

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

2008

Great Awakening

Bruce Dorsey

Swarthmore College, bdorsey1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Bruce Dorsey. (2008). "Great Awakening". *Oxford Encyclopedia Of Women In World History*.
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/327>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Great Awakening.

 oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195148909.001.0001/acref-9780195148909-e-401

Dramatic religious revivals in the British American colonies began in the late 1720s, peaked in the 1740s, and continued until the American Revolution. These revivals were often local social dramas, yet they were connected to transatlantic religious movements associated with the emergence of Protestant evangelicalism throughout northern Europe and America. What united these disparate movements was an experience of intense emotional conversion (called the “new birth”), an encouragement of lay preaching and church governance, and the spread of traveling or itinerant preachers, who often disrupted the authority of a community's established ministers and church leaders. Communities became bitterly divided between supporters, or New Lights, and opponents, or Old Lights, of the new religious practices. In all, the Great Awakening contributed to a growing consciousness of the self that flourished in the mid-eighteenth century.

Throughout colonial America, in every Christian group except the Quakers, women were denied positions of leadership, and their voices were silenced in public. The Great Awakening did little to change this gender inequality, but in the immediate moment when colonists embraced religious enthusiasm, some women asserted themselves more prominently in church affairs and raised their voices as preachers within evangelical communities, despite opposition from male leaders.

Evangelicalism encouraged an equality of spirit among the newly formed communities of believers. These communities affirmed that a person's worth should be measured not by one's wealth, rank, education, or outward displays of gentility but rather by the common experience of a spiritual rebirth and intense religiosity. Thus members of New Light congregations called each other “brother” and “sister” regardless of social standing, and evangelical groups like the Baptists became the first in colonial America to treat African Americans, slave and free, as spiritual equals, welcoming them as church members and even as preachers. Evangelicals also used a sexualized language of conversion, common since the Puritans, that depicted the intimate personal relationship between Jesus and the converted—male or female—as an erotic seduction. The 1760s revival leader Sarah Osborn spoke of her heart's “burning desires after the blessed Jesus. O, how was I ravished with his love!” The emotional and sensual language of evangelical faith, combined with an oppositional culture that praised piety over hierarchy and wealth, made the qualities of evangelism resemble those of femininity in the eighteenth century.

Many women embraced this spiritual equality as a means to their own empowerment. Evangelical women forged deeply emotional relationships with other women converts. Women converts established prayer groups where they sometimes taught both women and men. Some women spoke up in meetinghouses, challenged the theology and spirituality of

male ministers, asserted their rights to decide matters of church governance, and claimed their own spiritual calling as preachers. In more instances than not, these assertions of women's spiritual power met with charges of being threats to the social order, and women were disciplined by church authorities who wished to rein in the excesses of spiritual equality. When Bathsheba Kingsley was accused in 1743 of "stealing a Horse [and] riding away on the Sabbath with[ou]t her husbands Consent," it did not help her defense that she had stolen the horse to travel to neighboring towns to preach the gospel. The waning of revivals and the rise of revolution in the 1770s led to a reassertion of patriarchal control as evangelical sects shed their spiritual equality in favor of a new form of nationhood and citizenship for men.

Bibliography

Brekus, Catherine A. *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Juster, Susan. *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Westerkamp, Marilyn J. *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600–1850: The Puritan and Evangelical Traditions*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Bruce Dorsey