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## CONTENTS

TO THE READER .....	vii-xi
OLIVER SCHEIDING Mapping America and the Colonial Imagination .....	1
MARGIT PETERFY Images of Native Americans .....	27
CLEMENS SPAHR Puritanism in the New World .....	55
FRANK OBENLAND Providential Thought in the Puritan Historiography of New England .....	87
JAN STIEVERMANN Interpreting the Role of America in New England Millennialism, 1640 to 1800 .....	121
FRANK KELLETER The Great Awakening and the Enlightenment .....	163
GERD HURM Founding Dissent: Revolutionary Discourse and the Declaration of Independence .....	191
DENNIS HANNEMANN / ULRICH ESCHBORN The Early Republic and the Rites of Memory .....	219
GESA MACKENTHUN Expansionism .....	245
GÜNTER LEYPOLDT The Transcendental Turn in Nineteenth-Century New England .....	275

ISABELL KLAIBER	
Women's Roles in American Society: Difference, Separateness, and Equality .....	303
MELANIE FRITSCH	
Slavery and Racial Thought in American Cultural History .....	331
WOLFGANG HOCHBRUCK	
Civil War and Reconstruction .....	363
TIM LANZENDÖRFER	
The Gilded Age: The Emergence of Modern America .....	385
LIST OF KEY CONCEPTS .....	421
INDEX .....	423

FRANK KELLETER

## The Great Awakening and the Enlightenment

### I. Themes and Arguments

Four decades before the Revolution of 1776, recurring waves of religious revivalism began to sweep the British colonies in North America.<sup>1</sup> In their cumulated effect they constituted the so-called Great Awakening of the late 1730s and early 1740s. While the social and intellectual causes of this mass movement were manifold and complex – most of them having to do with the decline of established religious institutions and the rapid economic modernization of American colonial societies in the late seventeenth century – the ignition of the Great Awakening was largely the work of one man, George Whitefield (pronounced *Whitfield*), a British Methodist who traveled repeatedly through Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and the British colonies in North America to preach to large crowds of people and make converts.

In so doing, Whitefield and other British Methodists, such as John and George Wesley, practiced a new style of Calvinist Protestantism that changed the course of religious history, especially in America. Their evangelism aimed at bringing forth a spiritual rebirth in the believer: a deep and inwardly felt conviction of God's grace that would fundamentally regenerate the life of the convert. At first glance, this doctrine had much in common with more orthodox forms of Protestant belief, especially the Congregational faith of the Puritans in New England. The Puritan Congregationalists, too, believed that the workings of God's grace culminated in a radically new sense of selfhood. However, for orthodox Puritans the reception of God's grace was a complicated process, in which the believer had to be assisted by his or her minister and pastor, who provided guidance for biblical study and spiritual self-scrutiny (cf. Spahr in this vol., 60-7). In the words of Thomas Hooker (cf. doc. 44), there was a work of "preparation" to be done, and this preparation required life-long dedication without final certainty. Hence, the believer could never be sure whether he or she was saved or not. This "Puritan ordeal" (Delbanco 1989) helps to explain why pious New Englanders were constantly looking for signs concerning the state of their

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Christy Hosefelder, Daniel Stein, and Alexander Starre for assistance and critique.

salvation. In order not to give in to wild interpretations on their search for divine providence, and not to fall victim to either excessive spiritual pride or self-destructive despair, they felt that they had to be controlled and moderated by people specifically trained in such typological reading: professional and learned ministers (cf. Stievertmann in this vol., 134-5).

By contrast, the evangelists held that converts are touched by God in one momentous, supremely individual instant. George Whitefield had little patience with the orthodox insistence on guided self-inspections and communal intellectual reckonings. According to him and other itinerant preachers, the prime task of a Christian minister was not to teach, explain, or interpret Scripture for the sake of a self-governing and locally circumscribed congregation (because faith was a matter of the 'heart,' not of rational social organization), but rather to provoke a situation of spiritual crisis which made people receptive to the claims of the Holy Ghost. Often this was achieved by shattering the audience's sense of emotional security. The chief intention of many an evangelical sermon was to violently wake up its audience with graphic descriptions of impending punishment. Out of this crisis, a new sensibility for divine communication was supposed to emerge – and frequently did in the 1740s, as the massive success of "fire and brimstone" sermons such as Jonathan Edwards's *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (doc. 92) illustrates.

The new evangelical rhetoric was a far cry from the rational, doctrinally controlled, and logically structured oratory of orthodox Puritan sermons (cf. doc. 16). Whitefield and other evangelists insisted that the reception of God's grace was an *immediate* affair, both in the sense of 'sudden,' and 'unmediated.' Thus, conversion happened in an *instant*, and it required *no mediators*: no clergy, no church, no professional scriptural exegesis. From the perspective of orthodox ministers, these features of evangelical conversions – their suddenness and their relinquishment of intellectual and institutional mediation – were clear signs of enthusiasm and antinomianism, two key heresies in the Protestant faith.<sup>2</sup>

The man who took these evangelical dispositions to their logical extreme in eighteenth-century America was James Davenport, an itinerant preacher from Massachusetts. He claimed that the established and stationary ministers of New England were not inwardly converted but preached a formalist religion – a religion not of 'the spirit,' but of 'the letter.' Therefore, Davenport demanded that true believers should boycott these ministers. The New England clergy felt reminded of an earlier affair: the banishment in 1636 of radical Puritan Anne Hutchinson from Massachusetts Bay on charges of enthusiasm and antinomianism. This time, however, a century later, the Congregational establishment was no longer confronted with one woman and a small circle of dissenting believers, but a mass movement that transcended local communities. Thus, when the most

<sup>2</sup> 'Enthusiasm' describes the presumptuous belief in direct, personal communication with God; 'antinomianism' holds that true converts are no longer subject to the written laws or established practices of their community because they are authorized by an infinitely higher law and power.

radical propagandist of the Great Awakening, James Davenport, was finally censured, the colonial orthodoxy may have scored a victory, but their war against a modernized religion could no longer be won. Dynamic forms of religious communication such as itinerancy and camp meetings (cf. doc. 96) had already undermined the authority of traditional religious institutions, and they had done so more fundamentally than even evangelical doctrines.

When the revivals finally subsided, American religion and culture were no longer the same. The Great Awakening drew many people from the lower classes and from marginalized groups into Protestant sects and churches, producing a dramatically diversified religious landscape in the colonies. "The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole" (doc. 95) describes the attraction of Whitefield's evangelism on a farmer from Kensington, Connecticut. Like many converts, Cole followed the itinerant preacher from place to place – another instance of the spatial and social mobilization of American Protestant faiths during the 1730s and 1740s. For the first time, many women, African Americans, and Native Americans (such as Samson Occom) were granted recognition and a voice in religious matters, being authorized through a covenant of grace that bypassed social decorum or the laws of the state. In this context, it is no coincidence that almost all eighteenth-century slave narratives, including the popular *Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), contain a scene in which the black narrator tells his readers where and how he first heard George Whitefield preach.

As a result of the Great Awakening, the number of churches and sects in North America proliferated tremendously. About 150 new denominations came into existence because of the revivals. In consequence, the religious and cultural influence of the established denominations – Anglicanism in the South, Quakerism in Pennsylvania, and Congregationalism in New England – weakened, while Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists became dominant forces in American Protestantism. This new diversity prepared the way for the specifically American ideal of (trans-)denominationalism, which soon regarded all (Christian) churches as legitimate expressions of faith, deserving of equal esteem and independence, as long as they stayed within their own sphere and did not interfere in public affairs (cf. Leypoldt in this vol., 292). Again, this was a far cry from the religious vision of the Plymouth settlers in 1620, the so-called Pilgrim Fathers, but also from the non-separatist outlook of the Puritans who founded Massachusetts Bay in 1629-30.

The Great Awakening modernized colonial religion and society in other ways as well. In order to provide education and training for their own people – and to counter their critics, who held powerful positions at institutions such as Harvard College – the revivalists founded new colleges and universities, some of which became leading institutions in the country, not always, however, maintaining to the evangelical beliefs of their founders. The most important schools founded in this vein during or after the Great Awakening include Princeton, Columbia, Brown, Rutgers, and Dartmouth. Possibly even more important in terms of cultural history was the influence of revivalist enthusiasm on the sentimental

reform literatures of the nineteenth century, particularly on the abolitionist movement. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851-1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe – daughter of the charismatic Presbyterian preacher and temperance leader Lyman Beecher – owes a great deal to the evangelical idea of a religion that is felt in the 'heart,' and not in the rational mind of the believer. Holding that emotions are a better guide to moral action than the laws of the country, abolitionists such as Stowe and William Lloyd Garrison translated the enthusiasm and antinomianism of the Great Awakening into a principled opposition to slavery and other legally sanctioned ills (such as alcohol, prostitution, and child labor). Garrison, whose rhetoric of alarm had much in common with the evangelical immediacy of sermons such as *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, explicitly stressed the antinomianism of his position when he publicly burned the American Constitution in 1854, claiming that his attacks on the institution of slavery were authorized by a 'higher law' (cf. docs. 256, 266-7, 269).

Many historians have argued that the Great Awakening provided the mental and cultural foundations for the colonial revolt against British imperial rule three decades later. Ideologically, both events had little in common. However, in terms of its socio-cultural reverberations, the Great Awakening did prepare in numerous ways for the Revolution of 1776. At a time when British North America was divided by internal rivalries and conflicts of interest, the tours of George Whitefield and the attendant revivals, transcending geographical borders as well as social boundaries, produced the rare instance of a common experience shared by all thirteen colonies. Most evangelists were shrewd in exploiting the possibilities of new media, foremost newspapers, to advertise their spatially transgressive movement. They also developed innovative modes of promotion, such as the utilization of controversy for the sake of publicity, serial sermon tours (predecessors of the nineteenth-century "lecture circuit"), book signing events, and camp meetings. With measures such as these, the Great Awakening created something like a trans-colonial public sphere in North America, which the secular elites would use to political advantage thirty years later during the American Revolution (cf. Hurm in this vol., 192-7).

According to Jürgen Habermas (1990), the eighteenth-century emergence of a bourgeois public sphere marks one of the crucial origins of Western modernity. Significantly, in North America this transformation first occurred in connection with a spiritual event. It was not initiated by secular elites who argued against the feudal order but by religious extremists who practiced a Protestant faith both radically individualized and radically reproducible, centered on the masses. The secular revolutionaries arrived on the scene later. In North America, then, modernization – particularly the modernization of public communication – was initially accompanied and motivated by changes in religious discourse and practice. This helps to account for North America's divergent paths into modernity.

## II. Heartfelt Religion, Sublime Nature: Jonathan Edwards's "Account of His Conversion"

It is unfortunate that the Great Awakening is known to modern readers chiefly through the example of Jonathan Edwards, and Jonathan Edwards chiefly through the example of his most frequently anthologized sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Although he acted as an apologist for the movement, Edwards, who was also a staunch Congregationalist, had a nuanced and critical attitude toward the revivals' antinomianism and enthusiasm. He was particularly interested in the linguistic foundations of evangelical rhetoric and in the natural conditions of conversion (cf. doc. 93). Both interests reveal his early readings in British empiricism and other modern philosophies, particularly the moral sense-school of the Scottish Enlightenment (cf. Stievermann in this vol., 140-3).

Edwards's dual allegiance to the Puritan faith and to modern British thought is clearly visible in "An Account of His Conversion" (doc. 94). "I made seeking my Salvation the main Business of my Life," Edwards declares (*KC*, 218), sounding a note familiar from orthodox conversion narratives such as Thomas Shepard's "The Autobiography" (doc. 42) or Anne Bradstreet's letter to her children (doc. 43). Thus, unlike other eighteenth-century autobiographers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Giacomo Casanova, or Benjamin Franklin (cf. doc. 104), Edwards confronts his readers with a completely heteronomous self: a self that is literally nothing without God's grace, non-existent and devoid of reliable self-knowledge in an unconverted state. And yet, on closer inspection Edwards's "Account" reveals itself as a surprisingly modern text. Shepard's *ordo salutis*, for instance – the ordered, ministerially guided succession of alternating conversional stages of doubt and certainty – no longer applies. True, Edwards is troubled by suspicions and backslidings; like Shepard, he continually wavers between assurance and doubt (whereas Franklin, starting his autobiography thirty years later, tells a relatively straightforward success story). But it is revealing to see what Edwards's doubts are primarily about: "From my Childhood up, my Mind had been wont to be full of Objections against the Doctrine of GOD'S Sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal Life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in Hell. It used to appear like a horrible Doctrine to me" (*KC*, 218).

Like Edwards, seventeenth-century Puritans regularly admitted to their religious doubts, struggling for example (as Anne Bradstreet did most poignantly) with the mysterious providential meaning of death and disaster in this world. But their theological misgivings hardly ever centered so explicitly and predominantly on the doctrine of God's sovereignty, that eschatological cornerstone of the Puritan faith. Edwards, by contrast, lived and wrote in an age that had begun to believe in humankind's almost unlimited capacity for self-improvement and self-creation. Since Edwards was well acquainted with John Locke's theory that every human being is born a *tabula rasa*, a blank space of future possibilities, the old Puritan doctrine of

sovereignty, with its assumption of human helplessness and passivity in matters of salvation, presented an inevitable stumbling block to his eighteenth-century mind. The protagonist of Edwards's autobiography finally manages to overcome this enlightened doubt. Again, it is illuminating to see exactly how he does so: not by choosing an established faith over modern thought, but by modernizing his religion, i.e., by reconciling his need for orthodox salvation with the demands of Lockean empiricism. In fact, his skepticism about religious dogma prompts Edwards to do something that will later become a habit among American intellectuals when they lose faith in scripture or church – he turns to nature:

[And I] found, from Time to Time, an inward Sweetness, that used, as it were, to carry me away in my Contemplations; in what I know not how to express otherwise, than by a calm, sweet Abstraction of Soul from all the Concerns o[f] this World; and a kind of Vision, or fix'd Ideas and Imaginations, of being alone in the Mountains, or some solitary Wilderness, far from all Mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in GOD. The Sense I had of divine Things, would often of a sudden as it were, kindle up a sweet burning in my Heart; an ardor of my Soul, that I know not how to express. (KC, 219)

Thus, the protagonist of Edwards's conversion narrative overcomes his doubts about scriptural doctrine not only by studying the Bible even harder or asking the assistance of his minister (as an orthodox seventeenth-century Puritan would have done) but also and principally by closing the book and heading outdoors. The nature he finds there strikingly resembles John Locke's nature: It is a realm of sensuous experience and empirical knowledge. The great paradigm shift set in motion by Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689/1700) revolved around the idea that knowledge is dependent on man's natural senses rather than on libraries or the sayings of wise and learned men. This paradigm shift is visibly reflected in the vocabulary of Edwards's spiritual literature. Again and again, Edwards insists on having a "sense" of divine things; he speaks of conversion as a sensual experience – of seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting grace. Thus, in his most sophisticated sermon, *A Divine and Supernatural Light* (1733), Edwards distinguishes between a sensuous-empirical and an intellectual-doctrinal knowledge of God:

There is a twofold knowledge of good of which God had made the mind of man capable. The first, that which is merely notional; as when a person only speculatively judges that anything is, which by the agreement of mankind, is called good or excellent [...]. And the other, that which consists in the sense of the heart; as when the heart is sensible of pleasure and delight in the presence of the idea of it. [...] Thus there is a difference between having an opinion, that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness. A man may have the former, that knows not how honey tastes; but a man cannot have the latter unless he has an idea of the taste of honey in his mind. (Edwards 1995, 122)

According to Edwards, only the second kind of judgment, the one based on empirical experience, yields true knowledge. As a result, Edwards's conversion narrative abounds in sensual terminology whenever it speaks of God's grace. This textual feature seemingly conflicts with another, equally pronounced one: Throughout his narrative, Edwards describes his religious feelings as inexpressible. In the passage from "An Account" quoted above, he does so twice. He speaks of being carried away "in what I know not how to express otherwise, than by a calm, sweet Abstraction of Soul," and at the end of the passage he mentions "a sweet burning in my Heart; an ardor of my Soul, that I know not how to express" (emphasis mine). There are numerous other passages in which the narrator of "An Account" indicates that something cannot be communicated properly or that words fail him.

Why should this be so? Precisely because the experience he is recounting is not an intellectual one. As a true evangelical, Edwards in these passages refers to sensual, not doctrinal, knowledge. According to his epistemology, anyone who ever tasted honey knows this taste, yet is unable to describe or explain it to people who have never tasted it. These people may be perfectly able to use the word *honey* in conversation or to lecture competently about honey, but, strictly speaking, they do not know what they are talking about. Thus, there are no words or metaphors that could tell or teach a person the taste of honey if that person does not have a "sense" of it. According to Edwards, the same is true for the experience of God's grace. To read the Bible and to believe in what is written there is one thing, but real knowledge of God's sovereignty is like tasting honey: It is an empirical and sensual experience, and therefore inexpressible to those who have never had it.

This emphasis on an inward knowledge of God, on a religion of the heart rather than the mind, has always been a central part of the Protestant faith. Already the basic Protestant doctrine of *iustificatio sola fide* contained an inevitable appreciation of the affections. Significantly, however, it was only in the age of Enlightenment that these sensual tendencies came fully to the fore and managed to revolutionize the religious landscape of modernity. The colonial Great Awakening, too, while not being an 'enlightened' movement, participated in an intellectual climate that valued sensual evidence as the chief road to knowledge. As in Locke's more secular version of the same disposition, this entailed a patent threat to established doctrinal authorities. Suddenly, religious competency – particularly the right to spiritual instruction – no longer depended on education, social background, or institutional standing.

On the one hand, then, colonial religion, especially in its Puritan shape, was altered in fundamental ways by incorporating Lockean conceptions of knowledge. On the other hand, however, eighteenth-century evangelism also formulated a new and timely critique of secular, enlightened knowledge – a critique far advanced from the chiefly doctrinal arguments of traditional Christian positions. Consider Edwards's "Vision [...] of being alone in the Mountains, or some solitary Wilderness, far from all Mankind, sweetly conversing with GOD": Edwards's insistence on *isolation* ("far from all Mankind") points to an episte-

mological situation that in the hands of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau would later serve as a starting point for a trenchant criticism of Lockean empiricism (cf. docs. 196, 198-201). In a striking dialectics, then, the evangelical absorption of enlightened thought in the eighteenth century prepared for various Romantic attacks on the Enlightenment in the nineteenth century.

Nowhere is Edwards's proto-Romantic understanding of nature more evident than in his surprising usage of the term 'wilderness.' When he describes his vision of being alone in a "Wilderness," Edwards obviously employs one of the key terms of American Puritanism. But seventeenth-century Puritans used this term in a manner that was markedly different. For them, to describe America as a wilderness, as an uncultivated, possibly vacant land, suggested that their natural environment was a divine ordeal. Doing God's work in the New World consisted in *overcoming* the wilderness; God's grace would arrive only after the wilderness had been transformed into a garden. For Edwards, the term 'wilderness' still refers to uncultivated lands but no longer indicates the absence or an anticipation of grace. Rather, and biblically more accurate, the untouched and untouchable wilderness is now the very place where divine grace can be received directly. William Bradford still needed to domesticate and civilize America's nature to please his God (cf. doc. 32), but for Edwards the situation is reversed: Here the believer needs to flee civilization – the cultivated gardens of social order – to find his God.

Edwards's reinterpretation of the term 'wilderness' introduced a type of nature in American literature that in due time became a Romantic topos. This was the topos of *sublime* nature, one of the most successful concepts to record the meaning of material existence in the Western intellectual tradition. Edmund Burke, the preeminent eighteenth-century theoretician of the sublime in English, argued against the Lockean Enlightenment that there is a specific type of nature that cannot be grasped empirically. Mountains and oceans, for instance, because of their sheer size and grandeur, arouse a feeling of sweet terror according to Burke (1992), completely overwhelming the observer, leaving no room for "human understanding." Since it is impossible to measure the ocean and to make empirical sense of it, all an observer can do when confronted with this massive proof of his or her limitations is to feel the strangely contradictory emotions of awe and fear: sweet terror. The sublime, in this fashion, acts as a last bastion of supernatural power in an otherwise disenchanting natural environment.

There are various examples of this kind of natural sublimity in Edwards's "An Account." Here is one of them:

[S]carce anything, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning. Formerly, nothing had been so terrible to me. I used to be a person uncommonly terrified with thunder: and it used to strike me with terror, when I saw a thunderstorm rising. But now, on the contrary, it rejoiced me. I felt God at the first appearance of a thunderstorm. And used to take the opportunity at such times, to fix myself to view the clouds, and see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder: which often times was exceeding entertaining, leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God. And while I viewed, used to

spend my time, as it always seemed natural to me, to sing or chant forth my meditations; to speak my thoughts in soliloquies, and speak with a singing voice. (Edwards 1998, 794)

The narrator of Edwards's conversion narrative is fond of life-threatening thunderstorms because he feels that here at last is a phenomenon beyond the grasp of modern thought. Sublime nature illustrates for Edwards, as it will for the Romantics, an inevitable human dependency on higher forces, an insurmountable helplessness in the face of a power that can kill on a whim. This terror is "sweet" precisely because it attests to the existence of something larger than the autonomous, supposedly enlightened self. By giving himself up to this greater being, and by feeling both powerless and ecstatic in its presence, Edwards ultimately manages to make room for old Puritan doctrines in an eighteenth-century mind. The feeling of sublime self-loss allows him to experience by natural means a phenomenon that actually lies outside and above the realm of both natural understanding and enlightened language, and hence can only be spoken in a singing voice. Here, Edwards believes, is the empirical proof of *supernatural* sovereignty – until Benjamin Franklin steps out into American thunderstorms with a different purpose in mind and with different technological and discursive equipment in his hands.

### III. Liberal Religion and Modern Mass Psychology: Charles Chauncy's *Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against*

To understand the range of discursive possibilities within the field of competing positions that is eighteenth-century American culture, it is useful to discuss the Great Awakening in the context of two writers who, each in his own way, can be read as antipodes of Jonathan Edwards: Benjamin Franklin, who created – or at least popularized – the utilitarian version of American selfhood, and Charles Chauncy, who was Edwards's most outspoken critic within the Congregational establishment. Whereas Edwards's transformation of orthodox Puritanism looked forward to Romantic discourse, both Franklin and Chauncy modernized colonial notions of spirituality and selfhood in the context of discourses and practices usually described as bourgeois.

If Chauncy, minister of the First Church of Boston, is something of a forgotten figure in American cultural history, this is because modern anthologies tend to put a premium on dissident and heterodox voices, often at the cost of misrepresenting the cultural forces that provoked such dissidence and heterodoxy in the first place. Modern anthologies also tend to select their material according to the tastes and interests of a contemporary readership – and Jonathan Edwards's proto-Romantic sensibilities seem much closer to the spiritual views of a modern academic milieu than Chauncy's bourgeois re-orientation of orthodox Puritanism. But Chauncy was by no means the conservative disciplinarian that he is portrayed as in much of the secondary literature on the Great Awakening. Like Edwards, he was an avid reader of Isaac Newton, John Locke, and the

moral philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Like Edwards, too, he deployed these sources to create a decidedly modern, if counter-evangelical, version of colonial religion. In this sense, Charles Chauncy was a key figure in the transformation of seventeenth-century Congregationalism to a more liberal theology that would finally culminate in William Ellery Channing's Unitarianism (cf. doc. 193), a theology that did away with the traditional Puritan doctrines of original sin and unconditional election.

Chauncy's sermon *Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against* (doc. 98) was delivered in 1742, at the height of the debate between "New Lights" and "Old Lights," the advocates and critics of the revival in New England. Remarkably, Chauncy's argument is as empirical as it is doctrinal. In the rhetorical shape of an orthodox sermon, Chauncy presents a well-nigh clinical description of what he thinks is happening in the country at the time, diagnosing in effect a socio-psychological mass hysteria. He begins by defining enthusiasm, quite conventionally, as the false belief in direct personal communication with God. It is "an *imaginary*, not a *real* inspiration: according to which sense, the *Enthusiast* is one, who has a conceit of himself as a person favoured with the extraordinary presence of the *Deity*" (KC, 229). This false belief in divine presence, Chauncy explains, is usually accompanied by rantings and ravings, convulsions of the body, a wild countenance, and speaking in tongues. It is, in short, a supremely physical state which to an external observer looks like madness. To the enthusiast, however, it is the ecstatic abandonment that attends his or her sensual confrontation with a sublime and sovereign God.

Chauncy is insistent on this last point. As a Puritan, he believes that to receive God's grace is an inwardly moving and even life-shattering experience; it transforms the believer into a "new creature" (Chauncy 1741a). Also, Chauncy believes that the revivalists really think they are being converted. They truly feel that they have been awakened by a direct and personal revelation from God. For Chauncy, then, the Great Awakening is not a fraud. Other orthodox ministers surmised that the revivals were actually impostures; the colonial press suspected George Whitefield in particular of embezzling donations intended for his orphanage in Georgia.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Chauncy in *Enthusiasm* maintained that the Great Awakening is based on self-delusion rather than on a deliberate attempt to deceive. But why are good Christians suddenly convinced that they have heard the voice of God and stand above the law? What is the cause of enthusiasm?

<sup>3</sup> In his *Letter to the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield* (1745), Chauncy refrained from making such charges but held that "your Travelling about as an Itinerant Preacher was not to your Disadvantage, on temporal Accounts" (16). As a result of such allegations, some colonial churches allowed Whitefield to preach only on the condition that he did not collect money and did not comment on the conversational state of local ministers: cf. the invitation of the Eastern Consociation in Fairfield County, Connecticut, from October 1740, reprinted in Bushman (1989, 25); on the colonial debate about Whitefield's fund-raising, see Lambert (1994, 176-82, 195).

Chauncy's answer to this question is remarkable: "The cause of this *enthusiasm* is a bad temperament of the blood and spirits; 'tis properly a disease, a sort of madness: and there are few; perhaps, none at all, but are subject to it" (KC, 229). With this answer, Chauncy effectively 'naturalizes' the supposedly supernatural revivals, comparing them to a contagious virus whose irresistibility is distinct from the irresistibility of grace. There were pressing political interests behind this interpretation. Unlike John Winthrop a hundred years earlier, who, backed by a civil court, banished Anne Hutchinson from Massachusetts Bay because her evangelism endangered the social cohesion of the community, Charles Chauncy is acutely aware that banishment on charges of heresy is no realistic option in a modernized society. The people thus banished from the congregation might just choose to reorganize around charismatic leaders and establish a plethora of competing sects – which is exactly what happened in the Great Awakening. Chauncy thus understood that the major threat of the Great Awakening was diversification: a threat to the homogeneity of the religious and social establishment in New England. Thus, Chauncy had a vested interest in describing the theological-institutional crisis of the 1740s as only a temporary aberration: Enthusiasm was not to be regarded as an unpardonable transgression (as colonial governor Winthrop still saw it), but as a natural disease that occurred without responsibility on the part of those who suffered from it and that, most importantly, could be cured. Rather than court trials and ostracism, Chauncy recommended leniency and care as proper treatment for enthusiasts:

And much to be pitied are the persons who are seized with [enthusiasm]. Our compassion commonly works towards those, who, while under distraction, fondly imagine themselves to be Kings and Emperors: And the like pity is really due to those, who, under the power of *enthusiasm*, fancy themselves to be *prophets; inspired of GOD*, and *immediately called and commissioned by him to deliver his messages to the world*: And tho' they should run into disorders, and act in a manner that cannot be but condemned, they should notwithstanding be treated with tenderness and lenity; and the rather, because they don't commonly act so much under the influence of a *bad mind*, as a *deluded imagination*. (KC, 230)

Unfortunately, Chauncy admits, it is not easy to reason with enthusiasts in a gentle and understanding manner, because their very condition is defined by hostility to reasoned argument, especially if put forth by institutional authorities.<sup>4</sup> Like all participants in the public debate on the revival, Chauncy thus faced a problem of (Lockean) linguistics: If empirical knowledge is dependent on sensual experience rather than correct semantic identifications, how can one even tell if other people have truly had the experience they claim? There is nothing *in their words* that could demonstrate whether they really tasted honey or only talk about it – whether they had really received God's grace or only used, and possibly believed

<sup>4</sup> Chauncy knew what he was talking about, having been told to his face by James Davenport that he was an unconverted minister and bound for hell.



in, words. Worse still, enthusiasts themselves have no way of telling whether their innermost feelings are true or not.

The relationship between inward emotions and their external signs, such as words, gestures, and facial expressions, was one of the major intellectual problems of the eighteenth century, and it bothered defenders and critics of evangelical religion alike.<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards wrote a long and subtle study, *Religious Affections* (1746), to show how genuine spiritual feelings could be distinguished from delusions. Charles Chauncy also believed that there were ways to tell authentic religious affections from inauthentic ones, despite the inherent inexpressibility of sensual grace. Significantly, however, Chauncy's solution to the problem of individual sign-usage reestablished the importance of communal control and moderation through learned and professional, i.e., institutionalized, interpretations. Since a private language of faith was impossible, the semantic content of a revelation must be publicly recordable.

The entire second part of Chauncy's sermon attempts to establish an "infallible rule of tryal" (KC, 231) by which people can judge their feelings of sublime revelation. The first of these rules is as simple as it is orthodox: If a revelation is not consistent with Scripture, Chauncy holds, then it must be wrong. In theological terms, this means that whereas the supporters of the Great Awakening valued the "spirit" of their faith higher than its 'letter,' Chauncy asked believers to constantly check the sensual manifestations of their faith against the revealed letter. So while Edwards's "Account" advised the God-seeking subject to go out alone into nature, and there to abandon oneself to God's sublimity (i.e., to live the Bible, more than to study it), Chauncy's sermon claimed the exact opposite: not to isolate oneself from all community but to consult the book and to seek the advice of competent and legitimate readers, such as parents or ministers, in order to situate one's emotions within a larger social and doctrinal framework. Thus, Chauncy argued, if a believer is told by God to kill himself in order to arrive earlier in grace (as happened in at least one instance in Edwards's hometown of Northampton, Massachusetts), or if a believer is asked by God to prove his faith by slaughtering his family (a scenario memorably described by Charles Brockden Brown in his 1798 novel *Wieland; or the Transformation*), then these commandments cannot have been spoken by the voice of God, because the Bible does not condone suicide or the sacrificial killing of loved ones.

This neo-orthodox confidence in the legibility of Scripture is based on a complex, thoroughly anti-Romantic psychology. Chauncy refuses to take for granted the transparency of individual emotions; strength of feeling and strength of inner conviction are not accepted as self-evident signs of truth. At the core of this skepticism, there is an altogether enlightened awareness of the artificiality – the mediated character – of even the most immediate and intimate feelings. Thus, Chauncy's writings on the Great Awakening, especially his longer and

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed version of the following argument, see Kelleter (2002, 242-310).

more systematic publications such as *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England* (1743), offer some of the most refined contributions to the wide-ranging eighteenth-century debate on emotional manipulation and (self-) delusion. Other colonial ministers added to the socio-psychological sophistication of the debate, most notably William Rand in *The Late Religious Commotions in New-England Considered; An Answer to Jonathan Edwards "Distinguishing Marks"* (1743) and John Caldwell in his remarkable sermon *The Nature, Folly, and Evil of Rash and Uncharitable Judging* (1742). In all these cases, the critics of the Great Awakening, frequently denounced by modern scholars as "conservatives," insisted on the empirical agency of natural and social causes. Like a social constructivist *avant la lettre*, Chauncy asked in *Seasonable Thoughts* if the surprising mass conversions were not public rather than subjective events. To assess what happened within a convert's soul, Chauncy believed it was important to ask "how the Word was preached, either as to Matter, or Manner" (1743, 87). Thus agreeing with Shaftesbury that religious enthusiasm is "social and communicative," Chauncy pointed to "the natural Influence of awful Words and frightful Gestures" (Shaftesbury 1732, 1:16; Chauncy 1743, 80). Many an evangelist, he noted, coerced onto his audience heartfelt reactions whose appearance then proved the evangelist's own charismatic authority. Chauncy regarded this dramatic constitution of a public sphere (and the entire repertory of its communicative practices, from direct emotional addresses to comprehensive trans-local press coverage) as the proper object of a religious mass psychology:

[I]n order to give the People a plain Intimation of what he wanted, [a] Preacher sometimes told them of the *wonderful Effects* wrought by the Sermon, he was then preaching; how in *such* a Congregation, they were all melted and dissolved, and in another so over-poured, that they could not help *screaming out*, or falling down, as though they had been *struck dead* [...]. And what is it more than might be expected, to see People so affrighted as to fall into *Sbrieks* and *Fits*, under such Methods as these? Especially, when they have first been possess of the Notion, that the Persons who make Use of them, are *Men of GOD* in an *extraordinary Sense*; as being sent immediately, as it were, to deliver his Messages to them. The Mind is now prepared to receive almost any Impression from this Kind of Persons [...], 'till the Noise of such *extraordinary Effects*, as *Arguments* of an *immediate divine Power*, in one Place and another, had alarmed the People, and made many of them think, it was necessary they also should be in like Circumstances. (1743, 94-100)<sup>6</sup>

This answer to the question of enthusiastic motivation is remarkable for what it does not say. Unlike Edwards, who was also troubled by the possibilities of manipulation and self-delusion (cf. doc. 93), Chauncy refused to trace back false inspirations to evil – i.e., supernatural – causation. A satanic interpretation would

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in his sermon *An Unbridled Tongue a Sure Evidence, that Our Religion Is Hypocritical and Vain* (1741b), Chauncy suggested that sudden conversions can occur because the converts hope for social distinction, i.e., "the commendation and applause of others," or for political advantage, i.e., "the better to compass their worldly designs" (8-9).

have been the most plausible answer for an older generation of Puritans and it was, in fact, the strongest answer provided by Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield for the widely discussed cases of revivalism gone wrong (e.g., serial suicides): If inspiration is felt but does not come from the true spirit, then it must be a stratagem of the devil to undermine a congregation's cohesiveness or to endanger an ongoing revival. Chauncy was not impressed by the logic of this argument. Conceding the reality of supernatural evil, he found it unnecessary to explain enthusiasm in this fashion. In his *Letter to the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield*, he declared: "I never tho't there was the Hand of Satan in this Matter. A *disturbed* or *over-heated Fancy* will sufficiently account for it, without any Help from him" (Chauncy 1745, 37).

Chauncy's insistence on explanatory *sufficiency* recalls David Hume's famous maxim on supernatural phenomena: "[N]o testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish" (1975, 115). Following this axiom, Chauncy's *Enthusiasm* explicitly situates itself in a post-Satanic age: Anomalous occurrences in the natural world are no longer traced back to supernatural causation but are explained within the limits of the enlightened concept of nature itself. At the same time, however, Chauncy was deeply troubled by the consequences of this thought. Thus, it would be wrong to read Chauncy's sermon merely as a Lockean critique of evangelical religion. Like Edwards but with different results, Chauncy in *Enthusiasm* attempted to uphold the epistemological priority of religious discourse over purely empirical or scientific reason:

'Tis true, you must not go about to set up your own *reason* in *opposition* to *revelation*: nor may you entertain a thought of making *reason* your *rule* instead of *Scripture*. The Bible, as I said before, is the *great rule* of religion, the grand test in matters of salvation: but then you must use your reason in order to understand the *Bible*: nor is there any other possible way, in which, as a reasonable creature, you should come to an understanding of it. (1742, 18)<sup>7</sup>

This is a nuanced, if desperate, position. Rejecting evangelical anti-intellectualism and the proto-Romantic cult of sublime affections, Chauncy wished to contain enlightened thought within a differently modernized religion: a 'reasonable' Christianity. This was a dangerous gamble, because the Christian religion, as David Hume observed, "is founded on *Faith*, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure" (1975, 130). Thus, the very reason Chauncy wished to instill in Christian practice was capable of undoing it; taken to its logical conclusion, empirical reason led to deism, i.e., to natural religion.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Chauncy's sermon *Ministers Exhorted and Encouraged to Take Heed of Themselves, and to Their Doctrine* (1744): "[Ministers] must take heed to it, that [their Doctrine] be Christian, in Opposition to that which is the Result of meer Reason [...]. His preaching should not be in Words of Man's Wisdom, but the Truth as it is in Jesus" (16-7).

Like the revivalists of the pre-revolutionary era, deists insisted on the epistemological priority of the human senses. Their conclusions, however, were diametrically opposed to the evangelical doctrine of immediate grace – and to stress this point, they liked to quote the same passage from Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that was quoted by Chauncy in *Enthusiasm*. Deists or freethinkers held that God created the universe as a perfect and fully rational mechanism. Hence, they claimed, the creator-God no longer has to intervene in his creation. He is, quite literally, above miracles and spectacular communications, such as Christ's sacrifice. Instead of relying on such supernatural measures, he communicates with humankind exclusively through the regular laws of his creation. With this thought, enlightened reason, which had always tried to establish itself within or alongside Christian mythology, at last dismissed the Christian narrative of God's active and constant care for a fallen world. Deism replaced this narrative of divine incarnation with a narrative of scientific progress, claiming that the only way to know and worship God was to study his creation, i.e., to study the empirical laws of nature. In this vein, Thomas Paine and others held that the legitimate source of human knowledge was no longer the Bible, nor the scholastic wisdom of dead philosophers who merely 'thought' about the world and erected complex rational systems in their books, but nature in its enlightened definition as a realm of physical cause-and-effect relations. The natural sciences thus attained the status of true religion.

In his major writings of the 1740s, including *Enthusiasm*, Charles Chauncy tried to have it both ways: His desire was to establish a religion that would live up to the demands of enlightened reason without being transformed into a natural religion. He thus envisaged a religion that would stand its ground against the most radical consequences of Lockean empiricism and yet stay clear of the Romantic mass-delusions of modern evangelism. It was a strenuous two-front war, and it resulted in the conception of a scrupulously liberal and humane Puritanism, well adapted to the social and spiritual needs of Chauncy's Boston clientele. Chauncy's mature "Universalism" (systematized in books such as *The Benevolence of the Deity* and *The Mystery Hid from Ages and Generations*, both published in 1784) had little in common with the eschatological anxiety of William Bradford and John Winthrop. It left its mark on the American Revolution, which Chauncy supported, and proved to be a lasting influence on New England cultural history, paving the road for Unitarianism. In sum, it was a thoroughly bourgeois faith, crucially concerned with the conflicting claims of science and Christianity. Another – partly compatible, partly competing – attempt to come to terms with America's postcolonial demand for a modern theology can be found in the writings of Benjamin Franklin.

#### IV. From Utilitarianism to Trans-Denominationalism: Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*

Most American revolutionaries toyed with the deist faith in the 1770s. Many experienced its intellectual radicalism as a liberating force, among them Benjamin Franklin, who admitted in *The Autobiography* to a youthful infatuation with natural religion. Even *The Declaration of Independence* (doc. 131) flaunted deist vocabulary, in Jefferson's talk of the "Creator" (rather than "God") who endowed all men with inalienable – i.e., natural – rights, as well as in Jefferson's reference to "the laws of nature and of nature's God" (KC, 303). But deism was never a dominant strain within the American Enlightenment. The continued cultural authority of Protestant Christianity, together with the sobering influence of the republican-agrarian tradition, did much to tone down the more radical varieties of enlightened thought after the American Revolution. Throughout the 1790s, then, when the French Revolution sent its shock waves through the United States, the specter of deism produced numerous paranoid scenarios and manifold fears of conspiracy. Thomas Paine, whose pamphlet *Common Sense* (doc. 130) had introduced a new and thoroughly modern tone into the previously accommodating rhetoric of the American rebels in 1776, now bore the brunt of the political changes of the 1790s. Much maligned as a radical atheist after the publication of his deist manifesto *The Age of Reason* (1794), he spent the last years of his life as a *persona non grata* in America and died almost forgotten in 1809.

While deism failed to establish itself as the new creed of a secular nation, revolutionary America produced other, stunningly original and successful syntheses of enlightened thought and the Christian faith. Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography* provided a model narrative for many of these attempts at reconciliation. In the first part of his memoirs, written in 1771 with a British readership and the prospect of an imperial career in mind, Franklin gave a short survey of his religious development:

My Parents had early given me religious Impressions, and brought me through my Childhood piously in the dissenting Way [Congregational, later Presbyterian]. But I was scarce 15 when, after doubting by turns of several Points as I found them disputed in the different Books I read, I began to doubt of Revelation itself. Some Books against Deism fell into my Hands [...]. It happened that they wrought an Effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them: For the Arguments of the Deists which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much Stronger than the Refutations. In short I soon became a thorough Deist. My Arguments perverted some others, particularly Collins and Ralph: but each of them having afterwards wrong'd me greatly without the least Compunction, and recollecting Keith's Conduct towards me, (who was another Freethinker) and my own towards Vernon and Miss Read which at Times gave me great trouble, I began to suspect that this Doctrine tho' it might be true, was not very useful. (1986, 45-6)

Thus, the narrator of Franklin's *The Autobiography* asserts the intellectual superiority of natural religion but complains about the practical (social and moral)

results of his enlightened creed. Franklin's reminder that all deists he knew were immoral men – and that he himself, while a deist, wronged other people – reflects a common opinion about freethinkers in the eighteenth century: Since they no longer believe in an active and involved God, they neither believe in divine reward nor punishment. Hence, their 'freethinking' is not only an intellectual but also an ethical disposition: They act without bothering about the consequences of their actions. In the popular imagination of the eighteenth century, then, the words *freethinker* and *libertine* became almost interchangeable.

But despite his realization that freethinking was morally deficient, Franklin refused to re-convert to any of the socially more useful forms of Protestant Christianity. After his contact with deism he could not bring himself to regain faith in traditional creeds. So even though he abandoned natural religion, this did not return him to revealed religion:

Revelation had indeed no weight with me as such; but I entertain'd an Opinion, that tho' certain Actions might not be bad *because* they were forbidden by it, or good *because* it commanded them; yet probably those Actions might be forbidden *because* they were bad for us, or commanded *because* they were beneficial to us, in their own Natures, all the Circumstances of things considered. (KC, 244)

In other words, although biblical revelation might not be divine communication, its application is extremely useful in social life. The conclusion that Franklin drew from this observation was spectacular: If the primary truth of revelation is its appeal to morality, whereas the idea of revelation itself is irrational, why not have this truth without its irrational counterpart? Thus, in the third part of his autobiography, written in 1788, one year before the ratification of the American Constitution, Franklin designed an entirely new, synthetic theology, which he thought would do justice to both his critical and social-utilitarian interests:

I put down from time to time on Pieces of Paper such Thoughts as occur'd to me respecting [this subject]. Most of these are lost; but I find one purporting to be the Substance of an intended Creed, containing as I thought the Essentials of every known Religion, and being free of everything that might shock the Professors of any religion. It is express'd in these Words, viz.,

"That there is one God who made all things.

"That he governs the World by his Providence.

"That he ought to be worshiped by Adoration, Prayer and Thanksgiving.

"But that the most acceptable Service of God is doing Good to Man.

"That the Soul is immortal.

"And that God will certainly reward Virtue and punish Vice either here or hereafter." (1986, 77-8)

Competing varieties of revealed religions are thus translated into one common ethical system without any reference to revelation itself. The privileged status of particular holy books or documents, which Chauncy still insisted upon, is replaced by the principle of social utility: The "Service of God" is to do good to man. That

Franklin did not want to have this ingeniously secular faith confused with either evangelical or neo-orthodox forms of worship and charity is evident in the name he proposed for his new religion: “the Society of the *Free and Easy*” (1986, 78). Thus, Franklin’s basic version of human belief was supposed to be an organized and integrative creed rather than a private religion, in the Romantic sense of the term, or an elaborate theological system bent on orthodoxy. This “Free and Easy” creed – which to good Christians must have sounded as bad as “freethinking” – was ultimately closer to deism than to traditional forms of Protestantism, including Cotton Mather’s orthodox apology of “good works” (doc. 105).

On the whole, what Franklin presented was a natural religion with the additional assumption that God created human beings not only as rational but also as moral beings. Similar to earlier enlightened notions of a non-institutionalized, popular ur-form of Christianity, such as in John Locke’s *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), Franklin’s universal religion was a self-evident one and claimed to be comprehensible to all people without specialized training or authoritative exegesis. More importantly, it was a democratic faith, not only because people at large could believe in it, but because its anti-schismatic character made possible the close cohabitation of widely different kinds of people. In this sense, Franklin’s enlightened theology aimed not at establishing an unrivaled dogmatic truth but at organizing a peacefully inhabitable social environment in the face of religious diversity.

It is no coincidence that this idea took center stage in the writings of an American colonial and revolutionary. Like most American founders, Franklin was deeply concerned with the problems posed and the solutions suggested by a cultural environment unlike any in eighteenth-century Europe. To say that a certain idea might be true but not very useful takes on a special meaning and urgency in a heterogeneous frontier and settlement culture. Franklin – and with him the entire American Enlightenment – explicitly searched for religious and political institutions that were suitable and necessary for the highly improbable formation of a post-classical, post-European republic in faraway provinces.<sup>8</sup>

Franklin’s surprising solution to this problem prepared the way for a spiritual paradigm that determined the course of American religious history from the 1780s until at least the 1980s. It was the rather un-European idea that no single church, creed, or holy document had a monopoly on truth, and that therefore none of them should have a privileged say in the political affairs of the nation, *but* – and this was the revolutionary point, frequently misunderstood in Europe – that *all* of them, in their very diversity, fulfilled an indispensable social function by providing moral guidance and communal cohesion to the citizens of a paradoxically large and heterogeneous republic. This is what President Eisenhower meant in the 1950s, when he claimed: “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith – and I don’t care what it is” (quoted in Bellah 1967, 3).

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Kelleter (2008).

Franklin anticipated this thought when he justified his list of religious principles, saying that “these I esteem’d the Essentials of every Religion, and being to be found in all the Religions we had in our Country I respected them all, tho’ with different degrees of Respect as I found them more or less mix’d with other Articles which without Tendency to inspire, promote or confirm Morality, serv’d principally to divide us & make us unfriendly to one another” (KC, 247).

That such (trans)denominationalism fulfilled a civic service was clear to all delegates who, in 1787, drafted the American Constitution together with Benjamin Franklin. Avoiding both the fervor of evangelism and the skepticism of the radical Enlightenment without abandoning either, the drafters of the Constitution opted for a maximum extension and diversification of the religious landscape, hoping that the existence of an abundant number of local sects and churches would prevent any one of them from establishing a monopoly, while each single creed would instill in its members that sense of civic commitment necessary for a pluralistic republic to flourish. It was a small step from this functional understanding of faith to some of the more contemporary forms of American civil religion.

## Instructional Strategies and Classroom Issues

### I. Key Concepts and Major Themes

1. Enthusiasm and Antinomianism (docs. 93-4, 98, 256, 265)  
Enthusiasm is, in the Protestant terminology, the false belief in direct, personal communication with God. It is frequently accompanied by antinomianism, i.e., the conviction that true converts are no longer subject to the written laws or established practices of their community because they are authorized by the Holy Ghost. The American antinomian tradition was secularized in the abolitionist movement by William Lloyd Garrison and in the late phase of New England transcendentalism (cf. Henry David Thoreau’s concept of “civil disobedience”; cf. Leyppoldt in this vol., 278).
2. Deism, Natural Religion (docs. 99-102)  
According to deism, God created the universe as a fully rational mechanism, comparable to clockwork. Hence, God can safely withdraw from his perfect creation and no longer intervenes in it. The only way to know God is to study the laws of his creation, i.e., the empirical laws of nature. The natural sciences are thus identified as the only legitimate form of religious worship.
3. Denominationalism (docs. 101, 104)  
The idea of denominationalism argues that all (Christian) churches are legitimate expressions of faith, deserving of equal esteem and independence, as long as they stay within their own sphere and do not interfere in public

affairs. Religious diversity is thought to prevent monopolies and thus to make possible the establishment of a federal republic.

4. Evangelism (docs. 82, 91, 93, 95-6)  
This modern and modernizing variety of Protestantism is both radically individualistic and reproducible, i.e., mass-based. Evangelists believe that to receive God's grace is a sensual and *immediate* affair, both in the sense of 'sudden' and 'unmediated.' Thus, evangelical conversion happens in an instant and requires no mediators (clergy, church, or professional scriptural exegesis). Evangelism is usually innovative in its usage of modern media technologies. It is frequently close to, but not identical with, biblical fundamentalism. Ideologically, evangelism and fundamentalism are highly flexible; in American history, they have at different times occurred in conjunction with progressive reform and civil rights movements or in conjunction with conservative and reactionary movements.
5. Modernization (docs. 95-6, 98, 104)  
This term denotes the increasing diversification of life-worlds, ideologies, and religions, accompanied by spatially and socially ever more pervasive technologies of communication. Modernization is not a teleological or uniform process, but it produces competing and contradictory discourses and practices, e.g. sensual empiricism (Edwards) versus social empiricism (Chauncy), Romantic notions of selfhood versus utilitarian notions of selfhood, etc. Hence, reconciliation is one of the primary intellectual and institutional tasks in modern societies.

## II. Comparison – Contrasts – Connections

Example: Docs. 32-3, 42-3, 94, 104, 115, 119-20, 130, 200

More than other disciplines, American Studies suffers from the (omni)presence of popular and academic stereotypes concerning its object of study. Students entering the discipline frequently hope to make sense of the massive influence of US culture on their lives by reducing 'America' to simple and simplified master concepts such as the American Dream, the American way of life, America as redeemer nation, Puritanical America, etc. While these concepts hold a good deal of explanatory power in terms of anecdotal and everyday knowledge, their utility in terms of academic knowledge is less impressive. In fact, their usage in educational contexts (handbooks, anthologies, classrooms, etc.) is often counterproductive, as it tends to strengthen rather than question popular stereotypes, while giving them an air of scholarly expertise. Thus, it is often helpful to encourage students to question and unlearn the knowledge of America they already possess and to replace it with more reflective and self-critical forms of knowledge, i.e.,

with diversified, problematical, and rigidly historicized reconstructions and contextualizations of American culture.

A good starting point for this task is Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography*. Students will quickly be able to identify familiar concepts such as the self-made man and American nationalism in this text. This conventional reading can be enhanced by a more nuanced look at the autobiography's internal structure. The canonized title *The Autobiography* with its direct article glosses over the fact that this is not a unified text, either in terms of literary structure (authorial persona, narrator, addressee, etc.) or in terms of ideology (political allegiance, theory of social organization, religious conviction, etc.). To address these issues, students can be asked to identify the addressee of each part. Thus, they will recognize that the long first part is written with a British readership in mind and that it reproduces not genuinely "American" but British and imperial topoi, as well as some of the most basic conventions of early modern life-writing, such as humility topoi, familial didactic focus, etc.

Next, students can compare these dispositions to the later, more 'American' parts, asking how this Americanization is achieved by semantic, discursive, and literary means. At the level of semantics, students will probably notice that many values and concepts we usually identify as 'typically American' originate within a larger transatlantic framework, but are then successfully appropriated into an emerging, though controversial, national discourse. At the same time, there are a number of values and concepts that are abandoned or dramatically redefined in the course of Franklin's serial autobiography, such as that of 'humility.' Students might want to explore the literary reverberations of this semantic trajectory. To do so, they can discuss Franklin's clever way of invoking, while at the same time undermining, the traditional autobiographical humility topoi by opening the second part of his text with quotations from letters by Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan (rather than in his own voice). Between parts 1, 2, and 3, there are obvious shifts in the narrator's voice – and hence in the implied author's position – that counteract Franklin's attempt to give the impression of a smooth chronological narrative.

This reading of Franklin's *The Autobiography* can be followed by a discussion of Gordon Wood's statement that the historic Franklin "was never quite as self-made as he sometimes implied or as the nineteenth century made him out to be" (2004, 27). According to Wood, Franklin was even the most reluctant of revolutionaries. But then, comparing Franklin's autobiography with equally conflicted documents of the American Revolution (cf. docs. 115, 119-20) and further sources (especially from the republican rather than Lockean end of the revolutionary spectrum), students might want to ask if the American Revolution was not a reluctant revolution to begin with. Wood also calls Franklin "the least American and the most European of the nation's early leaders" (2004, 9). Here, too, students may want to critically examine the statement: To what extent were the early revolutionaries, and not only Franklin, forced to fulfill their desires for a

post-European identity against the background of a European, specifically British heritage? Significantly, the most radical political position in the second half of the 1770s was carved out by Thomas Paine (cf. doc. 130), who was not a native-born American but arrived only shortly before the revolution in the New World. In any case, Gordon Wood's reminder that Benjamin Franklin was not *born* a paragon of American patriotism but had to be *made* one will probably prevent students from an overtly homogenizing reading of *The Autobiography*.

Another possible comparison is with earlier and later modes of life-writing. A comparison between Franklin's *The Autobiography* and earlier texts such as William Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation" (doc. 32), Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty & Goodness of God* (doc. 33), Thomas Shepard's "The Autobiography" (doc. 42), or Anne Bradstreet's "To My Dear Children" (doc. 43) reveals stark contrasts between orthodox Puritan and enlightened views of selfhood, but also within the various genres of Puritan life-writing itself. Even more revealing are the contrasts with evangelical autobiographies, such as Jonathan Edwards's "An Account of His Conversion" (doc. 94), and transcendentalist autobiographies, such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (doc. 200); possible themes and issues for this comparison are suggested in the essay above.

### III. Reading and Discussion Questions

1. Discuss and evaluate Jonathan Edwards's description of his "sinfulness" in "An Account of His Conversion."
2. To what extent does the Puritan doctrine of "regeneracy" contribute to the practice of evangelical preaching, e.g. in Jonathan Edwards's *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*?
3. Compare the structure of traditional Puritan sermons to Jonathan Edwards's *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*.
4. Compare Charles Chauncy's evaluation of the Great Awakening to Benjamin Franklin's evaluation of it. How can we account for Franklin's description of George Whitefield in *The Autobiography*?
5. How can we account for Franklin's references to Cotton Mather in *The Autobiography*?
6. In what sense can Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography* be described as a modern autobiography? Compare Franklin's text to earlier forms and genres of American life-writing.
7. Assess the utility of narratological approaches to autobiographical writing in the context of cultural studies.

8. What are the chief concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment? Why are they important for our understanding of eighteenth-century American cultural history?

### IV. Resources

#### a. Recommended Reading

Ernst Cassirer. *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1932. Cassirer's seminal study, though old, is still one of the best introductions to enlightened philosophy. While it is not concerned with the American Enlightenment in particular, it provides detailed analysis of the sensualist, anti-rationalist, and anti-Cartesian strains of enlightened thought, thus allowing for interesting comparisons with the colonial Great Awakening.

Michael J. Crawford. *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England's Revival Tradition and Its British Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Crawford's book provides an accessible survey of the Great Awakening in New England. This regional study of revivalism is then evaluated within a larger, transatlantic (though not trans-colonial) framework.

Robert A. Ferguson. "The American Enlightenment, 1750-1820." *The Cambridge History of American Literature*. Vol. 1: 1590-1820. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 345-537. Ferguson's chapter examines the literary dimension of the American Enlightenment, providing a succinct and well-written overview of major works, genres, themes, and styles. This chapter is also available as a single-volume publication.

Norman Fiering. *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972. Fiering's study is a landmark in Edwards scholarship. It systematically traces Edwards's engagement with the Scottish Enlightenment, arguing that his theology is best understood as a continued attempt to come to terms with the philosophical consequences of the moral sense school. Critics have modified many of Fiering's conclusions in recent decades to account for the specifically colonial status of Edwards's writing, but his book remains relevant and influential.

Frank Kelleter. *Amerikanische Aufklärung: Sprachen der Rationalität im Zeitalter der Revolution*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002. A comprehensive account and analysis of the American Enlightenment from the Great Awakening to Jefferson's presidency. It stresses the interaction and competition of enlightened discourses and practices in North America. Many of the issues discussed in my essay above are treated in detail in this book.

Frank Lambert. "Pedlar in Divinity": *George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994; *Inventing the Great Awakening*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. Lambert's two intercon-

nected studies examine the commercial and modernizing aspects of colonial evangelism, the first focusing on George Whitefield, the second on the Great Awakening in general. Lambert is particularly good at reconstructing the innovative communicative practices of the evangelical public sphere in North America.

Henry F. May. *The Enlightenment in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. A pioneering study, differentiating between distinct varieties of enlightened thought in North America. While many of May's conclusions have been superseded by subsequent scholarship, the book remains an excellent introduction to the field.

Gordon Wood. *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Penguin Press, 2004. An easily read biography with an important thesis. Although criticism of the topos of the self-made man may not be a new enterprise in Franklin scholarship, it has rarely been presented in such a popular (and indeed populist) manner as in Wood's Pulitzer Prize-winning book. Thus, while not as original as it claims to be, Wood's publication itself is an example of successful public enlightenment.

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