The Effects of the Second Great Awakening

by Cory Schmidtz

Whether an avowed Atheist or a confirmed Believer, one would be hard pressed to deny the effects of Christianity on the formation and history of the USA. An Atheist, of course, would view this effect as a grand delusion; while a Believer would view it as a testimony to truth and righteousness. This paper will be focusing mainly on the causes of the Second Great Awakening. Perspectives will be taken from the three main sociological theories, with the exception of incorporating the naturalistic assumptions. To begin, one must be familiar with the powerful effect of this revival.

It is not hard to find historical information testifying to the tremendous impact of the Second Great Awakening. First, we must look at the background; many of the original settlers on American soil were Christians. In addition, many of those who framed the constitution were also Believers, as were the first two presidents.

"The first two Presidents of the United States were patrons of religion--George Washington was an Episcopal vestryman, and John Adams described himself as "a church going animal." Both offered strong rhetorical support for religion. In his Farewell Address of September 1796, Washington called religion, as the source of morality, "a necessary spring of popular government," while Adams claimed that statesmen "may plan and speculate for Liberty, but it is Religion and Morality alone, which can establish the Principles upon which Freedom can securely stand." Library of Congress VI (1)

For Washington, as for many others, faith was not viewed as a novelty; rather, it was essential to human happiness. In his Farewell Address 1,(2) Washington advised his fellow citizens that religion and morality are the "great Pillars of human happiness, they are the firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens." (2) 1796

While all this was true, it was in the 19th century that evangelical Christianity had the greatest impact on America. It was best described by the Library of Congress, which relates that:

"The religion of the new American republic was evangelicalism, which, between 1800 and the Civil War, was the "grand absorbing theme" of American religious life. During some years in the first half of the nineteenth century, revivals (through which evangelicalism found expression) occurred so often that religious publications that specialized in tracking them lost count. In 1827, for example, one journal exulted that "revivals, we rejoice to say, are becoming too numerous in our country to admit of being generally mentioned in our Record." During the years between the inaugurations of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, historians see "evangelicalism emerging as a
kind of national church or national religion." American library of congress VII. Religion and the New Republic

Social effect

The Second Great Awakening is notable because of the practical or social effect that these Believers had on society. This is most often commented on in relation to Charles Finney.

"Finney believed the Gospel did not just get people saved, but it was also a means of cleaning up society. He and his followers worked to make the United States a Christian nation. Finney himself was a strong abolitionist and encouraged Christians to become involved in the anti-slavery movement. Christians became the leaders in many other social concerns such as education, prison reform, temperance, Sabbath observance, and women's rights. The Second Great Awakening resulted in the establishment of numerous societies to aid in spreading the gospel.... *The large numbers of Christian workers for social reform became so influential they and the organizations they founded became known as the Benevolent Empire. The Second Great Awakening had a greater effect on society than any other revival in America.*

(GLIMPSES ISSUE #40 Christian History Institute) According to the center for history and news media "The modern feminist movement itself, in fact, finds its origins in the intersection of evangelicalism and religion."

These revivals also resulted in a practical unity and good will amongst various denominations, as stated by historian Donald Scot, Ph.D. (Queens College/City University of New York):

"Nineteenth century America contained a bewildering array of Protestant sects and denominations, with different doctrines, practices, and organizational forms. But by the1830s almost all of these bodies had a deep evangelical emphasis in common...This evangelical activism involved an important doctrinal shift away from the predominately Calvinist orientation that had characterized much of eighteenth-century American Christianity."

Robert Hagedorn’s popular sociology text said that "From the stand point of social scientists and lay persons alike, one of the most significant questions about religion is it's consequences. Does religion have an impact on the way individuals live their lives, or is it largely irrelevant?" (420)

In discussing today's society he paints a fairly bleak picture of the nominal effects of Christianity today. This, however, was not the case in the nineteenth century, as stated by Dr Donald Scott. "Religious enthusiasm transformed every aspect of American life in the Jacksonian period."
Today our society can be described as rapidly deteriorating, while then America was flourishing. It was into this society that the Government of France sent the eminent Judge and writer Alexis De Tocqueville. While France was being over run by crime and corruption, America was thriving, the Judge arrived in America in 1831 to find out why America was so illustrious. He reported,

I sought for the greatness of the United States in her commodious harbors, her ample rivers, her fertile fields, and boundless forests - and it was not there. I sought for it in her rich mines, her vast commerce, her public school systems and in her institutions of higher learning - and it was not there. I looked for it in her democratic Congress and her matchless constitution-and it was not there. Not until I went to the churches of America and heard her pulpit's flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and her power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great!” Democracy in America (211)

Tocqueville's analysis would have come as quite a surprise to the French, as they had been completely oppressive towards religion - much like America today. It used to be that America was looked at as a model society, having a crime rate so low that people would come just to study that alone. Now, however, virtually the opposite is true, with America pegged as being "far and away the most violent industrialized nation on the earth,” (Day America 6 & 120).

Today, despite all of America's secular theories, crime is among the highest in the world, and corruption is so widespread from the bottom to the top that it is almost viewed as normal. While Clinton was still a governor in Arkansas, he said: "I refuse to stand by and let our children become part of the first generation to do worse [financially] than their parents." (284 sociology 4th Hagedorn). This sounds nice, but despite his proclamation and theoretical predictions, he has not stopped our children from becoming the first generation to do worse financially than their parents. We should not lay all, or even a great portion, of the blame at his feet. A certain amount of blame lies at the feet of the Church, as it has considerably abdicated its role in society. Sociologist Will Herberg claimed that the religion he saw in 1960 seemed to have "little capacity for rising above national consciousness", and only a year later one of the most prominent sociologists, Joseph Berger, further asserted that the "God of Judgement has died." (Sociology 425).

Whereas America still retains considerable power politically, it has certainly ceased to be good and long ago ceased to be great, a consequence predicted by Tocqueville, Washington, and many others. While one could discuss at length the philosophical flaws which have lead to the failure of liberalism, for the moment let it be considered that "the proof is in the pudding." The question now before us concerns exactly what factors were influential in causing this dramatic piece of our history.

CJSchmidtz@angelfire.com
Citations.

Dave Breese *Seven men who rule the world from the grave* Moody Press, 1990.


Christian History Institute)(GLIMPSES ISSUE #40) *The second great awakening*

http://members.truepath.com/hf/2ndawake.htm (15 October 1999)

Drummond Lewis A. *The Life and ministry of Charles G. Finney.* Minnesota: Bethany House publishers 1985

Dworetzky John P. *Psychology* 3rd ed. West publishing co. 1988


Finney G. Charles. *Revival lectures* Fleming H. Revell Company

Crystal Christianity Witaker house, 1985


Miller Basil *Charles Finney* Bethany house publishers. Minnesota: 1942


Patterson James and Kim Peter. *The day America told the truth* New York: Penguin books 1992


Scott Donald *Divining America: Evangelicalism, Revivalism, and the Second Great Awakening* Queens College / City University of New York. National Humanities Center

http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us:8080/tserve/nineteen/nlinkssga.htm (15 October 1999)
Tocqueville Alexis *Democracy in America* Translated by Henry Reeve London: Saunders and Otley, 1835 Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress


University of Virginia, American studies, history dept Charles Grandison Finney and the revival
