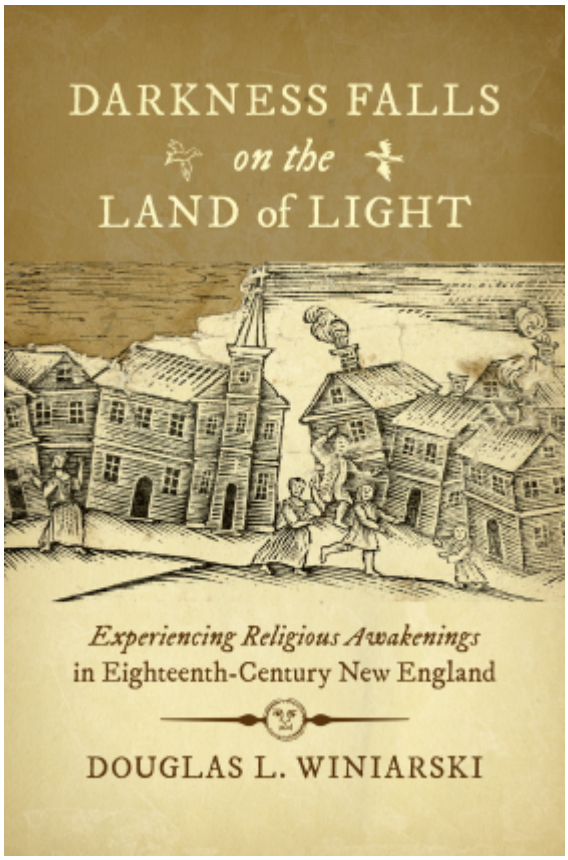
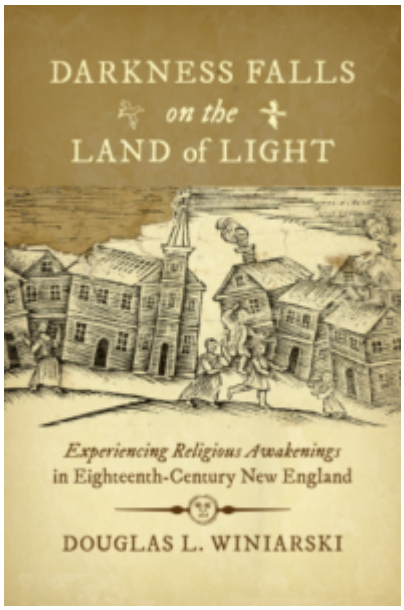
Fractious Piety: Revivalism and Disunion in Eighteenth-Century New England





Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England.* Chapel Hill, N.C.:

University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 632 pp., $49.95.

Douglas Winiarski's *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light* is the latest volume in a renewed scholarly interest in the eighteenth-century culture of New England. Winiarski's sweeping 632-page synthesis stands in company with recent work by Margaret Ellen Newell, Hilary E. Wyss, and Shelby Balik. Collectively, these studies look to define the contours of New England's religious identity and particular the effect that the First Great Awakening had on a notoriously quarrelsome and insular colonial region. Notably, this scholarship emphasizes the religious lives of ordinary people over what Christopher Grasso called a "speaking aristocracy": well-educated Puritan elites who had for several generations controlled much of New England's religious and civic life. Winiarski's book is also reflective of a trend to focus on regional identity, rather than treating individual colonies separately.

Winiarski is primarily interested in the impact of the introduction of popular religion on New England. It will come as no surprise to scholars of the Great Awakening that he highlights the role that the 1740 arrival of Grand Itinerant George Whitefield played in unsetting an already religiously fractious New England. The erosion of the Puritan canopy by the turn of the eighteenth century, the waning influence of the clergy in civic matters, the region's expanding connection with the commercial world, and the growth of individualism combined with a concern by New England clergymen like Benjamin Coleman that piety was on the decline among New Englanders. By 1740, Whitefield was already enmeshed in religious controversies in other regions, including his decade-long feud with Carolina Commissary Alexander Garden and the Old Side/New Side schism among Pennsylvania's Presbyterians. Indeed, his support for Gilbert Tennent's incendiary pamphlet "On the Danger of an Unconverted Ministry" was cause for alarm among many New England clergy and came with political costs for some. It is in this theo-political climate where Winiarski's assessment of New England's religious culture begins.

Darkness Falls on the Land of Light is a dense volume, drawn on twenty years of research and closely focused on the ways in which evangelism challenged and even dismantled New England's Congregational establishment. It is subdivided into five chronological sections beginning with an exploration of religious vocabulary in the sixty years leading up to George Whitefield's first missionary tour (23-130). Parts two through four discuss the ways in which revivalism broke down New England's strict Congregationalist hierarchy. In particular, Winiarski convincingly documents the ways epistolary networks persuaded participants that they were "witnessing an unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit" (18, 131-364). Part five demonstrates the ways revivalism brought discord to churches, but also to the followers of evangelical leaders (365-506). The religious pluralism that resulted, Winiarski argues, was so profound that it took until the early nineteenth century for New Englanders to come to grips with the change (19).

As scholars of religious history and New England studies are aware, print

culture played a pivotal role in New England and had since the seventeenth century. Mark Valeri, Charles E. Clark, and others have ably demonstrated the ways in which print culture shaped public discourse. One of the book's strengths is the thoroughness of Winiarski's research of pamphlets, tracts, diaries, and letters. He capably marshals them into a clear synthesis of eighteenth-century religious life and the fundamental shifts New England underwent as the result of the introduction of evangelicalism into the region. His chapters feature rich storytelling drawn from extensive primary resources. For example, the third part of the volume opens with a vignette of Martha Robinson, a young, belligerent woman confronting magistrate Joseph Pitkin and Timothy Dwight. Robinson, a devout woman who was influenced by George Whitefield's 1740 visit to Boston, found herself pulled between her "strong convictions" and "dark periods of melancholy punctuated by fleeting glimpses of spiritual light" (210-211). Her experiences with Whitefield, and then Gilbert Tennent and Daniel Rogers in the following months, were illustrative of a young woman struggling to understand her conversion. Robinson was amenable to conversion, but the intensity of her feelings appear to have frightened her.

Winiarski is correct in his assessments of the ways in which the Great Awakening challenged and undermined both traditional New England's piety and the ways in which it changed the roles of women, African Americans, and Native Americans in its religious life. For instance, he describes the ways that revivalism bolstered opportunities for African Americans to "enhance their social status through church affiliation," at a time when "owning the covenant declined among whites" (184). Winiarski acknowledges that many New England revivalist preachers were proslavery, including Jonathan Edwards. Yet, in contrast with other Protestant clergy, these preachers embraced catechism of African Americans and Native Americans (185).

One of the book's weaknesses is its tight focus on New England. Winiarski does devote the fifth part of his book to "travels," which illustrates the decentralized nature of evangelism within New England (367-506). But, with the exception of a few brief mentions, the book remains fixated on New England. To an extent, Winiarski's close focus is understandable. Evangelism affected the British dominion unevenly. New England was not the Chesapeake, and the southern colonies had their own local politics. And as thorough as Winiarski is, it would be a tall order for him to include some of the broader Anglo-Atlantic geographical context with the level of detail that permeates his book. Yet, news and gossip involving the Great Awakening spread from region to region. Itinerants like Whitefield sold newspapers. New England's theo-politics were certainly different from those elsewhere in the empire, and it meant that there were differences between regions in the ways evangelism stressed, angered, and/or excited its occupants. As a result, some readers may find that *Darkness Falls* would have benefited from a bit more attention to the connections between events in New England and events elsewhere in the British colonies. Nevertheless, this is a fine synthesis of eighteenth-century religious life and one that will be of particular use to scholars who are new to the field.

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