

The 3rd Great Awakening—Whose?

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In September of last year, President Bush met with a group of mostly conservative journalists in the Oval Office for an hour and a half. In that meeting he spoke, in the context of his own religious views, of the nation's struggle with international terrorists. He was quoted in the Washington Post and elsewhere as having said, "A lot of people in America see this as a confrontation between good and evil, including me." He went on to say, in speaking of our national culture "I think there's change happening here. ... It seems to me that there's a Third Awakening."

Well, it seems to me that if the President of the United States is going to talk about a third religious awakening it would behoove us to know something about the first and second, and maybe even the third and fourth, depending on how you count. Considerations of this nature—awakenings and eras of historic import—are serious business with serious consequences and should be approached with care.

So I ask: If there is or was or is to be a third religious awakening in this country, whose was, is, or will it be?

A Great Awakening is a period of dramatic religious stimulation marked by a shift in religious trends that often includes the rise of new denominations, new sects, or even entirely new religions. There are two such periods generally recognized in US history. I believe there's another period, recognized by independent scholars as the Third Great Awakening, that better epitomizes what the first two are purported to represent—a true religious awakening. That it is not generally recognized is an interesting cultural phenomenon that I'll get into.

There has certainly been an increase of public religious expression lately so the argument can be made—and the President has made it—that another awakening is underway. I don't quite buy it and that's something else I'll be getting into.

We in this country get religiously active and lazy in cycles, as do the institutions we form around our religious beliefs. Religious fervor runs like alternating current in our country, with ups and downs, peaks and valleys. It's like the cycles of commercial ventures and individual corporations. They are energetic and enterprising when founded or renewed, but eventually grow complacent, out of step with the changes going on around them, and wake up to find themselves out of touch. They become encrusted and fraudulent, a corrupted reflection of their former self. The alternating current of religion in our country seems to run in roughly 75-year cycles.

The two generally recognized religious awakenings were wholly Christian in context and revivalist in nature. They had a strong emotional overtone and contained a social element that affected political change. They were uniquely American happenings, enabled in no small part by the religious freedom and plurality in our country which form a laboratory for new religious formations. But that wasn't always the case.

The Puritan settlers of our country were persecuted in the England they fled. But they became equally if not more intolerant here. They did shed the vestments of Catholicism

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

and the Reformation and they adopted a congregational system of self-governing churches. However, their religious rules became civil law and other religious ideas were held to be wrong, harmful, and heretical.

They held the devil to be just as real as God, and those deemed to be possessed by evil spirits found themselves not just persecuted but prosecuted as well. And even for the un-possessed, good works alone were not enough to gain social favor, you had to believe. They eventually fabricated their own vestments and formed their own encrusted hierarchies.

And that was the perfect storm that blew in the First Great Awakening in the 1740s as colonial Protestants shook off the harsh, judgmental, kingly God of the Puritans in favor of a sweet, benevolent, more accessible God. This wave of religious enthusiasm was sparked by powerful preaching that affected listeners—most if not all of whom were already church members—and infected them with a great sense of guilt. But it also offered personal redemption through Christ.

It began with Jonathan Edwards. A Congregationalist minister from Massachusetts, Edwards sought to build off Puritan roots by emphasizing personal religious experience. He introduced an emotional form of religiosity, an admixture of Calvinism and Rationalism, that questioned predestination and embraced God in nature.

One of this period's central figures was the Methodist minister, George Whitfield, whom many consider to be the first evangelical preacher. A charismatic figure in his twenties, Whitfield took his preaching beyond the confines of church walls and addressed large crowds outdoors.

Employing theatrical gestures to get his point across, he spoke extemporaneously with the aid, he said, of the Holy Ghost. He spoke daily for months on end, mostly in New England, and once drew a crowd in Philadelphia estimated by Benjamin Franklin to be 10,000 strong.

Under Whitfield, baptism became an act of rational assent, the result of an adult conversion experience we now call being "born again." Whitfield preached that in order to be saved you didn't need church or clergy at all. Consequently, many of the preachers of the time didn't have pulpits but were itinerate field preachers who took Christianity directly to the people, including African American slaves. This planted the seeds of the abolitionist element of the Second Great Awakening, which came along in the early nineteenth century.

A move against the deism and skepticism of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Thomas Paine, George Washington, and nearly all the enlightened thinkers considered the progenitors of our country, the second awakening, like the first, promoted a renewed sense of personal salvation.

The signature events of this period were meetings or revivals that took place mostly between the Allegheny mountains and the Mississippi river. These revivals drew huge crowds and lasted days and in some cases weeks. Camp meetings at Creedance Clearwater Church and Cane Ridge, both in Kentucky, drew upward of 20,000 people.

These gatherings served as models for modern political conventions. Indeed, the blending of religion and politics in a democratic context is a legacy of this second awakening. They saw an association between religious belief and patriotism that is enjoying a disquieting resurgence today.

These revivals were not the quiet, pious affairs some might imagine. They could be as raucous as the political conventions they inspired. People, many who came for the pure spectacle of it all, lived in close quarters in tents. Beverage alcohol was available in abundance, and some said more people were conceived than converted in those camps.

Unlike the leading figures of the first awakening who were established pastors fired by theological differences, the vagabond revival preachers of the second awakening—Baptists, Methodists, and Scottish Presbyterians among them—were compared to actors, and that was not a compliment.

Tract publishers, Sunday schools, missionary initiatives out to convert everyone, the American Bible Society—which still flourishes today just around the corner on Broadway—all grew out of this period, as did new sects of Christianity.

The Cane Ridge camp revival alone was instrumental in the birth of the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, the Church of Christ, and other similarly named denominations. This second awakening eventually led to the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons) and the Seventh-Day Adventists.

It also saw the religio-social experiments of the Oneida Community in New York and that of The New Harmony community in Indiana. This latter, an experiment in utopian living, was a spin-off from Lutheranism and strove to create a more perfect society through free education and the abolition of social classes through the elimination of personal wealth.

Other interesting social sensitivities grew out of this period. The recognition of women's rights—the camps featured many women preachers—and a sense that slavery was morally abhorrent. This rise in social sensibility foreshadowed what I consider to be the most significant period in American religious development.

These first two awakenings are generally accepted. But compared to what happened in the next, they were more mere arousal than awakening. But then came a wakeup call in the form of a catalytic event that continues to influence religious thought like no other. I speak of course of Charles Darwin's findings on evolution, particularly the transmutation of species that struck right at the heart of the Genesis creation story, the inerrancy of the Bible as the revealed word of God, and the special place of humans in a divine scheme.

Throughout history, existence was accepted as an act of the supernatural—matter having arisen from the consciousness of a supernatural being or beings. Darwin's view of how life developed—that the reverse was true, that consciousness arose from matter—was a jarring affront to that assumption.

The concept that life arose not by design but by random and perpetual change and adaptation to an indifferent and often hostile environment offered religion a binary choice: Either reject human thoughts and discoveries in favor of scripture's account of the revealed words and works of God, or adapt the understandings of religion to the findings of science. Liberal thinkers and their modernist followers adapted. Fundamental theologians and their constituent adherents did not.

While many dug in against scientific findings, others saw broadened religious horizons and found new paths of religious expression. This led to what I consider the most significant era of religious renewal—and not just because it saw the founding of our own Ethical Culture movement.

A respect for education and a desire to eliminate poverty were growing. Increased awareness of these and other questions and problems faced by society eventually found full expression in the Social Gospel movement of what independent scholars hold to be the Third Great Awakening.

The first two took place in the Christian context, and orthodoxy and majorities have the tendency to reject anything that's not their own, and to overrate what is or was theirs. Consequently the Third Great Awakening in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, is ignored by the Christian majority.

Be that as it may, this period saw an invigorated religious creativity that attempted to synthesize traditional thinking with modern understandings. It also saw the formation of truly new forms and practices of religion. Much of this was centered right here in New York where so many of the era's central and peripheral players lived and lectured within and beyond the Christian context.

Within the Christian context, it sparked two divergent paths. In the face of science, Christian theological scholars turned to a deeper study of scripture intended to clarify and support their religious positions. Those two aims, to clarify and to support, turned out to be at odds with each other.

A closer look at scripture and how it came to be led to the inescapable conclusion that far from being the revealed word of God bound between two covers, the Bible was actually a compellation of a few texts selected from many by humans who were often motivated by religious politics. Rather than a divine creation it was a human product with its own complex history.

Some saw and rejected this scholarship along with Darwin's discoveries. Ignoring these and applying their own bizarre reasoning, they came to equally bizarre conclusions. One went something like this. Anglo Saxons, which they held to be racially distinct from other Caucasian peoples, were the most advanced and accomplished people. Protestant Christianity was the most evolved religion. Therefore, in a signature reasoning that enables faith to leap tall obstacles of rationality in a single bound, they concluded that it was their responsibility, their divine duty, to conquer and convert all the peoples of the world.

That thinking still infects our global culture today. But the other path within American Protestantism led to religious and social reform through the Social Gospel.

Straddling these two paths was Henry Ward Beecher, who lived and loved, some say too liberally, in Brooklyn, and whose older sister, Harriet, authored *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Beecher was liberal in some respects but clung to some pretty orthodox ideas. He maintained that people were poor because they were sinners. Yet in his contention that these poor sinners suffered from a "want of provident care and foresight" can be seen the germ of the Social Gospel.

It began with Washington Gladden, a Congregationalist minister who was a leader of the Progressive Movement and who, as editor of the *New York Independent*, campaigned hard against the likes of Boss Tweed. But it came to full flower in the preachings and writings of Walter Rauschenbusch, who was for eleven years pastor of the Second Baptist Church in New York City's "Hell's Kitchen."

The introduction to Rauschenbusch's magnum opus, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, opened this way: "Western civilization is passing through a social revolution unparalleled in history for scope and power. Its coming was inevitable. The religious,

political, and intellectual revolutions of the past five centuries, which together created the modern world, necessarily had to culminate in an economic and social revolution such as is now upon us.”

That was a century ago but it could have been written yesterday. Rauschenbusch himself was a pivotal figure in the revolution he proclaimed. He recognized the importance of well-intentioned people in transforming society. He believed that religion had a stake in social wellbeing. Taking religion out of the realm of miracles—like moving mountains—and placing it in the context of metaphors, he said, “The religious spirit removes mountains and tramples impossibilities.”

Rauschenbusch labored within the confines of his chosen religion but as his scholarship led him into a higher criticism of scripture, he found that “...inherited ideas about the inerrancy of the Bible became untenable.” He also found that religious concepts of divine justice were “repugnant to human sensitivities.” His thinking was, of course, condemned as heretical but he was undaunted by criticism.

He went on to shape the Social Gospel that held that sectarian differences don’t really matter; that it’s not individual souls that must be saved but the collective, the whole of society; that salvation must be achieved by social means. Sin, according to Rauschenbusch, was not to be considered something intrinsic or onerous because it was an offense against God. But rather social in nature, the product of ignorance and error. Eliminate the social causes and you eliminate sin. Universal education and social reform were the answers.

That thinking is the fertile soil of common ground. Rauschenbusch’s teachings came to influence the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Desmond Tutu, and paralleled the work and reconstructive efforts of Felix Adler and the Ethical Culture movement.

The codification of the Social Gospel by Rauschenbusch around 1910 marked the end of this pivotal period in American religious history. But it began a few years after the Civil War when foundationally new religious thinking emerged. This was evidenced not only in the founding of new religions like that of Ethical Culture in 1876, but in a burgeoning social awareness within traditional religions. The focus was poverty and in this the political economist Henry George was influential on both fronts—the Christian and the reconstructionist.

A Lincoln Republican turned Democrat, George published the incredibly popular and influential *Progress and Poverty* in 1879, a year before moving to New York City. *Progress and Poverty* sold three million copies, a pretty fair number by today’s standards and absolutely astounding at the time. George coined the term “wage slave” and was supported in his 1886 run for mayor by our own Felix Adler. He finished second to the Tammany Hall candidate, but ahead of Teddy Roosevelt.

This era saw the establishment of the vocation of social work and the founding of the settlement house movement. The first settlement house in this country, The Neighborhood Guild of New York City, was established by Stanton Coit. That was followed a decade or so later, in 1897, by the Hudson Guild, founded by John Lovejoy Elliot. Both Coit and Elliot were Ethical Culture Leaders.

In 1880 the Christian evangelical Salvation Army arrived in New York City from London with a charitable focus on poverty. About the same time, Felix Adler began a free kindergarten which grew into the Workingman’s School and is now the Ethical

Culture Fieldston School. At the time of its founding, Adler said “The ideal of the school is to develop individuals who will be competent to change their environment to greater conformity with moral ideals.”

Cultural reform through education and a more equitable distribution of communally created wealth became the social agenda of the era, an initiative that was realized in the implementation of FDR’s New Deal in the 1930s. Franklin Roosevelt incorporated the work and attitudes fostered by the socio-religious reformers of the Third Great Awakening into our secular government.

That’s more than social change, that’s a cultural shift of the first magnitude. The realization that we are responsible for each other went past the evolutionary. It was a revolutionary step past the social Darwinism of the robber barons that pitted friend against friend in a socio-economic survival of the fittest. The recognition of the ethical essence of the relationship between self and others, rather than the singular relationship between self and God, was a religious awakening of the highest order.

The cultural shift of the Third Great Awakening was one away from competition and toward cooperation. We still struggle with that and perhaps always will. The balance between self and others is a delicate one. There is a natural tension between the singular and the plural, between the individual and society, between self actualization and social integration—a natural and healthy tension. But when one gets lost in the other, when one is so individual as to be anti-social or so subsumed into the culture or sub-culture as to lose one’s sense of personal identity, the tension becomes unhealthy and troublesome.

We express ourselves personally—intellectually, artistically, emotionally—and find meaning and purpose in our individual identity, in our own individuality. We also find personal expression in the social, and there’s meaning and purpose in interconnectivity, too. The line between self and society is not a bright demarcation. There is identity in individuality and in interdependence. There is expression, purpose, and meaning in each.

Some of us gravitate to one more than the other and we all turn inward and outward to meet our and other’s needs. But these things can easily get out of balance.

Writer Lauren Sandler is quite concerned about just such an imbalance today. In her recent book, *Righteous: Dispatches From the Evangelical Youth Movement*, she contends that a sizable segment in America is suffering from economic frustration and is reaching out in desperation to fundamentalist religion. Here’s how she put it in an interview in *The Humanist* magazine.

“People are reacting to the notion that secular culture has become so commercialized, so entertainment based, so consumerist, so lacking in meaning, purpose, identity, and a sense of interconnection. [Evangelical] churches are giving all that to their youth, so long as they sign on the dotted line.”

She goes on to say, “By signing, if you’re a woman, you have to quit your job, get married and breed as much as possible. If you are a man, you need to be the leader of the household, you can’t have any intellectual freedom, and (for both men and women), the Bible needs to be the first and last word in your life. The extent to which this is happening right now is truly amazing.”

To which I would add, truly frightening as she describes the antithesis of liberal religion in general and Ethical Humanism in particular.

Now we could argue with her assertions that meaning has been sacrificed to commercialism, that purpose has been lost to entertainment, and that our identity and sense of interconnectedness have been consumed by consumerism. But she has a point. They certainly challenge the best of us and the accumulation of vast wealth by the few at the expense of the many is more than troubling.

And she may overstate the amazing extent to which the evangelical movement is turning young women into obedient breeders, young men into domineering householders, and both into mindless drones given over to the spell of charismatic leaders and teachings. But she has a point. Those things do exist and they represent an attitude at odds with the freedom and respect upon which our nation was founded and depends.

In a way she's announcing the same awakening George W. Bush is, though not with the same enthusiasm. It's always tempting to announce a resurgence or another period of this that or the other thing. These things are often hopefully and erroneously proclaimed by contemporary adherents and commentators. But they can be definitively defined only when looking back.

Some scholars are looking back and recognizing a Fourth Great Awakening that took place in the 1960s and '70s. Though the period lacks some of the classic earmarks, like the formation of new sects and religions, the argument is not entirely without merit.

This was a time when mainstream churches contracted dramatically in membership and influence, while more conservative, evangelical denominations grew rapidly, spread geographically, and became politically powerful. A focal shift to Jesus saw the rise of non-affiliated meg-congregations no longer even called churches but identifying as community faith centers and the like. Charismatics of various flavors placed emphasis on the experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But these various emphases were not new.

What was new, and may yet mark this era as an awakening, was the emergence of the religiously innovative consciousness movement. Beatniks became hippies, hippies became yuppies, and yuppies became New Agers, each forming new ways of personal expression. Woodstock was the camp revival of a new generation, and communes the workshops of more conscious living. There was an energized social and religious creativity evident as these and others drew from Eastern thought and Western mysticism in an effort—intentional or otherwise—to shape a synthesis or offspring from these two.

It's unclear where this trend will go or if it will eventually result in the transformations of the first, second, and especially the third period of religious awakening in our country. But I believe this thread has a much greater chance of impacting the religious landscape than a head-in-the-sand return to literal interpretations of ancient revelations that deny scientific advancements and modern understandings. That kind of thinking is destructive and must, eventually, collapse under its own weight. The open question is how much more damage it will do in the interim. The cycle of awakenings is ripe. But whose was, is, or will it be?

I side with those who say the Third Great Awakening came and went a long, long time ago. But I do so in hopes of yet another awakening. Whatever number is assigned I am dedicated to doing all I can to ensure it is fueled with the same energy as the first; that it gives rise to enhanced cultural sensibilities as did the second; that it is marked by the religious creativity and social improvement of the third; and that it incorporates the natural spirituality of what some consider the fourth.

But most of all, I hope it is an awakening to our commonality and an embrace of our worth and dignity that leads to the establishment of an enduring peace.

For if it is not, the religious awakening that can illuminate the future can just as likely extinguish it.

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