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Distinguishing Marks: The Politics of the First Great Awakening

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Research & Scholarship SYMPOSIUM

Distinguishing Marks: The Politics of the First Great Awakening

Few people spend much time thinking about the revivals of the 1700s on the American continent. Most Christians who do probably see the evangelical movement from about 1730 through the 1740s as a clear outpouring of God's Spirit. In the heat of the moment, though, not all were convinced that the revivals were from God. The First Great Awakening challenged the traditional theology in the colonies, pushing boundaries and forcing churches to wrestle with new issues. The revivals started in local areas, but soon spread throughout the colonies. Without a doubt, the Great Awakening permanently altered the face of religion on this continent.

The revivals brought out mixed reactions. Those who were in favor of the revivals were called New Lights, and those opposed to the movement Old Lights. This distinction between two groups remained mostly unquestioned in scholarship until Thomas Kidd's *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*. In this work, Kidd proposes a different grading method. Rather than a dyadic, two-ended scale, Kidd suggests that a continuum better fits the ideologies of the Awakening. The Old Lights are still the anti-revivalists, according to Kidd, but the New Lights are divided. In the New Light camp, the enthusiastic, entirely pro-revivalists would be radical evangelicals, while the cautious revivalists would be moderate evangelicals. Studying the era confirms Kidd's theory, as it is clear that revivalists were not all in agreement.