

Revive us again

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 14, 2001](#) issue

*The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* by Robert William Fogel

Robert William Fogel, a professor of economics at the University of Chicago, won the 1993 Nobel Prize for his economic history of slavery. His latest book identifies the great awakenings in American religion as the source of the nation's major progressive economic and political changes.

Drawing on William G. McLoughlin's original work, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (1978)--part of a series on American religious history edited by Martin E. Marty--Fogel examines each of four religious awakenings: the better-known first (in the 1730s and 1740s) and second (from the 1790s to the 1830s), a lesser-known third (beginning in the 1890s) and a fourth (which McLoughlin dates from the early 1960s and which he projected as ending in 1990). Fogel identifies egalitarianism as the common theme and goal of all the awakenings. The first three led to material equality, first of condition and then of opportunity. The fourth marked a shift in focus to equality in matters of the mind and spirit.

One of the founders of scientific economic history (cliometrics), Fogel draws from economic patterns and statistics to update McLoughlin. Though he writes from a secular perspective, Fogel understands American church history and appreciates the power of "enthusiastic" religion to bring about social change, a point, he argues, that is generally ignored by secular scholars.

The energized leadership of religious movements, largely Protestant, encouraged the major reforms through which the new nation developed its defining motif of egalitarianism. The American Revolution drew much of its energy from the first great awakening; the second generated such equalizing changes as abolition, women's equality, prohibition and a reduction in corporate corruption. The third brought further advances in women's rights and led to the civil rights movement and reforms in the labor movement.

The fourth great awakening, Fogel contends, is the source of a new focus in the nation's continued drive toward equality--a shift from material egalitarianism ("a chicken in every pot") to what he terms "immaterial" egalitarianism, equal access to matters of the mind and spirit. He has kind words for the much maligned Religious Right as enablers of spiritual development, self-esteem, strong families, work ethic, moral discipline and a desire for intellectual development. While many Americans are still poor, they are not nearly as poor as were their forebears and, in comparison to the poor of other nations, not really poor at all.

To Fogel, the inequality threatening us in the future is spiritual. He is concerned that spiritual development lags so far behind material that future citizens will be "poverty-stricken" in mind and spirit, and thus unable to cope with complex ethical issues. "Although the world that our grandchildren will inherit will be materially richer and contain fewer environmental risks, its spiritual struggles will be more complex and more intense than those of my generation. Ethical issues will be at the center of intellectual life, and engagement with those issues will form a larger part of the fabric of daily life than is the case today."

Fogel looks to the religious enthusiasts of the fourth awakening, located more in evangelical and New Age movements than in mainline religion, to address the needs of spiritually and intellectually deprived citizens. Two of the groups who have benefited from advances in material equality but who now require help in immaterial areas are the alienated young and the depressed elderly, many of whom lack a sense of purpose or meaning. Indeed, Fogel's analysis of how religion has shaped American life is so appreciative of both religion and economic advances that it could serve as a guidebook for President Bush's program to utilize faith-based organizations to address both the nation's material and immaterial needs.

His optimism will not be shared by those holdovers from the third great awakening who still believe that material poverty remains a serious burden for far too many American citizens. Nor are environmentalists likely to accept his view that environmental risks have been reduced. Indeed, we could argue that the third awakening resulted in a material pollution and a political determination to champion commerce over the public well-being that undermines fourth awakening efforts to improve our spiritual well-being.