The Great Awakening

The Great Awakening breaks out in America when several new religious leaders such as George Whitefield emerge to revive the church. This brings about new ways of worshipping and ultimately new religious sects such as Baptists and Presbyterians.

Keywords

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The Great Awakening

NARRATOR: In the early 1700s, worshippers of all denominations worried that religious piety was eroding in the colonies.

Professor KAREN ORDAHL KUPPERMAN (New York University): By the early 18th century religion has really fallen off in New England. The congregations are largely female. The churches are half empty. It's no longer the kind of place that we associate with Puritanism. And you begin to get these movements.

NARRATOR: Several religious revivals swept through the colonies in the 1730s and 1740s. Known as the Great Awakening, this religious fire was sparked in part by traveling ministers from England.

KUPPERMAN: What's beginning to happen is that you begin to get a few preachers who are preaching in a much more emotional style. And there are also these people who come in from Europe, George Whitefield is one, who travel throughout the colonies and preach in this very emotional style. And suddenly people are very interested in religion.

NARRATOR: Whitefield delivered his powerful sermons outdoors to thousands of listeners.

KUPPERMAN: It becomes a kind of mass movement in various locations. And you get not only George Whitefield, but then American ministers, some of them, become what they call itinerants. That is, they travel around. And so they start holding their meetings out in open fields. And the effect is really amazing. But now people are out in these fields where everyone is jostling together, and there's no hierarchy, and everybody is equally important.

NARRATOR: Colonial ministers like Jonathan Edwards soon followed in Whitefield's footsteps. One sermon called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” implored colonists to repent and threatened them with horrifying depictions of hell. Other ministers encouraged colonists to break away from the past and begin again in the eyes of God. These Great Awakening sermons appealed most to those who were struggling: sons denied an inheritance, women who didn’t have equal rights, and the poor. Ministers of established churches accused these new evangelizers of sowing disrespect and disorder.
KUPPERMAN: The so-called old lights, the people who wanted to stay with the traditional ways, and the new lights, the people who were in favor of the awakening, would split. And the new lights often would go out and build their own separate church with their own congregation.

NARRATOR: Different religious sects sprouted in the American colonies, including the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. The revivals of the Great Awakening weakened the hold of older Puritan denominations and gave America more religious diversity than ever before.