

Between Reason and Passion: The First Great Awakening

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Religion has always been and still is one of the most important factors for understanding America's cultural life. In particular, the United States has had religion influencing its development before the founding year of 1776. Among the most influential moments were the Great Awakenings that have periodically occurred over the past three centuries. The First Great Awakening, the subject of this research paper, took place in the early and middle 18th century spanning from the 1730s to the 1750s, concluding with the beginning of the Seven Years War and the start of the Revolutionary Era of U.S. history. Though there are many fascinating aspects that may be studied in this period, turning to the intellectual and cultural practitioners associated with this early period may be the most fruitful exploration for thinking about the relationship between religion and cultural life in the U.S. This paper asserts that the relationship between the emotional and intellectual that is present in the life and work of Gilbert Tennent, a significant figure of the First Great Awakening, is analogous to the tension between the emotional and intellectual in the larger culture of the United States.

Originating in England during the 1730s, and more commonly referred to as the Evangelical Revival in that geographical context, the Great Awakening was a period of increased religious zeal. Many Protestant theologians had become disillusioned with the state of their churches, the religious life throughout their society, and the spiritual health of their fellow Christians. Ministers such as George Whitefield and John Edwards began to preach with a new emotional urgency.¹ Of great importance to Revivalist theology is having an

¹ Bryan F. Le Beau, *A History of Religion in America: From the First Settlements through the Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 36, 38.

enthusiastic conversion and an emotional religious experience.² For these ministers, it was not simply enough to profess Christian faith, one needed to come to faith freely, from a place of emotional urgency.

The Great Awakening can be thought of as a reaction to the secularizing influence of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was an intellectual and philosophical movement that began in the late 17th century and reached its height in the 18th century. Above all the Enlightenment valued reason and the human ability to use reason to understand and demystify the world.³ This mode of thought would affect religion as it would all aspects of society. As religion became more rational, the counter-movement of the Great Awakening would act to revive religious passion.

English Revivalist ministers would eventually travel to the American Colonies where they would preach at outdoor revivals much as they did in England. Among these ministers was George Whitefield. Born in 1714 in Gloucester, England, Whitefield made several preaching tours through North America, his first being in 1740. His preaching tour of the 1740s drew crowds in the thousands and would serve to dramatically increase the popularity of Revivalist theology.⁴ Though Whitefield would return to England, his tours and those of other Revivalist preachers sparked a tradition that would continue to grow throughout U.S. history.

The Great Awakening was not solely English preachers coming to America, the colonies had a thriving Awakening tradition that included other ethnicities migrating from

² John Howard Smith, *The First Great Awakening: Redefining Religion in British America, 1725-1775* (Lanham, Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), 19.

³ William Bristow, "Enlightenment," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, August 29, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/enlightenment/>.

⁴ Le Beau, *A History of Religion in America*, 38.

Europe. The matter of enthusiastic religion was already being engaged with from New England to Pennsylvania to Georgia. In Pennsylvania, there was Gilbert Tennent, an Irishman who immigrated with his family in 1718.⁵ He would become one of the most important preachers and intellectuals of the Great Awakening: “He was an ardent evangelist, appealing to the emotions of his hearers, when many of his brother ministers deliberately avoided that appeal.”⁶ He was also one of the founders of the Presbyterian sect of Christianity, an approach that has a rich array of primary sources that help unpack this early period in American history.⁷

Looking at his life and work, within Gilbert Tennent there existed a dual nature. On one hand, he was an instrumental preacher within a movement founded on enthusiastic emotional experiences. While, on the other hand, Tennent was a well-studied and highly educated intellectual with scholarly training in Enlightenment philosophy. This tension shows up in the archives of Tennent’s sermons.

In his sermon from 1740, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*, Tennent lays out his arguments against the state of Protestant religion at the time. He was particularly concerned with what he terms “Pharisee-teachers” whom he described thusly, “First, I am to inquire into the characters of the old Pharisee-teachers. No, I think the most notorious branches of their character were these: pride, policy, malice, ignorance, covetousness, and bigotry to human

⁵ Frederich W. Brink, “Gilbert Tennent, Dynamic Preacher,” *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 32, no. 2 (1954): 91-107.

⁶ Brink, “Gilbert Tennent,” 92.

⁷ William Yoo, introduction to *The Presbyterian Experience in the United States*, ed. William Yoo (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 2.

inventiveness in religious matters.”⁸ In this unmitigatedly damning quote, the expression of the religious dissatisfactions gave rise to the Great Awakening.

Later in *A Persuasive to the Right of the Passions in Religion, or, the Nature of Religious Zeal Explained*, Tennent meditates on the nature of zeal and the many forms it takes. The first one listed is “Natural Zeal” which he defines as an “Activity - unsanctified, which is the Effect of a sprightly *Temperature* of Body; which, tho' it be not positively Evil, yet has Nothing spiritual or saving in it, and so is comparatively Bad.”⁹ This definition is rooted in Enlightenment thinking, it rests on the assumption that the natural state of humans is something to be overcome.

These two texts underscore the scholarly and intellectual side of Tennent. He saw proper education and training of ministers as the most effective way of promoting the proper spiritual health of his community. Over the course of his life, Gilbert Tennent was very involved with Log College in what is now Warminster, Pennsylvania.¹⁰ The founding people who built Log College would go on to found the College of New Jersey that would later become Princeton University. Princeton is not the only institution founded by Protestant ministers to become an Ivy League institution, both Harvard and Yale share this origin.

The duality of the Great Awakening and the duality of Gilbert Tennent mirrors the duality present in the larger culture of the United States. Duality is the quality of having two

⁸ Gilbert Tennent, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1742), 1.

⁹ Gilbert Tennent, *A Persuasive to the Right Use of the Passions in Religion, or the Nature of Religious Zeal Explained* (Philadelphia: W. Dunlap, 1760), 8.

¹⁰ C.N. Wilborn, “Gilbert Tennent - Pietist, Preacher, and Presbyterian,” in *Colonial Presbyterianism: Old Faith in a New Land*, ed, S. Donald Fortson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2007), 137.

seemingly conflicting aspects coming together to form a whole. In the United States, there is an anti-intellectual vein in its culture, yet it is home to the finest institutions of higher education in the world. People from all over the globe compete for admissions into the Ivy League universities like Princeton, Harvard, and Yale.¹¹ The founding of the United States mirrors the Great Awakening in their grievances. The rebelling Colonists had amongst their reasons corruption and the belief that their government did not have their best interests at heart.¹² Given these patterns, it is no wonder why the Great Awakening became a significant religious movement in the U.S., and more specifically why Tennent became a significant figure for it.

Gilbert Tennent's hostility to Pharisee-teachers is not unique to him in the Christian tradition. Many of Tennent's complaints about the corruption and lack of sincere faith amongst the clergy are the same issues that Martin Luther had with the Roman Catholic Church. These same arguments can be read coming from Jesus Christ in Mathew (23:4-7). What makes Tennent's life unique is his personal and professional blending of emotional religiosity with intellectual proclivities that live on simultaneously in U.S. culture (i.e. evangelicalism) and U.S. academics (i.e. Ivy Leagues).

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¹¹ Yoni Gutenmacher, "Admission rates across the Ivy League: a breakdown." *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.thedp.com/article/2018/03/ivy-league-decisions-class-of-2022-penn-upenn-philadelphia-yale-university-harvard>.

¹² Jennet Kirkpatrick, *Uncivil Disobedience: Studies in Violence and Democratic Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 34-38.

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Annotated Comments

Paragraph One- Three – Chris Ludd’s excellent paper was written for Community College’s History 170/Philosophy 170 course I taught in the fall term of 2019. This course, *Religion in American History*, “covers the origins, beliefs, practices and cultural significance of the major religious traditions and movements in American history. Close reading and interpretive analysis of primary texts constitute the major course activities.” During 2018-2020, the fall section of this course has included having the students complete a class research project using the resources of the Presbyterian Historical Society (PHS). The class instructor worked with PHS staff, especially the archivist Ms. Jenny Barr, to identify problem areas in U.S. religious history for which the Society has relevant holdings and to identify relevant sources. We fashioned six document sets consisting of primary and secondary sources and added “contextual reading questions” for students to answer (written for each document by Ms. Hannah Carney.) Over the course of the semester students completed “scaffolding” activities for historical skills such as reading and interpreting primary sources, evaluating competing primary sources, understanding “historical relativism” and forming historical inferences. Having used these skills during the term students were asked to deployed these moves in their research. Students had to follow a step-by-step process from selecting a document set to research to a preliminary draft, resulting in a short research paper using the primary and secondary materials.

Chris came to the class especially interested in studying American religious awakenings. While his first interest was in the Second Great Awakening, unfortunately

this was not one of the six document sets. Therefore, he selected the First Great Awakening for his research project. Chris does a very good job in his opening paragraphs of presenting some of these skills. This paragraph gives the historical context for the historical problem. Many students often do not give the relevant contextual information, historical dates and appropriate context. Chris does an excellent job of narrowing the scope of the short paper, focusing on “intellectual and cultural” history related to two primary texts by Gilbert Tennent (1703-1764). In the first paragraph he sets out his thesis, “that the relationship between the emotional and intellectual that is present in the life and work of Gilbert Tennent, a significant figure of the First Great Awakening, is analogous to the tension between the emotional and intellectual in the larger culture of the United States.”

Chris also gives the broader intellectual/theological context for the American First Great Awakening, although it would also have been good for him to give dates for historical figures such as Jonathan Edwards. He uses, as required, the Chicago-Style Citation that is standard in the fields of Religious Studies and History. He also uses secondary sources, including the course textbook *A History of Religion in America*, to support his arguments.

Paragraphs Four-Five – In this section of his paper, Chris begins to transition from a general overview of the general intellectual roots of the First Great Awakening to a more specific context for the thought of Gilbert Tennent, one of the major figures in the Great Awakening and the author of the primary sources in this document set. Sam Wineburg argues that history students, when confronted with multiple documents by the same author, often take one of two problematic approaches. The first is to ignore the historical context for the sources, simply giving a personal interpretation. The second, somewhat more sophisticated but still problematic approach is to read the documents in

a context, but the context of their contemporary world (“presentism”) [Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, 18-19.] Chris’s paper does a good job of avoiding these two approaches and setting the primary sources by Tennent in the context of his time rooted in various strands of thought. Chris also uses the secondary sources in the document set to illustrate this context.

Paragraphs Six - In this paragraph Chris introduces the cultural-intellectual history problem his paper addresses: the dichotomy and indeed tension seen in the writings of First Great Awakening figures such as Tennant and Edwards between the underlying emotional foundation of their thought, and yet its highly educated, intellectual nature. This provides the framework for the rest of the paper and for examining the two primary sources by Gilbert Tennent.

Paragraphs Seven – Nine – This section is the heart of Chris’ paper. Here he uses the two primary sources to try and understand this tension in The First Great Awakening. It might be useful here to introduce one of the most challenging aspects, to the students, of this project. I do not give students in this class a historical problem to address for each of the document sets. Each student has to formulate a problem from the primary source material. This is one of the most difficult, yet perhaps most important, aspects of the project. Historians and scholars of religion need to be able to formulate appropriate questions and problems when studying primary sources. While often the most challenging stage for undergraduates, but this is one place where they are being asked to think like historians and scholars.

Having posed this issue of a dichotomy in Tennent’s, and The First Great Awakening’s, thought, Chris analyses the two primary sources to try and understand how this dichotomy played out. It should be noted that these are difficult documents for most students, due to both the archaic writing style as seen in the quote and the abundant

references to Christian theological doctrines and concepts such as “natural zeal.”

Working with the excellent staff at PHS, we have attempted to guide and support the students by giving them the Contextual Reading Questions along with background information. Chris does a good job of using and interpreting these difficult sources.

One element that the paper might have addressed, but did not directly, is the differences between the two primary sources, and how they reflect two periods, separated by eighteen years, in Tennant’s life.

Paragraphs Ten-Eleven - In the concluding two paragraphs of his paper, Chris turns from the narrower focus on the First Great Awakening itself to reflect on how this dichotomy might cast light on larger issues in American culture and history. Some of the most effective secondary sources that students read in the class, by historians such as Perry Miller, Jon Butler and James Moorhead, are those that help illuminate contemporary American society. While a shorter research project such as this cannot prove the larger thesis Chris advances at the conclusion of his paper, it leaves the reader (and the author) with questions for further research. It is this balancing between “presentism” and applying insights from a particular historical period to the larger picture that might be one of the key insights for the undergraduate scholar working with archival material.