Great Awakening Essay

The Great Awakening was the first real social movement to sweep across the thirteen British colonies. Characterized by religious fervor and passionate affirmations of faith, the Great Awakening changed the concept and structure of religion in the colonies, which produced long-term social and economic implications for the colonists.

The sermons and testimonials of preachers like Jonathon Edwards and George Whitefield could cause even the most pessimistic attendee to get swept up in the contagious emotion of the revival. By creating images of hellfire and brimstone and urging their listeners to actively seek a relationship with God, the sermons of Edwards and Whitefield pointed to a growing disenchantment with the established churches, or the “Old Lights.” The “New Lights”, by emphasizing a personal relationship with God and moving away from a focus on theological knowledge, began to chip away at the colonial power structure that held the clergy in high regard. As more people became awakened to these new religious ideas, questions inevitably arose regarding not only the teachings and status of the church, but also of the tradition of the supporting churches like the Anglican Church with taxes that were collected from the colonists. Additionally, a number of new religious sects began to spring up in the thirteen colonies to meet the diverse needs of a religiously awakened society. Ultimately the Great Awakening would begin the process of decreasing the power of the clergy while also questioning the status of the Anglican and Congregational churches in the colonies.

The Great Awakening would also produce social changes as well. By uniting the colonies in the spirit of a religious movement, for the first time the colonies could share a common set of beliefs. While this isn’t of the same magnitude as a political unification, it is still important as the first message that would bring the colonies together. In addition, the Great Awakening also produced a renewed emphasis on education by providing higher education institutions to instruct the growing generation of ministers and clergy within the colonies.

While not economic in nature, the Great Awakening would produce some ideas that would alter the economic landscape. The Great Awakening reflected class divisions, as those in the lower classes were more likely to be influenced by the ideas of the Great Awakening. But as people’s focus on religious development and spiritual awakening began to grow, the world of material wealth seemed less important. Preachers like Edwards criticized the social classes of the colonies and urged their followers to take their attention away from material possessions and focus on their connection with God. The Great Awakening was concerned with spiritual, not economic, ascension.

The religious growth that accompanied the Great Awakening changed the spiritual fabric of the colonies and spurred social and economic changes as well.