. New social links were established by it: the clergy and laypeople began to correspond with each other to encourage

²³ NOLL, M. A.—HATCH, N. O.—MARSDEN, G. M.—WELLS, D. F.—WOODBRIDGE, J. D. (ed.): *Eerdmans’ Handbook to Christianity in America*, Grand Rapids, William C. Eerdmans, 1983, 101.

²⁴ NOLL (1989): 50.

²⁵ MCKENNA: *ibid.* 54.

²⁶ BUTLER: *ibid.* 310.

²⁷ MCKENNA: *ibid.* 54.

²⁸ MCKENNA: *ibid.* 54.

²⁹ NOLL (1989): 54.

local revivals, or quite the contrary, to warn against its excesses. Such was George Whitefield, who crossed colonial boundaries on his preaching tours as if they were not there; similarly, the common experience of the Awakening diminished the colonial, social and even ethnic boundaries and connected not only those who actively participated in the religious renewal but even those who just discussed the issue or opposed it.

Some historians have gone so far as to argue that it was the first movement that gave the colonies any sense of *common identity*. For instance, William C. McLoughlin states, “the Great Awakening /.../ was really the beginning of America’s identity as a nation”³⁰, and Clarence C. Goen contends that the Great Awakening “made these scattered Britishers and Europeans in North America aware, for the first time, that they were not just Georgians and Carolinians and Virginians and New Yorkers but that they were *Americans*, and that they were bound together with common experiences, common concerns, common problems, common solutions to those problems. They were beginning to be molded into a common character and to discover a common purpose and a common identity.”³¹

The Great Awakening provided the first feeling of togetherness to the inhabitants of the colonies, because a palpable sense of brotherhood ran through the revivals.³² As Heimert observes, “Not liberty, not even equality was, as it turned out, the essence of Awakening, but fraternity. In the course of the eighteenth century many Calvinists were to be shocked as they saw the single end toward which all strains of Providence and grace tended. But the spirit aroused in 1740 proved to be that of American nationalism.”³³

Moreover, as *Americans* began to regard themselves more distinctly as a coherent nation, they naturally became more suspicious of churches which retained secure ties with Europe, especially of the Church of England. The suspicion was nurtured both by the Anglican officials’ relative indifference to the spread of the Great Awakening and the Church of England’s close ties with crown officials. Later, when tempers between the colonists and the British began to flare, the religious mistrust intermingled with the political and became one more reason for distrusting the British in general.³⁴

But the Great Awakening not only ignored the regional boundaries of the thirteen colonies, provided a common experience, and formed common identity, but it also

³⁰ MCLOUGHLIN: *ibid.* 198.

³¹ GOEN, Clarence C.: “The American Revolution as a Religious Revival”. *American Baptist Quarterly*, X, 1991/December. 319.

³² MCKENNA: *ibid.* 65.

³³ HEIMERT: *ibid.* 94.

³⁴ NOLL (1989): 54.

transgressed the social boundaries of the period as well. As Mark A. Noll observes: “The Great Awakening had cut through colonial society like a two-edged sword.”³⁵ This topic will be explained in the next chapter.

IV. THE GREAT AWAKENING AS A CATALYST OF SOCIOLOGICAL CHANGES

In many scholars' opinion, the revivals had a distinctive role in the profound transformation of the social understanding of the eighteenth-century America. Within the colonies, the century began with local communities organized around their churches, with the pastors in control of doctrine and ecclesiastical forms. These were communities based upon deference, order, and established forms of public communication.³⁶ Most individuals gladly yielded their judgment and conscience to the superior claims and knowledge of the ruling elite in church and state, who derived their authority from God. The king, who ruled by *Dei gratia*, the governors, and, in the narrowest local communities, the pastors interpreted the will of God, and deference was their due.³⁷ Despite substantial differences between northern Puritanism and southern Anglicanism, all churchmen believed traditionally with Samuel Willard that God did “Ordain Orders of Superiority and Inferiority among men.”³⁸ Common people were supposed to know their place within this social framework, and they generally did. “This hierarchical world-view presupposed a society of face-to-face personal relationships in which people identified themselves with reference to those around them and acted according to their rank in the community. Forms of attire, the ‘seating’ of public meetings, and patterns of speech were among the more conspicuous indications of a pervasive social stratification that separated the leaders from the rank and file.”³⁹

Into this social establishment the Great Awakening brought revolutionary novelties. The message that the revivalist announced was familiar to colonial ears. The needs for personal repentance and conversion have been often proclaimed, especially in New England congregations, which were rooted in Puritanism. The sensational novelty was the revolutionary way in which this familiar message was proclaimed. The stimulating manner of its presentation and the open-air setting of its address was a never before seen innovation in the New World. Itinerant preachers

³⁵ NOLL (1989): 59.

³⁶ MCKENNA: *ibid.* 63.

³⁷ MCLOUGHLIN: *ibid.* 200.

³⁸ Quoted in *Eerdmans' Handbook to Christianity in America*, 128.

³⁹ STOUT, Harry S.: “Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution”. *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXXIV, 1977/October. 525.

put on public performances before large crowds, who were present without the direction or even the approval of local pastors, the representatives of local authority. It was a new style, a new “rhetoric of persuasion,” of which characteristics were cleric itinerancy, new approach to leadership, and lay participation in former exclusively clerical responsibilities.⁴⁰

In the established setting of colonial religious affairs inflexible rules governed who could speak in public settings, where, when, and to what extent. The speaker and audience were steadily reminded of their proper position in the community and no public gatherings took place outside of traditional associations based upon social rank. In this hierarchical world rules of public speech were rigidly circumscribed and limited to an elite, college educated “speaking aristocracy.” The public address remained the solitary privilege of the established, tax-supported clergymen, who would tolerate no interference from lower rank people.⁴¹ The suppression of those commoners, who wanted to participate in this privilege, went back to old traditions, which can best be characterized by the banishment of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams in Massachusetts Bay.

The itinerant preachers of the Great Awakening stirred up these traditional conceptions. Their wandering way of life troubled those settled pastors who thought that the right ministry must be accompanied with the authoritarian control of a congregation, expressing the insistence on those hierarchical principles upon which both family and social order rested. As Increase Mather added: “To say that a Wandering Levite who has no flock is a Pastor, is as good sense as to say, that he that has no children is a Father.”⁴²

As opposed to many settled ministers of the period, the itinerant preachers preferred the extemporaneous sermons, rather than reading a written, scholarly essay from the pulpit. Simple, everyday language was used during the meetings, which made it possible for the cleric promoters of the Awakening to encourage ordinary laypeople to deliver similarly extemporaneous sermons.

For the revivalist the right to perform Christian ministries, as well as to make a public address, was not dispensed by privileges, appropriate social status or education. Anyone could be a potential speaker by the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Charles Chauncy, one of the greatest opponents of the Great Awakening, described the “lay exhorters” saying, “They are chiefly indeed, young persons, sometimes lads, or rather boys; nay, women and girls, yea, Negroes, have taken upon them to do the business of preachers.”⁴³ Youth, women, and even blacks could practice such privileges, as the right of delivering a public address, which formerly

⁴⁰ Ibid. 526.

⁴¹ *Eerdmans' Handbook to Christianity in America*, 128.

⁴² Quoted in STOUT: *ibid.* 526.

⁴³ *Eerdmans' Handbook to Christianity in America*, 121.

was strictly restricted to the “betters” of the society. However, the revivalists were not primarily concerned about the rights of laypeople, but their concern to promote the glory of God, by opening the gates of public address for every awakened, also promoted the democratization of America.

Additionally, anybody’s right to serve as a minister could be questioned, if he proved to be unconverted. Gilbert Tennent’s 1741 sermon, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” exemplifies well this strict opinion, which designates these unconverted pastors as the “Servants of Satan,” in whom the “Satan himself is transformed into an Angel of Light,” and whose ministry is not only uncomfortable, but “dangerous, both in respect of the Doctrines and Practice of Piety.”⁴⁴ The ministers who did not show “the plain Evidences of experimental Religion” signified a tremendous peril for their flock by endangering their salvation.⁴⁵

By the questioning of the credibility of pastoral authority, which resulted in the shattering of communal churches and cut people loose from ancient religious bonds, “the Great Awakening represented a massive defiance of traditional authority ... And thus, the Awakening’s religious challenge to established authority inevitably but indirectly prepared many Americans for the subsequent political challenge that would become the American Revolution.”⁴⁶ In addition, the fact that revivalists were able to challenge traditional authority was in itself a demonstration that in the name of a so-called just cause traditional authority could be directly attacked.⁴⁷ It was a lesson that would not be forgotten.

The Great Awakening set the stage for the Revolution in regard of the literary and oratory expression as well, since it introduced such terms into the public discussion like “liberty,” “virtue” and “tyranny.” Originally these terms carried explicitly religious meanings, but the introduction of these terms into the public discussion, and the fact that they were great motivators for action, left a lasting legacy. During the Revolution it was far easier to make effective use of the capital that these terms had acquired in the Great Awakening.⁴⁸ The oratory style of the itinerant preachers prepared the audiences and readers for the fiery language of Thomas Paine’s pamphlets or the “hypnotic orations” of Patrick Henry’s “Give me Liberty, or give me Death!”⁴⁹ The most influential orators of the American

⁴⁴ TENNENT, Gilbert: “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry”. in Alan Heimert–Perry Miller (eds.): *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and its Consequences*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1967, 77; 82; 93.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁶ WOOD: *ibid.* 182.

⁴⁷ BRAUER, Jerald C.: “Puritanism, Revivalism, and the Revolution”. in Jerald C. Brauer (ed.): *Religion and the American Revolution*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1976, 25.

⁴⁸ NOLL (1989): 55.

⁴⁹ STOUT: *ibid.* 536.

Revolution used the same tactic as the revivalist: they tried to appeal to the emotions. As Thomas Jefferson remembers to Patrick Henry's "Give me Liberty, or give me Death!" speech addressed to the Virginia House of Burgesses on March 23, 1775: "Although it was difficult, when [Patrick Henry] had spoken, to tell what he had said, yet, while speaking, it always seemed directly to the point. When he had spoken in opposition to my opinion, had produced a great effect, and I myself had been highly delighted and moved, I have asked myself, when he ceased, 'What the devil has he said?' and could never answer the inquiry."⁵⁰ The emphasis on motivation often exceeded the quality of content in order to promote the crucial decision of the auditors, whether in religious or political matters.

Moreover, the assembled crowds, to whom the awakening speeches were addressed, were not only passive recipients of the evangelical message as it was expected from the common, pew-owning churchgoers. On the contrary, a kind of dialogue formed between the deliverer of public address and the audience. The people responded to the itinerant preacher's everyday-language sermons with shouts and ejaculations. The spontaneous, Spirit-moved "testimonies" and gestures put aside all formal, scripted exchanges between speakers and audiences and brought the common people to the discovery that they could be more than passive spectators; they could be active participants in the events.⁵¹ They began to feel that together they were able to form the events and even that they could confront existing institutional arrangements and there was nothing the authorities could do to stop them. It was a realization that later could easily cross from the religious sphere to the political and could prepare the way to the crowd's active political opining and role in public.

V. THE GREAT AWAKENING AS THE FORERUNNER OF THE CHRISTIAN MILLENNIUM

One more contribution, with which the Great Awakening promoted the ideological preparation for the revolution, came from the revivalist identification of the present events with eschatological proceedings, which later led to similar estimation in case of the Revolution as well.

Millennialism is usually classified into two different categories, namely the Post- and Pre-millennialism. Roughly speaking, the seventeenth century Puritans were preoccupied with the Pre-millennialism.⁵² According to this eschatological

⁵⁰ Quoted in COHEN, Charles: "The 'Liberty or Death' Speech: A Note on Religion and Revolutionary Rhetoric". *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXXVIII, 1981/October. 702-717.

⁵¹ MCKENNA: *ibid.* 65.

⁵² ONISHI, Naoki: "American Conceptualization of Time and Jonathan Edwards' Post-Millennialism Reconsidered". *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, XV, 2004. 26.

idea, after a series of cataclysm, such as wars, plagues, and earthquakes, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will occur, who destroys the Antichrist and render the final judgment of humanity. However, in Pre-millennialism the Second Coming will be followed by the thousand-year age of glory, this perception of the end of the world posits a sudden, dramatic conclusion of the human history.

By the time of the Second Great Awakening, the first three decades of the nineteenth century, the American millennialism transformed. Differing from the pessimism and the horrifying image of the abrupt end of the world, the Post-millennialism envisaged the thousand-year age of peace and moral progress on the earth, before Jesus Christ's Second Coming, the Last Judgment and the end of the temporal world will occur.

The American millennialism's transformation from a pessimistic, horrifying perception to an optimistic, animating one, was promoted mainly by the New Divinity, the followers of Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening. Jonathan Edwards adopted Post-millennialism and considered the revivals as the signs of the new age's manifestation in the temporal world. After "many sore conflicts and terrible confusions, and many changes, revivings and intermissions, and returns of dark clouds, and threatening appearance," Edwards predicted, that "Christ's kingdom shall be everywhere established and settled in peace, which will be the lengthening of the Millennium or day of the Church's peace, rejoicing and triumph on earth."⁵³ Edwards, in his *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* in 1742, even assumed that the millennial Kingdom of Christ itself will center in America, more specifically in New England. "And if we may suppose that this glorious work of God shall begin in any part of America, I think, if we consider the circumstances of the settlement of New England, it must needs appear the most likely of all American colonies, to be the place whence this work shall principally take its rise. And if these things are so, it gives us more abundant reasons to hope that what is now seen in America, and especially in New England, may prove the dawn of that glorious day."⁵⁴

After the revival fires cooled and life returned to conditions that had prevailed before 1740, Edwards became disillusioned about the success of the revivals in New England. Though, he never ceased to believe that providential events were occurring in his time and that America was the land set aside for final drama.⁵⁵

⁵³ Jonathan Edward's letter to William McCulloch on March 5, 1744. Quoted in ONISHI: *ibid.* 31.

⁵⁴ EDWARDS, Jonathan: "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England (1742)". in C. C. Goen (ed.): *Works of Jonathan Edwards: The Great Awakening 4*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1972, 358.

⁵⁵ MCKENNA: *ibid.* 67.

When the religious vivification calmed down and did not seem to bring the “dawn of that glorious day,” proponents of the Awakening wondered whether their eschatological hopes had been justified. Because they were accustomed to reading the signs of times in connection with the revival, now thought they could do it in the political sphere. The French and Indian War offered many occasion to revive the fading millennial dreams.⁵⁶

The war for commercial and colonial supremacy between the Protestant England and the Catholic French got an eschatological accent and was interpreted as the Last Day fight of the Protestantism against the Antichrist. The defeat of the popish, tyrannical France was seen as the next step for the coming of the millennial Kingdom. The application of eschatological thinking for the sake of the fight against the French got into new shape during the Revolution.

However, in its first phase the French and Indian War brought closer the colonists to the British than ever, in the end it resulted in the bitterest recriminations and an irreparable breach.⁵⁷ In the changed political situation, the identification of the Catholic French tyranny was revised and the colonist came to think that the Antichrist was the tyranny itself, which was embodied by the King and the Parliament, which violated the American colonies’ liberty. In theory, the real foe still remained the “popery,” “the greatest enemy, and the greatest corrupter of christianity” but in practice Catholic tyranny was interestingly intermingled with the “corrupt system of tyranny and oppression, that has of late been fabricated and adopted by the ministry and parliament of Great-Britain, which appears so favourable to popery and Roman catholic interest.”⁵⁸ The above mentioned lines came from Samuel Sherwood’s sermon on Revelation 13. This sermon, “The Church’s Flight into the Wilderness,” states that the British oppression of the colonies’ is the work of the Antichrist and the seven-headed beast of the revelation is nothing else than the corrupt system and tyranny of the Parliament.

Sherwood’s sermon exemplifies well that by the time of the Revolution, the merely spiritual millennialism of Jonathan Edwards and his followers became a religiously sanctioned political device, by which help, the struggle against the British Crown could be interpreted as a holy war for God against the Antichrist.⁵⁹

In this paper some examples were shown, how the Great Awakening helped to prepare the American society and culture for the Revolution. As the religious revivals ignoring the colonial borders spread throughout the colonies provided the

⁵⁶ NOLL (1989): 61.

⁵⁷ MCKENNA: *ibid.* 65.

⁵⁸ SHERWOOD, Samuel: “The Church’s Flight into the Wilderness”. in Ellis Sandoz (ed.): *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1998, 499; 502.

⁵⁹ NOLL (1989): 62.

feeling of togetherness to the colonists. The participating in the revivals became the first common experience of the inhabitants of the colonies and gave them a sense of common identity, which can be seen as one of the first steps on the way of becoming a nation.

The Great Awakening challenged and questioned the inherited forms of community and authority. This primarily religious challenge to established authority indirectly prepared many Americans for the following political challenge that would become the Revolution. Moreover, the revivalist confrontation served as a demonstration for that in the name of the just-cause traditional authority can be attacked.

The Great Awakening redefined the social context in which the public address took place. Encouraging laypeople to deliver public speeches the revivalist movement debated the exclusive rights of the “speaking aristocracy,” by which promoted the democratization of the American society. The itinerant preacher’s preference for extemporaneous, everyday language, prepared the audience for similar oratory of the Revolution

Finally, the revivalist emphasis on the impending millennium contributed to the misplaced millennialist rhetoric of the pulpit of Revolution.

FORRÁS
