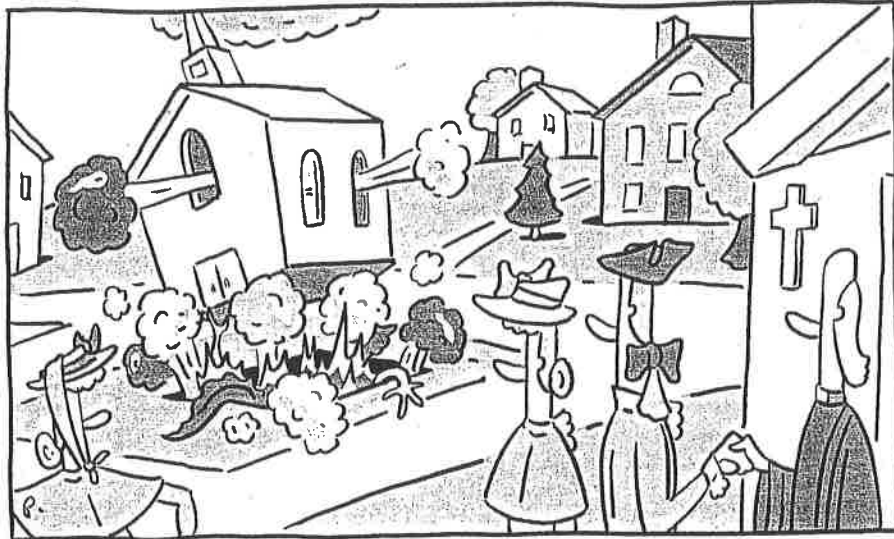


By Clif Garboden

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## The Great Awakening

Evangelical religion enjoys a

reputation as a scoundrel's refuge. Fallen would-be angels such as Jimmy Swaggart are easy targets for anyone out gunning for holy hypocrites. But the conflict between intellectual and emotional faith is nothing new. It was played out — theologically, politically, and with gusto — in the American colonies in the mid-1700s. The movement, spearheaded by true believers and discredited by extremists, was called the Great Awakening.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony's Puritan founders were strict. They practiced what they preached, and their religious obedience sustained them through the adversities associated with birthing a nation. But increasing comfort led to slacking and complacency. A growing merchant class had become uncomfortable sitting through sermons about the virtues of poverty and privation, so the clergy obligingly changed its tune. The old-time religion's spiritual and moral imperatives were diluted. Churchgoers made their weekly appearances before the pulpit, then went back to serving mammon. There were some confusing theological, as well as social, implications of all this. Some clergy saw creeping secularization as backsliding toward ritual and the Church of England doctrine of Arminianism — the belief that you get to heaven as a reward for good behavior. (Many Protestant theologians despised Arminianism because it empowered priests to grant forgiveness on God's behalf.) In America's middle colonies, Dutch Reform preacher Theodorus Frelinghuysen and Presbyterian theologian Gilbert Tennent initiated a backlash movement promoting the doctrine of "justification by faith," i.e., salvation comes solely from God, whose arbitrary judgments are based on a sinner's acceptance of Christ as a model rather than on a believer's "works" on earth.

All this came to a head in central Massachusetts, where rich man's minister

Solomon Stoddard, of Northampton, preached that "conversion" (being "born again") wasn't even a requirement for church membership. This opened New England's flocks (and control of the churches) to unregenerate businessmen. But in 1729, Stoddard's grandson, 26-year-old intellectual giant Jonathan Edwards, assumed the Northampton pulpit, preaching a fundamentalist creed based on people's fear of a God who "held them over the pit of Hell." Spiritual panic set in. Fueled by economic and class conflicts, the Great Awakening flourished among the young and radical poor. Lesser minds, fanatics, and opportunistic charlatans followed Edwards' tack. Itinerant preachers roamed the colonies, holding rowdy revival meetings damning the rich and godless. Church rolls swelled as thousands were converted. Ironically, the merchant establishment encouraged the religious revival to distract the poor from bread-and-butter issues. In 1740, traveling soul-saver George Whitefield (career-sermon total: 17,000) whipped Bostonians into such hysteria that five people were killed during one of his speeches. New clergy denounced old clergy. Anti-intellectualism reigned. Eventually, Harvard divinity scholars denounced the Great Awakening, and the fever broke, to recur, cyclically, throughout US history. •

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