

S. E.

Master North American Studies, Uni Bonn

Essay-Exam

## **Describe and Analyze the Second Great Awakening**

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## **1. Introduction**

The United States of America is a country filled with diversity, settled by people of different cultures, different regions, and of different religious beliefs. Going back to the first Puritan settlers, the country had a rich religious history, which continues to shape and influence American social and political life. One of the most influential religious movements in United States History was the Second Great Awakening, a religious revival which swept through the nation from 1800 to 1845, spreading westward. The Second Great Awakening was caused by the spreading secularism of the time after the revolution and continues to influence the nation even today.

Its dramatic theological changes concerning the turn from old-time Calvinism to Postmillennialism and its politicizing effect on fundamentalist Christians formed the basis from which later Christian political movements could emerge. This essay will describe the Second Great Awakening and analyze how its conditions and consequences influenced the modern-day Christian Right movement, which emerged in the 1970s. The essay will first deal with the different manifestations of the Awakening all over the country, including the theological foundations and then focus on the Awakening's political impact. It is based on the works of Richard Carwadine, John Corrigan and Winthrop Hudson, Michael Hochgeschwender, George M. Marsden and James A. Morone.

## **2. The Conditions of the Second Great Awakening**

### **2.1 The Appalachian Awakening**

The Second Great Awakening took place in a time of constant technological and social changes. Many Protestant Americans were opposed to the spread of secularism and Deism, which was promoted by people like Thomas Jefferson and as a result, a religious revival swept through the nation (cf. Carwadine). Nevertheless, the Second Great Awakening took different shape in different areas. The Western Awakening in the Appalachian region of Tennessee and Kentucky was characterized by so-called camp meetings. They received their

name because the Western frontier was scarcely settled and many people had to travel for days to reach the revival site, so the meetings lasted for days and people slept in camps. The most famous camp meeting took place in Cane Ridge, Kentucky in the summer of 1801 with approximately 25,000 people attending (cf. Morone).

Western revivals were ecstatic and almost vulgar, with people singing, dancing, and shouting. The area was also a 'breeding ground' for Baptists and Methodists, who traveled across the area to found people's churches. Ministers would stay in a town for a while and preach and when they left the people in town would continue to preach to others. Methodists had an organized ministry structure and so they increased their size from 14,000 at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to over a million by 1845. Baptists had similar growth numbers, despite being less organized in their ministry. The Western revival partly resembled the First Great Awakening in its intensity and was strikingly different from the revivals in the Northeast (cf. Morone).

## **2.2 The New England Awakening**

The Awakening in the New England region was a more sober Awakening compared to the one in the West. Instead of holding camp meetings, New England ministers focused on organizing benevolent societies, which tackled things like intemperance, to help the people fight their own sin by actively preventing the sins of others. Prominent revivalists like Lyman Beecher scoffed at the ecstatic revivals in the West and even sent worshippers home if they became too excited (cf. Morone). John Corrigan and Winthrop S. Hudson have determined that the differences between the Western and Northeastern Awakening were due to the fact that since the Western area was filled with a large migrating population and places to minister were scarce, Western revivalists had to act quicker and with more force than their Northeastern counterparts (cf. Corrigan and Hudson).

Despite the class differences between Eastern and Western revivalists, however, James A. Morone has identified four shared moral innovations in both groups. They all rejected old-time Calvinism with its predestination and belief that once a person has fallen from God's grace he could never redeem himself again. They also believed that people were responsible for their own souls and sought to change services from traditional Latin to more lively

services, including things like gospel music. Additionally, benevolent societies were important to both groups, according to Morone (cf. Morone). During the Second Great Awakening many New Englanders moved to the Western New York area, which became another important revival site (cf. Marsden).

### **2.3 The Western New York Awakening**

The Western New York area was vital to the Second Great Awakening, for it became the breeding ground for many of the era's more exotic religions like Mormonism, Adventism, Shakerism, and the Oneida. George M. Marsden compares the area to the California of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since both were areas that were quickly being settled and became open to religious experiment. Especially religious New Englanders moved to Western New York, which became known as the Burnt-Over District, due to the intense spirituality created there by various revivals. One of the most famous revivalists of the area was Charles G. Finney, a New York lawyer who experienced a dramatic conversion experience in 1821 and proceeded to close his law firm and instead devote his life to evangelism (cf. Marsden).

Finney became known for his 'New Measure' revivals, which placed more emphasis on the sinner's free will and his ability to actively change his fate (cf. Carwadine). Finney addressed people by their name during revivals and always spoke of 'you' instead of 'they' when referring to sinners. He traveled the area and held so-called protracted meetings, which lasted for weeks and included services at different times of the day as to accommodate everybody in the community, for example a farmer's schedule, which was different from a regular American's. He went against traditional services and instead his services took different shapes. Marsden compares Finney's protracted meetings to Western camp meetings because they were both designed to build up and sustain spiritual intensity (cf. Marsden). Like other revivalists of his time, Finney focused on the sinner's ability to seek salvation, which can be explained by the rise in Postmillennialism during the time.

## **2.4 The Theological Motives**

The Second Great Awakening caused a rise of people with millennial beliefs. Most people started to believe in Postmillennialism, which says that before Jesus can return to Earth, a 1000 year reign of peace has to be established. Postmillennialists believed they could actively contribute to this 1000 year reign, which is why Postmillennialism was closely connected to the notion of Perfectionism. This was a step away from Catholicism and reformed Orthodoxy, which stipulate that people are too imperfect to establish perfection. Only the Millerites adhered to the more Calvinist approach of Premillennialism, which believes that the point of Jesus' Second Coming is predestined and will occur before the 1000 year reign of peace (cf. Hochgeschwender).

Americans also believed that God had severed his bond with Israel and the – in their eyes – sinful European continent and instead forged a new bond with America. This brought them both joy and responsibility, since it suggested that America was responsible for the world's salvation and should set an example for all other countries (cf. Hochgeschwender). Michael Hochgeschwender thus comments that Mormonism, despite being attacked for its neglect of the Bible and polygamy, was the most American religion of all, since it placed Jesus' Second Coming on the American Continent (cf. Hochgeschwender). The notions of Postmillennialism and America being destined to bring salvation to the world have survived over the past century and are still very prominent in the American Christian Right today.

Christian Right foreign policy lobbying is especially motivated by their millennial belief that for Jesus to return certain conditions must be met, including the liberation of Israel. Middle East politics are a vital element to Jesus' return and therefore the Christian Right lobbied for the Iraq war after 9/11. In their quest to democratize the world, one might also argue that the United States and especially the Christian Right are still trying to achieve the world's salvation. Millennial beliefs are not only strong in Christian Right politics today, but also in American churches. Millennialist authors like Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, whose 'Left Behind' book series sold millions of copies, are promoting them. It comes as no surprise that Tim LaHaye is also an influential member of the Christian Right. The fact that fundamental Christians are active in politics today comes as no surprise if one looks at the political impact of the Second Great Awakening, which was just as influential as its cultural and theological impact, if not even more so.

### **3. The Political Influence of the Second Great Awakening**

#### **3.1 The Abolitionist Movement**

In his book “Hellfire Nation” James A. Morone writes “if the First Great Awakening primed Americans for their Revolution, the Second lit the long fuse to the Civil War” (Morone). Many scholars agree with this notion. Morone goes on to add that the Second Great Awakening’s influence was so big because groups of people who had always been oppressed suddenly barged into politics, like women – and slaves. He writes that the Awakening launched the Abolitionist movement because Evangelicals started to channel all their moral energy towards the sin of slavery by the 1830s (cf. Morone). Northern revivalists quickly marked slavery as the biggest sin of the American nation, eclipsing all other sins. They were also motivated by their Postmillennialist beliefs, which made them doubt that Jesus could ever return to a country in which an abomination such as slavery was taking place. Slavery had no place in a perfect society and many Northerners considered the South to be a “violent mass brothel” (Hochgeschwender) by the 1830s. In the North, joining the Abolitionist cause became like a religious conversion. People started to protest in front of churches that refused to condemn slavery and rallied against it. Michael Hochgeschwender therefore sees it as no surprise that the most important Abolitionist book, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”, was written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was the daughter of influential Northern revivalist Lyman Beecher (cf. Hochgeschwender).

The issue of slavery caused a rift between Northern and Southern Evangelicals. While the North had become more and more industrial since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the South was still very rural and dependent on its agriculture. Southern Evangelicals therefore tried to justify slavery by quoting Bible passages like “Cursed be Canaan: a servant of servants he shall be” (Morone). White efforts of keeping Blacks out of their churches also caused the rise of Black churches, which quickly became the political and cultural heart of the black community. Spurred by the abolitionist atmosphere, those churches inspired slaves to rebel. Most notably was Nate Turner’s rebellion of 1831, killing some 60 Whites. Morone describes Turner’s rebellion as the “abolitionist big bang” (Morone). Of course Whites reacted to this by imposing strict regulations on Black worshipping, but the fire had irrevocably been ignited. The Abolitionist movement also provided a chance for a second group of people to step out of the shadow into the political spotlight – women.

### **3.2 The Women's Movement**

In the 1830s more and more middle class women joined the abolitionist cause and thus quickly became politicized. At the beginning of the century it was still uncommon for women to speak in public and be important in the church. The issue even caused problems between Northern and Western revivalists. Westerners were more open to women becoming more important in churches, while revivalists of the North and East were more traditional on the subject (cf. Morone). John Corrigan and Winthrop S. Hudson argue that the conversion experience itself was a milestone for women since it included them relaying their conversion experience in front of the whole congregation, which boosted their self-confidence as public speakers. Charles G. Finney even used women as traveling ministers if their testimonies were particularly strong (cf. Corrigan and Hudson).

Despite being active in the movement, however, the question of a woman's role was still causing problems and so many newly politicized women abandoned Abolitionism and Evangelism in favor of their own Women's Movement. The manifest they wrote at the conference of Seneca Falls in 1848 thus became the founding document of early American feminism (cf. Hochgeschwender). The Second Great Awakening launched two important political movements, Abolitionism and the Women's Movement and furthermore acquainted religious Fundamentalists with political activism. Even though they were not constantly present in politics over the next decades, American Christians never fully disappeared from politics again, once they had gotten a taste of it.

### **4. Conclusion**

The Second Great Awakening had different impacts on different regions in America. In the Appalachian area it took place in form of camp meetings and contributed to Baptists and Methodists becoming one of the most dominant religious groups within the United States. Even today the South is still dominated by Baptists, which continues to influence everyday life and culture in the area.

In Western New York the Burnt-Over-District produced many original American religions like Mormonism, Adventism, and Shakerism, which are still dominant today. The Second Great Awakening thus permanently influenced American religious demographics.

In the North and New England benevolent societies eventually gave way to the Abolitionist movement, politicizing millions of Christian Fundamentalists in the process, including women and slaves. Scholars agree that the Second Great Awakening was the most influential religious movement in United States history. Its consequences not only ended up shaping American society and religious life in America, but also continues to heavily influence Christian fundamentalist political activism to this very day.

The millennial mission to bring forth the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is the most vital objective of fundamental Christians, be it through domestic policy efforts or – more importantly – through foreign policy efforts. Whether they are Postmillennialists or Premillennialists does not change their unwavering belief that America will be responsible for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

The Second Great Awakening politicized fundamental Christians. While some might argue that it wasn't until the 1925 Scopes Trial that Christian Fundamentalists were firmly established in American political life, it nevertheless should not be ignored that the Second Great Awakening also introduced Christians to political activism, thus setting in motion a process that would eventually lead to the modern Christian Right. If one looks at today's Christian Right tactics, they seem familiar to Eastern and also Western revivals of the Second Great Awakening, as well as the strategies of the time. Christian politicians rally with a fervor that reminds one of a Western revivalist, while others distribute pamphlets indicating political candidate's Christian beliefs, much like Eastern revivalists passing out pamphlets and Bibles through benevolent societies like the Bible Association, founded in 1816.

In conclusion one can say that the Second Great Awakening not only continues to be present in American society through its religious demographic consequences, but also through its theological changes in Millennialism, which not only shapes every-day normal Americans, but also political Americans. While it was not the sole cause for Abolitionism and the Women's Movement, it nevertheless sped up the process significantly, resulting into a country that today grants equal rights to women and men, as well as Blacks and Whites, thus really making it one of the most – if not *the* most – influential religious movements in American history.



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