

Religious movements of 18th century america



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Religious Movements of 18th Century America By the 18th century, the people of Europe and the Americas had entered the Age of Reason that had been ushered in by the Scientific Revolution. New thinking by people such as John Locke and Benjamin Franklin shunned the Calvinistic viewpoint of man as inherently evil and were more optimistic about man's ability to understand the world from a scientific point of view. This movement called The Enlightenment was contrary to other religious thinking at the time. A previous movement, The Awakening had been spearheaded by preachers such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whifield. While the Enlightenment would promote the scientific innovations that were necessary for life in the colonies, The Awakening formed the basis of social, political, and economic change for the upcoming American Revolution.

The Awakening was the first major religious movement to sweep through the colonies. By 1720, church membership had declined and in many areas in the backcountry preachers and churches were not available (Nash et al., 149). The Awakening was a non-denominational movement that derived its popularity from the belief that anyone could preach the word of God simply by being 'born again' into their faith in Christ. This attracted nomadic preachers and a revival environment that spread throughout the countryside. Because many of its followers were non-traditional and poor, the movement often became a lightning rod for social movements. The movement was able to draw distinctions between the elite and the poor and in doing so became an instrument of political and social reform.

The Enlightenment had begun in the middle 17th century in Europe and spread to the colonies by the early 18th century. It was also a religious movement, but believed that man and science could reason the universe

and come to an understanding with God. This belief, known as deism, promoted a natural order in the world (Henretta, Brody, and Dumenil, 113). Though most of the colonists were not scientifically trained and did not actively participate in the Enlightenment, it had the effect of instilling a belief that modernization and invention could benefit the colonies.

Either movement by itself would have been little more than a footnote in history. However, the combination of social upheaval and the belief that America was an abundant nation on the verge of enlightenment forged the colonies forward towards their battle for independence. The Enlightenment formed the progressive academic basis for the newly forming country, while The Awakening organized the masses and drove them to social and political reform. The concepts of freedom of religion and equal rights were born out of these two movements.

America was founded on the ideals of Christianity and reinforced by its belief in freedom of religion. The Enlightenment had also spurred a belief in the coming technological nation based in equality that we have today. Our social order is deeply rooted in the preaching of George Whitfield as well as the inventiveness of Benjamin Franklin. America has struck a balance between the teachings of science and the belief in God that has been a hallmark of the country and continues to endure.

Works Cited

Henretta, James A., David Brody, and Lynn Dumenil. *America: A Concise History*. 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2006.

Nash, Gary B. et al. *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*. 6th ed. New York: Pearson Education, 2004.