

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Marketing God

"'Pedlar in Divinity': George Whitefield and the Great Awakening, 1737-1745" by Frank Lambert, in *The Journal of American History* (Dec. 1990), 1125 Atwater, Indiana Univ., Bloomington, Ind. 47401.

"Great and visible effects followed his preaching. There was never such a general awakening, and concern for the things of God known in America before." So wrote Anglican evangelist George Whitefield in 1740 in a third-person account of his own revivalist activities, cleverly advertising them by means of an "objective" newspaper article. But his puffery actually was not far from the truth. The Great Awakening that began in 1739 and lasted through the ensuing decade was America's first mass movement, and Whitefield (1714-70), a proto-Billy Graham, was its catalyst.

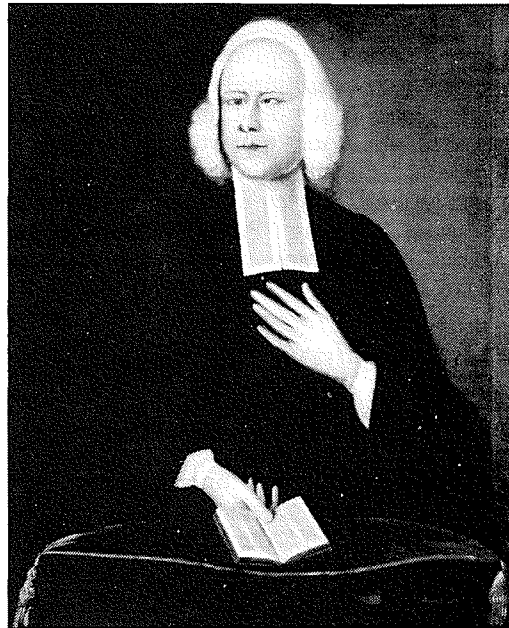
His message was of the need for a spiritual "new birth," an emotional experience of conversion and salvation, and he preached it in the open air to large, enthusiastic crowds in Philadelphia in 1739 and in New England the following year. The message itself was not new—Jonathan Edwards, Yale graduate and Congregationalist minister of Northampton, Mass., had powerfully delivered a similar one in an earlier, regional "awakening." What was new, according to Lambert, a Northwestern University historian, was Whitefield's aggressive use of advertising and other marketing techniques to promote the message of revivalism.

Drawing upon 18th-century merchants' experience in selling their wares at great distances, Whitefield used advance publicity, especially newspaper advertising, to prepare the way for his revivalist visits. Before his New England tour in 1740, for instance, newspaper readers in Boston were treated to glowing accounts of the evangelist's successes in the Middle and Southern counties, accounts that had been written by Whitefield himself or by his traveling companion.

Besides reports of his successes and itineraries, colonial newspapers also provided reprints of Whitefield's publications and

ads for his collections of sermons and journals. Publishers such as Ben Franklin found that Whitefield's tracts were hot commodities. In certain cities, such as Charleston, S.C., and Newport, R.I., Whitefield's works generated more revenue for Franklin than even his own *Poor Richard's Almanack* did.

Whitefield—despite his belief in the Calvinist doctrine of election—deliberately aimed his writing at a mass audience. He viewed the reader as a consumer. "I wrote short," he said about one of his pamphlets, "because I know long compositions generally weary the reader." Cheap serial publication of his sermons and journals also helped him get a large readership—and gave people, Lambert says, "a heightened sense of anticipation as [they] followed the evangelist's progress toward their own communities."



Whitefield inspired the Great Awakening.

Beyond Pragmatism

Americans characteristically shun theory and opt for "what works." But historian Forrest McDonald, in *Chronicles* (Feb. 1991), suggests that this pragmatic approach does itself not work. Americans, he says, "must learn, anew, how to think non-scientifically in dealing with nonscientific things."

It was fashionable, for a time, to ask the silly question, "If we can put a man on the moon, why can't we solve our social problems?" The reason we cannot solve our social problems is precisely the reason we can put a man on the moon. That is to say, it was our pragmatism in general and our scientific and technological mentality in particular that made our great material achievements possible. The essence of this mentality is the problem-solving approach. The scientific method isolates problems and solves them: It cannot take the broader view, for anything beyond the immediately demonstrable, testable, measurable, and provable is by definition unscientific. Americans are parodies of the scientific mentality: when anything goes wrong, we fix it, and do not take into account the possibility that our principles may be unsound. We have, for instance, been appalled

to learn in recent years that our children are reaching college without having learned to read. Some people responded to the discovery by seriously proposing that we should reorganize the entire educational system from kindergarten upward—and they were branded elitists, racists, or reactionary dodos. Far fewer people considered the possibility that the commitment to universal education is inherently futile, and that other means of civilizing children should be explored. Instead, the nation did what it always does: It tackled the immediate problem by instituting remedial reading classes in college and by dispensing with literacy tests. This [pragmatic inclination] enabled the United States to become the most proficient exploiter of technology the world has ever known; but the same mentality is a barrier to perceiving or dealing with human relationships. In sum, the trouble with pragmatism is that it no longer works.

Before it is too late, we must abandon our specialized, fragmented, problem-solving approach to knowledge and cultivate instead a holistic view, or what might be styled an ecological approach to human affairs. Doing so . . . will require nothing less than escaping the boundaries of our culture; but, however difficult it is, it can be done.

Not everyone approved of Whitefield's aggressive promotional efforts, however. Methodists John and Charles Wesley, for instance, deemed advertising religion a tasteless "sounding [of] a trumpet." Boston minister Charles Chauncy objected to Whitefield's giving "Public Notice" of his preaching activities. And an anonymous

correspondent suggested in the *Boston Weekly News-Letter* in 1742 that just as there already was "a very wholesome law in the province to discourage Pedlars in Trade," there ought to be a law "for the discouragement of Pedlars in Divinity also." Needless to say, that was one law that was never enacted.

Learning from Saints

"The Lives of the Saints and the Pursuit of Virtue" by Robert L. Wilken, in *First Things* (Dec. 1990), Inst. on Religion and Public Life, 156 Fifth Ave., Ste. 400, New York, N.Y. 10010.

Virtuous deeds "implant in those who search them out a zeal and yearning that leads to imitation," declared Plutarch (A.D. 46–120), whose *Parallel Lives* of noble Greeks and Romans offered just such moral instruction. By the time Christianity made its appearance in the Roman Em-

pire, the use of written narratives of noble lives to teach virtue was well-established, notes Wilken, a University of Virginia historian. "Yet Christian hagiography . . . does not emerge until the end of the third century and does not burst into luxurious bloom until the fifth." The early Christians,