
In the following article historian Harry Stout investigates the connection between the Great Awakening and the American Revolution.¹ (So this article is a secondary source.) For background on the Great Awakening see Out of Many, pp. 125–28. Historians use the term “American Revolution” to refer not only to the Revolutionary War (1775–1783), but also to the significant political, cultural, economic, and intellectual changes that transformed American society in the later 1700s and early 1800s. It is this wider “revolution” about which Stout writes in this article.

Questions to think about:
1. In what ways might the Great Awakening be described as “revolutionary”?  
2. What types of people might see the Great Awakening as threatening, and why?

of little help here. More to the point, they actually create the problem of interpretation.

Cole’s description of the popular enthusiasm of the revival suggests a different approach to the problem of popular culture and republican ideology. If what was communicated is qualified by the restrictive rhetoric through which the ideas were intended to be transmitted, it may help to ask instead how communications were conducted and how they changed during the second half of the eighteenth century. There could be no egalitarian culture as we know it today without an ideological predisposition toward the idea that the vulgar masses ought to be reached directly. By examining the changing style of communications in the revivals it is possible to gain insights into the nature of an egalitarian rhetoric through which, and only through which, republican ideas could be conveyed to an unlettered audience.

David Ramsay, a noted participant in and historian of the Revolution, recognized that, to understand the meaning of the Revolution, “forms and habits” must be regarded. Before a republican vocabulary could communicate radical social meanings, a new rhetoric had to appear in which familiar terms were used to express unfamiliar thoughts. And this, it is argued here, is precisely what happened in the mass assemblies inaugurated by preachers like Whitefield. Despite the differences in intellectual substance between the revivals and the rebellion, those movements exhibited a close rhetorical affinity that infused religious and political ideas with powerful social significance and ideological urgency. . . .

... Despite differences in style and substance between Puritanism and southern Anglicanism, all churchmen believed traditionally with Samuel Willard that God did “Ordain Orders of Superiority and inferiority among men.” This hierarchical world-view presupposed a society of face-to-face personal relationships in which people identified themselves with reference to those around them and acted according to their rank in the community. Forms of attire, the “seating” of public meetings, and patterns of speech were among the more conspicuous indications of a pervasive social stratification that separated the leaders from the rank and file. . . .

The social institutions of colonial America were designed to sustain this prevailing perception of proper social organization. In this traditional social ethic, itinerancy was inconceivable because, in Increase Mather’s words, “to say that a Wandering Levite who has no flock is a Pastor, is as good sense as to say, that he that has no children is a Father.” What made a pastor was not simply the preaching of the Word but also a direct, authoritarian identification with a specific flock. To ignore the personal and deferential relationships of a minister with his congregation would be to threaten the organic, hierarchical principles upon which both family and social order rested.

That ministers be “settled” was no idle proposition but rather an insistence carrying with it responsibility for the whole social order. An institution as critically important as the church could deny the forms of social hierarchy only at the peril of undermining the entire organization of social authority. In terms of communications this meant that speaker and audience were steadily reminded of their personal place in the community; in no context were they strangers to one another, for no public gatherings took place outside of traditional associations based upon personal acquaintance and social rank.

Within this world of public address Liberals and Evangelicals alike realized that something dramatically different was appearing in the revivalists’ preaching performances. The problem raised by the revivals was not their message of the new birth. Indeed, it was the familiar message of regeneration that lifted leaders into an early acceptance and even endorsement of the revivals. The problem, it soon became clear, was the revolutionary setting in which the good news was proclaimed. The secret of Whitefield’s success and that of other evangelists (no less than of Patrick Henry in the 1770s) was not simply a booming voice or a charismatic presence. It was a new style: a rhetoric of persuasion that was strange to the American ear. The revivalists sought to transcend both the rational manner of polite Liberal preaching and the plain style of orthodox preaching in order to speak directly to the people-at-large. . . . Their technique of mass address to a voluntary audience forced a dialogue between speaker and hearer that disregarded social position and local setting.

Immensely significant were the separation of the revivalists from local ministerial rule and their unfamiliarity with the audience. Until then, preachers, like political leaders, had to know whom they were addressing. Because the very act of public speaking signified social authority, they were expected to communicate through the existing institutional forms. When public speakers in positions of authority communicated outside of the customary forms, they set themselves, by that act itself, in opposition to the established social order. The eighteenth-century leaders’ obsession with demagogy and “enthusiasm” can only be understood in the context of a deferential world-view in which public speakers who were not attached to the local hierarchy created alternative settings that represented a threat to social stability. The frenzy raised by the itinerants was not born of madness but was derived from the self-initiated associations of the people meeting outside of regularly constituted religious or political meetings and, in so doing, creating new models of organization and authority. As the Harvard faculty clearly recognized in their censure of Whitefield, the “natural effect” of his preaching was that “the People have been thence ready to despise their own Ministers.”

In gathering their large and unfamiliar audiences the revivalists utilized the only form of address that could be sure to impress all hearers: the spoken word proclaiming extemporaneously in everyday language. As historians immersed in printed documents, we scarcely recognize the dominance of speech and oratory in aural cultures—an orality that, by definition, never survives in the written record. . . . Unlike print, which is essentially passive, reflective, and learned, sound is active, immediate, and spontaneously compelling in its demand for a response. Speech remains in the deepest sense an event or psychological encounter rather than an inert record—an event that is neither detached from personal presence nor analyzed, but is intrinsically engaged and calculated to persuade. Print cannot match the persuasive power of the spoken word whose potential audience includes everyone who can understand
the language. It is no wonder that literate elites have feared persuasive orators from Plato condemning the sophists to Charles Chauncy damning the demagogues of the revival. Once orators are allowed the opportunity to address the people, there is, in Chauncy’s words, “no knowing how high it [their influence] may rise, nor what it may end in.”

Returning not only to the social doctrine of the gospel but to its rhetoric as well, the evangelists excited the people to action by “calling them out” and exhorting them to experimental Christianity. Radical attacks on an “unconverted ministry” that acted more like “Letter-learned ... Pharisees” than preachers of the Word took on additional meaning in the social context of eighteenth-century established religion. The danger that the Liberals sensed in the revivals was rhetorical as well as doctrinal. The Anglican commissary Alexander Garden correctly, and sarcastically, identified this threat: “What went you out, my Brethren, to see, or rather to hear? Any new Gospel, or message from Heaven? Why, no? but the old one explained and taught in a new and better Manner.” Pointing to the spirit of this new manner, one opponent of the revivals observed that “it abhors Reason, and is always for putting out her Eyes; but loves to reign Tyrant over the Passions, which it manages by Sounds and Nonsense.” The identification of sight with reason, and of sound with the passions, is here obvious and comes very near to the center of the raging controversy surrounding the itinerants. At stake was nothing less than the rules and conventions governing public address and social authority.

The revivals’ repudiation of polite style and their preference for extemporaneous mass address cut to the very core of colonial culture by attacking the habit of deference to the written word and to the gentlemen who mastered it. Evangelical rhetoric performed a dual function: it proclaimed the power of the spoken word directly to every individual who would hear, and it confirmed a shift in authority by organizing voluntary popular meetings and justifying them in the religious vocabulary of the day. Partly through doctrine, but even more through the rhetorical strategy necessitated by that doctrine, the popular style of the revivals challenged the assumption of hierarchy and pointed to a substitute basis for authority and order in an open voluntary system.

The popular rhetoric of the evangelists contrasted sharply with the much more formal modes of address preferred by upholders of established authority. Nowhere were the social divisions of American society more clearly reflected than in the leaders’ utilization of a printed form of discourse that separated the literati from the common people... Linguistic uniformity conspired with classical education to establish a learned discourse that effectively separated the literate elite from the common folk. Hugh Blair, whose handbook, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, came to epitomize the style for aspiring gentlemen, averred that the educated class “is now so much accustomed to a correct and ornamental style, that no writer can, with safety, neglect the study of it.” To encourage such a style Blair pointed to the patrician cultures of classical Greece and Rome, and urged his fellow literati “to render ourselves well acquainted with the style of the best authors. This is requisite, both in order to form a just taste in style, and to supply us with a full stock of words on every subject.” The classical heritage provided a vocabulary and mode of discourse which leaders had to learn if they were to communicate through the proper forms. . . .

Attached to the elitist typographic culture were social imperatives. As long as social identities depended on a traditional social order for context and location within a finely graded hierarchy, communications had to be transacted through a elitist rhetoric. Power became so closely tied to print that advanced literacy and a classical education were virtually prerequisite to authority, and a college education guaranteed rapid advance in the social hierarchy. By 1776 there were nearly three thousand college graduates in the colonies who, through the remarkable improvements in post and press, were able to communicate with one another on a scale and with a frequency unimaginable in the seventeenth century. The cosmopolitan “better sort” formed a close-knit community that provided both authors and audience for the wave of printed literature that began to surge in the late eighteenth century. Pamphlets written by educated gentlemen, primarily lawyers, merchants, ministers, and planters, were addressed to their peers. The common people were not included in the audience, but it was assumed that they would continue to defer to the leaders. There was no recognition that the pamphleteers’ impassioned celebration of republicanism would require a new rhetoric of communications reflecting a profound shift in the nature of social authority—a rhetoric, in brief, that threatened to undermine the exclusive world in which the pamphlets were originally conceived. . . .

... The rhetorical division resulting from the revivals played a major role in generating subsequent tensions and conflicts in American society. These tensions, moreover, reflected not so much opposing ideas with conflicting literary traditions as entirely different social outlooks and attitudes toward social authority, all deriving legitimacy from the individualism implicit in a mass democratic society. Evangelical attacks on a settled and educated ministry may have expressed a pristine “anti-intellectualism” in the colonies, but it was an anti-intellectualism that was positive and creative—indeed, revolutionary. Without it there would have been no creation of an egalitarian American republic.

The oral explosion and egalitarian style evidenced in the revivals were not limited to religion, nor was the articulation of a radical ideology the conscious objective of itinerant evangelists. The primary concern of the revivals was the saving of souls, and the rhetorical innovations that lent force to the movement were not fully perceived or verbalized for what they could come to represent: a revolutionary shift in world-view. As a movement initiated from below, the social experience of the revivals existed in fact before the emergence of a literate rationale. This does not mean that the experience proceeded from irrational impulses but, rather, that the terms necessary for rational comprehension and formal legitimation had to be invented. What opponents of the revivals termed a “spirit of superstition” was, for Jonathan Edwards, a new “sense” that could not easily be rendered into the existing
forms of speech: “Some Things that they are sensible of are altogether new to them, their Ideas and inward Sensations are new, and what they therefore knew not how to accommodate Language to, or to find Words to express.” Edwards’s concern was to fit the new social experience of the revivals to its proper spiritual vocabulary, while acknowledging that no language could fully express the essence of religious faith.

What Edwards and other churchmen failed to recognize was that the “spirit of liberty” manifest in the revivals would not be contained in religious categories. In the movement for independence both leaders and followers adopted a political vocabulary that expressed the egalitarian impulse in the secular language of republicanism. . . .