Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England. By Douglas L. Winiarski (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by University of North Carolina Press) Pp. 607. $49.99

In this massive study, Douglas Winiarski analyzes the decline of New England Congregationalism and the concurrent rise of American Evangelicalism during the eighteenth century. According to Winiarski, the "New England Way" was not lost to the influence of secularizing impulses, as Perry Miller and his followers have contended, but was rather "buried under an avalanche of incendiary religious beliefs and practices" that accompanied "the Whitefieldarian" revivals in the 1740s.[1] Winiarski demonstrates the novelty of the practices and beliefs introduced by Whitfield and his followers by paying particular attention to the shift in language that lay persons used to express their religious experiences. Changes in how persons experienced religion did not indicate renewed and widespread devotion to the old Puritan way. Rather, these new experiences were radical religious innovations that led to the ultimate demise of the Congregational establishment in New England. Moreover, Winiarski argues that the main proponents of these new religious experiences were not influential ministers, like Jonathan Edwards, but rather laypeople.

Winiarski begins by examining the lay religious experience before the awakenings from 1680 to 1740. This period was not characterized by "nominalism" or factionalism but by a church culture that was "broadly inclusive, parish-based," and satisfying to its members.[2] During this time period, one's religious experience was marked by consistent outward acts of piety, including church membership, reciting healing vows, and giving orthodox relations of faith (written statements of one's religious past submitted for church membership).[3] These behaviors constituted the "godly walk" in which New Englanders after 1680 invested religious hope and confidence. All of these elements of religion combined to create what New Englanders called the "land of light," which provided godly walkers with comfort in this life and hope for the next.

Darkness fell on this land of light when an Anglican minister, George Whitefield, launched a direct theological and rhetorical assault on the godly walk during his New England preaching tour in 1740. During said tour, Whitfield proclaimed these practices of piety at best a "sandy foundation" on which to build one's religious hope. One must instead eschew all of the conventions of New England religion and focus on a singular, experiential event: the "new birth." Many preachers and lay persons adopted Whitefield's message with zeal and began to imitate his method of itinerant preaching apart from the Congregational establishment. This new message and method proved remarkably capable of convincing people to repudiate their past religious practices. The followers of Whitfield, or "Whitefieldarians," succeeded in moving New Englanders both spiritually away from the godly walk and physically away from their home parishes. It was these two factors that ultimately disintegrated New England Congregational

[1] Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 9.
[2] Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light,* 115.
[3] Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*, 128.

parish life.[4]

Whitefieldarian innovations ushered in many novel and fantastical religious experiences. Instead of undergoing conversion as a steady process marked by the performance of religious duties over time, Whitfieldarians began to associate the "new birth" and indwelling of the Holy Spirit with jarring performances. The "new birth" took the form of exercised bodies, biblical impulses (acting on Bible verses suddenly brought to mind), and the conveyance of visions. These new phenomena became widely popular and were acted out vividly in the conversion of young Martha Robinson; because of these behaviors ministers could not tell if she was filled with the Spirit or the devil, highlighting the minister's unfamiliarity with this form of the "new birth." These dramatic changes in the experience of religion, coupled with radical actions like James Davenport's book burning in New London in 1743, led many ministers, even Jonathan Edwards, to rein in their initial support for the revivals. This bred tension between the increasingly zealous and empowered laity and the skeptical clergy. It did not take long for the laity to boldly denounce their Congregational ministers and rally around schismatic preachers to form separatist congregations. It was this separatism that led to the downfall of the Congregational establishment.

This book is based on an impressive breadth of archival sources aimed at capturing lay religious experiences. Winiarski draws from a wide array of diaries, letters, prayer bills, sermons notes, and relations of faith. In particular, detailed relations of faith allow him to contrast how lay persons express their religious experience before and after the 1740 awakenings. In Appendix C of the book, he gives a helpful sampling of these relations to demonstrate this dramatic change. Winiarski also analyzes lay people's use of prayer bills: little slips of paper that they nailed to church doors with requests for prayer for the "sick, injured or dying."[5] Even these prayer bills became fodder for the Whitefieldarians' assault on Congregational ministers.[6]

Winiarski proposes numerous revisions and discoveries to the fraught religious historiography of colonial New England. For example, he wishes to separate the Whitefieldarian revivals from previous religious awakenings in New England. Many historians have read the spikes in church membership after the Great Earthquake of 1727 and the "throat distemper" outbreak in 1735 as precursors to the religious revivals in 1740. Winiarski, however, draws a distinction between the earlier awakenings which reaffirmed the godly walk, and those beginning in 1740 which caused a radical change in the experience of religion.[7] Winiarski also portrays James Davenport and the New London Bonfire 1743 as "Whitefieldian revivalism in full flower" and not as some "bizarre aberration," creating continuity for this previously disjointed moment in history.[8] Finally, Winiarski discovered a growing contingent of those who eschewed religious affiliation entirely in reaction to increasing factionalism. These "Nothingarians" were found, in particular, in the towns of New Haven and Suffield.[9]

This book is a remarkable accomplishment. Winiarski was able to pull together an

[4] Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light,* 159.
[5] Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*, 67.
[6] Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light,* 314.
[7] Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*, 75-76.
[8] Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light,* 292.
[9] Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light*, 497.

unprecedented number of archival sources in order to reconstruct lay piety and its transformation from Congregationalism to American Evangelicalism. His narrative challenges previous historiography and sets new terms for future studies of New England religious history. This book stands as the most comprehensive and in-depth study of the New England awakenings to date.

Roberto O. Flores de Apodaca
University of South Carolina