

# Another Great Awakening?

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Some observers of religion assert a socially transforming spiritual movement is sweeping the globe, resulting in 82,000 conversions to Christianity a day. But only 6,000 of them are in Europe and North America.

Two former Muslims pray to Jesus in  
Nairobi, Kenya.

"I believe we are in the midst of a great spiritual awakening. But when it's mentioned in the United States, it's generally met with blank stares, because it's not happening here," said Jim Denison, president of the Center for Informed Faith, based in Dallas.

Denison, theologian-in-residence with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, believes "there is a Fifth Great Awakening occurring in our world today."

Some historians debate whether two, three or four awakenings have occurred previously, and Denison has no interest in splitting hairs over the number. He's more concerned about why it's happening now in the developing world and not in Western Europe and North America.

## **Common conditions**

In a nutshell, he sees two conditions common to previous awakenings—concentrated prayer and a tremendous sense of desperation.

"In the United States, we're not desperate enough—at least, not yet," he said. "We live in a culture that views God as a hobby."

Spiritual awakenings "always seem to start in small groups," church

historian Alan Lefever observed, noting the spiritual movements often begin in Bible study groups or small prayer groups.

But the groups of Christians don't stay small. When the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s swept through colonial America, altars filled with penitent sinners who responded to the appeals of George Whitefield and to sermons such as Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Some historians assert up to 80 percent of the colonial population became identified with a Christian church.

During the Second Great Awakening of the early 1800s, Baptists and Methodists in the United States doubled in size, Lefever noted.

"The numbers say something significant happened," said Lefever, director of the Texas Baptist Historical Collection. Spiritual awakening results in increased religious interest, and that is reflected in numerical growth, he said.

### **Social transformation**



Although Sunday worship services at Sharon Baptist Church in Pampierstad, South Africa, have ended, church members do not stop their praise and worship. Rebecca Niogotsi (center) and other members of the Sharon Baptist congregation sing and dance outside while others meet and fellowship.

Positive societal change also marks genuine spiritual awakening, Lefever noted.

“In the Second Great Awakening, bars closed, and houses of ill repute shut their doors,” he said, adding the change in moral climate generally was not legislated. “People quit going to those places.”

Denison similarly points to two marks that distinguish spiritual awakening from localized revival: “Awakening is an enduring movement, as opposed to a single specific event. And awakening is a spiritual movement that produces social transformation. It’s across society, not just in a single community.”

Clearly, the First Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening met both criteria. Beyond that, historians and students of spiritual awakening lack consensus.

Some church historians trace the beginnings of a Third Great Awakening to the businessmen’s prayer movement that produced 1 million Christian converts in 1858. During the Civil War, about 100,000 soldiers came to faith in Christ.

Others claim the Third Great Awakening began in the late 1800s and ushered in the progressive era and the Social Gospel Movement. Social reforms such as child labor laws and the temperance movement grew out of that atmosphere.



An evangelical church in Nairobi, Kenya, attracts thousands of worshippers every Sunday.

The spiritual movement that swept through Wales in 1904 may have been a continuation of that awakening. Or, according to some experts, it may have been a Fourth Great Awakening.

Other observers assert a Fourth Great Awakening occurred in the mid-20th century, beginning with the youth revival movement after World War II and continuing through the rise of the Jesus Movement and charismatic renewal.

### **Hunger for justice**

Count evangelical social activist Jim Wallis among that group. And he believes the time is ripe for another socially transforming spiritual movement in the United States.

“I regard the black church’s leadership of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s as another ‘great awakening’ of faith that changed politics,” he writes in *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith & Politics in a Post-Religious Right America*.

Wallis stresses the link between spiritual renewal and social justice.

“Two of the great hungers in our world today are the hunger for spirituality

and the hunger for social justice,” Wallis writes. “The connection between the two is the one the world is waiting for, especially the new generation. And the first hunger will empower the second.”



Members of a Messianic Jewish congregation in Almaty, Kazakhstan, worship at a Saturday evening service.

Wallis points out during 19th century American evangelist Charles Finney’s altar calls, when new converts expressed their faith in Christ, he also enlisted them to work for the abolition of slavery.

## **Justice Revivals**

Wallis hopes “Justice Revivals” can recapture that marriage of spiritual dynamism and social justice. The first citywide event involving more than 40 churches in Columbus, Ohio, birthed church-based employment services in areas plagued by poverty and unemployment, he noted.

Another Justice Revival scheduled Nov. 10-12 in Dallas has been endorsed by churches across the theological and political spectrum, including leaders of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, Dallas Baptist Association and Dallas Baptist University.

Organizers hope the event will inspire at least 200 churches to create

partnerships with public schools and advocate for 700 new permanent housing units for the city's homeless population.

Both aspects—spiritual grounding in prayer and worship, along with concrete acts of social justice—are essential, Wallis noted.

“Apart from the accountability of a commitment to social justice, spirituality can too easily become narcissistic. It can become spirituality as a commodity serving only me,” Wallis explained in an interview.

“On the other hand, social activism that exists without it being grounded in spiritual soil can degenerate into despair that leads to frustration, anger, hatred and even violence.”

Reflecting on Denison's observation about prayer and desperation being conditions common to previous awakenings, Wallis suggested desperation exists in the United States, and prayers have been offered, but the two have not been wedded.

“Maybe we haven't been praying about the things we ought to be desperate about,” he said.

### **No easy recipe**

While students of awakening believe certain conditions lead to genuine spiritual movements, they emphasize great awakenings cannot be manufactured.

In the United States, nothing in the 20th century—or so far in the 21st century—matched the early great awakenings, Lefever observed. He believes in part the tendency of over-analysis—“dissecting how the Lord is moving”—may have played a role.

“No one in the middle of a spiritual awakening ever says it is a spiritual awakening,” he said.

But in recent decades, some Christians have been so quick to try to replicate results and find a formula for spiritual success that they may have squelched genuine renewal, he asserted.

“We want cookie-cutter everything. If XYZ works in one church, we think anybody who does it will have the same results,” Lefever said.

### **Different cultures**

Perhaps even the way spiritual awakening is defined should be reexamined.

The social transformation that accompanies renewal in one part of the world may look totally different on the other side of the globe, Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam said.

The “ripples are easier to see” in some societies than in others, he noted.

“We cannot tell God how to operate,” Callam said.

Whether they ultimately will be seen as great awakenings may best be judged in hindsight, but unmistakably, the church is “on fire” and experiencing tremendous growth in parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, he noted.

In Argentina and Brazil, young people have been the first to embrace the movement of the Holy Spirit, he pointed out, suggesting perhaps they feel less apprehension than their elders about the negative baggage of Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement.

“We do not need to fear the Spirit,” Callam said. “After all, is he not the third person of the Trinity?”