

The Crisis of the Churches in the Middle Colonies, 1720-1750

FIFTY years ago Herbert L. Osgood described the Great Awakening in America as "the first great and spontaneous movement in the history of the American people."¹ The profound significance that Osgood attached to the Great Awakening has spurred two generations of historians to explore in depth its impact upon the development of American life, institutions, and thought. In this preoccupation with the influence of the Awakening upon the later phases of American history, however, scholars have tended to overlook the origins of the upheaval. Nowhere is this hiatus more evident than in the historiography of the Middle Colonies. No one has ever attempted to explain why the Great Awakening happened there, or why it was a "great and spontaneous" popular movement.²

¹ Herbert L. Osgood, *The American Colonies in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1924; reprinted by Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass., 1958), III, 409. I would like to thank Carl Bridenbaugh, Robert L. Middlekauff, and Russell F. Weigley for their criticism and their encouragement.

² New England has been better served in this respect than have the rest of the colonies, particularly by Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), Chapters 9-12. Though Professor Bushman's book deals only with Connecticut, no other work discusses the background of the Awakening so comprehensively or with such insight. It should serve as a model for all future studies of the Great Awakening. The works of Perry Miller are invaluable for the intellectual origins of the revivals, especially his *The New England Mind; From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), and *Jonathan Edwards* (New York, 1949).

The only comprehensive study for the Middle Colonies is Charles Hartshorn Maxson, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Chicago, 1920; reprinted by Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass., 1958), which is still a useful survey, particularly because it includes the German revivals. The most valuable study of the background of the Awakening, at least among the English speaking settlers, is Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia, 1949). Professor Trinterud examines Presbyterian evangelism in the light of the constitutional crises in the Presbyterian Church and he includes some useful information on the religious conditions among the clergy and the laity, information which should be supplemented by Guy Soulliard Klett, *Presbyterians in Colonial Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1937), and Nelson R. Burr, *The*

The reason for this oversight, perhaps, has been the spell that the sectarians inhabiting the Middle Colonies have cast over modern historians. Their fascination with the Quakers and such German sects as the Mennonites seems to have blinded most students of the Middle Colonies to the significance of the denominations most affected by the revivals of the 1740's: the Presbyterian, Reformed, and Lutheran Churches.³

The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies was almost exclusively a movement among the church people—those settlers whose religious heritage can be traced to the established churches of Europe. The Anglican George Whitefield and the New Brunswick party of the Presbyterian Church dominated the awakening of the English-speaking colonists. These evangelists drew their following either from settlers raised in the Calvinistic traditions of the churches of Scotland, Ireland, and New England or from previously “indifferent” people whose religious background was unknown⁴ but who usually became Presbyterians as the result of their conversions. The Quakers, the principal English-speaking sect, were affected only superficially.⁵

Anglican Church in New Jersey (Philadelphia, 1954). None of these books, however, though they contain much of the material used in this article, attempt to explain why the revivalists got such a tremendous response from the laymen.

The intellectual origins of the Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies will not be explored in this article. For German evangelism, the student should begin with the several studies of the Dunkers and especially the Moravians. Professor Trinterud's work is excellent for the intellectual background of the Tennent party, although his observations on the significance of pietism have been corrected by James Tanis, *Dutch Calvinistic Pietism in the Middle Colonies: A Study in the Life and Theology of Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen* (The Hague, 1967).

³ Throughout this article we will refer to “sect” and “sectarians,” “church” and “church people.” The term “sect” includes the Quakers, Mennonites, Schwenkfelders, Moravians, Dunkers, and such smaller groups as Conrad Beissel's Seventh Day Baptists encloistered at Ephrata, Pa. By the term “church” we mean the Church of England, the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, and the various national branches of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches. For the difference between these two types of denominations, see footnote 9.

⁴ *The Querists, or An Extract of sundry Passages taken out of Mr. Whitefield's printed Sermons, Journals and Letters* (Philadelphia, 1740), 32; Samuel Blair, *A Particular Consideration of a Piece, Entitled, The Querists* (Philadelphia, 1741), 61–62; Thomas Prince, *The Christian History . . . For the Years 1744–5* (Boston, 1745), 295. There is good reason to believe that most of these “indifferent” people had once been affiliated with some church.

⁵ Frederick B. Tolles, “Quietism versus Enthusiasm: The Philadelphia Quakers and the Great Awakening,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXIX (1945), 26–49.

The German Awakening was staged by the Dunkers and the Moravians, two pietistic sects recently organized in Germany out of separatists from the established churches.⁶ Neither group had much impact upon the older Mennonite and Schwenkfelder sects; they soon found their appeal was infinitely greater among the Lutheran and Reformed laymen. Conrad Beissel, for instance, an erstwhile Dunker, who was the most successful German evangelist of the 1730's, was only an annoyance to the Mennonites, but he infuriated Reformed circles by his inroads on their congregations.⁷ Similarly, the Moravian revivals of the following decade were confined to the church people after the Pennsylvania sects, led by the Schwenkfelders, thwarted Count Zinzendorf's design to create a "church of the spirit" embracing all denominations.⁸

In this essay we will attempt to show how the breakdown of church religion in the Middle Colonies created a situation which made the church people unusually susceptible to evangelism.⁹ Our

⁶ On Dunker origins see Donald F. Durnbaugh, *European Origins of the Brethren* (Elgin, Ill., 1958), Chapter 1. On the Moravians see John Jacob Sessler, *Communal Pietism among the Early American Moravians* (New York, 1933), 8-12.

⁷ C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites* (Newton, Kans., 1950), 547; John C. Wenger, *History of the Mennonites of the Franconia Conference* (Telford, Pa., 1937), 81; [John Peter Miller], *Chronicon Ephratense: A History of the Community of Seventh Day Baptists at Ephrata*, Translated by J. Max Hark (Lancaster, Pa., 1889), 70-73; William J. Hinke, ed., *Life and Letters of the Rev. John Philip Boehm, Founder of the Reformed Church in Pennsylvania 1683-1749* (Philadelphia, 1916), 200-203, 274-275, 353-355, hereinafter cited as Boehm.

⁸ Sessler, 34-37; Smith, 547.

⁹ To keep this article down to a reasonable length, we will not deal in detail with the accompanying question of why the older sects—especially the Quakers, Mennonites, and Schwenkfelders—failed to participate in the Great Awakening. It seems proper, however, to outline the answer to that question, particularly since it is implicit in the paragraphs that follow.

In general, the sects were more successful than the churches in establishing their religious institutions, thus avoiding the crisis that came to confront the struggling churches. There were two basic reasons for the greater ease the sects enjoyed in settling the Middle Colonies: (1) Almost without exception, the immigration of the sectarians was better planned, organized, and financed than was the migration of the church people; but more importantly, (2) sectarian institutions were better adapted to the primitive conditions of the New World than were church institutions. The essential difference between a church and a sect, in this context, lay in their different conceptions of the ministry. A church minister was distinctly set apart from the layman by education, by calling, and by a special ordination. Furthermore, his profession was considered so sacred that he was not supposed to labor in a secular occupation. The sectarians, on the other hand, held a less exalted view of the ministerial office. No special qualifications or training were required of a sectarian minister. He was chosen directly from

thesis, simply stated, is that the churches of the Middle Colonies failed to establish institutions capable of fulfilling the religious needs of a rapidly expanding population. Before the late 1740's, neither the Church of England nor the several national branches of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches founded any American institution above the level of the congregation. The Presbyterians managed, early in the century, to reproduce the ecclesiastical system of Scotland, but when this organization could not cope with the demands of its congregations, it fell apart in 1741. While the young churches were faltering in their struggle to gain an institutional foothold in the New World, they were swamped by the vast immigration of church people from the British Isles and Germany which flooded the Middle Colonies after 1718. Unprepared to offer the stability the new arrivals so desperately needed amidst the moral and social confusion attending their settlement, the churches stood helplessly by as hundreds of laymen turned away from their inherited faith, went over to the sects or lapsed into religious indifference. Organized religion seemed on the verge of collapse when the Great Awakening, though at first adding to the disorder, rescued the floundering churches. By 1750, the strength and effectiveness of every church was increasing rapidly.¹⁰

The first prerequisite of a thriving church is an effective ministry. A minister is essential to the functioning of every congregation because only he can lawfully administer the sacraments and preach

the ranks of the lay membership, and he was expected to earn his livelihood in a secular calling. Because of this simplicity, sectarian institutions became fully effective as soon as a congregation banded together and elected its officers, but a church congregation was crippled until it could secure the services of a specially trained and lawfully ordained clergyman and find the means to support him.

¹⁰ It should be pointed out that the generalizations we will develop in this article must be applied with some caution to the province of New York. First of all, the revivals on Long Island, and to some extent those among the New Englanders in northern New Jersey, follow the pattern of the New England Awakening rather than that of the Middle Colonies. New England revivalism grew out of the tensions that had arisen in an older, more homogeneous society, whose religious institutions were firmly established, while the Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies was largely a response to problems created by the process of settlement. Secondly, conditions in New York City and its immediate environs also varied in several respects from the rest of the Middle Colonies. The Church of England and the Dutch Reformed Church were more securely entrenched there, the sectarians were weaker, and the influx of immigrants much smaller.

the Word of God. Furthermore, because of his specialized training in matters of the Spirit, the minister is the person best qualified to guide individual laymen in their private quest for righteousness and salvation. At the root of the institutional failure of the churches in the Middle Colonies, therefore, lay the churches' inability to establish a clergy numerous enough, or effective enough, to supply these elemental needs.

The most obvious symptom of the unhealthy condition of the churches in the Middle Colonies was the great disparity between the number of ministers and the number of congregations. The situation was particularly desperate in the German churches of Pennsylvania, where by 1740 there were but three German Reformed pastors for twenty-six congregations,¹¹ and only one clergyman for the twenty-seven German Lutheran congregations.¹² The Anglicans, the Dutch Reformed, and the Dutch and Swedish Lutherans were all better served than the Germans, although on any given Sabbath no more than half the pulpits of these denominations were ever occupied by ordained ministers.¹³ The Presbyterian Church kept pace with the demands of its multiplying congregations throughout

¹¹ Boehm, 83, 88-89.

¹² *Ibid.*, 83; Henry Eyster Jacobs, *A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States* (New York, 1893), 191.

¹³ The Anglicans in New York were always well supplied, but in the other provinces the Church of England only managed to keep about half its parishes in ministers. In 1724, for example, all six parishes in New York had ministers. In Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware, however, there were eight ministers for sixteen parishes, two of which were considered too weak to support a minister. Fulham Papers, XXXVI, 54-57, Lambeth Palace Library. New Jersey had five ministers for ten parishes in 1740. Burr, 86, 113. For further data on Pennsylvania and Delaware see William Stevens Perry (ed.), *Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church*, Volume 2: *Pennsylvania* (Hartford, 1871), 131-133, 145-146.

In 1737 the Dutch Reformed church, though it had had over a century to establish itself, could muster only nineteen ministers for sixty-five congregations. E.T. Corwin, J.H. Dubbs, and J.T. Hamilton, *A History of the Reformed Church, Dutch, the Reformed Church, German, and the Moravian Church in the United States* (New York, 1895), 136. There were usually one or two German clergymen in New York and another in New Jersey ministering to the scattered Dutch and German Lutherans in those provinces. Jacobs, 117-126.

The four congregations that made up the Swedish Lutheran Church were better off than any of the above denominations. During the first half of the eighteenth century the Wicacoa congregation near Philadelphia was vacant ten years, Racoon and Pennsneck in New Jersey twenty-one years each, and Christina, in what is now Wilmington, Del., just two years. Israel Acrelius, *A History of New Sweden* (Ann Arbor, 1966), 363. Besides their regular congregations, however, all the churches in the Middle Colonies had numerous out-parishes, or preaching stations, which were supplied haphazardly.

the 1720's.¹⁴ During the following decade, however, the Church was overwhelmed by the influx of Scotch-Irish immigrants. By sending their younger members on strenuous itinerations the presbyteries managed to bridge the widening gap between the supply of ministers and the number of congregations until the end of the 1730's, when it became impossible, even with some fifty clergymen enrolled in the American church, to honor every request for a preacher.¹⁵

The scarcity of ministers in the Middle Colonies stemmed ultimately from the churches' dependence upon Europe for their clergy. A church congregation could not simply appoint its minister from the ranks of the lay membership, as could a sectarian congregation. He had to be educated and ordained by institutions which were usually found only in the Old World. This reliance upon Europe (and upon New England, too, for the Presbyterians) was fatal because Europe could not begin to satisfy the colonial churches' demands for clergymen. Ministers were reluctant to emigrate to the New World. Unlike the Puritan hegira to New England or the immigration of the sects, the migration of church peoples to the Middle Colonies was not a movement of religious communities conducted by their religious leaders in pursuit of a religious ideal. Only the Scotch-Irish were driven at all by religious motives, and, partly for that reason, only Presbyterian ministers came to America in significant numbers.¹⁶ Other denominations were reduced to cajoling clergymen into undertaking an American mission by offering them such worldly advantages as a handsome salary or preferment at home after a period of service abroad.¹⁷

¹⁴ Jedediah Andrews to Thomas Prince, Oct. 14, 1730, Samuel Hazard, *Register of Pennsylvania*, XV (March, 1835), 200-201.

¹⁵ Presbytery of Philadelphia Minutes, 12-13, 48, 54, 56, 66 in Presbyterian Historical Society, hereinafter PHS; Presbytery of New Brunswick "Minutes," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, VI, 230-232. Fifty-four ministers were members of the Synod of Philadelphia in 1739. *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1841), 141.

¹⁶ According to the most recent authority, religious persecution was only a secondary factor in prompting Presbyterian ministers to leave Ireland; they seem to have been driven chiefly by economic want. R.J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America 1718-1775* (London, 1966), 27-28.

¹⁷ Anglican ministers employed as missionaries by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel were very well paid. See footnote 29. Swedish ministers were "provided with honorable situations" when they returned from an American mission. Acrelius, 369.

Because the immigration of clergymen did not allow the American churches to prosper, their only alternative was to become self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency, unfortunately, required institutions that were beyond the capacity of most churches to create at so primitive a stage of their development. Each denomination had to set up an ecclesiastical organization, independent of Europe and invested with the power of ordination, and then found a college to train a native ministry.

Only the Presbyterian church attained self-sufficiency during the first half of the eighteenth century, reaching it at the very end of the period. With the founding of the Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1706, the authority to ordain and regulate the American clergy was permanently located in the New World. The development of educational institutions, however, was much slower. William Tennent's "Log College," established at Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, in 1727, did little before the Great Awakening to relieve the Presbyterians of their dependence upon New England and the British Isles for training their ministers. By 1738 Tennent had supplied just five men to the ministry, four of them his sons, and his seminary had become so entangled in the controversy over revivalism that its very existence was threatened.¹⁸ Not until the Great Awakening saved Tennent's college and goaded the evangelical party to found the College of New Jersey in 1746 did the Presbyterian Church acquire an institution capable of preserving its independence.

The other churches lagged far behind the Presbyterians. None of them so much as attempted to found a college, and, until the late 1740's, their organization above the level of the congregations was rudimentary and dependent upon foreign authority. The episcopacy of the Church of England was represented in the Middle Colonies by two commissaries appointed by the Bishop of London, one at Philadelphia and the other in the city of New York. Their authority was small: they could hold visitations, call the clergy to informal meetings, report to the bishop on clerical conduct, and, in an emergency, temporarily suspend a wayward minister. Ordination and discipline, the two powers essential to ecclesiastical independence, remained the prerogative of the English hierarchy.¹⁹

¹⁸ Trinterud, 30, 71ff.

¹⁹ Osgood, II, 23.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the Lutherans in the Middle Colonies—Dutch, Swedish, and German—were supervised by a provost, a deputy of the Archbishop of Sweden. With the exception of three occasions when the Archbishop permitted his agent to ordain a candidate for the ministry, the powers of this official were identical to those of an Anglican commissary. Sweden, however, thoughtlessly neglected to designate a provost between 1730 and 1748, leaving the American Lutherans with no government at all during the most crucial years of their growth.²⁰

The Dutch and German Reformed ministers never had an over-seeing official, such as a provost or a commissary. They were completely unorganized until after the Great Awakening, although the Dutch ministers in New York sometimes met informally to discuss matters of policy, as during the controversy over Frelinghuysen's revival in the 1720's. Twice the Classis of Amsterdam grudgingly granted the New York clergy the power to ordain a minister, but it was only in 1747, following a decade of petitioning, that the Classis permitted the Dutch and the German churches each to erect an independent Coetus.²¹

When the Lutherans established a synod the following year, all the churches in the Middle Colonies, except the Anglican, which did not receive a bishop until after the Revolution, were ecclesiastically independent of Europe. Only then, by ordaining and regulating their own clergy, did these churches begin to grapple effectively with the shortage of ministers.

Supplying their congregations with pastors was only the most immediate problem the churches faced in the Middle Colonies. An even greater obstacle was the difficulty every church experienced in preserving the authority of the clerical office. The social status of the American ministers, and especially their control over the congregations, had to be enforced if they were to perform effectively. But for reasons which were only partly understood at the time, respect for the cloth seemed to vanish in the free air of the New World.

This disregard for the status of the ministry was due in part, as many contemporaries perceived, to the fact that the young churches

²⁰ Jacobs, 105-106; Acrelius, 364.

²¹ Boehm, 173; Corwin, 134, 136, 139.

enjoyed none of the wealth and power of their established parents. In Europe the spiritual authority of the clerical office, imparted to it by the rite of ordination, was enforced by powerful ecclesiastical bodies which were financially secure and backed by the state. But in the Middle Colonies the Presbyterians alone had any ecclesiastical organization; only the Anglicans in the vicinity of New York City received encouragement from the civil authorities;²² and, except for some individual congregations, all the churches were destitute. Stripped of the secular props that would have assured his authority, an American minister could count only on the sanctity of his office to command the respect and submission of the laity. In the words of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg: "A preacher must fight his way through with the sword of the Spirit alone . . . if he wants to be a preacher and proclaim the truth."²³

The prestige of the clergy was eclipsed also by the influence the sectarians had attained in many parts of the Middle Colonies. The churches in Europe had cruelly persecuted the sects, but in America the shoe was often on the other foot, and the sects tormented their erstwhile oppressors by blackening the character of individual ministers and publicly denouncing them as "hireling preachers" who earned their bread by gulling the people. So low did the reputation of some clergymen sink under the brunt of this anticlericalism that parents disciplined their children with stories of what the wicked parson would do if he caught them.²⁴

The most ominous challenge to the ministers' authority, however, came not from the anticlericalism of the sects, nor even from the want of governmental support, but from the unruliness of their own congregations. Clergymen in the Middle Colonies found themselves at the mercy of the people they served. This perversion of the "normal" relationship between a pastor and his flock was intolerable to ministers who were accustomed to the freedom European clergymen enjoyed from the popular will of their parishioners. The

²² Osgood, II, 14-22; III, 117.

²³ Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, *The Journals of . . .*, Translated by Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia, 1942), I, 67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 143, 221-222. For other examples of sectarian anticlericalism see *ibid.*, 96, 97, 122, 154, 204; John Holbrooke to Secretary S.P.G., Salem, N. J., Aug. 19, 1730, copy in H. E. Wallace Collection—New Jersey, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).

withering of the clergy's control over the congregations seemed to poison the very roots of organized religion.

This displacement of pastoral power arose initially out of the circumstances surrounding the founding of congregations. Clergymen being so scarce in the Middle Colonies, particularly in the newer settlements, ministers were seldom present at the gathering of a congregation. Neighbors simply banded together, chose their officers, and, later on, at great sacrifice to themselves, bought a lot and erected a meetinghouse. All this was done without the authorization of the clergy; at most a minister would be called in to sanction the work of the laymen by installing church officers and celebrating communion.²⁵ By the time the laymen could afford to settle a minister permanently, they had secured an unbreakable hold over the affairs of the congregation. They owned the church property, they were liable for the debts incurred in purchasing a lot and building the meetinghouse, and, because of these responsibilities, they were unwilling to relinquish any of their control to the pastor.²⁶

The minister's position in his congregation was further hampered by the control the laymen usually gained over his salary. No church in the Middle Colonies was independently wealthy: only in New York were tithes fixed by civil law;²⁷ the few congregations endowed with land often seem to have derived little income from it;²⁸ and only the Anglican missionaries employed by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel consistently received allowances from the mother country.²⁹ Nearly every congregation, therefore, supported its minister by a voluntary subscription to his salary, an arrange-

²⁵ For a particularly good description of the gathering of a congregation see Boehm, 157-158; also *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, III, 36, 86. For examples of the congregations' financial difficulties see Boehm, 241-242, 265-266, 281, 286, 413, 415-416, 457-458; Muhlenberg, *Journals*, I, 87, 94-95; William Becket Manuscript, 125, HSP.

²⁶ Boehm, 332.

²⁷ Osgood, II, 14-17.

²⁸ Perry, II, 223; Acrelius, 239-240, 253, 284, 289, 291-293, 297-298, 318, 328.

²⁹ Consequently, the Anglican clergy was the best paid ministry in the Middle Colonies. In 1724, for instance, the New York missionaries were given £50 sterling annually by the Society supplemented by a grant from the Assembly and voluntary contributions. The missionaries in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware received between £60 and £70 sterling plus a small voluntary contribution from their congregations. Fulham Papers, XXXVI, 54-57. The Presbyterian ministers in Pennsylvania, by contrast, seem rarely to have received more than £60 local money from their congregations, often half of it in farm produce. Presbytery of Donegal Minutes, 128-129, 145, 181, PHS; Klett, 109.

ment irksome to layman and clergyman alike. Because most church people were poor, these salaries were small, difficult to collect, and the frequent cause of ill feeling between pastors and their flocks.³⁰

Worst of all, the ministers' financial dependence crippled their authority over the congregations. Disciplining unruly parishioners could be costly because the chastened sometimes refused to pay their share of the pastor's salary. For the same reason, an entire congregation might be disrupted if some members took a dislike to the minister. His salary would diminish as his unpopularity spread until even the contented parishioners would turn against him for fear the burden of his support would fall upon them alone. Under these conditions, only a foolish minister, or an uncommonly courageous one, opposed the will of his people for long. Even preaching upon some unpleasant subject was risky: "I pay [the parson] by the year," explained one of Muhlenberg's parishioners, "but if his preaching does not please my taste, I'll go to another church where I can get it for nothing." The prevalence of such attitudes brought Muhlenberg to conclude, "it is easier to be a cowherd or a shepherd in many places in Germany than to be a preacher here, where every peasant wants to act the part of a patron of the parish, for which he has neither the intelligence nor the skill."³¹

The growth of popular control over the congregations was most noticeable in the German churches of Pennsylvania, where the clergy was too undermanned and too disorganized to offer much resistance. When Muhlenberg arrived in 1742, he immediately perceived how widely the American churches had deviated from the European norm: "In religious and church matters, each has the right to do what he pleases. . . . Everything depends on the vote of the majority."³² The clergy was abashed by this drift toward lay rule. The one minister who dared to justify it, the Reformed pastor John Peter Miller, was scorned by his colleagues and took refuge in Conrad Beissel's cloister at Ephrata.³³ Other ministers fought stub-

³⁰ Salary squabbles are rife in the church records. For some examples see Presbytery of Donegal Minutes, 110-111, 141, 158-162, 164-165, 184, and Presbytery of Philadelphia Minutes, 59, 66, PHS; Perry, II, 152-153, 196, 217, 221-222; Acrelius, 257, 278.

³¹ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, I, 100, 122, 251.

³² *Ibid.*, I, 67.

³³ Boehm, 199-200, 254-256.

bornly against the unruliness of their people, but they got nowhere until they organized themselves toward the end of the 1740's.³⁴

Meanwhile the Presbyterian Church managed to keep its congregations under restraint by wielding the authority of the presbyteries. In 1737, for instance, when the vacant congregation at Paxton refused to receive Thomas Craighead, the supply sent by the Presbytery of Donegal, the Presbytery declared that the Paxton church had shown disrespect for the ministry and decreed that the congregation would receive no more supplies until it acknowledged its fault and promised "more kindly entertainment" to the ministers sent its way. The people yielded at once, and ministerial supplies were renewed.³⁵

The restraining hand of the presbyteries, however, was lifted after Gilbert Tennent preached his famous Nottingham sermon in March, 1740. This utterance, the most significant of the Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies, justified, as never before, the popular tendencies within the congregations by defending the right of the layman to hear any minister he chose.³⁶ By accepting, rather than resisting, the increased independence of laymen in church affairs, Tennent unleashed a great popular upheaval. Responding to this passionate appeal, the laity revolted against their pastors and split their congregations, eventually rending the entire Presbyterian Church into Old and New Side.

The development of lay control in the Anglican congregations differed from the other churches in one significant respect. Because most Anglican clergymen in the Middle Colonies were missionaries employed by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, they received a handsome annuity from England, and consequently they were economically independent of their people. There were several instances of unpopular missionaries being hounded out of their pulpits by their congregations,³⁷ but, in general, clerical authority in the Church of England was somewhat better preserved than was the case elsewhere. Anglican ministers, for example, were able to

³⁴ For an example of one such struggle see *ibid.*, 198, 223-225, 281, 300-305, 324, 409-411, 430.

³⁵ Presbytery of Donegal Minutes, 137-138, 144, PHS.

³⁶ Gilbert Tennent, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry* (Philadelphia, 1740), 21.

³⁷ Perry, II, 217; Fulham Papers, VII, 174, 176.

preach against the Great Awakening, even while their people were swept up in it, without the dire consequences that overtook many Presbyterian opponents of the revival.³⁸

Nevertheless, a minister who was not subsidized by the Society, such as the rector of Christ Church in Philadelphia, was vulnerable to the same popular pressures as the pastors of other denominations. In 1737, for example, a quarrel broke out in Christ Church which epitomizes the tensions existing in all the churches of the Middle Colonies. The vestry, representing the desires of a large part of the parish, tried to install Richard Peters as assistant to the pastor, Archibald Cummings. Cummings sternly opposed the vestry's wishes, but, seeking to avoid a bitter confrontation, he deferred the matter to the Bishop of London, arguing that the Bishop alone possessed the authority to nominate and appoint an American clergyman. The vestry then claimed the right to present candidates for the Bishop's licensing because the members of the parish had built the church themselves and supported its minister solely by their voluntary contributions. Some parishioners were even inclined to doubt whether the Bishop had any jurisdiction at all in the affair. Although the controversy ended with the vestry's complete submission to the authority of the hierarchy, Cummings' reflection on the Peters case echoed the misgivings of many ministers who had opposed the will of their people with less success:

This and the like Disturbances might be prevented or easily cured had we a B[isho]p in these parts: Indeed in this Church 'tis no wonder Differences happen so often seeing there's no fixed Salary, but everything precarious, entirely at the will of the people; were it so in Old England I doubt not but in many parishes the like would frequently happen.³⁹

³⁸ When the Presbyterian congregations split over the Great Awakening, some Old Side ministers asked to be dismissed chiefly because they could not subsist on their reduced salaries. This is clearly what happened in the case of John Elder and seems to have been the determining factor in the dismissals of Adam Boyd and John Thomson. Richard Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Philadelphia, 1857), 454-455; *Presbytery of Donegal Minutes*, 230, 264, 286-289, PHS. This did not happen to the Anglican missionaries when many of their people abandoned them. Perry, II, 203-235 *passim*; Becket Manuscript, 101-112, 116-134, HSP.

³⁹ Fulham Papers, VII, 170, 175, 179, 189, 200, 201, 242; Hubertis Cummings, *Richard Peters: Provincial Secretary and Cleric 1704-1776* (Philadelphia, 1944), 13-23. An identical controversy arose in 1741 over establishing Peters as Cummings' successor. Fulham Papers, VII, 254, 291, 292, 300; Cummings, 42-70.

There was a saying current in the middle of the eighteenth century which depicted Pennsylvania as a "hell for . . . preachers."⁴⁰ This description might well have included the Middle Colonies as a whole because everywhere the ministers worked under the severest handicaps. Their authority and social status had been drastically undermined by the lack of government support, by inadequate ecclesiastical organization, and, above all, by the unruliness of their own people, to say nothing of the open contempt in which they were held by the sectarian population. At the same time, the scarcity of ministers, combined with the vastness of the country, greatly increased the physical burdens of their office. Most ministers traveled hundreds of miles through the wilderness every year preaching in vacant pulpits and administering to their own widely scattered flocks.⁴¹

When all these hardships are considered together, it is not surprising that the effectiveness of the ministry in the Middle Colonies was considerably reduced, and that a decline in religion among the churches inevitably resulted. Standards of religious observance suffered everywhere, in spite of the clergy's best efforts, and the religious needs of many church people went unfulfilled.

The journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, written during his early ministry in Pennsylvania, illustrate how impossible it was to maintain European standards of worship. Because Muhlenberg's parishioners were so widely scattered over the countryside, his performance of routine duties, such as pastoral visits, inevitably fell short of standards set in Germany where congregations were huddled together in villages and the members could easily be visited several times a year. For similar reasons, Muhlenberg was forced to lower the requirements for confirmation. Children in Germany had to know their catechism by heart, but Muhlenberg could not supervise the instruction of the young so carefully, and he accepted them if they merely understood the most elementary doctrines. When ministering away from his own pulpit, Muhlenberg tailored his services

⁴⁰ "Pennsylvania is heaven for farmers, paradise for artisans, and hell for officials and preachers." Gottlieb Mittelberger, *Journey to Pennsylvania*, edited and translated by Oscar Handlin and John Clive (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 48.

⁴¹ For examples of the strenuousness and dangers of the clergy's peregrinations see William Becket Manuscript, 145, HSP; Perry, II, 126, 167, 179, 182; Muhlenberg, *Journals*, I, 183, 187-188, 210.

to the ignorance of the people by shortening his sermons and spending the rest of the time catechizing his listeners. The celebration of communion in congregations where he did not personally know the qualifications of the members posed a particularly delicate problem of weeding out the ineligible. Muhlenberg's method was to cross-examine the deacons and elders about each applicant, hoping this would suffice, but he also soothed his ruffled conscience with the thought, "the Lord knoweth the heart."⁴²

By these compromises with accepted standards, Muhlenberg actually made himself as effective as a clergyman could be in the Middle Colonies. Few ministers, however, possessed Muhlenberg's genius. They were generally men of only ordinary capacities, no better and no worse qualified than their European brethren.⁴³ But in America they faced extraordinary conditions which required unusual character, insight, and flexibility. Inevitably, many of them stumbled, and their blunders further impaired their effectiveness.

The most common kind of blunder, as one might expect, was the failure to adjust European usages to American conditions. Pastors who were unwilling to compromise with necessity risked destroying their usefulness altogether by alienating their congregations. Muhlenberg summarized their plight thus:

Young beginners in this important office of the ministry do not have sufficient experience and possess more efficiency than insight. They start out vigorously and use European standards which do not always fit the complicated conditions in America. They usually stand alone without anyone with whom they might confer concerning the trials that occur. They are beset on every side by *spectateurs* and hostile lurkers who watch not only their whole work, but every little move they make, and treat even the smallest mistake as a criminal act.⁴⁴

John Pugh, an Anglican missionary in Delaware, was such a stickler for European practices. In 1738 he wrote desperately to the Society

⁴² *Ibid.*, I, 98, 118-120, 194-195, 235.

⁴³ The German churches were repeatedly scandalized by ministers fleeing an evil reputation in Europe, but the other churches seem to have done quite well in keeping unqualified men out of their pulpits. The Swedish Lutherans, Anglican, and Dutch Reformed ministries were selected with care by the European authorities, while the American presbyteries, though sometimes lax in disciplining their members, performed the same services for the Presbyterian church.

⁴⁴ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, I, 249.

for the Propagation of the Gospel asking whether he should adapt baptismal requirements to the demands of the settlers. He feared that his people, objecting to his rigid insistence upon qualified sponsors, would be driven over to the Presbyterians.⁴⁵ If a minister was to retain any effectiveness at all, therefore, he had to accept changes in religious observance.

It is not surprising that some ministers broke under the strain of such adjustments, while others became entangled in useless disputes with their parishioners, or, possessed by a sense of their inadequacy, fell into the dull, lifeless legalism which the revivalists were to exploit so pitilessly. Whatever the particular causes of individual failures, however, enough has been said to suggest that ministers in the Middle Colonies were considerably less effective than they probably would have been in Europe.

During the 1730's the impotence of the clergy brought organized religion to the brink of disintegration. When the ministry was unable to administer its office effectively, church institutions could no longer fulfill the religious needs of the laymen. This institutional breakdown became ever more serious as immigration swelled the numbers of church people, thus multiplying the burdens of the undermanned ministry and resulting ultimately in widespread discontent. A spiritual crisis developed among the church people which enabled the revivalists to touch off the popular outbursts of the 1740's.

The breakdown of organized religion, by seeming to close off the normal approaches to heaven, was intolerable to most church people because they were still deeply concerned with the hereafter. Despite all that has been written about the secularization of thought during the early eighteenth century, salvation remained the ultimate goal in the lives of ordinary laymen.⁴⁶ Consequently, when church institutions failed, this fundamental religiosity was often deflected into unexpected channels, none of which were fully satisfying. Three such deflections were of especial importance in preparing the church

⁴⁵ Perry, II, 201. The Anglican rite of baptism was a frequent source of difficulty for the missionaries. Burr, 173-174.

⁴⁶ For a description of the religious conscience of the layman, see Ebenezer Pemberton, *Sermons on Several Subjects* (Boston, 1738), 17-19.

people for the evangelical movements of the 1740's: a peculiar kind of religious indifference, legalism, and anticlericalism.

The most obvious symptom of religious malaise, to contemporaries of the Great Awakening, was the shocking growth of religious indifference. Although religious indifference assumed a variety of forms, ranging from hardened unbelief⁴⁷ to mere religious slothfulness,⁴⁸ there was one type of indifference which is considerably more important than the rest for understanding the mood of the church people before the Great Awakening. Many laymen no longer knew what religion to believe; they had come to doubt the validity of their own creed without having found a satisfying substitute. Such people were not indifferent in the strictest sense of the term because they were still spiritually concerned, and often deeply troubled, but in their uncertainty they frequently abandoned organized religion altogether and adopted a position indistinguishable, on the surface, from the slothfulness and hardened unbelief around them.

Among Muhlenberg's converts were several persons whose case histories illustrate this type of indifference in its purest form. The father of a young man in Muhlenberg's care, for example, told Muhlenberg that he had become skeptical of his Reformed beliefs and had allowed his children to grow up unbaptized because he was thoroughly confused by the multitude of denominations in Pennsylvania, each crying, "Here is Christ; we have the best medicine and the nearest road to heaven!" In spite of his own uncertainty, however, the father taught his children to read the Bible, hoping they would eventually be able to choose for themselves the religion most in agreement with God's Word.⁴⁹

This unwillingness to commit oneself to a denomination was frequently preceded by several changes in religion. Another of Muhlenberg's future parishioners, though raised in the Reformed Church, attended services with his Lutheran wife until he became disillusioned with the churches in general. He then tried some of the sects, but finding them equally unsatisfying, he resolved thereafter to hold aloof from all communions and seek peace only in Christ.

⁴⁷ For examples see Muhlenberg, *Journals*, I, 138; Perry, II, 161, 178.

⁴⁸ For example see John Pierson to Dr. Bearcroft, Salem, N.J., Oct. 30, 1744, copy in H.E. Wallace Collection—New Jersey, HSP.

⁴⁹ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, I, 236.

The spiritual odyssey of Conrad Weiser, the famous Indian agent, followed a similar course. During the 1730's, Weiser progressed from Lutheranism, his ancestral religion, through the Reformed faith to Conrad Beissel's monastery at Ephrata, which he later quit after a brief flirtation with the Moravians. Weiser no longer knew where to go when Muhlenberg met him in 1742, and for five years he lived in a religious limbo until Muhlenberg finally persuaded him again to receive communion in the Lutheran Church.⁵⁰

In each case, the uncertainty which drove these men to adopt an attitude of outward indifference is closely related to the denominational heterogeneity of the Middle Colonies. The multiplicity of religions, more than any other single factor, appears to have provided the layman with the incentive to question his inherited faith. Opportunities for doubting one's beliefs were more limited in Europe and in New England where a dominant church either suppressed its rivals or relegated them to a distinctly inferior position. But in the Middle Colonies dozens of denominations competed on a more or less equal footing and the babble of creeds inevitably obscured the old certainties. Consequently, an unusually large number of settlers abandoned their beliefs and either joined another denomination or fell into a skeptical indifference.

Religious belief might have been better preserved had the Middle Colonies not been a veritable battleground of warring religions. All denominations were inflamed with a lust for proselytes. The Anglican missionaries, as instruments of their employers' grand design to bring the plantations under the sway of the Church of England,⁵¹ were probably the most ambitious soul gatherers of any group of clergymen. Though their accomplishments fell far short of their objectives, they sustained their zeal and justified their salaries with glowing accounts of every little triumph over the "dissenters."⁵² Nor were the Presbyterians remiss in propagating their version of the Gospel. During the 1730's, for example, the Anglicans in the Pequea Valley of Pennsylvania pleaded desperately for a missionary

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 143-144, 102-103, 170, 172, 188-190.

⁵¹ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre; Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics 1689-1775* (New York, 1962), 26.

⁵² For examples see Perry, II, 161-162, 170-171, 189-190, 194.

to do battle with the Presbyterians who were leaving no stone unturned to draw them into their communion.⁵³

The sects, rather than the churches, were the most successful proselytizers. Not only did the sectarians dominate many parts of the Middle Colonies in wealth and prestige, but the confused and disillusioned church people were unusually easy prey. Numerous immigrants from the British Isles quickly forsook their churches and joined the Quakers, while many Germans, impressed with the prestige of the Friends, became indolent in the practice of their own religion.⁵⁴ The greatest inroads among the German church people, however, were made by the pietistic sects, whose missionary efforts led directly to the German Awakening of the 1740's. The Mennonites too, though less zealous for converts than either the Quakers or the pietists, seldom shunned the opportunity to entangle an occasional stray in their nets.⁵⁵ Even unbelievers and "deists" joined the competition for proselytes, causing more than one Anglican priest to complain of "bad men" who promoted infidelity and profaneness throughout the country by sowing "loose and Atheistical" principles.⁵⁶

It was difficult to avoid having one's religious beliefs challenged, because so many laymen, particularly from the sects, dabbled in missionary work among their neighbors. These zealots employed the crudest techniques, ridicule and insult, to destroy the faith of their victims. Typical of the heckling the church people endured was the scrape of an elderly Englishman with a local Quaker magnate: upon hearing his neighbor had just been baptized, the Friend jeered, "Why didn't thee desire the Minister rather to piss upon thy Head . . .; that would have been of more effect." Such an incident, though trivial in itself, could discourage even a devout person if it became an everyday experience. Muhlenberg tells of an old couple, staunch Lutherans in Germany, who were so ridiculed by their sectarian neighbors in Pennsylvania that by the time he found them "their

⁵³ *Ibid.*, II, 183.

⁵⁴ John Holbrook to Secretary S.P.G., Salem, N.J., Dec. 5, 1729, copy in H.E. Wallace Collection—New Jersey, HSP; Muhlenberg, *Journals*, I, 197.

⁵⁵ Smith, 547; Muhlenberg, *Journals*, I, 127-128, 144.

⁵⁶ Perry, II, 195-196, 177; William Becket Manuscript, 53, HSP.

candlewick scarcely glimmer[ed].” Not all laymen, of course, submitted to these attacks quietly. Whenever the sectarians challenged Frederick Stengel, one of Muhlenberg’s most ardent parishioners, and provoked him to argument, he was so heated in the defense of his religion that they eventually learned to leave him alone. Disputatious fellows like Stengel lived dangerously, however, for, as Muhlenberg observed, if the sectarians found someone who was not solidly grounded in doctrine, they would relentlessly entangle him in his own arguments and lead him away from the church.⁵⁷

Indentured servitude and religious intermarriage also encouraged lay proselytizing. An indentured servant, cut off from the fellowship of his co-religionists, was all but helpless before the indoctrination of his master. Such was the experience of the Lutheran, Michael Walker, for many years the servant of a prominent Friend. Walker was often tempted to join the Quakers and attended their meetings regularly, but eventually his earlier religious training prevailed, and, when freed, he became a Lutheran schoolmaster. Muhlenberg relates several other cases of Anglicans or Lutherans, indented to sectarians, who also survived to join his congregations.⁵⁸ One can presume, however, without stretching the imagination, that numerous church people succumbed to the propaganda of their employers and abandoned their original faith. Matrimonial converts were common, too, despite the strictures of every denomination against religious intermarriage. In 1741, for example, an Anglican missionary lamented the inroads the Presbyterians were making on his parish by marrying his young people, and Muhlenberg mentions several persons who married into the Lutheran Church.⁵⁹

Religious intermarriage, indentured servitude, and the daily clashes with sectarians, therefore, all combined to undermine the religious beliefs of the church people. At the same time, the inefficacy of church institutions, and the economic burden of their support,⁶⁰ severely strained the layman’s loyalty to his denomination. Unable to cope with such pressures, hundreds of people abandoned the churches. Many changed their beliefs and joined another com-

⁵⁷ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, I, 198, 151, 232.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 202, 205, 213, 234.

⁵⁹ Perry, II, 215; Muhlenberg, *Journals*, I, 202, 241.

⁶⁰ Perry, II, 201. Presbytery of Donegal Minutes, 4, PHS.

munion, while countless others, hopelessly bewildered but still spiritually concerned, quit organized religion altogether.

Meanwhile, the laymen who remained steadfast in the practice of their religion were subjected to a legalism which was virtually a compromise with indifference. Many ministers, aware of the pressures driving the laymen away from the churches, sought to preserve the allegiance of their parishioners by easing the requirements for Christian fellowship. They made few demands upon the inward spirituality of their people, being content merely if their congregations attended worship regularly and were correct in doctrine and outward behavior.

This was the policy, for example, of Jedediah Andrews, pastor of the Presbyterian church in Philadelphia, whose legalistic preaching Benjamin Franklin immortalized in the pages of his *Autobiography*. Franklin, who at the time was nominally a Presbyterian, occasionally went to hear Andrews, though with growing reluctance because: "His discourses were chiefly either polemic arguments, or explications of the peculiar doctrines of our sect, and were all to me very dry, uninteresting, and unedifying, since not a single moral principle was inculcated or enforc'd, their aim seeming to be rather to make us good Presbyterians rather than good citizens." Eventually Andrews hit upon a text, which Franklin thought "could not miss of having some morality," but to his disgust Andrews confined the sermon to five points only: "1. Keeping holy the Sabbath day. 2. Being diligent in reading the holy Scriptures. 3. Attending duly the public worship. 4. Partaking of the Sacrament. 5. Paying due respect to God's ministry." This was not the useful, social morality Franklin had in mind, and he "attended his preaching no more."⁶¹

Though we may sympathize with Franklin's disillusionment, Andrews' legalistic preaching was, nevertheless, a necessary response to the plight of his people. His congregation, like many in the Middle Colonies, was a mixture of "divers Nations of different sentiments,"⁶² and it was forever threatened from within by the disintegration of religious belief and from without by sectarian criticism. Under these conditions, Andrews had little choice but to in-

⁶¹ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of . . .* (New York, 1950), 92.

⁶² Jedediah Andrews to Benjamin Colman, Apr. 7, 1729, Ebenezer Hazard Manuscript Notes, I, PHS.

culcate and defend the "peculiar doctrines" of Presbyterianism if he expected to hold such a group together and bolster its wavering faith. He had to insist, furthermore, that his people perform at least the minimum religious duties—read the Bible, attend church, etc.—if he was to prevent many of them from becoming outwardly indifferent.

Legalistic preaching, therefore, may not have been very inspired, but, because it dealt directly with many of the problems undermining church religion, it probably helped stave off a complete disintegration of religious belief. By preaching doctrine and good behavior, ministers, such as Andrews, instilled their congregations with a sense of denominational identity and pride. No doubt, too, the spiritual needs of some colonists were completely satisfied by this easy-going formalism, while others, inwardly shaken by the religious anarchy around them, suppressed their doubts and accepted legalism for want of anything better. Consequently, until the revivalists offered a more fulfilling alternative, legalism prevailed in congregations throughout the Middle Colonies.⁶³

Though some people found solace in legalism, other laymen were unhappy with its cold formalism, which could not satisfy the inward needs created by the spiritual crisis they were undergoing. Persons who were baffled by the variety of religions in the Middle Colonies, and had come to doubt their beliefs, could not be consoled by doctrines and rules. When their religion was reduced to a set of dogmas, it appeared to these troubled souls as just another creed, with only its familiarity to recommend it over the teachings of other denominations. Few settlers were qualified to undertake the comparative examination of theologies needed to decide whether their creed was the one most in accord with God's Word. Nor were they capable of making so weighty an intellectual decision without a deeper emotional affirmation. By failing to supply that emotional affirmation, legalism probably intensified the uncertainty of numerous laymen.

Because legalism was unable to mollify the spiritual confusion of the laity, there was nothing to prevent the discontent of the church

⁶³ For the prevalence of legalism in the Presbyterian Church see the testimonies of the antirevivalists against it: John Thomson, *The Government of the Church of Christ* (Philadelphia, 1741), 120–124; George Gillespie, *A Sermon against Divisions in Christ's Churches* (Philadelphia, 1740), Appendix, i–ii. In 1738 J.B. Boehm was accused of insufferable dullness by some of his people. Boehm, 261, 314.

people from spreading during the decade before the Great Awakening. John Peter Miller observed that by 1730 many church people in Pennsylvania were "so confused they no longer knew what to believe."⁶⁴ In a sermon in 1733, T.J. Frelinghuysen described the religious uncertainty he had detected among the settlers of New Jersey: "I would be religious, did I only know which religion is the true one; but how shall I who am young, arrive at a correct conclusion? One pursues this course, and another that—one professes this belief, and another that, and a third rejects both?"⁶⁵ The Anglican missionaries commented frequently, throughout these years, on the spiritual restlessness of the population. Robert Weyman, for example, noted with some surprise a "general disposition" of Pennsylvanians to hear him out, "notwithstanding the Prejudices they had been brought up in against the Church of England." Other missionaries in Pennsylvania and Delaware also reported "dissenters of all persuasions" flocking to their services.⁶⁶ More and more laymen, it seems, were ignoring denominational lines and looking for solace in any religion that was close at hand.

The ugliest symptom of the church people's uneasiness, however, was the growth of anticlericalism within the congregations. Reading through the church records of the 1730's, one becomes increasingly aware of a deep hostility on the part of many congregations toward their pastors, a hostility manifested in the readiness of laymen to exaggerate and denounce the pettiest professional and moral failures of the ministry.⁶⁷ The existence of this undercurrent of contempt for the clergy is confirmed by the Great Awakening itself, when one congregation after another openly aired its hatred, blackened its pastor's character, and tried to turn him out of his pulpit.⁶⁸ Histor-

⁶⁴ *Chronicon Ephratense*, 70.

⁶⁵ Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, *Sermons by . . .*, Translated by William Demarest (New York, 1856), 168-169.

⁶⁶ Perry, II, 162, 196, 197.

⁶⁷ The Minutes of the Presbytery of Donegal are the best source for studying this phenomenon because they are the most thorough. See especially the disputes between William Orr and the Nottingham congregation, 13-22, 67-81, 85-96, 99-109, 112-115, 119-121. A similar hostility toward J.P. Boehm can be detected throughout his collected letters, but it is not very evident in Muhlenberg's *Journals*.

⁶⁸ See Presbytery of Donegal Minutes, 192ff, and Presbytery of Philadelphia Minutes, 78-80, 82-87, 97-99, PHS.

ians have missed the full significance of this bitter censoriousness by attributing it simply to the barbarizing effect of the frontier or, in the case of the Scotch-Irish, to "racial" characteristics. But if we accept these denunciations of the clergy at face value, they are obviously an unequivocal expression of the laymen's profound discontent with their ministers.

That discontent can be traced ultimately to the inability of the clergy to deal with the needs of their people. In the eyes of ordinary laymen, the clergy had failed to provide the institutional stability they so desperately desired. Church members were disturbed by the puzzling weakness of clerical authority and distressed by the ineffectual performance of their pastors. Preaching seemed to have declined too, because doctrines which had been accepted as self-evident in the Old World, now often appeared to be no more worthy of belief than the creeds of the most fantastic sects. The clergy's insistence that their parishioners give them a comfortable maintenance, after the laymen had already sacrificed so much to establish the congregations, deepened popular resentment. Encouraged, perhaps, by the anticlericalism of the sects, the laity's frustration came to focus, half-consciously, upon the simplest possible explanation of these vexing conditions: their pastors were incompetent, avaricious, and morally degenerate.

Although the failures attributed to the clergy were exaggerated and often unavoidable, the latent hostility they engendered in the congregations provided much of the raw emotion necessary to the success of the Great Awakening as a popular movement. When revivalists, such as Gilbert Tennent and George Whitefield, publicly condemned their ministerial opponents as "unregenerate," blamed them for the languishing condition of the congregations, and urged the laity to abandon them,⁶⁹ hundreds of laymen thought they had found the answer to their religious predicament. "Unregenerate" ministers suddenly became the scapegoats for all the bitterness arising from the breakdown of religious institutions and beliefs. By striking down the "pharisee preachers," many people felt they could

⁶⁹ Tennent, *Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*; George Whitefield, *Journals* (London, 1960), 345-346, 350-351.

free themselves from the unbearable psychological burden of their years in the Middle Colonies.⁷⁰

The Great Awakening, however, was only incidentally a crusade against an unregenerate ministry. The central teaching of the revivalists, their doctrine of the New Birth, led them to a more enduring solution to the problems we have been discussing as constituting the "crisis of the churches" in the Middle Colonies. Their reinterpretation of conversion as an emotional experience provided the laity with an experimental basis for religious belief. A person experiencing the New Birth could know with some certainty that he was on the path to salvation, no matter what his denominational creed.⁷¹ And when the New Birth was wedded to a specific set of doctrines, such as Calvinism, these doctrines, too, were empirically reaffirmed.⁷² By resolving the layman's crisis of faith, the evangelists not only brought hundreds of people back into organized religion, but they also restored some of the prestige and moral authority the clergy had lacked before 1740. Pastors could once again minister to the innermost religious needs of their flocks, thus removing the most dangerous source of the tensions that had existed between ministers and their people. Once these tensions subsided, and the methods of the Great Awakening became common practice, the churches in the Middle Colonies could be rebuilt independent of the Old World and rooted in the peculiar conditions of America.

The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies, therefore, was intimately bound up with the process of immigration and settlement.

⁷⁰ Anticlericalism does not seem to have been a significant factor in the German Awakening, probably because there were so few ministers for the Moravian evangelists to oppose. Its importance for the Awakening among the Presbyterians, however, has been drastically underestimated. Condemning and overthrowing "unregenerate" ministers may have been more important than conversion to many laymen. Both conversion and anticlerical revolt served to remove the sense of guilt which had arisen among the church people as a result of the tensions we have been describing. Conversion purified the acknowledged sinner by giving him an experience of the grace of God. Anticlericalism operated more crudely, but it too relieved the individual of his burden of guilt by transferring it to the minister who was then denounced and, if possible, driven away. If this is an accurate interpretation of the significance of anticlericalism, the immediate emotional and psychological impact of the Great Awakening was broader and deeper than the rather small number of conversions would indicate.

⁷¹ This was essentially the approach of Whitefield and Zinzendorf.

⁷² Gilbert Tennent and the New Brunswick evangelists generally took this tack.

It arose out of the difficulties the churches experienced in establishing their religious institutions and maintaining their religious beliefs in a perplexing and often hostile environment. Before the 1740's the church people were confused Europeans, dependent upon the institutions and outlook they had left in the Old World. By 1750 this was, in general, no longer true. The Great Awakening had provided them with a set of principles that could reconcile their Old World heritage with their New World experience.

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