Religion as the Cause of Temperance and Abstinence: How the Second Great Awakening took the Fun out of Nineteenth Century America

Pre-marital sex and consumption of alcohol are a continuous presence in America. While many may think this statement would describe a modern day college campus, it is actually an accurate portrayal of the 19th century in the United States. These trends continued until one reform movement resulted in a sudden decrease in pre-marital sexual activity and constant intoxication. This reform came in the shape of religion. The Second Great Awakening brought about several changes in society that altered the way Americans lived their lives. After the mid-19th century, sex and alcohol would never be the same. Ultimately, the Second Great Awakening, through the reformation of consumption of alcohol and sexuality, shook America to its core and altered the everyday lives of a nation forever.

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Soon, however, religion swept through the nation like wildfire, burning into the hearts and lives of Americans. The Second Great Awakening was a religious revivalist movement, which occurred between 1790 and the 1840s. This movement emphasized a new dependence on God and taking control of one’s own religious fate. Soon, church attendance spiked across the nation, emphasizing order, discipline, and self-restraint.

Thanks to the preaching of religious leaders like Charles G. Finney, the effects of the Second Great Awakening were felt almost immediately. By 1830, the average consumption of liquor declined to 1.8 gallons per year. Additionally, evangelists helped this number continue to decline by setting up voluntary societies for the promotion of self control and moderation.

Finally, with the efforts of ministers such as Charles H. Parkhurst and Sylvester Graham, abstinence made its way through America. Evangelists taught that sex was both physically and spiritually harmful, as well as causing poverty and a decline in community cohesion. With the movement towards abstinence, more women decided to save themselves for marriage. By 1840, the number of pre-marital conceptions declined to 18-25%, cutting the numbers in half in less than 50 years.