

ACROSS THE GREAT WATER: RELIGION AND DIASPORA IN THE BLACK
ATLANTIC

By

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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2008

2008 John William Catron

To the two people who inspired me and kept the faith: my mother, Patricia, and my wife,
Tracey.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No one writes a doctoral dissertation by themselves, and I am no exception. Without the help and encouragement of academic advisors, the staffs of historical archives, family members, fellow graduate students, and friends, this project would never have been started, much less completed. I am grateful to the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, for providing me access to its extensive holdings of eighteenth-century Atlantic-world Afro-Moravian culture, to which a majority of this work can be attributed. The chief archivist in Bethlehem, Paul Peucker, was particularly helpful, as was his knowledgeable assistant, Lanie Graf. Former Moravian archivist, Vernon Nelson, also provided valuable insights into early Moravian history and suggested further venues for research. The staff of the Archives and of Moravian College made it possible for me, as well, to spend several weeks in Bethlehem which gave me a chance, in my off hours, to explore the region where many of the historical characters in this study lived and worked, adding immeasurably to my understanding of this subject.

I am also indebted to the staffs of the Georgia Historical Society, the South Carolina Historical Association, the South Caroliniana Library, Moravian House-London, the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, Lambeth Palace, Regents Park College-Oxford University, the Latin American Collection at the University of Florida, and Interlibrary Loan for allowing me access to their collections and services.

At the University of Florida, Jon Sensbach encouraged my interest in early American history while gently guiding me into several fruitful areas of study. Jon's work with early Afro-Moravians and his Atlantic-world perspectives deepened my own interest in trans-oceanic religious movements and the cross-cultural connections that made them possible. David Geggus and Jeffrey Needell's seminars on slavery and Brazilian history are also responsible for broadening my understanding of early American history to include the Caribbean and Latin

America. David Hackett and Anna Peterson deepened my appreciation of the importance of religion in the historical development of the Americas. I am also thankful for the many excellent fellow graduate students who, over hundreds of hours of discussions in the cramped graduate student lounge and at history seminars, provided a wealth of information from a wide range of disciplines and gave me much thoughtful criticism.

As this project progressed, I received several grants and awards that helped to make it possible. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the History Department at the University of Florida provided several generous grants that allowed me to travel to archives in Britain and to deliver papers in North Carolina and Georgia that became part of this work. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences also provided me with a dissertation fellowship that gave me valuable time to write. I am especially grateful to the History Department's faculty committee that chose one of my dissertation chapters as the winner of the Proctor Award for the best work on Southern history by a graduate student.

My greatest debt of gratitude is to my family. My mother, Patricia Brodersen; and my late father, John David Catron, inspired in me a love and appreciation for the past and imbued a lasting curiosity about human foibles and triumphs. My mother also performed the yeowoman's duty of editing, and is therefore responsible for much of what is good about the literary style and clarity of this work. As life-long friends, my sisters Cecilia and Carol and my brother David have given continued and enthusiastic support. Finally, my wife Tracey and daughters Amanda and Heidi deserve more thanks than I can give for enduring my long hours of study and the extended periods I have spent away from them on research trips. Though this academic work may be somewhat of a conceit, I hope that it will make them all proud.

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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August 2008

Chair: Jon F. Sensbach

Major: History

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, people of African descent throughout the Atlantic world increasingly turned to evangelical Protestant Christianity to sustain them through the travails of the slave trade and forced labor. Afro-Protestantism became a faith that spread across the Atlantic in multiple directions. Through a network of free and enslaved black ministers, missionaries, and lay leaders, black Christians in Africa, the West Indies, North America, and Europe maintained contact with, and gained strength from, their fellow religionists around the globe. These networks stimulated the creation of a black Atlantic religious culture that enabled many people to transcend their status as enslaved laborers and identify themselves as Atlantic Christians. Empowered by their Christian identities, many began to push more forcefully for emancipation and for an end to the slave trade. Focusing on evangelical Protestantism, this dissertation explores the rise and expansion of black Atlantic religious culture in the eighteenth century. Afro-Caribbean Protestantism had a particularly profound effect on the growth of African American Christianity in North America beginning in the mid-eighteenth century. Both white and black evangelical missionaries circulated around the Greater Caribbean. They acted as agents of cultural exchange, bringing cautious white versions of Christianity to the Caribbean, while black Caribbeans brought Afro-West Indian spirituality and less cautious

attitudes about rebellion and cultural autonomy to the mainland. People of African descent ultimately embraced evangelical Protestantism as a way to help them maintain their ethnic identities, to keep from being dominated by rival ethnic groups, and to re-establish authority within the slave quarters separate from the plantation complex. By converting to Christianity, they helped to create a black Atlantic littoral spiritual community that integrated the cultures of the West Indies, North America, Europe, and Atlantic Africa. Held together by black evangelicals' vision and tenacity, Afro-Atlantic religion helped to inspire the growth of the black church throughout the Atlantic world as the nineteenth century unfolded.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Henry Beverhout looked out over the West African village of Freetown in 1792 with misgivings. From his own experience and from the complaints he received from other townspeople, he now recognized that the black men and women of Sierra Leone were not being afforded the equal treatment they had been promised. Exploited and discriminated against for most of their lives by white task masters in America, these expatriates had crossed an entire ocean determined to chart a new course for themselves in West Africa. But the way to freedom turned out to be littered with obstacles. They soon encountered problems with white Sierra Leone Company officials over low pay, high prices, and the slow pace at which land was apportioned to the new settlers. Just as important, the black émigrés were dismayed by the Company’s legal system, whose juries Beverhout noted did not “haven aney of our own Culler in” them. Having absorbed the British and American legal traditions of trial by a jury of one’s peers, he demanded that in any “trial thear should be a jurey of both white and black and all should be equal.” Going even further, he then made the explosive claim that “we have a wright to Chuse men that we think proper to act for us in a reasenble manner.”¹

For Beverhout to demand that blacks be granted full civil rights and be put on the same legal footing as whites was quite unusual in 1792 in a British-controlled colony, but his character and background in the Atlantic world had prepared him well for his bold leadership role. Born a free man of color in St. Croix, he was probably the mulatto son of one of the leading white families in the Danish West Indies. Beverhout’s position among St. Croix’s other people of color was bolstered by his connection with evangelical religion. Firmly entrenched in the

¹ Christopher Fyfe, ed., with a contribution by Charles Jones, *‘Our Children Free and Happy’: Letters from Black Settlers in Africa in the 1790s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 25-26; Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

planting class, the Beverhout family was an early supporter of Moravian Church missionaries in their work to convert the archipelago's Afro-Danish slaves to Christianity as early as the 1730s, providing Henry with access to a world-wide network of Protestant evangelicals. His global perspective and sense of personal worth was enhanced by the Moravian practice of giving people of African descent positions of authority within the church hierarchy. His process of self-discovery continued when, shortly before the American Revolution, Beverhout left St. Croix for Charleston, South Carolina, only to be evacuated to British Canada at the war's conclusion with other Loyalists. In New Brunswick, he organized a Methodist congregation which in 1792 migrated en masse to Sierra Leone.²

Beverhout's experiences and exposure to exciting new political and religious ideas made him somewhat exceptional. Though his life may have been atypical compared to the vast majority of enslaved African Americans, he does represent in broad outline how many eighteenth-century black Christians lived in the British Atlantic world. Educated and mobile, though not always free, and not content to live in static social environments that oppressed their brothers and sisters, Afro-Christian leaders like Beverhout moved multiple times throughout their lives in their search for dignity and autonomy. As a free person of color, Henry Beverhout expected greater civil rights and liberties; as an evangelical Christian, he knew that blacks and whites were equal before God; and as a citizen of the Afro-Christian Atlantic world and a practical man, he realized that to attain what he wanted he had to utilize every resource available to him. Like such fellow Afro-Atlantic Christians as Olaudah Equiano, Rebecca Protten, and George Liele, he did not shrink from the challenge. His hopes had been inflamed by the

² Fyfe, 'Our Children Free and Happy', 70; C.G.A. Oldendorp, *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, Johann Jakob Bossard, ed., Arnold R. Highfield and Vladimir Barac, trans. and ed. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987), 688n.

seemingly limitless possibilities for human advancement which proximity to the Atlantic world, the Age of Revolution, and the new evangelical religion inspired.³

Beverhout and other black Protestants reached out to Africa, Europe, the West Indies, and America for cultural touchstones, but in many ways looked beyond those static geographical markers. With footholds in all four regions, they found themselves oppressed and ultimately rejected by each one. Searching for identity and home in such hostile environments, people of African descent who lived on the Atlantic littoral were forced to forge new self-conceptions. Initially seeing themselves as Temne, Igbo, or Mandinka, or as members of even smaller social, linguistic, and familial groups, the newly enslaved did not think in terms of African identity. Over the next one hundred years much of this parochial way of thinking dissolved as black captives reached out to each other for mutual support. For those who embraced Christianity in Britain's American empire during the eighteenth century, however, there was an important intermediate stage. While in the process of being transformed into African Americans, they were also Afro-Atlantic Christians with few attachments to rigid political boundaries. Rather than being simply African American, Afro-British, or Afro-Caribbean, they an identity as Afro-Methodists, Afro-Baptists, and Afro-Moravians as well. As such, eighteenth-century black Christians were comfortable moving almost anywhere within the Atlantic world as long as they could connect with other Afro-Atlantic Christian communities.⁴

By focusing on the spread of black evangelical Protestantism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the object of this study is to expand our understanding of African-

³ Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (London: BBC Books, 2005), 336.

⁴ For more recent discussions of the creation of African identity by New World blacks, see James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

American social and religious history beyond the plantations and plantation churches of Virginia and South Carolina to include the entire Atlantic world. Many Afro-evangelicals were highly mobile, using a discourse of freedom and equality to connect people of color in North America with their fellow Protestants in the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. Because they maintained an egalitarian vision, black evangelical leaders felt that it was their duty to travel in ever-expanding itinerant circuits that eventually encompassed the entire Atlantic basin. The Atlantic's seaport towns were important incubators of the resulting black Atlantic culture and for the development of black churches. In ports like Charleston in South Carolina, St. John in Antigua, Elmina on West Africa's Gold Coast, and Halifax in Nova Scotia, black Protestants had easy access to information about, and subsequently helped to foster enthusiasm for, the black Great Awakening that began in places like Antigua and St. Thomas. Central to the growth of this Atlantic littoral spiritual community was its constituent's belief that evangelical Protestantism was a liberation theology. Afro-Atlantic Christian leaders worked for emancipation, culturally autonomy, and when they could not achieve them, rebellion. For the mass of slaves whose mobility was more restricted, Christianity became a way for them to maintain links with Africa. Many of these Atlantic creoles joined Christian churches hoping to reconnect with people of similar cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, thereby maintaining some connection with their former identities.⁵ Suffering from the dehumanizing effects of plantation slavery, people of African

⁵ For the roles that religion played in African and African American society and what the implications of conversion to Catholicism and Protestantism were, see John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 235-271; Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves-Casa Grande and Senzala: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1986), 332-337; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 161-183, 232-235; Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1969), 190-195, 207-215; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), 70-76; Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979); Jon F. Sensbach, *A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763-1840* (Chapel

descent also became Christians in order to re-establish clearer lines of authority within the slave quarters separate from white hegemony.⁶

A pivotal event in the development of black Atlantic culture was the American Revolution, which brought about a reverse diaspora. Blacks who had embraced Christianity in the New World between the 1730s and the 1770s began to move out from their former homes in the Caribbean and North America to spread a gospel of hope and freedom to people of color in Africa, Europe, and even as far away as Australia. Despite assumptions of cultural superiority, the American blacks who went to the West Indies in the 1780s, Sierra Leone in the 1790s, and Liberia in the 1820s always believed, unlike many whites, in the moral and cognitive abilities of native Africans. All that was needed to achieve modern conceptions of civility and progress, they believed, was Western education and exposure to Christianity. By traveling to the British empire's furthest limits and establishing churches wherever they landed, black Protestants in the eighteenth century created a black Atlantic culture and set the stage for the growth of world-wide Afro-Protestantism in the nineteenth century.

Historians have written voluminously on African American history and culture since the late 1960s, though as historian Steve Vaughn has commented, the number of studies on African American Christianity in the eighteenth century is limited. Even more scarce are studies that examine African American Christianity in its Atlantic world context. Most historians who have addressed the subject and the period have treated it briefly before moving on to the nineteenth century where the sources are more copious. Albert J. Raboteau, in *Slave Religion: The*

Hill, North Carolina: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaves in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

⁶ For suggestions about new directions for the historiography of religion in the South, see Jon F. Sensbach, "Religion and the Early South in an Age of Empire," *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. LXXIII, no. 3 (Aug., 2007): 631-642.

“*Invisible Institution*” in the Antebellum South, rekindled the debate in 1978 first taken up by E. Franklin Frazier and Melville Herskovits in the 1940s. In *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovits argues that African American Christianity was heavily influenced by African cultural survivals reinterpreted in an American context. Conversely, Frazier claims in *The Negro Church in America*, that African culture was swept aside by the brutality of the slave experience, with the preponderance of young male captives untutored in traditional religious values and the mixing of tribal and kin groups on American plantations leaving no room for African cultural continuity.⁷

Raboteau believes that both Herskovits and Frazier overstate their arguments. Clearly there were numerous African holdovers in the form and practice of African American Christianity, including the ring shout, black believers being slain in the spirit, and spirit possession. Moreover, the continued use of African funerary customs and beliefs in conjuring, divination, and witchcraft exhibited direct fusions of European and African folkways. As important as these Africanisms were, Raboteau argues that black preachers placed far greater emphasis on the search for and insistence upon equality within Christianity. Here again, most of the evidence Raboteau cites is garnered from antebellum sources, far removed in most cases from preaching done when more native Africans were present in North America. He left a more complete examination of eighteenth-century Afro-Protestantism to others.⁸

Writing concurrently with Raboteau, Mechal Sobel makes imaginative use of West African philosophy to deal more directly with black religion in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake. In her book, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*, Sobel contends that it is not

⁷ Steve Vaughn, “Making Jesus Black: The Historiographical Debate on the Roots of African-American Christianity,” *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 82, no. 1 (Winter, 1997): 25; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper, 1941); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 72, 85.

important that discrete African religious rituals survived the Atlantic crossing. What scholars should focus on, she asserts, is the continuance of an essential African worldview which captives carried with them to the Americas. Sobel recognizes that there was no African worldview in Africa given the thousands of discrete ethnicities that existed there, so the values of the slaves were a combination of multiple ethnic beliefs. West and West-Central African peoples shared many cultural traditions, however, which in America allowed them to coalesce. Unity and cultural autonomy separate and different from European folkways also developed because, at least initially, many Southern blacks lived together in dense plantation groupings among a small white population. Whites could not, and had little interest in, imposing European values and religion upon the alien and potentially dangerous slaves in their midst.⁹

By the mid 1970s, most scholars agreed that any discussion of African-American religion had to include a thorough examination of African culture. This trend is clearly in evidence in Margaret Washington Creel's *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs*. Using sources from anthropology, Creel uncovered the existence of secret societies in West and West Central Africa that were sources of social and political unity and power. According to Creel, the men's society, called the Poro, and its female equivalent, the Sande, served to homogenize African cultures before they came to America. As a result, it was not difficult for Africans of different ethnic backgrounds to cooperate with one another, especially the Gullah of the Sea Islands of South Carolina who were primarily from Angola. Though the Gullah did not embrace Christianity until rather late, says Creel, when they did they merely incorporated it into their already existing Poro and Sande framework. Though Creel's work is full of remarkable insights, Gullah society on South Carolina and Georgia's Sea Islands

⁹ Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 33, 34, 35, 38.

was isolated from the rest of black and white culture, so it can only suggest how the more integrated churches of the rest of the South developed.¹⁰

More recent work on African American Christianity in the eighteenth century has begun to utilize more forthrightly the Atlantic-world paradigm as a framework for explaining why people of color embraced Christianity and its implications. Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood's *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* is one of the most successful early attempts to incorporate the religious history of the colonial South with that of the West Indies and Africa. Frey and Wood emphasize the vital role people of color played in the conversion process while also acknowledging the obvious contributions of white evangelicals. A central premise of *Come Shouting to Zion* is that African American women were responsible for establishing many of their early churches and for sustaining them thereafter. Ultimately, say Frey and Wood, evangelical Protestantism played a key role in transforming Africans into African Americans. Though the authors try to expand the study of African American religion to incorporate the American South and the West Indies, they fail, in my view, to successfully integrate the two regions into a cultural whole. Caribbean churches appear to have developed virtually independently from their North American cousins, even though the connections between the two within the British Empire would seem to indicate closer linkages.¹¹

A further example of the historiographical trend toward thinking of the Atlantic Ocean as a facilitator of cultural exchange is Jon F. Sensbach's *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World*. Beginning on the Danish West Indian island of St. Thomas in

¹⁰ Margaret Washington Creel, *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullah* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 46, 48.

¹¹ Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press), 1998.

the 1730s, Sensbach uses the story of Afro-Caribbean Rebecca Proten to show how people of color in the Americas struggled to secure cultural space within the often deadly brutality of sugar island slavery. Though the price was often high, Sensbach contends that by embracing Christianity the blacks of St. Thomas successfully rebuilt their once shattered community-cultures within the slave quarters. To follow Rebecca's story, Sensbach plumbed previously unused sources, including German, Dutch, and Danish-language texts, diaries, and church records. Reversing the usual trajectory of Atlantic slave studies, *Rebecca's Revival* travels west to east, rather than east to west. As the wife of a white missionary, Rebecca Proten traversed the Atlantic to live in Germany. Once ordained a missionary in her own right, she left Europe to evangelize the people of West Africa, where she worked until her death in the late 1700s. Perhaps Sensbach's greatest contribution here is to put a human face on the usually anonymous, quantitative studies of Atlantic-world slavery. A possible criticism is his focus on the experience of an exceptional person, rather than that of a common slave. As a free person of color and Christian who had the opportunity to travel not only to Europe but back to Africa as well in the eighteenth century, Proten certainly was exceptional. Most early black evangelicals, though, were exceptional individuals. Because they were prophets of a new way, they faced persecution by white hegemony and skepticism from fellow blacks. To survive, early Afro-Atlantic evangelicals had to be more dedicated and perhaps smarter than their adversaries.¹²

People of African descent in Catholic-dominated America encountered the same issues of accommodation, resistance, and acculturation as their counterparts did in Protestant colonies. In *Santeria Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion*, David H. Brown also crosses the Atlantic in multiple directions to investigate the cultural exchanges that helped to

¹² Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005).

shape Afro-Cuban spirituality. Santeria (or Lucumi), explains Brown, developed in a state of both constant change and continuity. It received fresh cultural infusions from Africa from the new slaves who continued to stream into Cuba until the 1860s, keeping many African rituals alive. At the same time, however, it was being continually modified to allow its practitioners to deal with slavery's relentless oppression. Lucumi spread to North America, where it became an integral part of the belief systems of thousands of West Indians who live in cities like Miami, New York, and Philadelphia. Brown also takes us back to Africa, where modern Santeria priests from Cuba have gone in recent years in an attempt to learn from the faith's cultural wellspring. One of Brown's chief contributions to African American historiography is his explanation of why people of color converted to Christianity. Many scholars have pointed to certain similarities between African traditional religion and Christianity, inferring that because of these similarities, African captives and their descendents easily accepted the new faith. Many African religions recognize a creator god and a pantheon of lesser gods that represented the power of wild animals, fire, war, and thunder, among many other things. The lesser deities supposedly correspond to various saints while the creator god is really the Christian God. Brown contends that though Africans believed in a creator god, he was not the all-powerful Christian deity and after his first act of creation he receded into the background. The other gods were more active, but the most important deities in most African cosmologies were localized, personal spirits who protected individuals and family members. The concept of a universal, omniscient, and omnipotent god was alien to most Africans. For Brown, Christianity was a complete break from the traditional African metaphysical worldview. Afro-Cubans became Catholics because of white pressure and the social benefits accruing from it, but they also remained affiliated with overtly African religiosity.¹³

¹³ David H. Brown, *Santeria Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: The

In my study of eighteenth-century African American Christianity I continue and expand upon the more current historiographical themes elucidated by Frey and Wood, Sensbach, and Brown. Chapter One investigates the existence and breadth of Christianity in Africa from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century. Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, Italian, and English missionaries evangelized the peoples of Atlantic Africa beginning in the late 1400s, sometimes with remarkable success. How well they did depended on multiple factors, the most crucial of which were the strength of ethnic identity and the political cohesion of the ruling groups. There were up to two million Kongolese Christians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries because of strong ethnic identity and political organization. There were correspondingly fewer West African Christians because the reverse was true. European nations sent hundreds of missionaries to the region over several centuries, but because they died of tropical diseases so rapidly, the brunt of the evangelical labor was done by native Africans, many of whom were the mixed-race sons of African mothers and European fathers. These Atlantic creole priests lived in a cultural

University of Chicago Press, 2003). For the rich literature on the conflicts and continuities between African-derived religions and Catholicism in the Americas, see Karol K. Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), chs. 7 and 8; Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Random House, 1983); Hemchand Gossai and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, eds., *Religion, Culture, and Tradition in the Caribbean* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), ch 3; Margaret E. Crahan and Franklin W. Knight, *Africa and the Caribbean: The Legacies of a Link* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2003); Margarite Olmos Fernandez and Lizbeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Miguel Barnet, *Afro-Cuban Religions*, trans. from Spanish by Christine Renata Ayorinde (Princeton, New Jersey: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001); George Brandon, *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); George Eaton Simpson, *Religious Cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica, and Haiti* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Institute of Caribbean Studies, University of Puerto Rico, 1970); Pedro Perez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds., *Afrocuba: An Anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics, and Culture* (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: Ocean Press, 1993); John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 235-271; Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves (Casa-Grande and Senzala): A Study of the Development of Brazilian Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 332-337; Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

middle ground and not so surprisingly mixed traditional African beliefs with Christian cosmology. Despite African Christianity's hybrid nature, it was still recognizably Christian and was carried to the Americas by the captives of slave ships.

For those African Christians who were enslaved and sent to Britain's American empire, their chances of being able to continue worshipping as Christians were increased if they ended up on the Caribbean island of Antigua. Chapter Two analyzes why Antigua became an even more influential cradle of Afro-Protestantism in the New World than other more populated colonies such as Jamaica, South Carolina, or Virginia. Antigua's political economy, the actions of certain black and white individuals, and even the island's geography played vital and intersecting roles in bringing about Christian conversion. Tangentially, the larger question of why captive Africans and their children ultimately embraced Christianity, which was, after all, the faith of their oppressors, has been puzzled over by generations of historians, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, and casual observers. Many scholars note that evangelical Protestant church services and traditional African religious celebrations shared the same sense of heightened emotionalism, spirit possession, and physicality, thus allowing Afro-Caribbeans and African Americans to feel familiar and comfortable with the new religion. There are examples, though, of large numbers of black American Christians who did not engage in emotionally charged church services, calling into question the trend by some historians toward an African essentialism. Afro-Antiguans, and perhaps all people of color, embraced Christianity in part because it allowed them to re-establish stable and harmonious social relations, enabling them to construct clear lines of authority independent of white masters. Ethnic identity also played a role in the conversion process. Thanks to the recordkeeping zeal of Moravian Church missionaries, we are able to quantify the national and ethnic composition of thousands of black Antiguans over

the second half of the eighteenth century and the first third of the nineteenth. Those data reveal a wealth of knowledge about who these people were, how they lived, and why they abandoned their old beliefs to become Christians. The records also contribute more evidence to the scholarly debate over the survival of African ethnic identity in the Americas.

Antigua was a vital cradle of Afro-Protestantism in the West Indies and, to a certain extent, for the entire New World. Chapter Three studies the Afro-Christian diaspora from Antigua throughout the Caribbean and North America beginning in the 1760s, and the struggles of the preachers and missionaries to establish churches wherever they went. Some were slaves, sent to new colonies at the whim of their owners, some were prisoners of war taken by invading armies, while others traveled to distant shores as self-appointed missionaries eager to propagate the faith. Besides spreading the Gospel, these itinerant Afro-Antiguans strengthened the black freedom struggle by providing alternative sources of leadership for the enslaved, thereby undermining slavery's legitimacy. This newly created clerical black leadership class also reached out to other black and white evangelical groups in Europe and the Americas for support in an attempt to slacken the grip of planter power. Though unsuccessful in the short term, evangelicals and evangelical networks made Afro-Christians in North America and the West Indies aware of new ideas then circulating within the Atlantic world about natural rights and salvation by faith, giving them the intellectual tools they needed to fight for freedom.

Afro-Christianity in eighteenth-century North America grew along the Atlantic littoral, brought there in part by black Caribbeans and Christians from Africa. An early seedbed of Afro-Atlantic Christianity was the Moravian Church community of Bethlehem in eastern Pennsylvania. Chapter Four describes why Bethlehem, as early as the 1740s, attracted people of color from around the Atlantic basin, especially those who recognized and appreciated the

economic and social opportunities the Moravian settlement offered. Some of the town's blacks learned skilled crafts, owned land, married, and gained their freedom. Several achieved the highest possible status, becoming some of the first church-sponsored black missionaries anywhere in the British Atlantic. Given the relatively small number of people of color in Bethlehem, and in the Mid Atlantic colonies as a whole compared to the South, it was difficult for Afro-Moravians and all Afro-Christians in the North to maintain their African identities. First generation African captives continued to think of themselves as Igbo, Papaw, Soso, etc., though by embracing Christianity they lost some of their cultural linkages. Instead of being Africans who happened to be in America, this first generation became Afro-Atlantic Christians with identities based in the West Indies, North America, and Africa. Afro-Moravian evangelicals established networks that served as conduits for the transmission of both German-American culture to the Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean culture to North America. Studying this sort of social interpenetration adds complexity to our understanding of black life in the North in the early and middle part of the eighteenth century, a topic usually examined only in the period after the American Revolution. As a region intimately tied to the Atlantic world, the colonies of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York had always been natural incubators of cross-cultural exchange. Black Atlantic Moravians took advantage of the area's liminality to better their lives.

Chapter Five examines how early black Christianity developed in the South's Atlantic littoral. Black Christianity in the American South grew up in the region's seaport towns and villages, a phenomenon other scholars have recognized, but whose importance few have fully explained. Men and women in Atlantic-facing cities and towns such as Charleston and Georgetown in South Carolina, and Savannah and Sunbury in Georgia, traded with West Indian sugar planters from Antigua, African slavers from the Gold Coast, and merchants from

Philadelphia and New York, and were influenced by an all-encompassing Atlantic culture. Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Atlantic Christianity infiltrated these southern towns first, then moved west with the advancing American frontier. The eighteenth century had already seen the creation of evangelical networks that revolved around white Atlantic-world preachers such as George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent, but it also witnessed smaller, but nonetheless important, networks of black evangelicals. Both black and white missionaries helped to create a western Atlantic littoral spiritual community encompassing much of the British West Indies, North America's south Atlantic coast, the Bahamas, and even Bermuda. Taking advantage of these networks, preachers of both races moved easily between mission stations throughout the region, acting as agents of cultural exchange. The first Atlantic-world Protestant networks were instituted by English Quakers and the Anglican Church in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, though they were later overwhelmed, first by Moravian, and then Methodist, missionaries beginning in the 1730s. The Methodists' first real successes among people of color occurred in the West Indies. From the Caribbean, biracial missionaries moved north to spread Afro-Caribbean Protestantism to people of color in low country Georgia and South Carolina, North Carolina and into the Bahamas. Though most of this type of spirituality was apolitical, black insurrectionist, Methodist exhorter, and Caribbean native Denmark Vesey interpreted Afro-Atlantic Christianity as a liberation theology, an idea that later white evangelicals knew they had to expunge.

The era of the American Revolution caused great change for many African Americans in Britain's Atlantic empire while simultaneously solidifying a static form of race relations that would not be altered for the following eighty years. For a determined cadre of black Christians, though, the Revolution meant freedom and the opportunity to spread African American

Protestantism throughout the Atlantic world. Chapter Six explores the effects of the black Loyalist diaspora and what motivated them to do so. Having absorbed the Revolution's liberal tenets of individualism, freedom, and natural rights, they tried to export these ideas to the rest of the Atlantic world. Journeying throughout the Caribbean, Canada, Europe, and finally to Africa, men such as George Liele, Moses Baker, David George, and Boston King forged black evangelical networks that circled the Atlantic rim. In Jamaica, Liele built the first Baptist church on the island. In West Africa, George and King established new churches, but also came in contact with Luso-African Christians, thereby closing a circle first opened three hundred years earlier. Though most black Christians operated at a local level, some maintained contact with the wider world through the efforts of their pastors. Black Baptists in Jamaica could take comfort, pride, and a new sense of Atlantic-world identity knowing that their fellow Christians worshipped the same God in Georgia, Nova Scotia, London, and Sierra Leone.

“Across the Great Water” refers to a metaphysical region beyond the Atlantic horizon which many traditional African religions associated with the afterlife. It was for many West and Central Africans a pleasant place where the dead reunited with their ancestors in happy communion. In the context of the Atlantic slave trade, the western ocean's association with death became less benign. Most Africans could easily see that the men and women who sailed over the horizon on European ships were still alive and never came back. The linking of the Atlantic with heaven, honored ancestors, and a new beginning, but also with separation and suffering, was a source of considerable internal conflict for many people of color in both Africa and the Americas. Most second-generation African Americans, given the option, chose to stay in America rather than return to Africa. They nevertheless maintained a connection with the land and people across the Great Water. Headstones in eighteenth and nineteenth-century black

cemeteries almost always faced east toward the ocean and Africa. An abandoned graveyard for the slaves of Silver Bluff plantation on the banks of the Savannah River in South Carolina is arranged this way. The gravestones in this burying ground, now overgrown with grass and shaded by moss-covered oaks and long leaf pines, all face east. Scattered around the few remaining small monuments are shards of broken porcelain, another African-derived ritual conducted at funerals which allowed the spirits of the dead to break free of their earthly bonds and rejoin other deceased family members. Most of the people buried at Silver Bluff's slave cemetery died in the mid nineteenth century, but the old traditions of looking east across the Great Water remained intact. Forced to leave their homelands, family, and kin on European and American boats, many people of color in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries never left those slave ships. Never fully integrating into New World cultures and separated from the Old, they were left somewhere in the middle. For those who chose to make the journey to the Old World, the trip was not one of simply going "back to Africa." No longer Africans or Americans, people like Henry Beverhout had been transformed by slavery and Christianity into citizens of the Atlantic world.

CHAPTER 2 CHRISTIANITY IN ATLANTIC AFRICA BEFORE 1800

In his groundbreaking work on the transmission of African folkways and culture to the West Indies, eighteenth-century Moravian ethnographer C.G.A. Oldendorp observed what he believed was the practice of Christian ritual by Africans in Africa. In the religious services by which the West Central African Sokko people celebrated the seventh month of the year, according to Oldendorp, “one can see traces of their contact with Christian missionaries. Throughout that month, practices such as a daylong fast and a suspension of all work activities until sunset are observed. On those occasions, a priest addresses the assembled people by reading to them from a book, exhorting them to believe in God as the source of all that is good and warning them to obey his word.” Moreover, the “priest also kneels and prays with the people who touch the earth three times with their foreheads during prayer and cross themselves three times after the conclusion of the service.”¹

There are certainly many traces of Christian ritual in the Sokko celebrations, though the influence of Islam and indigenous religious practice can also be discerned in Oldendorp’s description. Besides revealing the multiple inputs that helped to shape African spirituality, the above citation illustrates well the presence and character of Christianity in Africa as well as in the Caribbean. Many Africans, it appears, were Christians before they came to America. Discovering how they came to be Christians, how many black Christians there were in Africa, how contact with African culture changed Christianity, and whether Africans brought their version of Christianity to the Americas is the object of this chapter.

¹ C.G.A. Oldendorp, *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, Johann Jakob Bossard, ed., Arnold R. Highfield and Vladimir Barac, trans. and ed. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Karoma Publishers, 1987), 195.

In assessing the origins of African American Christianity it is important to keep in mind a number of ideas. First, that the development of black Christianity was an Atlantic-world phenomenon. There were black Christians in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean long before people of color were converted in large numbers in North America. Afro-Christians, moreover, moved around the Atlantic basin with startling regularity. Most went as unwilling immigrants to work New World plantations and mines, others began their lives as slaves but used their wits and, sometimes, their religion to gain freedom and new homes, while others, already free, traveled the Atlantic in search of education and opportunity. Furthermore, there were far more Christians in Africa before 1800 than has been previously recognized by most scholars of the Americas. At its height in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there were up to two million Afro-Catholics in Kongo/Angola. Though less successful, Catholic and Protestant missionaries from Portugal, Spain, France, Holland, Germany, and England also brought the “true faith” to the people of West Africa. Operating out of trading “castles,” European and Eurafrican missionaries were successful in bringing a large but unknown number into Christian churches from along the region’s Atlantic coast over the course of three centuries; a remarkable feat considering the scant resources afforded them and the small number of evangelists involved.²

With the exception of Kongo/Angola, Christianity was a minority religion in Atlantic Africa during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, notwithstanding the efforts of Iberian monks and Eurafrican priests and missionaries. This circumstance is tied to the link that exists in Africa between religion and political cohesion. In areas where political power was centralized and covered a large geographic area, as was the case in the kingdom of Kongo in the sixteenth

² C. R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415-1825* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1969).

and seventeenth centuries, Christianity was readily adopted, becoming the faith of the majority. In other regions, most notably West Africa, identity was far more localized, built on extended families or single villages rather than on large unified states. As such, the establishment of a universalist faith like Christianity was made far more difficult without the centralized rule necessary to coerce compliance. Islam, another universalist faith, was successful in the western Sudan and along the coast of Guinea precisely because it bridged ethnic divides effectively with a combination of long exposure, educational initiatives, economic stimuli, and in some cases military coercion.

Finally, the spread of Christianity in Africa would have been impossible without the assistance of native Africans and Atlantic creoles. Both groups took the lead in propagating the faith in the absence of sufficient numbers of European missionaries, most of whom died rather quickly from tropical disease. Native African and creole Christians, moreover, did not merely translate European Christianity word-for-word. They developed a hybrid faith that integrated with indigenous cultural norms and served the particular spiritual needs of Africans. They created, in the process, a uniquely African Christianity that was then carried in the hearts and minds of enslaved Africans to the Americas. There it either flourished, simmered below the surface, or died as circumstances dictated. Though not the only source of African American Christianity, Africa, because of Christianity's long presence there and the large numbers of Africans converted, must be included as one of the regions that influenced its development and growth.

The Role of Atlantic Creoles

One of the groups most responsible for the growth, development, and maintenance of African Christianity before 1800 was the mixed-race offspring of African women and the European men who came to Africa to profit from the slave trade. Most children of these unions

who grew up in Africa were maligned by white European observers as merely “nominal” or semi-Christians, whom they damned for never completely separating themselves from their African social and religious heritages. At the same time, many were unable to fully integrate themselves into the African societies in which they lived, often occupying a painfully lonely and insecure middle ground.

The mulattoes who inhabited the African Atlantic coast in large numbers by the eighteenth century were the products of European and African unions. Living on the margins of both cultures, many took advantage of their knowledge of both to fashion a new hybridized culture. Atlantic creoles, as these mulattoes are better described, were fluent in many of the trade languages of the Atlantic basin and were, in Ira Berlin’s words, “cosmopolitan in the fullest sense.”³ Many Atlantic creoles worked in the European trade forts that dotted the African shoreline, using their facility with languages, their knowledge of African culture, as well as their intimate acquaintance with the trade policies of Europe and Africa to survive and sometimes prosper. Most Atlantic creoles lived on the West Central African coast and were referred to as Luso-Africans because many had Portuguese forefathers. Many other Africans with varied interracial backgrounds, however, could be encountered all along the long African coastal littoral from Cape Verde in the north to Angola in the south.

Atlantic creoles were almost universally condemned by European observers who saw their lives as dominated by “whoring, drinking, gambling, swearing, fighting, and shouting.” They undoubtedly engaged in their fair share of debauchery, but many also sent their children to the trading forts’ schools, went to Christian churches, and earned what livings they could in the commerce of the Atlantic market. Complicating matters was the presence, beginning in 1601, of

³ Ira Berlin, “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 53, no. 2 (April 1996): 254.

the so-called New Christians, or Jews newly converted to Christianity, in Portugal's African colonies. Forced to abandon their ancestral religion by the Catholic government, New Christians took advantage of the lack of European clerical and secular authority in most of West Africa to return to the faith of their fathers. Fear of Portuguese reprisals, though, caused many West African Jews to let outsiders believe that they were really Christians.⁴

What constituted a "real" Christian in the African context is further illustrated by the case of black creole Edward Barter. Contemporary Dutch slave trader Willem Bosman described the Anglo-African Barter as a figure caught in the interstices of two cultures who prospered nonetheless by serving British interests at the British trading post at Cape Coast Castle in the early eighteenth century. Barter was valued by his employers because he was half English, but even more so because, as the son of a local African woman, he knew far more about the region's political, economic, and social affairs than did most of the short-tenured British governors stationed at Cape Coast. He used his position, according to Bosman, to attain near warlord status; he could "raise a large number of Armed men, some whereof are his own Slaves, and the rest are Free-Men, that adhere to him." The source of Barter's wealth and power was his control of access to the British: "whoever designs to trade with the English," Bosman said, "must stand well with him before they can succeed."

Having one foot in the European world and the other in the African, the aptly named Barter naturally blended many aspects of both cultures in his daily life. Bosman accused him of "pretending to be a Christian," clearly failing in the Dutchman's estimation to uphold European Christian standards of morality. Barter, it was said, had "above eight wives," even though he had

⁴ Berlin, "Creole to African," 259; Peter Mark, "The Evolution of 'Portuguese' Identity: Luso-

Africans on the Upper Guinea Coast from the Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of African History*.40, no. 2 (1999): 176-177.

previously married a white woman while living in England.⁵ Polygyny, however, was an accepted West African practice, the only limit on the number of wives a man could possess being his ability to maintain them.⁶ African wives could also be important sources of wealth. Most women of such marriages were put to work in some capacity, usually weaving cloth that could be sold domestically or exported to the Mediterranean or the Middle East. The more wives an African or mixed-race man had and could usefully employ, the higher his potential for profit.⁷ As a man of importance, Barter no doubt felt he had a right and perhaps even a duty to take as many wives as he could afford. If by doing so he found himself at variance with European conceptions of Christian behavior, he may have believed that he was practicing a form of African Christianity that synthesized aspects of both cultures, but was at its heart Christianity nonetheless. Barter could well have responded to critics like Bosman by pointing out that many so-called European Christians resident at Cape Coast, including, according to Bosman, “most of their chief Officers or Governours,” also kept mistresses and “quasi-wives,” and even kept multiple wives from local families.⁸

Social pressures and the press of business caused some creolized Africans, like Barter, to seek a tenuous middle ground between European and African religious beliefs. Bosman writes of another Anglo-African merchant who considered himself a Christian but did not allow his

⁵ Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts. Containing a Geographical, Political and Natural History of the Kingdoms and Countries: With a Particular Account of the Rise, Progress and Present Condition of all the European Settlements upon that Coast; and the Just Measures for Improving the Several Branches of the Guinea Trade. The Second Edition* (London, 1721), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>.

⁶ Claire Robertson, “Africa into the Americas? Slavery and Women, The Family, and the Gender Division of Labor,” in David Berry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hines, eds., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 10.

⁷ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 86.

⁸ Bosman, *Coast of Guinea*, 51.

faith to become common knowledge. He feared that if his African customers and neighbors knew of his Christian affiliation they would shun him, leaving him friendless and lacking a way to support his family. Even though this man, in Bosman's words, "ridiculed his own Country Gods," he still made public profession of his belief in them, ignoring men like Bosman who decried his "weak ... faith."⁹ Many European observers like Bosman complained that Africans living around the coastal trading forts who called themselves Christians were really "a sort of half Christians" only. Such observers did not think that reciting the Pater Noster and Ave Maria, confessing to a priest, and attending church on Sundays was enough to make true Christians.¹⁰

French observers in Senegambia during the 1790s agreed with this judgment of many African Christians. While touring the kingdom of Galam on the middle stretch of the Senegal River, French traders Saugnier and Brisson complained that the favorite wife of the king of Galam merely "pretends to be a Christian." At one time she had been the mistress of a French factor on the Senegal, who over the course of his years in that country converted her. She held on to her faith as best she could under the circumstances, wearing a cross and observing holy days, but her show of religious loyalty and conviction was apparently not enough for the two visiting Frenchmen.¹¹ In a region dominated by indigenous religion and under increasing attack from Islamic jihadists, solitary Christians like Galam's queen did the best they could without the support of foreign or indigenous clergy. Saugnier and Brisson also noted that some of the local Joloff people were Christians as well, but again doubted their sincerity. According to the

⁹ Bosman, *Coast of Guinea*, 368,

¹⁰ Bosman, *Coast of Guinea*, 416.

¹¹ Saugnier, *Voyages to the Coast of Africa, by Mess. Saugnier and Brisson: Containing an Account of their Shipwreck, with an Accurate Map of Africa. Translated from the French* (London, 1792), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>, 217.

Frenchmen, religion was “a matter of indifference to” the Joloff, who were only interested in trade.¹²

French cultural influence was felt in portions of Senegambia as early as the late seventeenth century. Especially in the port city of St. Louis, a large portion of the indigenous male population worked as boatmen and in other capacities servicing the slave trade. Some were certainly Christians, though Catholic influence should not be exaggerated. They largely adopted the French way of life, but were probably more Muslim than Christian.¹³

Many scholars agree with Bosman, Saugnier, and Brisson that a deeper knowledge and psychic attachment to Christian dogma was necessary before a person or people could be called true Christians. If so, however, many whites who thought of themselves as Christians in the eighteenth century probably did not qualify by that definition. White settlers in the trans-Appalachian West living on the fringes of Anglo-America in the colonial era were accused by visiting preachers as being little better than “white Indians” because they had forgotten Christian practices and rituals and did not meet to worship in organized congregations. Widely spaced settlements and a lack of ordained clergy were responsible for the diminution of organized religion on the American frontier, but it would be wrong to say that those frontiersmen and women were living completely outside the Christian orbit; they readily returned to the church when it became possible to do so. Many African Christians also went without ordained priests and ministers for long periods, but persevered nonetheless, though how they celebrated that faith

¹² Saugnier, *Coast of Africa*, 182.

¹³ Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 114.

evolved and moved away from European norms. Differences of geography notwithstanding, it is unfair to hold people of color to one standard of faithfulness and whites to another.¹⁴

The mulatto women of Holland's West African trading castle of Elmina came in for scorn from Bosman, as well, for clinging to certain indigenous beliefs while adhering to Christianity. The distance between the sacred and the profane narrowed considerably, however, when it came to treating the sick. Bosman deplored the Eurafrikan Christian women's practice of making "rich Offerings" to African priests and medicine men when illness struck, in whom, he said, they seemed to have greater confidence than did pure-blood Africans. The Dutchman noted with even more disgust that local Europeans had "grown very fond of wearing some Trifles about their Bodies which are consecrated or conjured by the [African] Priest." That same despised priest took on a high degree of legitimacy, though, when he dispensed efficacious medical cures.

Bosman was astonished at the success African priest doctors achieved in curing the worst maladies and wounds with what he termed "contradictory Ingredients." He was so impressed with African medicine that he thought it "much to be deplored that no European Physician has yet applied himself to the discovery of" the "Nature and Virtue" of African herbal medicine.¹⁵ Many whites who worked at the European trading factories on the African coast were more than willing to accept non-Western medical and religious concepts because of the horrible mortality rates they endured there. For example, the *Carlton*, a ship sailing from England to Whydah in 1721, began its voyage with 55 whites who were going to Whydah to work for the Royal Africa Company. Within four months of landing 37 were dead. Another shipment of Royal Africa Company workers was recruited for the trading post in Gambia. This group must have had some

¹⁴ Charles Woodmason, *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the American Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*, Richard J. Hooker, ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953), xxiv.

¹⁵ Bosman, *Coast of Guinea*, 224.

foreknowledge of conditions in tropical Africa because 50 of their number mutinied, sailing to the West Indies to try their luck as pirates. Of the 110 who remained in Gambia, 49 (44.5 percent) died in the first four months and 79 (71.8 percent) were dead within a year.¹⁶

Considering the sheer number of Europeans who died, it is interesting that Bosman could so easily divorce religion from medicine (the heart from the mind), deploring African spiritualism while at the same time lauding African medicine as superior to Western practice. He was not alone in this seeming contradiction; the separation of the soul and the body has been a hallmark of European and American medical practice since at least the seventeenth century, a concept considered quite alien to so-called “less advanced” cultures in Africa and the Americas who believed the two to be inseparable. Curing the body without paying attention to the spiritual welfare of the patient would have seemed absurd and self-defeating for priest doctors unaware of advances in “enlightened” Western medical science. Given the linkage by Africans of the physical and spiritual worlds, the relative inefficacy of European medicine compared to African cures was perhaps another reason why it took longer for Christianity to make significant inroads into the African consciousness.¹⁷

Obstacles to Acceptance of Christianity

A large number of Eurafricans had been Christians since birth, but just as many, and probably many more, rejected the religion of their white fathers. Thomas Thompson, a British missionary employed by the Church of England’s Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in

¹⁶ K.G. Davies, “The Living and the Dead: White Mortality in West Africa, 1684-1732,” in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 91-92.

¹⁷ For Western medicine’s separation of body from spirit, see Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996), 144; James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 228-229.

Foreign Parts doing evangelical work at Cape Coast Castle in the early 1750s, expressed his discouragement and dismay at the lack of interest in Christianity shown by the local mulatto population. He assumed that since part of their heritage was European, they would naturally have a heightened interest in the Anglican gospel. The SPG's first missionary to Africa was quickly disabused of this assumption. Thompson preached regularly in the head caboceers's, or indigenous leader's home, but only to small audiences of both mulattoes and black Africans. His listeners were polite and attentive but generally uninterested in what he had to say. They probably attended his Sunday services at caboceer Cudjo's urging, who "seemed to be well satisfied in the Christian religion" as long as it promoted continued trade between himself and the British and did not unduly upset local indigenous religious leaders.¹⁸

The difficulty Thompson experienced in spreading the Gospel was compounded by the language barrier. Outside of the port towns few Africans spoke English. There were interpreters, but Thompson found that much of what he tried to convey was misinterpreted. It is possible, as well, that Thompson himself was not a terribly charismatic preacher, a necessary quality when attempting to convert people to a new spirituality. Despite this probable shortcoming, Thompson attempted to learn Fante, the lingua franca of the Cape Coast region, that was at least partially understood for several hundred miles fanning out in every direction. But even after he gained a rudimentary proficiency in the language he ran into additional difficulties. Because Fante was not yet a written language, the possibilities for variation turned out to be extraordinary. Much to his consternation, Thompson found that even simple words like

¹⁸ Thomas Thompson, *Memoirs of an English Missionary to the Coast of Guinea; Who Went Thither for the Sole Purpose of Converting the Negroes to Christianity* (London, 1788), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>, 17.

the one for “tree,” for example, could be spoken as *idweah*, but also as *eduah*, as well as *edweah*, sometimes by one and the same person.¹⁹

Contact with Christianity for many Africans was imperfect at its best and a grossly negative experience at its worst. In West Africa, Christian missionaries and chaplains usually confined their activities to the European trading forts on the coast, the sites of some of the most shockingly brutal treatment of one set of human beings by another. And those engaged in the most sadistic behavior, as any African could easily see, were white Christians who seemed to have the sanction of resident Christian priests.

Racial and ethnic antagonisms among Atlantic creoles, black Africans, and whites, just as much as indigenous religion, also impeded the growth of Christian churches in Atlantic Africa. Many white priests and pastors were not without prejudice toward black Africans, but there was also a virulent strain of racism among the growing mulatto population toward their black half brothers and sisters. For example, wishing to disassociate themselves from their black brethren whom they considered of lower caste, mulatto clergymen in West Central Africa in the early eighteenth century energetically distanced themselves from the few black clergy then extant. This was especially true in Portuguese Angola where mulatto priests petitioned the king in 1707 to not appoint any more black African priests to the Angolan see. One hundred years earlier a bishop of Sao Tome complained that he needed more white priests because even black Africans would not accept baptism from black priests.²⁰ From these two examples it is clear that racial and ethnic antagonisms spilled over into African spirituality, and served as a dismaying roadblock for European and African clergy trying to propagate the faith.

¹⁹ Thompson, *Memoirs*, 28.

²⁰ Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1983), 36.

Mixed-Race Unions and African Influences

Intermarriage between European men and African women was quite common on the African coast during the early years of contact and served to integrate Christianity into local cultures. The relative socioeconomic class of the white groom seemed to make little difference in these unions, according to Danish observer Ludewig F. Romer, allowing common European soldiers to marry the daughters of rich and powerful local African families. Romer, a resident of the Danish fort of Christiansborg on the Gold Coast in the 1750s, had a chance to observe and record the social and cultural life of the region. In such unions, he noted, benefits accrued to both marriage partners. The European man, if he was a merchant, instantly became part of an extended lineage group which gave him access to the internal trading networks of a wide area. In taking an African wife, a soldier at a trading castle, like the merchant, acquired a sexual partner and companion, something considered quite necessary because many white men remained at these foreign posts for many years and did not bring European women with them. Nor did many white women venture to the coast of tropical Africa on their own during the eighteenth century. By marrying African women, white men were also guaranteed a constant supply of food, since the families of their African wives would not allow one of their own to starve. The African women benefited from having a white husband because of the ties marriage gave her and her family to the European merchant establishment. Marrying a European meant greater access to Western goods and trade, as well as protection for the entire clan in times of war at the fort under shadow of European cannons.²¹

The offspring of marriages between Europeans and Africans at Christiansborg enjoyed a number of additional benefits. African creole children at the Danish castle were entitled to

²¹ Ludewig Ferdinand Romer, *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea (1760)*, Selena Axelrod Winsnes, trans. and ed. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000), 185.

support from a “Mulatto Treasury” subsidized by mandatory withdrawals from the white father’s salary. Christiansborg’s religious authorities sanctioned having interracial children and taking an African wife or concubine, as well, as long as the white husband made good on three conditions. First, the white man could obtain and keep only one wife at any one time. Second, he had to “promise to see his heathen wife” converted to Christianity, something that most attempted, though with mixed results. And third, on the husband’s return to Europe, he was required to bring his African wife (though not his children) with him if she wanted to go.²² The mulatto children were encouraged to stay in Africa as employees of the trading companies since they were usually multilingual and so made excellent intermediaries and translators as well as being used as guards and soldiers. The Danes at Christiansborg were also required to get permission to marry an African woman from the fort’s political authorities. Gaining the blessing of the High Council was easy enough, though, because it too generally looked with favor on such matches as a way to reduce the men’s homesickness and thereby increase the length of time they stayed in Africa. Notwithstanding this benefit to the Danish West India Company (WIC), the High Council’s consent came, like the church’s, with several conditions attached. For an employee of the WIC to marry an African woman, he was forced to give up one half-month’s salary when he got married, an equal amount on his departure to Europe, and 4% of his wages every month during his stay in Africa. Funds thus collected went to the care and maintenance of the offspring of these marriages.²³

The mulatto children of Christiansborg were, according to Danish employee Paul Erdmann Isert in 1788, “always christened and instructed in Christianity.” The idea was to take care of

²² Romer, *Reliable Account*, 186.

²³ Selena Axelrod Winsnes, trans. and ed., *Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade: Paul Erdmann Isert’s Journey to Guinea and the Caribbean Islands of Columbia (1788)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 156.

both their physical and spiritual welfare since it was inevitable that their fathers would either leave for Europe in several years or die even sooner in the tropical heat.²⁴ Absent a European Christian father, most Eurafrikan children absorbed a very Africanized Christianity that in many cases did not differ greatly from indigenous African beliefs.

Though the African wives of European men were supposed to be educated and converted to Christianity, cultural transmission sometimes went the other way. Romer claimed that “We have had such fools among our people” who at the behest of their African wives wore fetishes “on their bodies, underneath their clothing” to ward off disease and ill luck. Given the prevalence of death of Europeans in tropical Africa and the ineffectiveness of European medicine, it was only natural that anxious soldiers turned to African healing practices, which were inseparable from indigenous religion. As disparaging as any white of African spirituality, Romer had to admit that “I myself have experienced events which I still cannot explain,” though he quickly pinned the power of African religion on the influence of the Devil, who took “possession of the mouths and tongues of the Blacks.”²⁵

Following the Danish example, the British commander of Cape Coast Castle in the 1730s also took a local African wife and she, too, exercised a high degree of influence over her European spouse. In this case the commander’s wife was a *consa*, or temporary bride, because despite his wishes, she refused to leave Cape Coast and return with him to Britain. She was, according to British Royal Navy surgeon John Atkins, a light-skinned mulatto with “flaxen Hair and complexion,” the child of a Dutch soldier and an African woman from Elmina. She attended Christian services held at Cape Coast at the behest of her English husband but refused to be

²⁴ Winsnes, *Letters on West Africa*, 157.

²⁵ Romer, *Reliable Account*, 104.

baptized, “being a strict Adherer of the Negrish Customs.” As a “strict adherer,” she appeared to have a greater religious influence on her Christian husband than he had on her. Atkins found when giving medical assistance to Cape Coast’s British governor that he had more confidence in his wife’s African fetishes, “which he wore on his wrists and neck,” than in Western medicine, and probably with good reason: Atkins’ prescription for his patients was the then accepted European practice of bleeding to rid the body of unhealthy blood.²⁶

Some mulatto children of European men and African women did well, becoming merchants or even receiving educations in Europe. For most mulatto boys, however, the only employment to be found was at the trading forts as soldiers. The British, according to Romer, used African creoles almost exclusively as troops in West Africa in the eighteenth century, largely because they could not recruit white Britons for such hazardous duty and because they could get away with paying them near-starvation wages. A mulatto soldier’s salary was often paid to him half in brandy, or “killdevil” as it was known, and half in water. The brandy could be bartered for food and other provisions in the local market, though it never allowed for more than a rude subsistence. Even though the British need for mulatto soldiers was high, the number and dire need of most mulattoes was usually higher; so despite the low wages, hazardous duty, and bad living conditions, local creoles flocked to the castles. Atlantic creoles made up the vast majority of employees and soldiers at Britain’s African trading posts, with only two or three Britons being present at any fort at any one time. As the main British entrepot in the region, Cape Coast Castle was the exception, but even there the English counted only fifteen whites while employing an equal number of mixed-race creoles.²⁷

²⁶ John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West Indies; In His Majesties Ships the Swallow and Weymouth* (London, 1735), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>, 94.

²⁷ Romer, *Reliable Account*, 57.

The status and life possibilities of Eurafricans many times depended on the social positions of their mothers, but could also be affected by the type of social structure in place in the communities where they lived. In stratified and patrilineal societies such as the Wolof, Serer, and Mandinka, Luso-Africans were marginalized, being forbidden to marry free persons, join craft associations, or cultivate the land. Cut off from the cultural mainstream and barred from making a living in traditional ways, these sons and daughters of European men and African women were forced into up professions associated with the Atlantic-world market, taking up jobs such as sailors, interpreters, compradors, and traders. Living apart from mainstream African society, many Eurafricans reacted by trying to forge new identities. Instead of embracing their African backgrounds, they went to the other extreme, wearing European-style clothes, prominently displaying crucifixes and rosaries to enhance their Catholic identity, speaking Crioulo (derived from Portuguese and western African languages), and loudly proclaiming that they were ‘Portuguese,’ ‘whites,’ and ‘Christians,’ even though Europeans rejected them even more than did Africans.

For those Eurafricans lucky enough to live in acephalous and matrilineal societies such as the Papel, Landuman, Temne, and Bullom, full social and economic integration was far easier. In such societies mulattoes could marry whom they chose, join iron-making and other craft associations, and become what most other Africans were: farmers or herders.²⁸ In acephalous and matrilineal societies, Eurafricans probably did not embrace Western lifeways or Christianity in very large numbers, given their success in integrating with local culture.

Many African creoles who were baptized and church-going Christians nonetheless maintained a healthy respect for the religion of their African mothers. Paul Erdmann Isert

²⁸ George E. Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), xxi.

recounted an incident when one of his slaves fled to a local fetish temple as a sanctuary of freedom. Fear of the power of the fetish kept away most Africans who might have wanted to retake the runaway, so Isert sent a Christian mulatto soldier to accomplish the task. The mulatto did as he was directed, but “admitted that from fear of the fetish he had been trembling throughout his entire body.”²⁹

Awareness of the power of African indigenous spirituality probably influenced the religious policies of most the Protestant traders who did business there. Indeed, evangelizing the Christian religion was an afterthought for most of Holland’s authorities and merchants on the African coast. When Isert first arrived in the mid 1780s, Elmina had just received a new chaplain from Europe, the first at the outpost in some fourteen years. He was initially kept busy baptizing all the mulatto children conceived since the departure of the last pastor. The new chaplain soon fell out of favor with the Dutch rulers and the mulattoes, though, because he began excommunicating all church goers who engaged in polygyny, which apparently meant almost every man, whether white, black, or mulatto, in Elmina.³⁰

Perhaps the most interesting ministers to evangelize the Christian faith in Atlantic Africa in the eighteenth century were a pair of Atlantic creoles: the married couple Christian and Rebecca Protten. The Prottens proselytized their black brethren and sisters not only in Africa, but in Europe and the Americas as well. Christian was an African creole with a Danish father and an African mother. Rebecca was also of mixed-race parentage, beginning life as a slave probably on the Caribbean island of Antigua before being “sold to a family of high-standing” on the nearby island of St. Thomas. Born on the Gold Coast in 1715, at the age of ten Christian was

²⁹ Winsnes, *Letters on West Africa*, 81.

³⁰ Winsnes, *Letters on West Africa*, 149.

taken to Denmark where he adapted to his new surroundings quite well. He received a good education and was evidently a bright student. He reputedly became proficient in as many as ten European and African languages. His intellectual abilities gained him entrance to the University of Copenhagen in 1732, but after several years of study he decided to travel to Germany to visit the Moravians' religious settlement at Herrnhut. After two years there, Christian decided his future lay back in Africa as a missionary. In 1737, with Moravian leader Nicholas von Zinzendorf's blessing, he left for his old home on the Gold Coast. His years in Europe apparently made adjusting to life in Africa difficult, because after only a few years he was recalled to Germany by Zinzendorf. As an Atlantic creole, occupying a cultural middle ground proved hard on Christian. A mission to the Brethren's station in St. Thomas several years later also ended in failure and his recall to Europe in 1745.³¹

Rebecca Protten's early life was marked by religious activism and, as a result, conflict with the Danish rulers of St. Thomas. Having learned to read and write Dutch in her owners' home where she was a domestic slave, Rebecca soon came to associate herself with the new Moravian mission on the island which had been instituted there in 1732. Becoming an active church member, Rebecca began walking the well-worn paths between St. Thomas's sugar plantations, preaching the gospel to enslaved African field hands and eventually marrying fellow missionary and white Moravian Matthäus Freundlich in 1738. No sooner had the couple married than they found themselves in jail on a charge of fornication. The pastor of the island's Dutch Reformed Church filed a petition claiming that they had been married by an unordained Moravian minister and were therefore living together unlawfully. The case really revolved around the conflict

³¹ Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 162.

between the Reformed Church and the Moravian presence on St. Thomas (which the former church found repugnant), as well as the scandal of a white man marrying a black woman.³²

After four months in jail, Matthäus and Rebecca were finally released. Their persecution by the courts and local planters continued, however, and when a chance came to travel to Germany in 1742, the physically and emotionally exhausted couple jumped at the opportunity. Tragically, following the long sea voyage and cross-country trip to Saxony, the ailing Matthäus died, leaving Rebecca alone in a small German village among strangers. As might be expected, it took a while before Rebecca adjusted to her new circumstances. Intelligent and strong-willed as ever, she soon regained her confidence, quickly assuming a leadership role in her new home among the Moravians of Herrnhut.³³

Though they undoubtedly knew of each other, Christian and Rebecca did not actually meet until the spring of 1745. Church leaders decided that, considering their shared backgrounds as missionaries and as Atlantic creoles, they would make useful marriage partners; they were married in 1746.³⁴ After living almost twenty years in Saxony, the Prottens were offered the chance to do missionary work on West Africa's Gold Coast in 1765.³⁵

At Christiansborg castle they opened a school for the Danish fort's mulatto children. Using knowledge gained through hard experience, they instructed their students in the difficult art of living Christian lives within their two cultures. Christian died in 1769 at the age of fifty-four, leaving Rebecca, twice a widow, alone on the coast of Africa with few ways of supporting herself. The Moravian Brethren in Germany voted to give her a one year stipend and in 1776

³² Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival*, 109.

³³ Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival*, 158.

³⁴ Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival*, 184.

³⁵ Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival*, 214.

even offered to repatriate her back to St. Thomas. The notion of going back to the islands of her birth must have held some attraction for Rebecca, but the prospect of such a rigorous sea voyage at her age was probably enough to dissuade her. She spent her final years at Christiansborg, either in an unused corner of the castle or with friends in the surrounding town, dying there in 1780 at the age of sixty-two. Rebecca and Christian Proppen led remarkable lives, touched by struggles, suffering, and frustrations, but also with triumphs and steadfast faith in their redeemer God. If they did not spark a revival, they can be seen as inspirational and pioneering figures, carrying on Christian evangelical work in three widely separated parts of the world and touching the lives of thousands.³⁶

Political Influences

The Proppens, as Atlantic creoles, lived and worked in a world dominated by the Protestant northern European countries of Holland, Denmark, and Germany. Most Africans, if they were Christians in the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries, were not Protestants, however, but Catholics. The roots of Christianity in Sierra Leone, for example, though usually associated with the British Protestant settlement of London's "black poor" and the black Loyalist refugees of the American Revolution beginning in 1787, are really to be found among Portuguese Catholics in the sixteenth century. Though Portugal's commercial and spiritual influence in the region was in eclipse by the mid 1700s, it did leave behind a sizable population of Luso-Africans who doggedly held on to their Catholic identities.

Contemporary European observers, mostly French and English sailors and merchants, usually denounced them as merely "nominal" Christians, though that charge must be taken with

³⁶ Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival*, 232.

a grain of salt for a number of reasons.³⁷ Firstly, the accusers were usually Protestants who viewed Catholics as barely Christian and Afro-Catholics as not Christian at all. Second, white Protestant leaders in the eighteenth century equated Christianity with adherence to strict moral codes regarding sexual relations between unmarried and even married couples. A person could hardly be a true believer if he kept more than one wife or had more liberal ideas about pre and extra-marital sex, both activities which were accepted practice in most West African cultures. Furthermore, politically expansionist and culturally hegemonic European nations had little interest in fostering or acknowledging the existence or legitimacy of a large Christian presence in black Africa. After all, one of the chief rationalizations for the enslavement of Africans was that it was better for them to be brought to the Americas in chains where their souls could be saved through conversion to Christianity, then to allow them to remain free in Africa and die as pagans, doomed to spend eternity in hell. Apologists for slavery, usually West Indian planters or employees of slave trading companies, regularly made this argument, as did numerous missionaries who were forced to accommodate and ingratiate themselves to planter power. Efforts were made nevertheless, as we will see, to bring Protestant Christianity directly to Africa during the eighteenth century. Given the relative lack of success of English, Dutch, and German evangelicals in West Africa, it was probably not difficult for many Europeans to conclude, however speciously, that their salvation depended upon the Africans' enslavement and transportation to the Americas.

Notwithstanding the above arguments, the Portuguese did attempt to bring Christianity to the Sierra Leone region as early as the 1530s when they created a see in the Cape Verde Islands off the western coast of West Africa. The bishop there made a number of excursions to the

³⁷ P.E.H. Hair, "Christian Influences in Sierra Leone Before 1787," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 27, no. 1 (1997): 3.

mainland, mostly in limited attempts to bring spiritual comfort and, more probably, spiritual discipline to Portuguese traders and sailors living there. The odd visitation was no substitute for establishing a full-time resident priest, something that did not happen until a vicar was appointed in the 1590s at Cacheu. A major problem that plagued church officials trying to maintain adequate staff in Sierra Leone, as well as the rest of tropical Africa, was the horrific mortality rates endured by white missionaries who fell victim to the tropical disease environment. Another obstacle was the language barrier that made trying to convey abstract religious concepts nearly impossible. In one instance, at least, Portuguese church officials attempted to place a priest in western Africa who could communicate effectively with locals and survive the climate and tropical diseases. A black African, educated and ordained in Portugal, was sent to the region as a priest, but in the end even he did not succeed. Unspecified friction with the bishop of Santiago in the Cape Verde Islands, perhaps over the extent of African religious elements the priest was willing to integrate into Catholic dogma, led to his early dismissal.³⁸

Portugal's Catholic authorities did not send any more missionaries to the Sierra Leone coast in the sixteenth century, but a sizable number of Africans converted to Christianity nonetheless. The instruments of their evangelization were largely local headmen who sent their sons and even a few of their daughters to Europe to be educated in Western and Christian ways. Some of these European-educated Africans may have played a role in helping to convert the hundreds of refugees who fled an invasion of the Mane people and were subsequently evacuated to both the Cape Verde Islands and Cacheu in the 1560s. The latter group of former Sierra Leoneans were ruled by a Christian chief who was reputed to be able to "read and write as he was brought up on Santiago Island" in the Cape Verde archipelago. According to a Portuguese

³⁸ Hair, "Christian Influences," 4.

observer in the 1590s, “all the other blacks in this settlement are Christians,” and the ruler “has all the babies who are born there baptized. Every night in this settlement Christian doctrine is taught publicly, and is attended by children of the more advanced blacks of the country, although they are not Christians.”³⁹

A Jesuit mission to Sierra Leone was instituted in 1604 which sent three missionaries to the region through 1617. They managed to build and maintain a half a dozen churches in that short period, but absent more support from home, what success they enjoyed depended in large measure on the help they received from Portuguese and Afro-Portuguese laymen and women. After the Jesuits left in 1617 and throughout the rest of the seventeenth century, rivalry between Spain and Portugal led those two countries to send competing religious orders to the region. Spanish Capuchin monks came to Sierra Leone in the 1640s, but faced many obstacles put up by Portuguese agents who viewed them as interlopers on their papally sanctioned religious territory. In response, Lisbon sent Franciscan monks to the Cape Verde Islands. One of them, a young man named Andre de Faro, ventured from the Cape Verde Islands as far as Sierra Leone in 1663. By the 1650s, however, Portuguese influence in the area was in decline, battered by economic competition from the Dutch, English, and French, with the British gaining preeminence along the Sierra Leone coast. The British displayed little interest in Christian evangelizing in Sierra Leone before 1787, but several British travelers did nevertheless note Christianity’s continued presence.⁴⁰

Naval officer John Atkins, sailing with a British squadron along the West African coast in the 1720s as escort for several slave trading ships, visited the Sierra Leone coast where he met a

³⁹ Hair, “Christian Influences,” 5.

⁴⁰ Hair, “Christian Influences,” 8.

Seignior Joseph, whom he described as a “Christian Negro of this Place.”⁴¹ A native African, Joseph had originally settled at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River in 1715. He was the first Catholic priest to visit or live in the region since the 1680s. The grandson of the ruler of Cape Mount, Joseph had traveled the North Atlantic in his youth, living in North America before crossing over to Britain. It is unclear what prompted young Joseph’s travels. He may have been enslaved as a consequence of war or been kidnapped, taken to America, and subsequently freed when he showed evidence of royal birth or education. Another possibility is that he was sent to America by his family specifically to get a Western education, and was never a slave. Though not common, it appears that this African version of what Americans and Europeans in the nineteenth century called the “grand tour” did occur. This story was confirmed years later by SPG missionary Thomas Thompson, who on his way back to England after several frustrating years on the African coast met Seignior Joseph. Joseph told of his sojourn to New York, where he had gone to school and been baptized a Christian.⁴² He had continued his education in England, which presumably included a heavy dose of Protestant Christianity. That part of his education apparently did not stay with him, though, because when he next traveled to Portugal he quickly converted to Catholicism and trained to be a priest. Upon his ordination, Joseph sailed for Sierra Leone and home.⁴³

Originally settling on the coast, Joseph subsequently moved his family, along with clan members and hangers on, nine miles upriver. He explained that difficulties with local slave traders as well as proximity to European factories on the coast had necessitated the move.⁴⁴ Not

⁴¹ Atkins, *Voyage to Guinea*, 54.

⁴² Hair, “Christian Influences,” 14.

⁴³ Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 239.

⁴⁴ Atkins, *Voyage of Guinea*, 55.

wanting his family exposed to the slave trade, this black Christian no doubt felt it was best to have as little contact as possible with white Christians. It is impossible to estimate how many other African Christian leaders felt and acted as Seignior Joseph did, removing their people from the shadow of European corruption and observation, and thereby being lost to history.

As a priest Joseph did his best to evangelize and save souls. To that end he built a small Christian shrine, erected a cross, tutored his family in Portuguese so they could read the “Romish Prayer-Books” he brought with him from Europe, and even gave his children Christian names. He had over the years asked Portuguese officials to send missionaries to help him propagate the faith, but none had ventured even the short distance inland from the coast where Joseph lived. Atkins surmised that the “Poverty of their Country” would “probably keep them a long time from that Benefit.” Missionaries usually only went to places in Africa that engaged in trade with Europeans and which provided the resources to maintain a priest and mission. Even when the money was found to support one or two priests, most European clergymen found the isolation of living in the interior of Africa away from European contact more than they had bargained for. White missionaries were also terrified and repelled by, in Atkins’ words, the “Danger of Wild Beasts ... (especially Wolfes)” and all the “Rats, Snakes, Toads, Musquitoes, Centipedes, Scorpions, Lizards, and innumerable Swarms of Ants” that were an inevitable part of life in tropical Africa.⁴⁵

While in England and Portugal, Joseph had apparently picked up a number of European habits. Much to Atkins’ surprise, his Afro-Christian host entertained him “with a clean Tablecloth, Knives and Forks, and a variety of Wines and strong Beer.” Atkins also noticed with some pleasure how Joseph’s wife and daughters behaved with “Quaker-like Obeysance,” leaving the

⁴⁵ Atkins, *Voyage to Guinea*, 54.

dining area “decently and without Hurry or Laugh.” Atkins no doubt attributed this good behavior to the civilizing influence of Christianity.⁴⁶

The African Catholic priest Joseph lived an apparently long and well-traveled life. There is evidence that he moved himself and his followers from Sierra Leone north and west to the coast of Bissau after 1750. In Bissau a local leader named José Lopez, who Hair believes was in fact Seignior Joseph, contacted the Portuguese in the 1750s asking for missionaries and a trade alliance. Joseph’s mantle in Bissau was taken up later in the century by a “Seignior Domingo,” a local African leader who could reputedly read Portuguese and claimed to be a Catholic. The African American Protestants who settled in Sierra Leone came into contact with Domingo in the 1790s, keeping West African Christianity alive and closing a circle that had first been formed centuries earlier.

As late as the 1790s, a Portuguese traveler in Sierra Leone claimed that “the number of Christians dispersed through the distant hinterlands is infinite.” He described an incident in which a priest, when encamped at a river crossing, was inundated by faithful Africans demanding that he dispense the sacraments and baptize their children.⁴⁷ While reports of such large examples of spontaneous popular Christianity in West Africa may be a case of wishful thinking by a hopeful Lusitanian, there is a grain of truth to the idea that Christianity survived in the African hinterland without European priests to guide it or, unfortunately, write about it. The African form of Christianity had been a presence in coastal West Africa for over two hundred fifty years by the turn of the eighteenth century. It had always been a minority religion in the region, but to have survived at all it had to have been incorporated into the social fabric of

⁴⁶ Atkins, *Voyage to Guinea*, 56.

⁴⁷ Hair, “Christian Influences,” 9.

individual clans or lineage groups. If village leaders like Seignior Joseph and Seignior Domingo accepted Christianity, then it became an essential part of that group's identity, so that to be part of the group meant being Christian. With this type of quasi-institutional support, Christianity's continuance, however modified or muted by isolation from Europeans, was certainly a possibility.

Western Penetration of West Africa

White missionaries may not have survived long enough in tropical Africa or been there in large enough numbers to keep Christianity alive and vibrant, but an intrepid band of passionate European clergy nevertheless sacrificed years of their lives (and indeed, for many, their very lives) evangelizing in the African mission field. Some found encouragement from African rulers who saw advantages to inviting Christian sojourners into their dominions. Thomas Thompson, the SPG missionary to Cape Coast Castle, as noted previously, had received a warm reception from Caboceer Cudjo, the local African ruler, on his arrival in 1751. Cudjo had several years before sent his son and the son of a neighboring caboceer to London to get a Western education. It made sense, then, that when Thompson requested that the caboceer build him a church, Cudjo suggested that he open a school for the sons and daughters of local African families instead.⁴⁸ The natives of Cape Coast had had a long enough acquaintance with whites to question the validity of Christian moral values, exposed as they were to the most brutal form of capitalist exploitation practiced by European Christians, but they also recognized the power to be derived from Western knowledge.

Forts such as Elmina, Cape Coast Castle, Christiansborg, and St. Louis were tiny islands along the immense expanse of the African coastline in the eighteenth century with little power to

⁴⁸ Thompson, *Memoirs*, 8.

influence the vast hinterland in a cultural sense. There were few European missionaries (or Europeans of any profession for that matter) in the region, due mostly to the unhealthy epidemiological climate that killed a shockingly high proportion of whites who ventured into the area. Only the very hardy, the exceptionally greedy, or the religiously passionate sojourned in the “torrid zone,” and few survived for long.

Some Westerners penetrated short distances into the interior to establish trading outposts, but travel through the rugged West African hinterland could be dangerous and difficult. Besides wild beasts who liked to eat unwary travelers, and local human populations who generally looked upon foreigners with the deepest suspicion, few of the region’s rivers provided easy access to the interior. While the Gambia River is navigable in high water two hundred fifty miles from its mouth on the Atlantic, allowing considerable traffic by ocean-going vessels into the western African heartland, the region’s other rivers are not so easily negotiated. The Senegal River’s flow is insufficient to float larger ships for much of the year and also has a dangerous bar at its mouth and numerous rapids and falls along most of its course. West Africa’s largest river, the Niger, was also inaccessible to European ocean-going craft because of its large and confusing delta as well as more rapids and falls along its lower course. European explorers had to wait until the 1830s to traverse the Niger’s entire length.

One of the first Europeans to penetrate the West African interior to any great extent was a Scotsman named Mungo Park, whose first expedition into the area did not take place until the mid 1790s. Park found somewhat to his chagrin that by the late eighteenth century, their scarcity notwithstanding, Europeans were a known and feared quantity in much of western Africa’s inland area. On one occasion when Park accepted the hospitality of a Fulla herdsman to share a meal with his family, he was astonished at their reaction to him. No sooner had the shepherd

mentioned that Park was a “Nazarani” (a Nazarene or Christian) then his host’s children began to cry “and their mother crept slowly towards the door, out of which she sprang like a greyhound, and was instantly followed by her children.”⁴⁹ Because of its long association with the slave trade, anyone labeled a Christian was apparently an object of fear for many people in this stretch of western Africa, a fact that must certainly have hindered its popularity.

Christian missionary activity on the Slave Coast, a region that stretched roughly from the mouth of the Volta River east to the Niger River delta, began in the seventeenth century and was again, as in Sierra Leone, initially undertaken exclusively by the Catholic Church. Efforts at evangelization had already been undertaken by the Portuguese when the Spanish in 1660, and the French in 1670, sent missionaries to the kingdom of Allada. The king of Allada had been educated in a monastery on the island of São Tomé off the coast of the modern country of Gabon. In 1658 he sent an embassy to the Spanish court asking for missionaries. Madrid dispatched Capuchin monks to Allada in 1660, but half of the twelve missionaries succumbed to tropical diseases within five months of their arrival. The surviving Capuchins were put off by Allada’s king whose interest in Christianity cooled considerably when he learned that he had to give up all his wives except one, along with his natal religion.⁵⁰

French priests and Italian Augustinian monks operating out of Sao Tome made further visits to the Slave Coast between 1688 and 1703 at the request of Whydah’s King Agbangla. The prohibition against polygyny and local popular opposition to the foreign religion, however, made headway difficult, even with royal support.

⁴⁹ Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa: Performed Under the Direction and Patronage of the African Association in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797.... With an Appendix Containing Geographical Illustrations of Africa by Major Rennell* (London, 1799), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>, 183.

⁵⁰ Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on African Society* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1991), 153.

Fostering European trade was important to Whydah, Allada, and Dahomey's rulers, but they soon found that their lack of Christian conviction was not a roadblock. The pale-skinned traders on the coast, it turned out, had few scruples about buying slaves from non-Christians. Far from attacking or pulling away from indigenous African religion, whites on the Slave Coast, like British and Dutch officials on the Gold Coast, incorporated a good deal of indigenous spirituality into their trading routines. English merchants made sure never to kill pythons in Whydah because that snake was central to the national Dangbe cult. In 1740, a shrine to an indigenous Whydah god was even erected at the English trading fort there. Business deals were regularly concluded with a ritual oath invoking the protection of local deities, an indication of how important the resident English knew religion was to Africans. British merchants might dismiss the act as pagan superstition, but they recognized its power and dared not offend its practitioners.⁵¹

The desire for trade with Europe by Africa's rulers and the spread of Christianity were sometimes closely linked, but economic opportunism should not obscure the spiritual integrity of either side. African kings often allowed white missionaries access to their territories only if they were accompanied by merchants.⁵² Questions arise about the sincerity of African rulers' conversions to Christianity given that they were usually accompanied by pleas for European consumer goods and weaponry. In the late fifteenth-century Senegalese kingdom of Jolof, for example, that country's ruler asked King João II of Portugal to send trade goods. João responded by suggesting that trade between the two nations might be facilitated if the Jolof prince, named Bumi Jeleen, joined the Christian church. Jeleen initially declined, but was later forced to

⁵¹ Law, *Slave Coast*, 154.

⁵² Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 193.

reconsider the offer when a palace coup led to his need for foreign allies. Living in exile in Portugal, Jeleen eventually converted to Christianity, but he also never stopped asking for arms to regain his lost kingdom. In 1488, the displaced Jolof monarch finally got his wish. Escorted by a fleet of twenty Portuguese caravels and plenty of arms and ammunition, Jeleen sailed for his native land. King João, in aiding the African Christian, wanted both to spread the faith and establish trade relations with the Jolof and the legendary and presumably rich commercial center of Timbuktu. Unfortunately for both João and Jeleen, none of these plans came to fruition in 1488. The commander of Portuguese flotilla charged with returning the Jolof prince to his homeland became so worried about dying of a shipboard epidemic that, on the eve of the invasion, he had Jeleen murdered and scuttled the entire enterprise.⁵³

The relationship between trade and political power on the one hand, and religious faith on the other has always been fraught with charges of opportunism. But as the Jolof king's example illustrates, there was no clear line between religion and politics in early modern Europe or Africa. There is evidence that Jeleen's conversion to Catholicism was sincere. Rulers like Jeleen, and João as well, knew that to succeed in politics or on the field of battle, supernatural allies were essential. Adopting a non-African religion could be dangerous for a ruler, but the power of Western technology must have inspired many Africans to believe that metaphysical forces were behind the power of European guns. Cold calculation by African monarchs no doubt played an important role in such matters, but religious conviction cannot be discounted.⁵⁴

Not all European trading nations felt the need to evangelize the Christian faith in their overseas possessions and outposts. England, Denmark, and Holland all established mercantile

⁵³ David Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe, 1450-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26.

⁵⁴ Northrup, *Africa's Discovery*, 27.

factories on the Ivory, Gold, and Slave coasts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but appeared more interested in trade than in bringing the “true faith” to the “heathen.” The Catholic powers of Spain, Portugal, and to a lesser extent France, were not as shy about religious matters. They were usually the vanguard of the Church in their imperial and commercial relations with the non-Christian world. But by the seventeenth century, the former two countries, and especially Portugal, were in decline. The Lusitanians, with their archaic governing structure, feeble economy (the Marque de Pombal’s efforts notwithstanding), and small population could no longer effectively compete on the international stage with the larger, richer, and more aggressive Dutch, British, and French.⁵⁵ A consequence of Portugal’s diminuendo was its inability to send traders and priests to areas of Africa where it had claimed influence in the past. The Lusitanians continued to maintain control of the Cape Verde Islands but could rarely send missionaries from there to the West African coast; French, British, and Dutch authorities had effectively squeezed them out of much of the region. Portuguese merchants and missionaries were not, however, shut out completely. The wars that plagued Europe during the “long eighteenth century” caused Portugal’s rivals, principally England and France, to concentrate on fighting each other, which disrupted their trading operations in western Africa and gave Lisbon several small openings.

The War of the League of Augsburg (1689-1697) was one such conflict that gave Portugal an opportunity to reestablish itself in the Bissau region. The government in Lisbon sent merchants and Franciscan monks to the court of the ruler of Ilha de Bissau in 1687. The next year Bissau’s ruler, Bacampolco Co, and numerous other Papel were baptized as Christians. The Franciscans received aid from the local Luso-African community, one of whom, Barnabe López,

⁵⁵ Thomas E. Skidmore, *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 23.

was both a cousin of Bacampolco Co and held a commission as a lieutenant in the Portuguese army. By 1694, with official Bissau embracing, or at least not resisting, Franciscan evangelism, the monks claimed to have brought some 700 Africans into the Church in Bissau, 1200 in Geba, another 700 at Cacheu, and 600 more at Bolor.⁵⁶

Commercial and spiritual success in Bissau for the Portuguese depended in large measure on their ability to maintain good relations with the local ruling class. Bacampolco Co's death in 1696 brought Incinhate to the throne, who allowed himself to be baptized, but was less sympathetic to the Franciscans and was considered only a nominal Christian. Portugal's commercial monopoly in Bissau ended as abruptly as it began with the end of the War of the League of Augsburg. French and English merchants reappeared and Portugal's efforts to keep them out angered Incinhate, who wanted access to the cheaper and better quality goods offered by French and British traders. Christianity lived on in Bissau in the eighteenth century, but without the support of European priests or the encouragement of local rulers. It was up to Africans like Seignior Joseph and Seignior Domingo to propagate the faith over the next century.⁵⁷

The retreat of Portuguese power had a deleterious effect on the maintenance of Afro-Catholicism throughout West Africa. By the 1770s, Luso-African traders were unable to compete with the English for the purchase of slaves and ivory. The creoles were also becoming, in the estimation of one Portuguese official, almost indistinguishable in their lifestyles from local Africans. Mulatto Luso-Africans were already partially integrated into local West African culture, a process that continued unabated since no European priests had ventured into the area

⁵⁶ Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 193.

⁵⁷ Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 194.

for some twenty years. Despite the lack of outside support, Luso-African Christianity persisted. When white priests finally trekked up the Nuñez River valley in the 1780s, for example, local African Catholics seized the opportunity to make confessions, take communion, and have their children baptized.⁵⁸ By then, however, a new effort to bring Christianity to West Africa was in the offing; and again, it depended on black people (this time Protestants from the Americas) to make it work.

Competition from Islam

A potential roadblock to Christian evangelization in West Africa during the Atlantic slave trade era came in the form of Muslim raiders and traders. Islam was well established when Christian missionaries came to the western Sudan, but as we will see, its presence turned out to pose as many opportunities as it did dangers for the region's Christians. European traders and explorers knew that Islam existed as a minority faith in western Africa, since they came into direct contact with many merchants and a few warlords in their travels who were Muslim.⁵⁹ Many different religions were observed in western Africa by the eighteenth century, including Islam, which had been influential in the region since the eleventh century. Examples abound of captive Africans in the Americas who continued to practice Islam, though it never threatened to dominate the slave quarters of the West Indies or North America. Nevertheless, black Muslim slaves, some of them distinguished by their ability to read and write, attracted the notice of slave owners in the Americas.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Brooks, *Eurafricans*, 296.

⁵⁹ James Walvin, *Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 153; Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 59, 62-67, 249.

⁶⁰ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 421.

Islam's expansion in West Africa was accelerated by the sporadic Muslim holy wars, or *jihads*, that engulfed the western African hinterland for much of the eighteenth century. As early as 1727, Fulbe Muslims attacked their pagan neighbors, selling some, in this case the Susu, into the Atlantic slave market.⁶¹ Ethnic groups, such as they were, could be split along religious lines, pitting one faction of believers in indigenous Africa religion against an Islamic faction. Such was the case for the Fulla living in what is now the state of Guinea. They divided themselves into Fulla-Timba (pagan) and Fulla-Labe (Islamic) groups, making war on each other even though they shared many of the same folkways and spoke the same language.⁶² Futa Jalon's Muslim armies won and lost numerous battles during the course of the eighteenth century, causing some of their number to be sold into slavery in the Americas. A decisive victory in 1789, however, consolidated Fulbe Muslim hegemony over Futa. After destroying its enemies at Sira-Kure, Futa Jalon was never successfully invaded again until European colonization occurred in the late nineteenth century.

One of the main reasons why Muslim leaders resorted to armed aggression against their neighbors was because those same neighbors had been raiding Muslim towns, capturing free Muslims, and selling them into slavery. Interestingly, western Africa's Muslims were not opposed to slavery as an institution: there is no prohibition against slavery in the Koran. Without any religious sanction, the Futa became a major slave trading people as the century wore on, selling the victims of its raids and wars to the French at Conakry and the British at James Fort at the mouth of the Gambia River.⁶³

⁶¹ Jean Boulègue and Jean Suret-Canale, "The Western Atlantic Coast," in J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, eds., *History of West Africa, Volume One*, third edition (Harlow, England: Longman, 1985), 524.

⁶² Bruce L. Mouser, ed., *Guinea Journals: Journeys into Guinea-Conakry During the Sierra Leone Phase, 1800-1821* (Washington, DC: University Press of America), 1979, 6.

⁶³ Boulègue, "Western Atlantic Coast," 524.

Thus, Muslim slave traders felt no need to justify their activities. Not so British slave traders, whose apologists used the threat of Islam's expansion as a rationalization for the trade's continuance. John Matthews, a lieutenant stationed aboard a British Royal Navy frigate that toured the coast of West Africa in the 1780s, maintained that to abolish the slave trade would mean bringing to an end the education of numerous Africans who were sent to Europe for that purpose. Gaining some Western learning and, Matthews hoped, a dose of Protestant Christianity, these sons and daughters of Africa would presumably then return to their native lands to remake them to European standards. The suspension of the slave trade would bring a halt to this "civilizing" program which would lead, he cunningly argued, to an even worse consequence: that all Africans would become "converts to the disciples of Mahomet."⁶⁴ The fear by many Europeans of an aggressive and expanding Islam did not end, it appears, with the defeat of the Turks at the gates of Vienna in 1683. Matthews drove the dagger of the lingering fear of Islam even deeper by invoking the specter of black Muslim slave armies storming the beaches at Brighton. He hypothesized that Morocco's army, which was "composed of black slaves purchased in the more southern parts of Africa," could be used to check the growth of Europe's international mercantile interests. If this threat to Britain's overseas trade was not worrisome enough, Matthews was also "credibly informed" that thousands of African slaves were sold each year to "Turkey, Persia, and Arabia," who might in turn utilize them in a race war against white Christians in Europe.⁶⁵ Hoping to wield the club of Muslim expansion to defend the slave trade, the British lieutenant did his best to exploit the ongoing conflict between East and West in the popular imagination.

⁶⁴ John Matthews, *A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone, on the Coast of Africa; Containing an Account of the Trade and Productions of the Country* (London, 1788), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>, 171.

⁶⁵ Matthews, *A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone*, 175.

Another Briton, professional adventurer Mungo Park, took away from his exposure to Islam in West Africa a quite different impression. On his trek back to the safety of a European trading fort on the Gambia River after a multi-year expedition into the African interior, Park fell in with a slave coffle making its way to the coast. He was glad to do so because it provided necessary protection and companionship in a beautiful but brutally rugged land whose people generally looked upon strangers, particularly Christians, as enemies. Also accompanying the coffle was a black Muslim schoolmaster named Fankooma who during the long hours on the trail explained to Park part of the curriculum he taught his students. Besides obligatory lessons in the Koran, Park was surprised to find that Fankooma's students also took lessons from the Jewish Torah, which was referred to as *Taureta la Moosa*. They had as well Arabic versions of the Psalms of David and the Book of Isaiah, known to them as *Zabora Dawidi* and *Lingeeli la Isa*, respectively. From these texts, Park observed, black African converts became acquainted with the stories of the Old Testament: Adam and Eve; "the death of Abel; the deluge; the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the story of Joseph and his brethren; the history of Moses, David, Solomon, etc." Park heard these familiar stories in the Mande language, told with "tolerable exactness."⁶⁶ The enslavement and transportation to the Americas of some of these black Muslims, educated as they were in the Old Testament, was certainly a possibility. Some of them, on hearing these same stories of Moses and David told anew by Protestant missionaries, could not help but feel some breath of familiarity in the new religion, which in turn may have facilitated their conversion to Christianity.

The European fear of Islamic hegemony and the desire to hold it in check may also have motivated Portugal's Christian evangelization of the West African kingdoms of Warri and Benin.

⁶⁶ Park, *Travels to the Interior Districts of Africa*, 313.

The Iteskiri kingdom of Warri was located south of Benin City and was at one time subject to it before breaking away in the late sixteenth century. Tension between the two peoples may have been caused by the conversion of the Warri royal court to Christianity at that time. The outcome was a series of military conflicts culminating in a major war in 1735-36 in which Warri wrested control of the lower Benin River from Benin. The victory gave Warri's rulers access to the Gulf of Guinea and European customers for their slaves.⁶⁷

The first serious attempt to bring Christianity to Warri occurred much earlier, though, when its *obu*, or monarch, sent his son to Portugal for a Western education in 1600. Upon his return after eight years of training, Domingos, as the Warri heir-apparent had been christened, built a church and did his best to propagate the faith among his subjects. All through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries intrepid monks, many of them Italian Capuchins, were sent to Warri, often at the request of the current *obu*. Several Capuchins came to Warri between 1715 and 1717, having some successes at the royal court. Reliance on the king made the foundations of Warri Christianity unstable, though, especially when the *obu*'s favor was lost, as it was in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The fortunes of the Christian church in this small kingdom waxed and waned after that, but there was still evidence of Christian activity as late as 1807, though it was clearly on the decline. Hardy as they were, the Capuchin fathers never succeeded in building a popular church. Without a mass following they could do little but rant against indigenous practices they believed unchristian. Warri's *obu* in the last years of the eighteenth century, though not an outright foe of Catholicism, still maintained most of his traditional African customs, including keeping a harem of some sixty wives. Christianity would

⁶⁷ A.I. Asiwaju and Robin Law, "From the Volta to the Niger, c 1600-1800," in J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, eds., *History of West Africa, Volume One*, third edition (Harlow, England: Longman, 1985), 418.

have to incorporate far more indigenous practices to be acceptable in Warri, something that most early white missionaries were unwilling to do.⁶⁸

Warri's neighbor and rival, the powerful lower Niger River valley kingdom of Benin, agreed to receive Christian missionaries as early as 1486. Trade and firearms appeared to be on the mind of Benin's *oba* more than spirituality, but again, the two cannot be completely divorced. In 1514, for example, Benin's Oba Ozulua went to war with a neighboring kingdom. It proved to be a long and brutal contest; the fighting was so hard that the *oba* called his Portuguese Christian missionaries from the capital city onto the battlefield. In a war for survival, Oba Ozulua wanted as much spiritual power on his side as he could muster. Ultimately though, Christianity made few inroads into Benin's culture. Much depended upon individual obas and their desire to propagate the foreign faith. Oba Ozulua died in battle in 1516 and few of his successors saw many advantages to the spread of Christianity in Benin. Spanish and Italian missionaries continued to visit the kingdom as late as 1710, but opposition from court administrators and indigenous religious leaders turned those overtures aside.⁶⁹

One last opening to Christianity occurred in 1710-11, but appeared to be the result of political expediency rather than spiritual awakening. A civil war had brought a new *oba* named Ozuere to the throne. He appears to have used Christianity as a tool to displace opponents who were allied with local indigenous religious leaders. Oba Ozuere only retained power for several months spanning the winter of 1710-11. After he was deposed Christian proselytizing by Europeans came to an end in Benin.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe*, 32; Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1983), 42.

⁶⁹ Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe*, 30.

⁷⁰ Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 51.

West Central Africa: Kongo and Angola

Christianity first came to the West Central African kingdom of the Kongo in 1484 on Portuguese ships. In several important respects West Central Africa in the early modern period was quite different from the West African kingdoms referenced above. First, much of the Congo Basin and Angola were linguistically and culturally homogeneous. Second, it was more heavily influenced, and for a longer time, by Europeans and Luso-Africans whose presence caused a more complex mix of cultures to develop. As a result, West Central Africans sold into the Atlantic slave trade tended to blend more easily into American culture, but also tended to lose their tribal and religious identities in the process.⁷¹ Those enslaved Christians baptized in Africa and practicing African Christianity may have rejected the Anglican Church's austere spirituality once they were transported to the British West Indies or North America, preferring to practice the faith of their homelands. Rather than join whites on Sunday for a celebration of their oppression, captive African Christians probably stayed in the slave quarters or, when they could, slipped out to hear a black preacher in the brush arbor. As Annette Laing notes, however, by separating themselves from white-dominated churches, blacks in the early eighteenth century were probably not consciously trying to resist slavery. Newly enslaved African Christians in the New World, if they did not attend Anglican services (or were prevented from doing so by their enslavers), continued to practice an African form of Christianity, adding selected parts of Anglican ritual and practice when they proved meaningful to them.⁷²

⁷¹ Linda M. Heywood, *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 13.

⁷² Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival*, 51; Annette Laing, "'Heathens and Infidels'?: African Christianization and Anglicanism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1700-1750," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 12, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 200-201.

Because West Central Africans were relatively homogeneous, Christianity blossomed into a popular religion, becoming the faith of some two million Kongolese by the seventeenth century. Though it acquired a mass following over time, Portuguese missionaries first concentrated on converting Kongo's ruling class. Capuchin monks succeeded in this goal in 1491 when they baptized the king of Kongo, who subsequently took the Portuguese name of João I. Catholicism's future in the subequatorial kingdom was assured when the monks wedded themselves to the winning party in the struggle for João I's succession. In 1506, the so-called Catholic party successfully pushed their candidate, Alfonso, onto the throne. He then enjoyed a long rule (1506-1543) which helped to seal the country's commitment to Christianity.⁷³

One of the reasons for Christianity's rapid growth and popularity during Alfonso's reign and thereafter were his efforts to link it to Western education. The extensive school system initiated by Alfonso taught the children of the elite, who then traveled the countryside teaching Christian dogma to the common folk. As a result, average Kongolese became devout Christians, attending Mass regularly, baptizing their children, and wearing the cross. At the same time, though, they also sought help and protection from traditional sources such as dead ancestors and local conjurers.⁷⁴

Attempts were made to harness the indigenous folkways and political heritage of West Central Africans to deepen their spiritual conviction and allegiance to the Catholic Church. In Soyo, a province of Kongo located just south of the Congo River estuary, Capuchin missionaries used saints' day festivals as a way to encourage participation by common people in the church,

⁷³ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 146; Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe*, 33.

⁷⁴ John Thornton, "Religious and Ceremonial Life in the Kongo and Mbundu Areas, 1500-1700," in Linda M. Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 84.

hoping thereby to promote Christian belief. This strategy included popular, hands-on participation incorporating visual and physical elements that appealed to the senses, whether or not Soyo's people completely understood them. Church leaders also instituted festivals with direct connections to events of importance in Soyo history. The feasts of St. James and St. Luke were both celebrated on the anniversaries of great national wartime victories. By engineering such coincidences, missionaries hoped to incorporate Soyo ethnic pride into Christianity at a grassroots level.⁷⁵

By the seventeenth century almost everyone in the kingdom of Kongo was a Christian. Some contemporary observers (and modern ones as well) claimed that it was a hopelessly adulterated form of Christianity they practiced, changed so much as to be almost unrecognizable. Certainly Christian ritual and practice in West Central Africa had been modified to fit the needs and culture of local people, but most complaints about the lack of religious orthodoxy came from Portuguese priests and soldiers who made claims against Kongolese Christians to enhance their own positions. More impartial observers, like the Dutch, simply stated that "the king of Congo and his people are Roman Catholics." Wooden crosses were erected throughout the countryside and every Kongolese had "their rosary or chapelet around their neck."⁷⁶

Kongolese Catholicism grew and perhaps achieved an even wider following as a result of political crises in West Central Africa during the second half of the seventeenth century. Once powerful, the kingdom of Kongo was defeated in battle at Ambouila by a Portuguese army in 1665. The political center at Sao Salvador, once a city of thousands, was abandoned and civil war devastated the region over the next thirty years, pitting rival factions against each other for

⁷⁵ Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in West Africa* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 56.

⁷⁶ Thornton, "Religious and Ceremonial Life," 83.

the moribund royal mantle. Kongo's political meltdown was partially halted in the early years of the eighteenth century, however, by a religious revival led by self-described saint Kimpa Vita, or Doña Beatriz. A Joan of Arc figure, Beatriz was purportedly a young Mukongo aristocrat who had been a priestess in the Marinda cult. At the age of twenty-two she had a vision demanding that she lead her people back to the deserted capital of São Salvador, political unity, and greatness. Using religion to spur cultural and political revitalization among marginalized peoples is a fairly common phenomenon, having occurred among the victims of European and American imperialism numerous times. Beatriz used the Catholic St. Anthony as her vehicle of spiritual revival and political unification. This saint was revered in both Portugal and Kongo because he was seen as a particularly powerful intercessor, in the case of the Kongolese, between black Africans and God.⁷⁷

Beatriz herself took on the identity of St. Anthony in 1704, claiming to die every Friday, dine with God to ask His help for her troubled people, and then being reborn on Saturday. She borrowed heavily from Catholic motifs but was at heart a nationalist. Beatriz maintained that Christ had been born in Central Africa the son of a servant woman and that the Holy Land was in fact located in the Kongo hinterland. Recognition of these truths would, she proclaimed, herald the coming of a golden age and a rebirth of the kingdom. Though borrowing much from Catholic dogma, the Kimpa Vita wanted little to do with the ambassadors of Western Christianity. White missionaries and priests were driven away by her followers and even the use of the cross was discontinued as it was believed to be the instrument of Christ's death. While

⁷⁷ For examples of religiously-based resistance movements by Native Americans, see Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983). Georges Balandier, *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo: From the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, Helen Weaver, trans. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1968), 256.

attempting to resurrect her country, Doña Beatriz was also helping to build a new African church that synthesized Christianity and indigenous African culture and religion.⁷⁸

As powerful as she became, Beatriz could not overcome Kongo's slave-trade induced internal fragmentation; her downfall came in 1706 when she became embroiled in a power struggle for the royal throne. King Pedro IV of Kongo was initially hesitant to have her executed even though she appeared to support a rival faction, but was persuaded by Capuchin spiritual advisors that she posed a threat which had to be eliminated. Burned as a heretic, the memory of Doña Beatriz lived on, though, in the Kongolese consciousness: hers was a broadly-based mass movement that touched many Kongolese and gave Christianity a more radical, nationalist flavor. People of African descent thus transformed Western religion into a theology of African liberation from white domination even before they boarded ships for the Americas.

Christianity's fate in Kongo was tied to the political and economic health of the kingdom, which was in turn tied to the selling of slaves to Europeans and Americans. The slave trade drained away West Central Africa's people, and with them went the power and autonomy of the Kongo state. By the seventeenth century, Kongo was a dependency of Portugal. Catholic missions to the depleted kingdom became sporadic during the next two centuries as Portugal's attention shifted south to Angola. Nevertheless, Christianity survived at the Kongo court and among its people. In the early nineteenth century a Christian manikongo, or king of Kongo, for example, sent his son to Portugal to be educated as a priest. Christianity's continuing presence in

⁷⁸ Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 261; Balandier, *Kingdom of the Kongo*, 259.

Kongo meant that of those slaves exported from the region to the Americas, some were probably Christians before they left Africa.⁷⁹

Afro-Protestant Missionaries

The Atlantic slave trade presented individual Africans and Atlantic creoles with a whole host of obstacles, but some still managed to move around the Atlantic basin with remarkable regularity. Many of them were slaves, of course, with little say in where they went, but slave or free, a surprising number took advantage of the slim opportunities afforded them to make a place for themselves in a world undergoing rapid change. Of this latter group, a small but significant minority chose to help propagate black Atlantic Protestant Christianity. Perhaps the most famous African Protestant of the eighteenth century was a Gold Coast native named Jacobus Capitein. Though thought of as an ethnic Fante, he did not know where or even when he was born and could have been of Nzima, Ahanta, Effutu, Ga, Ada, Ewe, or Fante stock. Whatever his exact origins, Capitein was removed from them at age seven or eight when he was seized in a raid. He was taken to the Dutch trading factory at Shama on the Gold Coast, and became a domestic slave of West India Company official Jacob van Goch. The young West African remained at Shama for several years until Goch decided to return to Holland in 1728, taking the now teenage Capitein with him.⁸⁰

Over the next decade and a half Capitein received a remarkable education and converted to Christianity. He became so thoroughly acculturated that his mission in life soon became to bring the “true” religion to his fellow Africans. His sense of missionary zeal was fueled by his intellectual training at one of Europe’s finest institutions of higher learning: Leiden University.

⁷⁹ Balandier, *Kingdom of the Kongo*, 261; Northrup, *Africa’s Discovery of Europe*, 35. For pagan and Christian Kongolese in the Americas, see Esteban Montejo, *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, Miguel Barnet, ed., Jocasta Innes, trans. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 26, 33-37, 126-149.

⁸⁰ Folarin Shyllon, *Black People in Britain, 1555-1833* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 62.

After five years of intensive study at its school of divinity, Jacobus Capitein graduated with a dissertation that made him one of the most famous students and black men in Europe. Arguing for the need to evangelize the faith in Africa, he claimed that slavery and Christianity were not, in fact, hostile institutions. The Dutch, he reassured them, could continue buying, selling, and owning African slaves and still remain good Christians. Moreover, they could convert their slaves to the true religion without having to free them. These arguments, in one form or another, had been advanced before by self-interested whites, but coming from an African and a former slave was a balm to Dutch consciences. Capitein's dissertation was published in book form, widely distributed, and made the publishers, if not the author, a handsome profit.⁸¹

To fully understand how a former slave could write such a treatise, Capitein and his work must be viewed in their historical context. His own experience with slavery had been short and fairly benign, perhaps allowing him to believe that, since Atlantic-world slavery brought millions of pagan Africans into the Church, the ends justified the means. Slavery and a generally rigid hierarchical social system existed in Africa at the time, as well, and most people in Europe and Africa were only then beginning to question their legitimacy. Moreover, though hardly benign, slavery in Africa was usually nowhere as harsh or foreclosing in future life possibilities as it was in the Americas. Never having witnessed first-hand the misery of life for African captives on a West Indies sugar island or a Brazilian plantation, Capitein may in some measure be excused some of his conclusions.⁸²

Capitein's views on slavery and religion brought him a good deal of attention from official Holland. The Dutch West India Company took notice of the young theologian, appointing him

⁸¹ David Nii Anum Kpobi, *Saga of a Slave: Jacobus Capitein of Holland and Elmina* (Legon: Cootek, Ltd., 2001), 34.

⁸² Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe*, 170.

chaplain of its trading castle of Elmina on Africa's Gold Coast. In 1742, after fifteen years in Holland spent soaking up European religion, scholarship, and culture, Jacobus Capitein arrived on the coast of Africa an African in skin color only, having even forgotten his natal language. How he identified himself is an interesting question: did he think of himself as a member of an extended family, a village, the Fante people, an African, black, a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, or an educated European of the upper-classes? He could have been all of them, a combination of several or, since his cultural inputs were so diverse and at odds with each other, he could have been cut off from all of them, a lonely figure with little to cling to but personal faith.

One possible answer to the ambiguities of Capitein's self-concept may lie in his work. As chaplain of Elmina castle, he was responsible for the spiritual welfare of the WIC's white employees. He was also told to evangelize his fellow Africans, something only one other Dutch parson on the Gold Coast had been instructed to do, and the mission Capitein personally believed his most important. Realizing the broad cultural chasm that divided him from his potential flock, Capitein took action on several fronts to bridge the gap. In short order, the chaplain arranged with a local family to marry one of their daughters as a means of integrating into African society. Problems with the match quickly surfaced when Capitein's religious superiors, the Classis of Amsterdam, dismissed his marriage plans because the bride was not a Christian. Realizing their parson's plight, however, the Classis sent a white Dutch woman from Holland to take her place as a more suitable wife for the chaplain of Elmina castle.⁸³

The order proscribing the marriage of Christians to non-Christians had consequences beyond those for Elmina Castle's parson. Shortly after he arrived on the Gold Coast, Capitein

⁸³ Kpobi, *Saga of a Slave*, 50.

opened a school, knowing that the best way to attract locals to the Dutch Reformed Church was to offer their children an education. The school's curriculum included a large dose of Christian philosophy along with reading, writing, and mathematics and was an instant success. By mid 1743, enrollment had climbed to forty-five students, comprised of four mulatto boys, seven mulatto girls, five black girls, while the remaining students were all indigenous African boys. The problem here was that, assuming that the African boys became members of the Reformed Church, most of them would be unable to marry because there were not enough Christian girls at Elmina. Capitein complained about this obvious deficiency to the Classis, but the Amsterdam fathers blithely replied that he should recruit more African girls. He found it difficult to do so, however, because local black families had stopped sending their daughters to his school. The problem for them lay in the schoolmaster's moralist lessons that taught the girls not to give themselves to Europeans for material gain. Most African cultures at the time accepted concubinage. In this case strict adherence to European Christian rules of sexual conduct came up against African folkways, making further growth of the church in Africa almost impossible.⁸⁴

Capitein's mission to the Gold Coast was not without its successes. Though he had forgotten his native language, Elmina's chaplain recognized the importance of being able to communicate effectively with local people. Many of his mulatto students knew some Dutch, as did those students whose parents worked with Europeans at the castle. Nevertheless, Capitein knew that spreading the gospel among literate Elminans meant making religious texts available in the indigenous language. To that end he translated and published three documents into Fante in 1744. The Lord's Prayer, the Twelve Articles of Faith, and the Ten Commandments, in their

⁸⁴ K. Nwachukwu-Ogedengbe, "Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Aboh (Nigeria)," in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 151; Kpobi, *Saga of a Slave*, 55.

Fante translation, became standard texts in his school and, he hoped, would provide an opening wedge for greater acceptance of Christianity.⁸⁵

The reputation and importance of Capitein and his school extended far beyond Elmina's town limits. News of the Christian school infiltrated the African interior as far north as the Asante capital of Kumasi. Merchants and slave traders traveling between the two cities no doubt informed the king of Asante, Opoku Ware, of Capitein's academy. Asantehene Ware had hoped to send fourteen young Asante to Holland to be educated, but his plan was deemed impractical by the WIC's director-general, who suggested that the young Africans enroll at the Capitein's school instead. Opoku Ware agreed to this plan and the young Asantes became students in Elmina. Capitein's death before the age of 40 appears to have cut short this early thrust of Christianity into West Africa's interior. He died suddenly in 1747 with a mixed legacy of frustration and the potential for great, but unfulfilled, success.⁸⁶

Another African who made his way to Europe and returned to Africa to propagate Protestant Christianity was a man named Philip Quaque (pronounced Kwaku). The first record of young Quaque we have comes from Society for the Propagation of the Gospel missionary Thomas Thompson in the 1750s. Thompson's only real accomplishment after five years on the Gold Coast was to send three young Africans to England in 1754 to be educated "in Christian Principles and Civility of Manners." Of the three, only Quaque survived the cold and unhealthy British environment to return to his native country. After marrying a white English woman, Catherine Blunt, he went back to the Gold Coast in 1765 as the Church of England's first fully ordained black priest to take up the post of "Missionary, School Master, and Catechist to the

⁸⁵ Kpobi, *Saga of a Slave*, 58.

⁸⁶ Kpobi, *Saga of a Slave*, 60.

Negroes,” as well as chaplain to the “Company” whites at Britain’s Cape Coast Castle slave trading outpost.⁸⁷

Quaque soon discovered that the task set out for him by the SPG was nearly impossible to fulfill. The whites of Cape Coast rejected him because of his skin color. He could have dealt with that handicap except that in the ten years he spent in England he had forgotten Fante, his mother tongue, finding it difficult to communicate with his fellow Africans. Like Jacobus Capitein, he also had probably lost most of his cultural identity as an African, thinking of himself as a middle-class Anglican clergyman (which he was). Being paid little by the SPG, he turned to trade to survive and was largely unmolested by church officials who over the years only occasionally corresponded with their African missionary. With all of the obstacles that stood in the way of his evangelical progress, Philip Quaque persevered, remaining a missionary and chaplain employed by the SPG for fifty years until his death in 1816. Little is known of his half-century of service since few pieces of correspondence from or to him survive, though his role as a pioneering indigenous missionary makes him an important agent of black Atlantic Christian culture. Paul Isert, a Dutch West India Company’s agent at the West African trading castle of Christiansborg who must have met him on one of the African’s missionary or trading sojourns apparently respected him. Isert recalled that Quaque was “a very learned and agreeable man.”⁸⁸

Overlooked Role of Africa’s Christians

The relatively large number of African Christians and their role in influencing the creation and development of African American Christianity has largely been neglected by scholars of the African diaspora. Captives from the kingdom of Kongo were the most likely to have brought

⁸⁷ Thompson, *Memoirs of an English Missionary*, 67; Northrup, *Africa’s Discovery of Europe*, 171.

⁸⁸ J. Kofi Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Missions and Church Foundations, 1482-1919* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), 8; Winsnes, *Letters on West Africa*, 150; *Papers of Philip Quaque*-Collection 151, Billy Graham Center Archives, <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives>.

their African version of Catholicism with them to the Americas. Forced immigration from West Central Africa made up roughly half of all the black men and women who crossed the Atlantic between 1500 and 1880, increasing the probability that many slaves were Christians or at least had an adequate knowledge of it before they left Africa. The odds were increased, moreover, by the sheer length of time Christian missionaries had evangelized in both West and West Central Africa, beginning in the late fifteenth century. As a result of the long exposure to European culture and Europeans, a large creole population existed, as well, on Africa's Atlantic coast, many of whom became Catholics and, in West Africa, some of the first Afro-Protestants. Because most foreign observers harbored hostile opinions of these mixed-race Atlantic creoles, they dismissed the Christian faith of Anglo, Dutch, Franco, and Luso-Africans, while conveniently ignoring the many cleavages that rocked European Christianity throughout this same period. Though numerous white missionaries attempted to spread the faith in Africa, the only group who experienced real success were those native African clergy who, through their positions as clan or national leaders, had the political power and cultural influence to bring their people into the church with them.

To induce a whole people to switch their spiritual allegiance, foreign missionaries had to offer some very compelling reasons. In all of Atlantic Africa, the lure of Western trade goods gave Christian evangelists vital openings, but access to European guns and textiles, by themselves, was never enough to stimulate wholesale conversion. Perhaps the most critical factor in establishing Christianity in the long run was the building of mission schools that taught West Central Africans both Western mathematics and business, but also Christian devotion. The inability of Protestants to build and run successful Christian schools (for the reasons discussed), and the slow decline of Portugal's influence in the region, limited the effectiveness of the

Christian message in West Africa. Nevertheless, many West Africans converted to Christianity over the first three centuries of its presence there. Though it is not possible to estimate how many West and West Central African Christians were enslaved, survived the Middle Passage, and lived long enough in America to influence African American Christianity, enough had made the harrowing journey by the early eighteenth century that Africa must be considered as one of the more important sources of black Christianity in the West Indies and North America.

CHAPTER 3
THE FAVORITE OF HEAVEN: ANTIGUA AND THE GROWTH OF AFRO-
CHRISTIANITY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

African Christians encountered many challenges as they attempted to negotiate an eighteenth-century world made turbulent by capitalist transformation, international slavery, and the escalating violence that followed in the wake of both. They nevertheless persevered, helping to build a black Atlantic culture wherever fate took them. Those who were captured and brought to Iberian and French colonies in America could gain some comfort in the arms of the Catholic Church, which accepted all applicants, regardless of skin color or condition of servitude. Africans sold into bondage in British, Dutch, and other Protestant-controlled colonies were not so fortunate: for a variety of reasons few Africans became Protestants in North America or the West Indies before the 1730s. All this changed with the coming of the evangelical Great Awakening in Britain and America and the rise of the Pietist movement in Europe. For the first time blacks were offered (and accepted) the Protestant message in large numbers. Slaves and freemen in North America were evangelized, but it should not be forgotten that people of African descent in the West Indies were also part of this general religious awakening. Afro-Caribbeans, in fact, were the first people of color in the Americas to join Protestant congregations in large numbers, beginning as early as 1732 in the Danish Virgin Islands.¹

Afro-Protestantism in British America can also trace some of its roots to the West Indies. By the mid 1770s, Methodist and Moravian missionaries had baptized thousands of blacks on the

¹ Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 182; Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 220; A.G. Roeber, ““The Origin of Whatever Is Not English among Us”: The Dutch-speaking and the German-speaking Peoples of Colonial British America,” in Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 220; C.G.A. Oldendorp, *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, Johann Jakob Bossard, ed., Arnold R. Highfield and Vladimir Barac, trans. and ed. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987), 271.

island of Antigua, which itself became the seedbed for evangelization of the rest of the Protestant Caribbean. This chapter investigates the reasons why Antigua became a center of early Afro-Protestantism in the Americas and why Afro-Antiguans and, ultimately, people of color elsewhere, were attracted to the evangelical message. The actions of religious individuals in Antigua, the island's political economy, Afro-Caribbeans' need for stability, and pure chance all contributed to the island's central role in the Christianization of people of African descent. As important as these factors were, though, ultimately it was the struggle for cultural continuity and ethnic identity waged by New World Africans themselves that proved the most significant reason for their conversion to Protestantism.

Part of the problem that Atlantic creole evangelists like Christian and Rebecca Proten faced in trying to bring Christianity to Africans in the West Indies and Africa had to do with Atlantic Africa's great multiplicity of ethnic and sub-ethnic group identities. Missionaries trained in Europe were accustomed to the larger political units with homogenous populations and centralized political organizations that existed in much of eighteenth-century Europe. Africa's overwhelming ethnic heterogeneity meant that older tactics, like converting regional rulers so that their people would follow their example, did not always work. Political units in most of Atlantic Africa in the eighteenth century were so fragmented that even if a priest or missionary succeeded in bringing one group into the church, the number of people actually converted would not extend beyond a core group of villages which constituted the effective territory for that one people. On the other side of the hill or, for that matter, merely downstream several miles was another people who considered themselves distinct from and only marginally connected to the

neighboring group which had embraced Christianity. They could also be rivals or even mortal enemies who would think twice before taking up the faith of their adversaries.²

Adding to, and making more severe, Africa's political and ethnic fragmentation were the horrors and dislocations of the Atlantic slave trade. The international trade in human beings exacerbated Africa's already endemic problems caused by wars, kidnapping, debt peonage, environmental disasters, and judicial slavery. These pre-existing problems led to even greater ethnic and political atomization, making Christian evangelization immensely difficult in Africa. Yet that same trade in human flesh might have made African captives more likely to embrace Christianity in the Americas.³

Mungo Park and the Slave Trade

An example of the dislocation to ethnic identity caused by the Atlantic slave trade and how it influenced the development of Afro-Protestantism in the Americas is found in the travel journal of British adventurer Mungo Park. On his historic trek through western Africa in the mid 1790s, Park fell in with a slave coffle making the long journey from the western Sudan's hot, dry interior to Senegambia's wet, tropical coast. Most of the captives in Park's coffle had been on the road for quite some time, in the course of which they suffered from insufficient diets, exposure to the harsh West African environment, bands of marauding bandits, and if they lagged behind, brutal punishment at the end of a whip. Many of the captives in Park's coffle had initially been made prisoners by the Segu Bambara in a war with the neighboring kingdoms of Wassela and Kaarta. The conflict between these three kingdoms was part of a larger policy of expansion instigated by Segu's King Ngolo Jarra (1766-90), and continued by his immediate

² Donald R. Wright, "What do you Mean There Were no Tribes in Africa?": Thoughts on Boundaries – and Related Matters – in Precolonial Africa," *History in Africa*, 26 (1999): 414.

³ Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 9-36.

successors. Under Jarra's direction, Segu expanded to its greatest extent, fighting wars of aggression that brought most of the western Niger valley into its orbit, as well as many slaves which were sold primarily to the Asante to the south, but also to local slave merchants. The captives in Park's coffle were originally brought to Segu, a city on the banks of the upper Niger River some seven hundred miles from the Atlantic coast. A city of whitewashed one and two-story buildings and numerous mosques, the Bambara capital of 30,000 people took Park by surprise because of its size, wealth, and the power of its rulers. Few cities of that size existed in Africa at the time; its presence in the heart of what most Europeans considered an uncivilized continent truly astonished the Briton.⁴

In Segu, some of the war captives had been imprisoned for over three years. They were eventually auctioned off to traders, who in turn offered them for sale at slave markets along the Niger. They were finally bought by a West African named Karfa, the head slattee, or slave trader, of Park's coffle, and began their long trek to a Gambia River trading post and America. There were twenty-seven slaves in the coffle when it left the Niger valley, made up of at least two ethnic groups (the Wassela and Kaarta). It is difficult, however, to ascertain whether these prisoners of war thought of themselves as members of discrete ethnic groups. In an incident that occurred early in the journey, one of the prisoners had somehow acquired a knife, with which he managed to free himself. He did not, though, bother to cut the bonds of his fellow prisoners before running off into the night, leading to the conclusion that he was probably not related to them through ties of family, clan, or ethnicity. If this escaped prisoner shared a sense of ethnic

⁴ Philip D. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 180.

identity with his fellow captives, it was not strong enough to foster a collective identity capable of creating and sustaining effective resistance to oppression prior to leaving Africa.⁵

During the long march to the sea, the captives were kept “constantly in irons,” with the right leg of one secured to the left leg of his or her companion. Likewise, every four pairs of captives were tethered together by their necks with a “strong rope of twisted thongs.” To prevent nighttime escapes, additional shackles were put on their hands and an iron chain was wound around their necks. The rigors of travel in the hot West African interior were made worse for the captives because of the pace they were forced to maintain; up to thirty miles per day on many occasions. The enslaved were also made to carry heavy loads of trade goods in addition to food and any slaves who could not maintain the killing pace. Two captives ultimately died on the trail before reaching the Gambia River.⁶

One member of the Park’s coffle who could no longer continue the march was lucky enough to escape death from exhaustion, starvation, or West Africa’s hungry predators. Instead, he was exchanged at a local village for a young woman. This girl had probably been living in that village for some time, because when she realized her fate, having “a load put upon her head” and a “rope fastened around her neck,” she cried and tearfully called out goodbyes to her former companions. By sheer chance, this young person’s life, which though not secure had probably been fairly stable for a number of years, was suddenly turned upside down. That she was traded away so easily meant that she was not considered part of her owner’s extended family and therefore had few, if any, rights or legal protections against being sold away from the village. She no doubt spoke the same language as her owners, but was from a different ethnic or lineage

⁵ Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa: Performed Under the Direction and Patronage of the African Association in the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797... With an Appendix containing Geographical Illustrations of Africa by Major Renndell* (London, 1799), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>, 318.

⁶ Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, 327.

group who had suffered defeat in war or been captured in a slave raid. Her ethnic identity unclear, the young woman was thrown into line with the other captives, part of a motley assortment of peoples taken from a wide area of the western Sudanese hinterland.⁷

As with many other historical events, chance and contingency played a large role in the development of African American Christianity. It was only by ill-luck that a young woman was exchanged for a crippled man in slattee Karfa's slave coffle, snatched from a familiar way of life on the western Sudanese savannah and transported into the maw of New World slavery. Having survived the trek from her former village to the port of Pisania on the Gambia River (a trip of over 100 miles), she was loaded onto the American-owned slave ship *Charleston*, along with 130 other captives in mid June, 1797. The trip down the Gambia in the middle of the summer was, according to Park, "hot, moist, and unhealthy." Before reaching the slave port of Goree on the West African coast, eight of those on board, including four crewmen, the surgeon, and three captives were all dead from disease. The captives' suffering was further prolonged when the *Charleston* could not embark for America for over three months because of a lack of provisions. While waiting, they were either kept in the ship's hold or in Goree's infamous dungeons.⁸

The *Charleston* finally weighed anchor in October. Because the ship's surgeon had died on the Gambia and Park was a doctor and needed a way to return to England anyway, he signed on as the *Charleston's* medical officer. During this Atlantic voyage, Park counted a total of 22 deaths of Africans: three died on the trip down the Gambia River, eight more passed away while

⁷ Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, 353; Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 15.

⁸ Park, *Travels Into the Interior Districts of Africa*, 361. For the size of slave ships and the number of captives on them, see James A. Rawley, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 338; E. Phillip Leveen, "A Quantitative Analysis of the Impact of British Suppression Policies on the Volume of the Nineteenth Century Atlantic Slave Trade," in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 60, 62, 63.

waiting in Goree, and eleven lost their lives during the Middle Passage. Not included in Park's calculations were the two captives who died on the overland march to Pisania, along with those captives from other slave coffles who also lost their lives on the trek to the seaport. If the seven percent of captives Park's coffle lost on the overland trip is extrapolated to the remaining 123 captives supplied by other slattees to the *Charleston*, the total number of Africans who perished before they left Africa amounted to nine. When added to Park's initial death toll, the percentage of African captives who died because of their enslavement and transportation to the Americas on this journey reached fully 22 percent of the slaves. That is a very high figure when compared to the average mortality for British slave ships, which because of closer attention to hygiene and sanitation dropped to roughly 5 percent by the late eighteenth century.⁹

More captives would certainly have perished if the *Charleston* had followed its intended plan of voyage. The slave ship's original destination was Charleston, South Carolina, but because the *Charleston* was so old and in such bad repair, taking on water as fast as it could be pumped out, the captain decided to steer for the much closer West Indies. In consequence, the trip between Goree and the new debarkation point of St. John, Antigua took only 35 days, undoubtedly saving the lives of many more captives. To keep the *Charleston* afloat, "some of the ablest of the Negro men" were put to work manning the bilge pumps. Their efforts saved the ship and everyone aboard, but as Park observed, working the pumps day and night over several weeks "produced a complication of miseries not easily to be described" for those captive thus employed. When they finally reached Antigua, it was decided to sell all the captives on that island, rather than risk losing the entire "cargo" and the ship itself on the last leg of the journey

⁹ Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America*, 142; Robin Haines and Ralph Schlomwitz, "Explaining the Mortality Decline in the Eighteenth-Century British Slave Trade," *The Economic History Review*, new series, 53, no. 2 (May 2000): 265.

to South Carolina. Again, chance and the economic calculations of the slave trade changed forever the lives of this group of captive Africans. Instead of working the rest of their days in the American South cultivating rice, indigo, or cotton, our fictive West African girl and her fellow shipmates ended up in Antigua. The politics and economics of sugar planting, as well as fate, dictated where they would live and what their futures would be as the new century unfolded. For some of the *Charleston's* unwilling passengers, ending up in Antigua would shape not only their physical circumstances, but their spiritual lives as well. A large number of them, including perhaps the young West African slave woman mentioned by Mungo Park, would come to embrace evangelical Protestantism.¹⁰

Antigua: The Center of Afro-Caribbean Protestantism

Given Africans' cultural biases and the roadblocks put up by slavery, it is remarkable that slaves in the Caribbean, like our hypothetical West African girl, chose to join either the Methodists or the Moravians, but they did. By the time all slaves in the British West Indies were emancipated in 1834, fully one quarter were Christians.¹¹ Given that statistic, it would be natural to assume that Jamaica, Britain's largest, richest, and most important Caribbean colony, would be at the center of Afro-Caribbean Christianization. During the eighteenth century though, it was the much smaller British possession of Antigua which claimed the mantle as the birthplace of Afro-Protestantism in the British Caribbean. Antigua was, in Methodist Bishop Thomas Coke's estimation, "the favorite of heaven," and the number of converts, almost all of whom were people of color, bear out Coke's judgment. By 1798, Moravians in Antigua counted 11,105 full-time attendees, which included 8,596 who had received baptism, 269 candidates for baptism, and

¹⁰ Park, *Travels to the Interior Districts of Africa*, 363

¹¹ Barry W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Kingston, Jamaica: The Press, University of the West Indies, 1995), 72.

1,540 “New People.” Afro-Methodists in Antigua, though not as numerous as the Moravians, were still impressive, with a total of 3,516 mostly black members by 1804. Taken together, the roughly 14,500 Afro-Moravians and Methodists at the turn of the eighteenth century accounted for almost 40 percent of Antigua’s entire population of some 33,000, black, brown, and white. These figures are all the more impressive when compared to Jamaica, which in 1804 only tallied 520 baptized Methodists and 315 Moravians out of a total population of over 300,000.¹²

The reasons why people of African descent converted to Protestant Christianity in such large numbers in Antigua more than they did elsewhere are various, having to do with such factors as the relative power of the royal government, the extension of civil rights to a larger portion of society, the actions of religiously-minded individuals, and the ethnic make-up of the island’s black population. Antigua’s geography and economy also played pivotal roles in shaping the religious and secular lives of its inhabitants.

What brought Africans to Antigua in the first place was the need for their labor. The island’s system of racial slavery began in the 1650s as a result of what Richard Dunn has called the Sugar Revolution. Sugar culture was brought to the British West Indies by the Dutch in the 1640s, initially to Barbados. It spread north over the next several decades, quickly supplanting the smaller-scale tobacco and cotton growing enterprises previously established in the Leeward Islands by middling British immigrants. Subsequently, a slave society centered almost completely on the production of sugarcane pushed out most of the first white settlers. Much of the land, made expensive by the high profits garnered from sugar and its scarcity, was bought up and taken over by planters with money or access to it. Though dominated by sugar culture,

¹² Thomas Coke, *A Farther Account of the Late Missionaries to the West Indies: In a Letter from the Rev. Dr. Coke, to the Rev. John Wesley* (London: 1789), 3; Elsa V. Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1965), 281, 298; *West Indies Correspondence*, box 111, 1803-04, Methodist Missionary Society Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Antigua was also noted for its agricultural diversity, at least by the standards of the slave-era Caribbean. Cotton continued to be exported in commercial quantities until the early years of the nineteenth century, when its market share was gobbled up by planters in the American South. Sheep were also raised for their wool, as were cattle for their beef. Food crops and livestock were grown mostly in the southern parishes of the island where the land was not as fertile and therefore not as well suited for sugar culture. Antigua's agricultural diversity only went so far though: by 1800, fully 80% of the island's slaves worked to produce sugar.¹³

Antigua is roughly 108 square miles in area, making it a medium-sized colony for the British West Indies, if large colonies such as Jamaica, British Honduras, and British Guiana are excluded. By the middle of the eighteenth century, most of the island's forests had been cleared to make way for sugar cultivation. The lack of almost any jungle, along with a relatively flat topography, made slave revolts difficult since there were fewer places for rebellious slaves to meet or hide. Unable to resist politically, some slaves may have calculated that accepting Christianity and gaining some benefits from it was the only safe avenue of resistance left open to them. Another consequence of Antigua's physical environment that turned out to influence its slaves' religious decisions was the island's relatively flat topography. Because it has few mountains, moist air cannot rise up mountain slopes to condense, meaning that Antigua gets relatively little rainfall and is subject to periodic and sometimes devastating droughts. Dry spells struck Antigua a number of times during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one of the worst events occurring in 1779. In that year, ponds dried up almost completely, causing many cattle and other livestock to die of thirst. Thousands of Antigua's slaves also died horribly.

What caused the devastation in Antigua in 1779-80, however, went beyond the drought. The

¹³ David Barry Gaspar, *Bondsmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1985), 65; Higman, *Slave Populations*, 52.

American Revolution raging to the north led to an embargo of American goods to the British West Indies, cutting off a primary source of food. Compounding the crisis was an infestation of worms that destroyed the island's pea and potato crops. As a result of dry weather, the embargo of American corn, and agricultural pests, some 10 percent of Antigua's slaves, roughly 3,500 men, women, and children, died in an epidemic of dysentery brought on by a lack of both food and potable water. It was in the middle of this crisis that, by sheer coincidence, English Methodist missionary John Baxter moved to the island and began preaching to the slaves. Despite the truly dire conditions, or perhaps because of them, Baxter's church grew rapidly; the severe privation being, in Methodist leader Thomas Coke's words, "God's opportunity." Baxter's presence and compassionate outreach to the slaves during a time of suffering helped cement his and Methodism's reputation among Antigua's blacks, laying the foundation for future growth: Baxter gathered 600 Afro-Antiguans to hear him preach in that first drought-plagued year alone.¹⁴

The Search for Religious Options

Much like John Baxter's appearance in Antigua during the 1779 drought, the captives shipped to the Americas on the leaky ship *Charleston* in 1797 arrived and stayed in Antigua purely by chance. Their lives thereafter would be dictated by the demands of the West Indian sugar economy, the men who controlled and defended it, and to some extent by those few men and women who were trying to ameliorate the conditions of slavery in the British West Indies and elsewhere. Though caught up in a brutal system that killed more captives than the slaves

¹⁴ Higman, *Slave Populations*, 41; Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 6; Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History Each Island; With an Account of the Missions Instituted on those Islands, from the Commencement of their Civilization, but More Especially of the Missions which have been Established in the Archipelago by the Society late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley. Volume II* (Liverpool: Nutall, Fisher, and Dixon, 1808), 417, 429; J.R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery, 1750-1834* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 66.

could naturally reproduce without constant infusions of more people from Africa, the bondsmen and women of Antigua did exercise some control over their lives and destinies. One choice that a slave in Antigua could make for her or himself had to do with religion.

The young woman whom Mungo Park noted being exchanged for a lame older man in a West African village and thrust into Atlantic world slavery, had just that choice to make when she was hustled off the *Charleston* on a wharf at St. John, sold to a local sugar planter, and began work on his plantation. We do not know for sure if she survived the Atlantic crossing, of course, but the fact that she was young, presumably healthy, and a woman, increased her chances of making the passage alive. Aside from the fact that young, healthy adults resist ill-treatment and disease better than the very young and the very old, women on slave ships were usually not shackled during the voyage and were generally allowed more time on the top deck to enjoy the benefits of fresh air and sunshine, an amenity the more potentially dangerous male captives were not proffered.¹⁵

Once in Antigua, this West African girl, assuming she survived, could have chosen between several religious providers for her spiritual needs. As a native African, she might quite naturally have chosen the African-derived obeah cult. Priests of obeah were themselves usually bosals, or native Africans. They held great influence, according to a white observer in the Leeward Islands, over fellow Africans who, “have great Faith in it [obeah], and practice its Charms for Protection of their Persons and Provision Grounds, Hogs, Poultry etc.” Obeah men and women were, as well, renowned in the West Indies, as they had been in the Old World, for their skill in the use of herbal medicine. An observer of obeah priests in St. Kitts noted that

¹⁵ John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West Indies; In His Majesties Ships the Swallow and the Weymouth* (London, 1735), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>, 71; James Penny describes the Middle Passage to Parliament, *British Sessional Papers, Commons, Accounts and Papers*, 1789, XXVI, Pt. 2.

“from their Skill in Simples, and the Virtues of Plants, they sometimes operate extraordinary Cures in Diseases that have baffled the Skill of regular Practitioners, and more especially in foul Sores and Ulcers.” As Willem Bosman discovered on the Gold Coast, most Africans did not draw boundaries between the spiritual and the physical.¹⁶

Obeah men and women were respected healers, but they were also feared for their ability to put curses on the unsuspecting and to concoct poisons, both of which could kill. While poisoning was a chemical reality, the power of laying baleful curses derived from the spiritual beliefs of many slaves, and could be just as potent. An obeah woman was accused of causing the deaths of some one hundred slaves on a Jamaican plantation in 1775. A raid on her small home by the resident white planter produced, among other mystical artifacts, a large earthen jar that contained “round balls of earth or clay ... whitened on the outside, and variously compounded, some with hair and rags or feathers ... others blended with ... the upper section of the skulls of cats, or stuck round with cats teeth and claws, or with human or dogs teeth, and some glass beads of different colours.” Possible poison was detected in “a great many eggshells filled with a viscous or gummy substance,” though the planter “neglected to examine” their contents. Though dismissing the metaphysical power of obeah, the planter knew, from testimony from one of his slaves, that the captives of his estate had for a long period of time been terrorized by this woman. He also knew that he had to act, or his plantation would no longer make him money. He ordered the obeah woman’s house “instantly pulled down, with the whole of its contents committed to the flames,” and the offending woman, a native of Popo on West Africa’s Slave Coast,

¹⁶ For a description of bosals or bozales, see Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 15, 18. Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands*, 248.

transported to Cuba. Thereafter, the captives on his estate only died from overwork, the effects of corporal punishment, and insufficient diets, rather from poison or psychological terror.¹⁷

Some whites disliked the African-derived spirituality practiced by their slaves for other reasons. Obeah was sometimes used to detect wrongdoers and enforce community values in the slave quarters. Methodist minister Thomas Coke described a traditional African dance and religious ceremony which took place, apparently with some regularity, on the island of Tortola, though it was likely practiced throughout the Caribbean. Called by Coke the camson, its purpose was to identify guilty parties with the help of dead ancestors. The camson, besides being “heathen superstition,” was for the prudish Coke also a “filthy, lascivious dance ... in which every lustful inclination was indulged to excess.” Even more threateningly, the entire ceremony was supervised by a shadowy figure that interpreted the commands of the dead and delivered judgment on the accused. These were rivals that Coke could not abide. Triumphantly, he proclaimed that with the coming of Methodism, “This diabolical custom is now totally abandoned.” Coke’s victory was tempered, however, because he was forced to admit that only “many” and not all had “exchanged it for the truth as it is in Jesus...” Though Protestant Christianity made significant inroads among Caribbean blacks in the eighteenth century, it should be noted that a majority remained faithful to more African-derived religions. If our young African woman was attracted to obeah, she must quickly, though, have become aware of the hazards its use entailed. Cornelia, a Popo woman from the Slave Coast and a former member

¹⁷ Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies. In Two Volumes. By Bryan Edwards, Esq. of the Island of Jamaica, Volume II* (Dublin, 1793), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>. For another example of the survival and power of traditional African spirituality in the Americas, see Esteban Montejo, *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, Miguel Barnet, ed., Jocasta Innes, trans. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 133.

of Antigua's Moravian church, was not only "expelled from our [Moravian] fellowship for dealing in Obeah work," but also "hanged for that very reason" on October 22, 1817.¹⁸

Mungo Park's young West African woman might also have considered joining the Anglican Church in Antigua. The Church of England had been actively proselytizing black people in Britain's colonial possessions since the establishment of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in 1701. For a variety of reasons, including planter resistance, few qualified missionaries, and a general lack of interest by the slaves themselves, the SPG's initiative among people of color atrophied until the early nineteenth century. A subordinate yet practical reason why Afro-Caribbeans stayed away from Anglican Church services was the simple matter of cost. Baptism, as John Luffman observed while visiting Antigua in the 1780s, was "allowed by some owners," but slaves had to pay the local Anglican priest "for executing his office" and the price of one dollar was beyond the reach of most people of color. If they could afford the expense of membership in the Church of England, blacks still did not receive equal treatment. At death, for example, even Christian slaves were buried in graveyards separate from those of whites. Dying was also expensive for black Anglicans. A fee was charged not only for the burial service, but also for a ceremonial ringing of the church bells. Though desperately poor, Afro-Caribbeans did try to pay their respects to the dead, usually laying out money for the less expensive bell ringing, while performing the funeral service without assistance from an Anglican priest. Expenses for blacks' funerals were kept low by legislative mandate in the British Virgin Islands, though probably not out of concern for the household budgets of its slaves. Legislation passed by the Leeward Islands assembly in the early eighteenth century

¹⁸ Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of Each Island; With an Account of the Missions Instituted in those Islands, from the Commencement of their Civilization, but More Especially of the Missions which have been Established in the Archipelago by the Society late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley, Volume III* (Liverpool: Nutall, Fisher, and Dixon, 1808), 141; *Book of Exclusions*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

forbade the burial of bondsmen and women after sunset in a coffin that was not of plain construction and ornament. Lawmakers went so far as to proscribe the wearing of scarves by black mourners because they might try to imitate “White Persons in pompous and expensive Funerals.”¹⁹

One of the important reasons why people of African descent initially rejected Protestant initiatives to convert them was over the twin and related issues of slave marriage and polygamy. Though planters in the British West Indies eventually came to realize that promoting stable family life among their slaves would bring multiple benefits, such as fewer runaways and higher fertility rates among slave women, slave marriages were never recognized as legally binding or as providing any kind of protection; individuals, even if married in some form, could always be sold away from each other to a far away island.²⁰

The other major obstacle to conversion, polygamy, was generally not seen as a problem by planters in the Caribbean. They knew that polygamous unions provided more offspring which, of course, only made them richer. The practice of maintaining multiple wives was, moreover, a cultural tradition for many African peoples but was, of course, contrary to Christian doctrine. The practice was so ingrained that most early Protestant missionaries to the West Indies, namely the Moravians and Methodists, realized they would have to bend considerably to this particular African folkway if they wanted to make any headway among Afro-Caribbeans. Rather than prohibit polygamy altogether, which would have alienated many potential converts, the Moravian church established a set of rules regarding the number of wives any slave man could

¹⁹ James Walvin, *Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 161; John Luffman, *A Brief Account of the Island of Antigua, Together with the Customs and Manners of its Inhabitants, as Well White as Black, Written in the Years 1786, 1787, and 1788* (London: 2nd ed. [1789?]), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>, 109-111; Goveia, *Slave Society*, 167.

²⁰ Robert Fogel, Ralph A. Galantine, and Richard L. Manning, eds., *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery: Evidence and Methods* (New York: Norton, 1992), 152.

keep. For scriptural authority, the Brethren turned to the Apostle Paul: “If any brother have a wife that believeth not, that is yet an Heathen, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away.” But they did not endorse polygamy, also quoting scripture that “a Bishop must be blameless, the husband of one wife.” With those two biblical injunctions to guide them, the Moravians adopted rules concerning slave marriage. First, they allowed a male slave who had more than one wife before he was baptized to keep all his wives, as long as they gave their consent. That man could not, however, hold a leadership position in the church as a “Helper or servant.” Moreover, if single when baptized, male slaves could thereafter take only one wife. Wives in polygynous marriages were even given some protection, it being against Moravian rules to divorce any wife “who themselves did not want to be divorced.” Despite these restrictions, it remains astonishing that the Moravians were willing to countenance such a radical deviation from standard European Christian dogma.²¹

They were, of course, bending to the realities of life in a slave society. One of the more tragic realities therein was the breaking up of slave families, which in the West Indies sometimes meant that family members were sold to different islands, leaving little chance for even eventual reunion. In these cases, and “especially if a family of young children” was involved, slaves were allowed to remarry even when their original spouse remained alive. In these circumstances, the Brethren, if not the dispossessed captives, took some solace from the knowledge that, when an enslaved church member was sold to another island, they would thereby cause more people “to hearken to their word, and to believe.” In other words, even the breaking up of families was seen to have some benefit; in this case of spreading the faith to distant shores.²²

²¹ *Periodical Accounts Relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren Established Among the Heathen* (London, 1790), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>, 8; Oldendorp, *History of the Mission*, 454.

²² *Periodical Accounts*, 14.

Methodist missionaries in the West Indies also found out that flexibility on some moral issues was essential when working in island slave societies. In one case, William Dowson, a Methodist itinerant in the Bahamas in the early nineteenth century, tells of a black class leader in his church named Johnson who had been separated from his wife in the United States when he was sold to a new owner in Nassau, who then came to the missionary requesting that he be allowed to remarry. Class leaders were, and still are, laymen and women who assisted ordained ministers and missionaries by conducting prayer meetings and confirmation classes as well as acting as “morals police” among their fellow parishioners. The practice of naming class leaders was initially instituted by the Moravian Church, and was quickly adopted by the Methodists and Baptists. Given his position in the church, Dowson believed that Johnson was a good and devout man, “striving to do right,” and should be allowed to take a Bahamian wife. In Dowson’s opinion, monogamy, or at least serial monogamy (however defined), was better than living and having sexual relations with someone who was not your spouse.²³

The problems that slavery wrought for marital fidelity also stretched the scruples of another Methodist missionary in the Bahamas during the 1790s. Methodist minister William Turton was approached by two members of his Nassau church asking that he marry them. Bahamian law forbade the ritual, but Turton decided to go ahead and marry them anyway in what he called “the American form.” The latter term probably makes reference to an extempore and not legally binding ceremony because Turton did not perform the usual Methodist service. Within a short time, though, Thomas Murray and Betsy Hall, the newlyweds, were separated, Murray’s owner transporting him to the Turks Islands in the distant south. There, Murray subsequently took another wife and Hall “got herself a husband on this island.” There the matter

²³ A. Dean Peggs, ed., *A Mission to the West India Islands: Dowson’s Journal for 1810-17* (Nassau, Bahamas: The Dean Peggs Research Fund, 1960), 74.

rested until several years later, when Murray was returned to Nassau, Hall's spouse had died, and the couple asked if they could come together again. Somewhat taken aback by the whole affair, Turton decided after some thought that they had always been husband and wife and that if they could "forgive each other and come together none can find fault as you are husband and wife, though you may have had twenty others." All seemed to be resolved, but the case did not end there. After being readmitted into Nassau's Methodist society and some time had elapsed, Murray abandoned Betsy and took up with another woman. Johnson, the black class leader from America, then bought Betsy's freedom and asked permission to marry her. Turton concluded from this extended episode that slaves should not marry in the Methodist church and if a free person wanted to marry a slave, the latter had to have some expectation of emancipation, otherwise the union was bound to fail.²⁴

Early Efforts to Evangelize Afro-Caribbeans

The practice of serial monogamy among enslaved African Americans may have put up certain barriers to the acceptance of Protestant Christianity by the slaves. It did not, however, dampen the ardor of white evangelists to spread the Gospel, nor did it extinguish the interest of blacks in hearing it. As important as John Baxter and the Methodists were to the evangelical movement in the West Indies, they were not the first Protestants to evangelize Antigua's slave population. Almost from its very beginning in 1652 in Britain, the Society of Friends, or Quakers, was involved in missionary activity. As early as 1656, Friends were crossing the Atlantic to evangelize in Britain's possessions in North America and the West Indies. Though not part of a planned or centrally organized effort, Quaker missionaries spread their beliefs in an

²⁴ Peggs, *Dowson's Journal*, 84.

ever widening, though thin, network based on the intangible yet powerful bonds of love, fellowship, and a common faith.²⁵

In the half century after 1652, almost 150 Quaker men and women rode the Atlantic circuit. Joan Vokins, a frail mother of seven decided to leave her home and family in England in the late 1670s for the wilds of Rhode Island and the mid Atlantic colonies. Booked on a ship back to Britain after her North American sojourn, Vokins suddenly heard a new calling and set sail instead for Barbados. En route she had yet another vision: instead of Barbados, it was the Leeward Islands that needed her help. A series of events subsequently diverted her Barbados-bound ship to Antigua. After a short visit with Friends there, Vokins next wanted to visit Nevis, and though the boat's captain had no intention of such a side trip, contrary winds blew them there. The female Quaker itinerant also journeyed to Montserrat and finally Barbados before heading home to Berkshire. She had been gone for over a year and a half, visiting along the way with Quakers all over Britain's American empire; she was especially proud, though, of her "meetings" with black slaves in the West Indies. As the case of Joan Vokins illustrates, Quakers placed few restrictions on female preaching and especially on women missionaries. The importance of Quaker women's spiritual role overrode traditional constraints on females in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The belief that women had a duty to spread the word of God just as much as men was not peculiar to the Friends, but their traveling and preaching, many times without a male escort, was revolutionary.²⁶

British Quaker William Edmundson equaled Vokins' enthusiasm for both evangelism and far-flung travel. He began a trip in 1671 that included stops in Barbados, Antigua, Barbuda,

²⁵ Frederick B. Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1960), 13.

²⁶ Rebecca Larson, *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700-1775* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 94.

Nevis, and Jamaica, before going on to Maryland, Virginia, Carolina, New York, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts.²⁷ Quakers like Vokins and Edmundson not only knit together transatlantic Friends on the fringes of the British Empire, they also helped non-Quakers spread evangelical Protestantism whenever they could. The diaries of Methodist and Baptist missionaries tell of many cases in which a kind Quaker came to their aid during some time of persecution or need. As a persecuted minority looked upon by both New England Puritans and West Indian planters with distaste and distrust, Quakers probably viewed like-minded evangelicals, wherever they met them, with the affection of brothers and sisters in arms. As committed evangelicals, they could not help but be moved by the huge number of slaves in Britain's newly acquired empire who remained unchurched. Their activities among African Americans never harvested many souls for Christ, but they did assist other evangelical missionaries who came later.²⁸

In a limited way, Christianity became an African America faith in British America even before the Quakers conducted their "meetings" with scattered groups of blacks and was a product of efforts by African Americans themselves. They were aided, in a perverse way, by the Dutch, who in the seventeenth century were one of the primary carriers of slaves from Africa to the New World. Holland gained preeminence in the Atlantic slave trade by invading and conquering most of Portugal's Atlantic basin empire, including parts of Portuguese Angola and Brazil. Kongo, as noted previously, was a center of African Christianity, with at one time several million faithful Afro-Catholics. With control of the slave trade firmly in their hands, Dutch ships transported many Atlantic creoles, some of whom were Christians, to various parts of their empire, including New Amsterdam, later known as New York. Dutch records in New Amsterdam are strewn with

²⁷ Tolles, *Quakers*, 26.

²⁸ Coke, *History of the West Indies*; Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 103.

evidence of this transatlantic transfer, including such Luso-African names as Paulo d'Angola and Anthony Portuguese, Pedro Negretto and Francisco Negro, Simon Congo and Jan Guinea, Van St. Thomas and Francisco Cartagena, Claes de Neger and Assento Angola.

The chances that many of these people were Christian before they left Africa or South America were high. First, because Kongo and Angola had long histories of contact with and acceptance of Portuguese Catholicism; and second, because most slaves taken by the Portuguese were baptized as Christians as a matter of course. That New Amsterdam's blacks were comfortable in their Christianity can be seen by the number of weddings they consecrated in the colony's Dutch Reformed Church: a total of 25 in the first 20 years in a town with only 300 people of color.²⁹

In the Danish West Indies there were some Christian slaves before a major missionary effort was instituted there by the Moravians in 1732. Spanish Catholic priests from Puerto Rico instructed the African slaves of the Virgin Islands in the fundamentals of Christian faith before the island chain was purchased by the Danes in 1672. Catholic fathers continued to visit and baptize the islands' slaves during Denmark's hegemony, but the number of baptized Afro-Catholics in the Danish Virgin Islands always remained low.³⁰

African Christians show up, as well, in South Carolina's low country during the early eighteenth century, where they surprised white planters by celebrating the feasts of "Easter and All Saints Day or Hallowe'en," and knowing the catechism, as well as the names of many Christian saints. Many blacks who fled to Spanish St. Augustine from Carolina were also African Catholics. They had already been baptized and knew how to pray, but asked God for

²⁹ Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 53, no. 2 (April 1996), 265.

³⁰ Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 264; Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 13.

forgiveness in their native Kikongo language. In 1710, Francis Le Jau, an Anglican priest also in the low country, remarked that “I have in this parish a few Negro slaves ... born and baptized among the Portuguese.” As important as it is to note the presence of African Christians in America, it should also be kept in mind that by 1710 the type of Christianity brought by African captives was an African variant. After several hundred years in West Central Africa, Christianity had been adapted to and syncretized with indigenous beliefs. Le Jau may have recognized many facets of Christian practice among his new black congregants, but there would also have been some discrepancies. Le Jau and other eighteenth-century Anglican priests in the South were never successful in bringing many people of color into their church. Numerous reasons exist for this lack of success, but that Africans who identified themselves as Christians may have looked upon English Protestants as errant in their faith and therefore bad Christians, is a possibility. These people were African Catholics who may have had little interest in joining a Protestant church.³¹

Most Africans were not Christians before they came to America, but nevertheless were at least partially acquainted with the faith while still living in the Old World. The task of trying to differentiate Christian practice from indigenous African beliefs and those of Islam among New World slaves puzzled many Protestant missionaries in the West Indies. Captives from the Sokko people incorporated Christian and Muslim fasting, prayer rituals, and the use of a holy book into their religious observances. On the Caribbean island of St. Thomas, Moravian ethnographer C.G.A. Oldendorp also noted what he believed was the purely Christian practice of baptism of grown children by slaves from Watje, where they were sprinkled three times with water while

³¹ Berlin, “From Creole to African, 280; Ras Michael Brown, “‘Walk in the Feenda’: West-Africans and the Forest in the South Carolina-Georgia Lowcountry,” in Linda M. Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 297.

prayers were sung. The newly baptized children were then given new names, usually after the day of the week they received baptism. Though water baptism was a long established rite in many traditional African religions, taken as a whole these rituals evidence the blending of multiple religious traditions, a phenomenon that was also fairly common in much of Africa at the time.³²

On St. Thomas, Moravian missionaries Augustus Spangenberg and Friedrich Martin also detected the blending of several religious traditions by Africans in the West Indies. They “experienced great joy” when they met Marotta, whom they described as “an old Guinea woman from the Papaa nation.” Marotta prayed in the morning before she ate and at night before she went to sleep. On both occasions “she falls on her knees, lowers her face to the earth,” before praying. When asked, however, she said she had never “yet heard the gospel of Jesus Christ,” but she did have some vague notions about the trinity. She had probably learned about it living in or near Great Popo along the Slave Coast from African Christians or the occasional Portuguese priest who visited the area from time to time. This Popo woman proclaimed that there was only one God, the Father, who she referred to as Pao. He had a son named Masu, who was the “only door ... through which it is possible to come to the Father.” Marotta was, though, unfamiliar with the idea that Jesus (or Masu) had become a man and sacrificed himself to redeem all mankind. Before joining the Moravians, she routinely sacrificed a goat or a lamb to placate her god and ensure her own well-being. Marotta was not a Christian in Africa, but the influence of Islamic and Christian ideas can clearly be detected. Spangenberg and Martin were happy enough to use whatever entree they could to spread their brand of the faith.³³

³² Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 195; Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 140.

³³ Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 312.

From the observations gathered from other West Indian islands and North America, it can be reasonably concluded that some of Antigua's black slaves were Christians or Muslims upon arrival, or had been exposed to Christian or Muslim teaching before Protestant missionaries came on the scene. Evidence from Moravian church registers in Antigua lends credence to this supposition. Three regions in Africa represented in the Moravian registers known to have large Christian populations or to have been influenced by Christianity supplied 631 members to the Moravian mission in Antigua; Angola with four, Congo with 427, and Popo with 200 church members. Added to this list are single individuals designated as being or being from "Portugive," "Portuguese Guinea," and "Yellow Guinea," with an implication that they were the offspring of Portuguese Christian fathers and African mothers. Afro-Moravians originally from Muslim dominated areas of Africa accounted for 124 church members, including 71 from the Mandingaw, 47 Fullas, and six designated outright as being Moors. The above figures are only suggestive, there being no guarantee that most or even any of the people from those "nations" were Christians or Muslims in Africa. Taken together with other evidence provided above, however, the chances that a substantial number of Afro-Antiguans were Christians before they crossed the Atlantic are greater than previously thought. And as Spangenberg and Martin learned in St. Thomas, evangelizing people who were already familiar with Christian ideas made their task far easier: all they and other white missionaries had to do was try.³⁴

New Efforts in the Eighteenth Century

The presence of Christian Africans and those individuals whose religious heritage had been influenced by Christianity in Antigua played an essential role in Protestant evangelization of the larger black population. They were aided by the coming of Moravian missionaries, first to

³⁴ *Moravian Church Registers-Antigua*. Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

the Danish West Indies in 1732, and then to the British Caribbean after 1754. Why the Moravians became so involved in missionary work was, in part, a function of their own history. Though considered one of the oldest Protestant denominations, the Moravian Church only became more widely known outside Eastern Europe in the late 1720s. Also known as the United Brethren, the Unitas Fratrum, the Herrnhutters, the Brudergemeine, or simply the Brethren, the Moravians trace their origins back to reforming Catholic cleric Jan Hus (1369-1415) and fifteenth-century Bohemia and Moravia. Hus was burned at the stake for heresy and Catholic Church officials and state authorities remained suspicious of the group throughout the fifteenth century, though the Moravians endured its worst persecution as a result of the sectarian Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) when they were forced to scatter to refuges in more tolerant countries throughout Europe. They remained largely unorganized and without a home until a sympathetic German nobleman, Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf, allowed a small group of Moravians to settle on his estate in Saxony in 1722. It was there that the Unitas Fratrum was "reborn" in 1727 and became a small but important part of the Pietist movement that was then attempting to bring reform to Europe's stagnating Protestant churches. Zinzendorf, though a Lutheran, saw in the Brethren's innovative, simplified, and heart-felt spirituality exactly the reforms he hoped to foster among the Lutherans. The count never renounced his Lutheran affiliation, but did assume leadership of the Moravians, viewing the smaller group as a church within a church, somewhat like John Wesley's conception of the Methodists' relationship to the Church of England.³⁵

As a small denomination which initially counted its members only in the hundreds, the Brudergemeine's leaders knew that it could only survive and grow by instituting an aggressive missionary outreach program. That is exactly what they did. Almost from its rebirth, the

³⁵ Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Jesus is Female: The Moravians and the Challenge of Radical Religion in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 4.

Moravian Church began sending missionaries to the far corners of the globe in search of the unchurched and non-Christians. The Brethren's first mission outside of Europe began as a result of a chance meeting between Count Zinzendorf and a Dutch-speaking Afro-Caribbean Christian then resident at the Danish royal court in Copenhagen in 1731. The Afro-Caribbean, a man named Anton Ulrich, complained to Zinzendorf that there were thousands of West Indian blacks in the Danish Caribbean who were "longing to come to know about God." Seizing the opportunity, the count dispatched two young men to St. Thomas to serve as Moravian missionaries. By late 1732, the two Brethren, David Nitschmann and Leonard Dober, arrived on the island and began proselytizing the slaves. They ran into early opposition from St. Thomas' whites because a massive slave rebellion on the neighboring island of St. John in 1733 made them fearful of all activities that allowed slaves to gather in large groups. General distrust of slaves being instructed in Christianity, as well as suspicions about the religious orthodoxy of the Moravians, put up further barriers. Though persecuted by legal and extra-legal means, the Brethren's record of producing seemingly content and outwardly honest, hard-working, and uncomplaining slaves forced St. Thomas' planters to recognize the value of maintaining the Brudergemeine's missions. After several years of hard work and sacrifice with little success, the mission in the Danish Virgin Islands finally began to grow. With the help of Anton Ulrich's brother Abraham and his sister Anna, the mission increased in membership to 4,500 baptized slaves by 1770.³⁶

Initially limiting themselves to the Danish islands of St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix, by the 1750s the Moravians began to expand their evangelical mission to the British West Indies.

³⁶ Jon F. Sensbach, *A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763-1840* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Published for the Omohundro Institute for Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 29; J. Taylor Hamilton, *A History of the Church Known as the Moravian Church, or the Unitas Fratrum, or the Unity of the Brethren, During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Times Publishing Company, Printers, 1900), 50-52.

They were able to do so at the time because Britain's Parliament passed legislation in 1749 acknowledging the legitimacy of the Moravian Church, giving it legal standing within the Empire. With this legal sanction, the Brethren took their mission work to the British West Indies, going to Jamaica in 1754 and Antigua two years later. Arriving in 1756, Englishman Samuel Isles was the first Moravian to evangelize Antigua's people of color. He remained on the island, working hard to convert the slaves, until his death eight years later. A combination of Isles' personal inability and the indifference of Afro-Antiguans, though, resulted in only a handful of the island's blacks coming into Isles' church.³⁷

Moravian fortunes in Antigua improved considerably beginning in the 1770s. The first successful mission to the slaves in Antigua and, for that matter, in the entire British Empire, occurred at that time on Samuel Martin's Green Castle sugar plantation. Employing an intensely personal one-on-one approach that included visiting slaves in their small homes and learning the rudiments of their languages, missionary Peter Braun brought thousands of Afro-Antiguans into the fold before his death in 1790. Braun's mission was important in Antigua, but its significance extended far beyond that island's shores, serving as a model for missions to the slaves throughout the British West Indies. Before the Moravian experiment, other Protestant denominations exhibited little interest in evangelizing New World slaves. The Moravians provided a model that British Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians subsequently used beginning in the 1780s.³⁸

Given the ongoing links between the British West Indies and mainland North America, the Antigua model also probably influenced white opinions about the practicality and safety of

³⁷ J.C.S Mason, *The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening in England, 1760-1800* (Woodbridge, England: The Boydell Press, 2001), 8.

³⁸ Mason, *The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening*, 111.

allowing blacks to attend churches in the American South. News began to filter out of Antigua about how, in planter Samuel Martin's words when referring to the Moravians, "the instructors [sic] of my Negroes have made such a reformation among them that delights my heart, and I shall continue the like Method of instruction without mystery or enthusiasm."³⁹ Certainly some African Americans went to church with their owners before Braun's model of mission organization became more widely known. The number of black North Americans, especially in the South's port towns, who had been converted and regularly attended church did not begin to grow, however, until the 1780s. Whites living along the South's Atlantic littoral, like their cousins in Antigua with whom they were in close contact, discovered that benefits, rather than problems, could be accrued by bringing their slaves to church.

Favorable Conditions for Missions in Antigua

As influential as Peter Braun was for the wider Christian evangelization of African Americans, determined opposition from whites and the institutions of coercion they controlled could have made their conversion difficult, and perhaps impossible. The structure of royal and colonial government in eighteenth-century Antigua was such, however, as to actually foster Christian evangelization of the slaves.

The government of Antigua was at the time subsumed within a larger one for all the Leeward Islands controlled by the British. A captain-general or governor-in-chief was appointed by the Crown who as chief executive was responsible for all the Leewards. He was assisted by a lieutenant-general, who governed in his absence. Each island of any size had its own lieutenant-governor to administer local government. The captain-general's usual place of residence was Antigua, which meant that affairs on that island came under closer scrutiny by royal officials

³⁹ Mason, *The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening*, 112.

than in the surrounding islands of St. Kitts, Nevis, and Montserrat. Compounding the general lack of royal government control in the out islands was the fact that most of the Leewards' lieutenant-governors lived in England. As a consequence, most local government outside of Antigua fell to each island's Council, which in turn was led by a locally elected president. Because of their relative isolation, being islands, the island presidents, Councils, and later representative assemblies acted with considerable autonomy and tended to resent any outside interference. Only in Antigua, where the governor lived full-time, was there any guarantee that laws passed by the British Parliament would be observed completely and in a timely manner.⁴⁰

A limitation on the power individual island assemblies could exercise over their own affairs was their dependence upon the Royal Navy for defense against raids by pirates, invasion by the Spanish, Dutch, and French, or rebellion by angry slaves. Nevertheless, London and Parliament were a long way away and much could be done to protect local interests which conflicted with the will of the Crown – at least for a while. Sending pieces of colonial legislation to England usually took months, and the Crown's response – either acceptance or disavowal – took a like amount of time. In the interim, the object of the wrath of a colonial assembly – perhaps a missionary who preached to the slaves – would rot in a rat-infested and disease-contaminated jail and either die there or have his or her health so impaired as to make continuing with mission work impossible. The nearly-inevitable message from London disavowing the island assembly's proposed law would, by then, be moot.⁴¹

The most blatant example of the lack of provincial loyalty toward a royal governor in the British West Indies was the fate that befell Daniel Parke, the governor of the Leeward Islands.

⁴⁰ Goveia, *Slave Society*, 52.

⁴¹ Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 109.

In 1710, Parke was gruesomely murdered by planters in Antigua in a dispute about quartering troops. The colonial assembly refused to pay for the troops' provisions, so Parke resorted to using a detachment of British regulars to enforce compliance. After a pitched battle that pitted Parke and seventy British soldiers against a much larger colonial mob, the governor was cut down and chopped into small pieces while defending his home. While no other British colonial governor suffered the same fate, the affair no doubt weighed heavily on the minds of Parke's successors. Considering that his assailants received no punishment from royal authorities, future governors knew that they had to tread lightly in the Leeward Islands when issues of colonial autonomy arose.⁴²

The administrative structure of the British Leeward Islands played an important role in Antigua's emergence as the center of Afro-Protestantism in the Caribbean. The actions of individual planters, inspired by both spiritual and practical considerations, however, were also decisive. Some insight into why planter Nathaniel Gilbert, who later became the first Methodist to evangelize Antigua's people of color, took an especially keen interest in the spiritual welfare of Afro-Antiguans can be found in the role he played in the investigation and suppression of the slave conspiracy that rocked Antigua in 1736. An act of the island's assembly gave the then youthful Gilbert, along with three other political leaders, the power to inflict "pains or tortures not extending to Loss of life or limb" to find out how the plot was to be prosecuted and who the conspirators were. Though unsuccessful, the 1736 plot shook the confidence of many of Antigua's leading slave holders. Not only were supposedly content creole slaves in charge of the rebellion, but much of the unity among the slaves was forged through the use of African-based religious rituals. The plotters all took oaths and participated in ritual dances that were of Asante

⁴² Goveia, *Slave Society*, 60; O'Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*, 43.

origin. Gilbert and his fellow inquisitors, fearful of being overwhelmed by a foreign and dangerously violent population in their midst, took immediate and draconian measures to deal with the problem.⁴³

Those convicted of participation in the plot received various forms of brutal punishment. Three of the conspiracy's masterminds, Court, Tomboy, and Hercules, were all broken on the wheel, a particularly horrible way to die in which the condemned is tied up spread-eagle, then beaten with a heavy iron bar. Bones are broken and internal organs are smashed, leading to a slow and excruciating death. After Court was executed in the marketplace before a large crowd of onlookers, his blood-spattered head was cut off, stuck on a pole in front of the local jail, and what remained of his body was burned. His two fellow conspirators received the same grisly treatment, dying, it was said, "with amazing Obstinacy." Nine other slaves implicated in the plot were also executed by being chained "to stakes alive and burnt."⁴⁴

In the years following the slaughter of so many men trying desperately to be free, Nathaniel Gilbert may have reflected on the ineffectiveness of such draconian measures. Though Antigua's slaves never rose again in rebellion after 1736, they did find other ways to resist their captivity. In 1746, one of Gilbert's slaves was executed for poisoning a white man, poisoning being a favorite method captives employed to exact vengeance on hated masters. Arson by disgruntled slaves was another form of resistance that seemingly defied legal censure because it

⁴³ Gaspar, *Bondsmen and Rebels*, 21; Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 122.

⁴⁴ For an illustration of the like punishment of being "broken on the rack," see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 346. Gaspar, *Bondsmen and Rebels*, 22.

was difficult to prove. Two of Gilbert's slaves were found guilty and executed for setting fire to cane fields, but most culprits evaded planter justice.⁴⁵

Gilbert may have come to the conclusion that passing punitive laws was an insufficient solution. Only when Afro-Antiguan captives could be convinced that destroying property and murdering someone, even an abusive master, was a sin, would these and whole host of other transgressions be brought under control. The vehicle for such a moral transformation, Gilbert may have reasoned, was the conversion of Antigua's slave population to evangelical Protestantism. The Methodists and Moravians, along with other evangelical denominations then gaining wide acceptance in Europe and America, looked upon an individual's renunciation of sin as indispensable to their salvation. The evangelical's message of redemption through personal salvation was exactly what nervous planters wanted, if some did not realize it initially. Sin, evangelicals believed, resided in every living being. Slavery, they rationalized, was not inherently sinful, only individual slave owners and, of course, all "heathen" slaves. Conversion and strict adherence to Christian principles, they preached, would make people of color into better workers and sober subjects, while allowing white masters and black slaves to live in harmony.⁴⁶

Antigua's leaders were the most accepting of missions to the slaves of any like group in the Caribbean, believing that missionary evangelization made their slaves more easily controllable. There was one incident in December of 1790, however, that indicates that not all white Antiguans were happy with the evangelicals. After preaching to a packed church of mostly Afro-Antiguans, Methodist leader Thomas Coke's white assistant John Baxter was

⁴⁵ Gaspar, *Bondsmen and Rebels*, 195.

⁴⁶ For reactions to similar problems in the "burned-over district," see Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 140.

assaulted by “three drunken gentlemen.” One of them cried out, “I’ll murder thee, Baxter, I’ll murder thee.” Only the timely intervention of two magistrates then passing by on the street averted a tragedy. The offenders could have faced punishment, even jail time, but Coke felt it was more expedient to forgive the young “gentlemen,” hoping to shame the rowdies and preserve relations with the white power structure.⁴⁷

Planter anxiety about maintaining a stable society and tractable, productive slave laborers was particularly acute in Antigua during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Because of increased sugar production, the number of ships transporting slaves to Antigua between 1751 and 1775 was the largest of any comparable twenty-five year period. During that quarter century, 229 slave ships docked at Antigua’s principal ports of St. John and English Harbour, compared to only 269 slave ships for all other periods, from 1600 to 1807, combined. Anxiety by the island’s whites about how to incorporate this new alien population was one of the primary reasons why many slaveholders accepted and even encouraged the presence and activities of evangelical missionaries among their bondsmen and women. Though perhaps an historical coincidence, it is interesting that Moravian and Methodist missionaries made their first appearances in Antigua at precisely the time that this surge in the numbers of captive Africans occurred. Planters realized that if they wanted to avoid being overwhelmed culturally, and perhaps politically as well, they needed help of a spiritual nature.⁴⁸

Antigua’s early white evangelists, though providing a needed service to sugar planters, never attained sufficient power relative to the ruling oligarchy to challenge their hegemony. Conversely, they usually did everything in their power to ingratiate themselves to the planter

⁴⁷ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. II, 442.

⁴⁸ David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, Herbert S. Klein, and David Richardson, *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Data Base* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

elite. The missionaries knew that their access to people of color depended upon the good graces of plantation owners or overseers, without which mission work was impossible. The first Protestant missionary to evangelize the slaves in Antigua, English Moravian Samuel Isles, came to the island in 1756. Partly because he wanted access to the slaves and also because he had few means for his own support, Isles always lived on sugar plantations at the sufferance of their owners. Living on planter property and accepting slavery's legitimacy, though, was not that much of a problem for many Moravian missionaries. The majority of Moravians came from central Europe, where the existence of a paternalist and hierarchical social structure that divided nobles from commoners may not have seemed that different from the West Indian slave-master relationship. As such, the Moravian Church accepted slavery and even owned slaves. There were, however, negative consequences to maintaining old ideas about social organization in the new setting. One of the reasons why their mission in Jamaica, established two years earlier in 1754, was not a success was that the Moravians there not only lived on slave run plantations, but actually bought one and ran it themselves. The conflict between the hated slave system and Christian evangelization was not lost on Jamaica's people of color: few joined the Brethren's church in that colony.⁴⁹

Isles, while never working on or owning a plantation in Antigua, nevertheless associated quite closely with several local planters. His first benefactor, planter John Le Spencer Spranger Rossington, invited Isles to dinner numerous times during the latter's eight years in Antigua, the two becoming good friends. Rossington opened his estate to Isles for mission work among his slaves, as did other major planters such as Nathaniel Gilbert, William Dunbar, and Mr.

⁴⁹ Vernon H. Nelson, "Samuel Isles, First Moravian Missionary of Antigua," *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society* 21, part 1 (1966), 3; Oliver W. Furley, "Moravian Missionaries and Slaves in the West Indies," *Caribbean Studies* 5, no. 2 (July 1965), 4.

Hillhouse. Isles' close association with these and other slave owners may have prejudiced would-be converts. After fully eight years of diligent effort, which included daily visits to slaves in their small huts, preaching to both small and large audiences several times every week, and traveling to every corner of Antigua, Isles could only count fourteen Afro-Antiguan converts. Part of the reason for his lack of success was the strict standards the Moravians demanded of new communicants. Afro-Antiguans had to prove that they not only knew and understood basic Christian dogma, but also that they had experienced a spiritual re-birth in Jesus. These requirements were relaxed in later years but served to dampen church membership while Isles was in Antigua. Another obstacle for Isles was the association of the Moravians with the slave power. It is ironic, therefore, that his connection to one of Antigua's great planters, Nathaniel Gilbert, would help pave the way for the establishment of Methodism in the West Indies.⁵⁰

Nathaniel Gilbert's family was, by the 1750s, well established in Antigua, the first members of which came to the West Indies in the seventeenth century. Gilbert himself had held numerous positions in the colony's government over the years, finally serving as speaker of Antigua's assembly in the 1760s and 1770s. Through the first two years of his tenure on the island, Samuel Isles made frequent references to the kindnesses shown him, and his wife Molly, by Gilbert. Antigua's speaker invited the missionary couple to dinner on numerous occasions, allowed Isles to evangelize on his estates, and even requested that he preach sermons to his family at the plantation's big house. Gilbert's interest in bringing Christian revelation to the people of color of Antigua, then, began well before he traveled to Britain in 1758 and came

⁵⁰ Nelson, "Samuel Isles," 11-12; Adolph Schulze and S.H. Gapp, *World-Wide Moravian Missions: In Picture and Story* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: The Comenius Press, 1926), 72.

under the influence of John Wesley and the Methodists. Close association with Moravians Samuel and Molly Isles clearly influenced Gilbert's later spiritual awakening.⁵¹

On his return to the West Indies, Gilbert began holding Methodist services in his house for his own slaves and any others from surrounding plantations who cared to attend. By the time he died in 1774, Gilbert had gathered some 200 persons, most of whom were black, into his "society." Thus was born the first Methodist church in the Americas, predating by five years its establishment in the mainland colonies when in 1763 members of Irish and English Methodist societies migrated to America and began preaching in New York and Frederick County, Maryland. The friendship between Isles and Nathaniel Gilbert remained strong, even after the latter's conversion to Methodism. In the spirit of ecumenicalism, Gilbert continued to allow Isles on his estate to evangelize his slaves.⁵²

That sugar barons in Antigua like Nathaniel Gilbert saw real benefits, at least for themselves, to the Christianization of West Indian blacks would have made little difference if Afro-Antiguans had not agreed that their lives would somehow be enhanced by accepting the Protestant evangelical message. The reasons why people of African descent allowed themselves to be converted to Protestantism can be separated into two major categories: considered pragmatism on the one hand, and the desire for spiritual fulfillment on the other.

Many Afro-Caribbeans viewed their conversion to Christianity as a way to attain their freedom or, more realistically, to gain a greater measure of autonomy and independence. The

⁵¹ J. Gordon Melton, *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African American Methodism* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 24-25.

⁵² Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 104; *Antigua Diary, 1756-1757*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of Each Island; With an Account of the Missions Instituted in those Islands, from the Commencement of their Civilization, but More Especially of the Missions which have been Established in the Archipelago by the Society late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley, Volume I* (London: Nutall, Fisher, and Dixon, 1808), 212.

great fear of many whites was that religion would be used by slave leaders to foment servile insurrection. There was nothing inherently revolutionary, though, about Christian dogma, or about obeah or vodou for that matter. The real danger perceived by whites lay in the regular gathering of large numbers of slaves, under the guise of spiritual communion, where plots could be organized without arousing unwanted attention. The leaders of numerous slave conspiracies and rebellions have indeed been ministers or lay exhorters, or have used religion to unify their followers. In the Antigua slave plot of 1736, for example, the creole slave Court employed Asante religious rituals to stiffen the resolve of his followers. In the three most noted slave plots and rebellions in North America, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner had all been evangelical exhorters. The qualities of religion that might cause people to rally against their oppressors, however, can just as easily work to suppress discontent. Revolutionary tensions might just as readily be dissipated during ecstatic religious episodes played out in small Methodist meeting halls or in obeah ceremonies performed in clearings in the woods on starry nights, than through violent revolution.⁵³

The Church and Black Leadership

Attempting to overthrow the planter regime by violence proved suicidal for black Antiguans in 1736, as it was for all West Indian slaves outside of Saint Domingue. Most Afro-Caribbeans recognized this reality and looked toward more attainable goals such as limited economic and cultural autonomy. The Moravian church provided slaves with an outlet for this need. In its campaign against sin, the Brethren instituted a system of discipline for converts that involved constant formal and informal supervision. Given the relatively small number of white

⁵³ Walvin, *Black Ivory*, 155; Gaspar, *Bondsmen and Rebels*, 237; Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 46; George Eaton Simpson, *Religious Cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica, and Haiti* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: University of Puerto Rico Press, 1970), 110.

missionaries in the field at any one time, the only way to make this system effective was to recruit native assistants. As such, Afro-Moravians were the first black Protestants to be given positions of authority in the church as officers known as “helpers.” Given these positions, Afro-Moravians naturally took more pride of ownership in their church; during class meetings and on Sunday they became citizens rather than passive subjects. The Baptists and Methodists copied the Moravian practice of establishing small class meetings and appointing blacks to positions of authority in their local churches. In no other area of their lives did most blacks hold such positions of power. The offer of limited power and autonomy might explain, in part, the attraction of evangelical Protestantism for Afro-Caribbeans.⁵⁴

That Afro-Caribbeans were using evangelical class meetings and their positions as helpers to exercise some autonomy and recreate African social structures can be seen in the way they turned inward to black class leaders and white missionaries for the resolution of disputes. Instead of going to a white overseer or plantation owner, Protestant West Indian slaves took their conflicts to church leaders who became part of their extended kin group. They usually abided by decisions handed down by church officials because the sanction for disobedience, exclusion from the church, was akin to being banished from the clan. Though the Methodists and Moravians could offer little protection against the horrible living conditions and deadly work regimes of plantation slavery, they could provide a degree of comfort, psychic security, and a sense of belonging.⁵⁵

West Indian slave women, in particular, were drawn to evangelicalism because it promised some protection from rape by their white masters. There are no rape statistics for the Caribbean

⁵⁴ Goveia, *Slave Society*, 275.

⁵⁵ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. III, 143; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 4, 5, 43.

for the eighteenth century involving black women slaves and white masters, so it is hard to say whether conversion by black women actually provided such protection. It is more than a coincidence, however, that black women were always at the forefront of instituting and maintaining Afro-Protestant churches. Antigua's Methodist church would have died out after Nathaniel Gilbert's death in 1774 had it not been for the effort and sacrifice of two of Antigua's women of color, Mary Alley and Sophia Campbell. Being members of an established, international church made Antiguan like Alley and Campbell feel more secure because it put them, in a moral and spiritual sense, on the same level as whites; the only difference being that they were born without, as Afro-Antiguan and Methodist Elizabeth Hart Thwaite stated in 1798, "favorable circumstances and opportunities." Because they were members of Moravian and Methodist churches previously led, respectively, by German nobleman Count Nicholas Von Zinzendorf and John Wesley, a "distinguished international Anglican as well as a Methodist," slaves felt that they gained something through the association. The reason for their low status, therefore, was the result of being caught in a historically coerced situation, rather than through any deficiency of character.⁵⁶

Protection from the glow of international Methodism could dim quickly, though, as a black Methodist woman in Trinidad found out. Missionary William Dowson described a horrifying incident that occurred when he was visiting a white family. As he looked on stupefied, "a free black woman, a member of our society, in passing the house was seized by a dog which rushed from under the raised boarded floor of the house, and tore away in an instant a mouthful of flesh from the calf of her leg, and the blood issued from the wound freely and copiously." As terrifying as this scene was for Dowson, just as disturbing was the reaction of the white women

⁵⁶ Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 247; Moira Ferguson, ed., *The Hart Sisters: Early African Caribbean Writers, Evangelicals, and Radicals* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 28, 46.

with whom he was having tea. They seemed in “no way affected by it and took little notice of it.” Dowson’s feelings, at least, “were greatly shocked,” and he “left the house immediately,” though, interestingly, he does not mention whether he went to the victim’s assistance. Slave societies, it seems, brutalized everyone connected to them; and racism usually trumped Christian sympathy.⁵⁷

The Great Awakening in the Afro-Caribbean

The international Great Awakening that began in the 1730s that brought many whites back to the church also played a role in the religious choices made by African Americans. In an era of heightened religiosity, when more whites went to church and actually listened and cared about what was said there, masters began to bring their slaves with them on Sunday. Once there, people of color found that some of the ritual of the new evangelical churches was rather close in style to remembered African religious celebrations. Most services included singing, while much Baptist and Methodist worship also integrated physicality, call-and-response, greater use of singing, and, if not outright dancing, then the near-dancing of the ring shout. Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood echo Albert Raboteau in arguing that North American and Caribbean slaves did not lose or forsake the religion or gods of their ancestors when they embraced evangelical Protestantism. African Americans in the eighteenth century merely adapted Protestant rituals to fit traditional African cosmologies. Baptism by total immersion, antiphonal singing, hand-clapping, foot-tapping, rhythmic preaching, and heightened emotionalism during church services that were central to black Protestant religious practice, say Frey, Wood, and Raboteau, were all well-established facets of African ritual.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Peggs, Dowson’s Journal, 15.

⁵⁸ Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 140; Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 35; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15, 65.

Blacks along North America's east coast were first exposed to the more emotional Christian preaching in 1739 when evangelist George Whitefield made his second American tour. Whitefield, an English Anglican minister, used particularly un-Anglican methods to arouse the spiritual awareness of his audiences. His sermons were emotional, utilizing music and physicality, and were many times held outdoors where thousands could hear and obey his command that they repent their sins. People of color were probably attracted to Whitefield's message of personal redemption that demanded their direct participation in their own salvation. His services also included music, rhythmic clapping, shouting, and singing – all activities that had parallels in African religious rituals.⁵⁹

The Moravians may have attracted people of color because they too employed rituals that some Africans found familiar. The Brethren embraced, for example, a “blood and wounds” theology for much of the eighteenth century which in symbol and word glorified Christ's suffering on the cross. In a 1748 “lovefeast,” or meeting of the congregation, a Moravian described how “our bloody Lamb kissed and blessed us with a bloody mouth during the enjoyment of his martyred flesh and blood with indescribable blessing and grace.” A baptism in that same year involved “an especially bloody blessing ... His [Jesus'] most beloved side hole opened, and let much blood and water stream...” The earthiness of this type of rhetorical bloodletting may have been attractive to people of recent African descent, having in it many parallels with African religious motifs. By emphasizing the agony of Christ on the cross, moreover, Moravians brought passion and a sense of connection to the divine to their services for both whites and blacks. The end result for all Dissenter sects was a heightened emotional tone

⁵⁹ Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 1988, 18.

that sometimes caused individuals to lapse into states of ecstasy that dimmed the line between Christian and non-Christian spirituality.⁶⁰

As important as the use of emotional and physical religious ceremonies were in bringing Afro-Caribbeans and African Americans into Protestant churches, there are notable exceptions to the received wisdom that all people of color are somehow innately musical and emotional. Raboteau affirms that the heightened emotionalism, rhythm, and physicality of African American Protestant church services were the product of the African heritage of dance, rather than an innate emotionalism. Most scholars would agree that there was no such thing as an African essentialism, but nevertheless proceed with their analyses as though there was one. An example is what has been written about black preacher “Uncle Jack,” a native of Africa who lived most of his adult life in eighteenth-century Nottoway County, Virginia. Though very popular with both black and white audiences, he did not engage in or approve of emotional church services, vision travels, hasty conversions, or chaotic revival meetings. Mechal Sobel argues that he had accepted not only the white man’s religion, but also white modes of expressing his spirituality. By doing so, says Sobel, Uncle Jack had departed so radically from his African roots that he ceased being African altogether.⁶¹

The idea that all African Americans needed to utilize two facets of African religious culture, namely emotionalism and dance, to be sufficiently “African” is affirmed by Frey and Wood, who state that they were the defining elements of African American spirituality and what differentiated them from white evangelicals. Michael A. Gomez also affirms that dance and heightened emotionalism were key components in the religious lives of people of color in the

⁶⁰ *Single Brethren’s Diary, 1744-1752* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Historic Bethlehem Partnership, 1996), May 18, 1748, November 13, 1748.

⁶¹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 61; Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, 195.

Americas. Blacks, says Gomez, reinterpreted Protestant rituals, making them more lively, and therefore more apt to fit broadly accepted African religious motifs. In doing so, they were able to achieve racial unity outside of more narrow ethnic boundaries.⁶²

There is little doubt that dance and other ecstatic expressions of spirituality were important parts of many Africa religions and that slaves brought those motifs with them to America. Nevertheless, there were significant examples in North America and the Caribbean where people of color embraced evangelical Protestantism but did not engage in emotional and physical displays. Thousands, and later tens of thousands, of blacks in the West Indies became full members of the Moravian Church beginning in the 1730s. Afro-Moravian services in places like St. Thomas, Antigua, and Jamaica were, according to contemporary accounts, joyous but sober affairs. Every evening, except Saturdays, groups of slaves were separated into class meetings where they would examine their fellows' moral probity. Sunday was reserved for general worship by the entire congregation, most of which was taken up with singing hymns. Instead of following a charismatic preacher and engaging in ecstatic religiosity, Afro-Moravians achieved communion with God in a more muted, but no less African, form of worship. Anglican priest James Ramsay, observing black Moravian church services in Antigua in the early 1780s, commented that "as far as the simplicity of their rites permit, they draw imagination to their assistance, and paint religion almost in *sensible* colours."⁶³

Black evangelicals in North America during the Great Awakening also engaged in more than just emotion-laden bouts of religious ecstasy at revivals. The evangelical movement of the

⁶² Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 108-109, 143, 181; Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 10-12.

⁶³ James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies. By the Reverend James Ramsay, M.A.* (Dublin, 1784), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>.

mid eighteenth century was maintained not only through revival meetings, but through the use of print media as well, which meant that evangelicals of all colors respected the written word and were encouraged to learn how to read. Not only were they literate, but the many publications of ministers such as George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and George Tennent that circulated around the Atlantic world forced their subscribers to think about religious and philosophical issues. Whitefield, Presbyterian evangelist Samuel Davies in Virginia, the Moravians in Bethlehem Pennsylvania, and Quaker Anthony Benezet in Philadelphia, moreover, all opened schools for or disseminated books to African Americans. Most of the black authors of the eighteenth century were evangelical Christians, including Olaudah Equiano, Phyllis Wheatley, John Marrant, James Gronniosaw, and Ottobah Cugoana. It is clear that emotional displays were integral to many black church services, but a rational and intellectual component suffused African American evangelicalism as well.⁶⁴

Did Afro-Moravians and other black evangelicals abandon, consciously or unconsciously, their African cultural heritage when they became Christians? The Sunday services, rituals, and practices of black Moravians were subdued and sober affairs with seemingly little in common with African spirituality. Rather than committing cultural suicide or assimilating into white culture, though, it appears that many black Brethren came to see themselves as the bearers of a new spiritual tradition not associated with the religion of their white masters.⁶⁵ Before Moravian missionaries arrived in the West Indies, there was little contact between British and Danish ministers and the mass of African and creole slaves. The Brethren's poverty and willingness to

⁶⁴ Frank Lambert, "I Saw the Book Talk': Slave Readings of the First Great Awakening," *The Journal of Negro History* 27, no. 4 (Autumn 1992): 193; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 196.

⁶⁵ For the argument that Afro-Moravians did assimilate, see Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the Caribbean, 1736-1831* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 243-249.

talk to and visit slaves in the “quarters” was something new. The Moravians’ religious message, though recognizably Christian, was markedly different than the Anglican or Dutch Reformed message, placing almost exclusive emphasis on Christ’s suffering on the cross. Moravian ritual and practice were so different that white church members endured persecution from more orthodox Protestants for much of the eighteenth century.⁶⁶ The differences were large enough that Afro-Caribbeans may have considered Moravianism as not quite European or white. Instead, they may have thought of it as an Afro-Atlantic faith that required them to make changes in the basic performance of ritual, yet allowed them to retain a communal ethnicity apart from condescending white clergy from Anglican or Reformed churches. Changes were demanded, but the revisions were free of the taint of cultural inferiority. Afro-Moravians, therefore, did not need to reaffirm their African identities by engaging in the ring shout. Moravian churches, and all Protestant evangelical churches in the Caribbean for that matter, moreover, had always been almost wholly black, the only whites being the few missionaries. Those missionaries may have preached obedience to masters, but that was merely a byproduct of Christian devotion. The Moravians’ focus was on salvation through communal brotherhood, a concept deeply rooted in both African and Moravian cosmologies.

For many black evangelicals, as was true for most people of any race, going to church on Sunday was a profoundly social event. It was a chance to put on their best clothes and visit with friends, family, and perhaps seek a marriage partner with a similar ethnic or cultural background. Peer pressure meant that even the poorest parishioners tried to dress well. Methodist leader Thomas Coke describes an Afro-Antiguan congregation where the women all dressed in “white linen gowns, petticoats, handkerchiefs, and caps.” All the expense and effort must have taxed

⁶⁶ Mason, *The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening*.

the budgets of field slaves, but the church played such a central role in their lives that no expense was spared. Peer pressure and the social possibilities offered by church attendance perhaps also explain why black West Indians adopted Protestant Christianity so quickly. Once a family member converted, she usually brought a brother or sister along to the next meeting; soon entire families began coming to church. When asked why he came to church, one Afro-Methodist in the Leeward Islands replied: “We see everybody coming, Massa, and we can’t stay out any longer.”⁶⁷

People of color who wanted to reestablish the stable and familiar societies they knew in Africa in the British West Indies and North America would have found the social structure of Moravian mission stations and settlements very appealing. Part of the attraction of the Moravian mission’s political economy for people of African descent was, on the one hand, its similarity to the social structures of many African villages, and on the other, its place as a more comprehensible alternative to the slave plantation model. In typical small-scale African polities, social order, sobriety, and fidelity to ethical and spiritual codes was maintained by social hierarchies established by village elders. That order and harmony enjoyed by African villagers was recreated in the physical structure of the Brethren’s mission stations and the strict codes of behavior enforced by black helpers. In the 1780s, the Moravians built a mission station in Antigua whose basic layout was remarkably similar to a typical African village. It consisted of four multi-room buildings arranged around an open area that served as a focal point for social interaction. The living quarters were segregated by sex, much like many African villages.⁶⁸ The mission’s architectural design helped to emphasize the Brethren’s more inward looking

⁶⁷ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. II, 437; Goveia, *Slave Society*, 295.

⁶⁸ Claire Robertson, “Africa Into The Americas? Slavery and Women, The Family, and the Gender Division of Labor,” in David Berry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hines, eds., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 12.

character, again something they shared with traditional, family and clan-oriented African society.⁶⁹

For Anglican priest James Ramsay, the Moravian mission station's layout, along with constant policing by Afro-Caribbean helpers produced among black Moravians "an orderly behavior, a neatness in their persons and clothing, a sobriety in their carriage, a sensibility in their manner."⁷⁰ The behavior of Afro-Moravians in places like St. Thomas, Antigua, and Jamaica might be interpreted as their abandonment of African culture. Much of their old culture was lost, but they put it away in a desperate attempt to reestablish avenues of order and power. Moravian mission stations gave them a humane refuge from the brutalities of slavery, allowed adult slaves to exercise authority, and perhaps just as significantly, allowed them to exercise that authority in the presence of their children, thus helping to reinforce basic familial and social values.

Moravian mission stations may have been bastions of psychic freedom for many Afro-Caribbeans, but the power they gained there was necessarily limited. Frey and Wood argue that the Moravians were the most inclusive, and therefore the most empowering, Protestant denomination, with bi-racial congregations in both the West Indies and North America. The Brethren shared the kiss of peace, laying on of hands, and ritual foot washing with all communicants, without regard for race or ethnicity. In doing so, Frey and Wood contend that Afro-Moravians absorbed the implicit message of equality with their white co-religionists. As powerful as these symbols of fellowship were, they were tempered by other Moravian beliefs

⁶⁹ Mullin, *Africa in America*, 244-245, and for a plan of the Moravian mission at Grace Bay, Antigua, 246-247. For a description of Igbo sociopolitical organization, see Victor C. Uchendu, "Slaves and Slavery in Igboland, Nigeria," in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 123-124.

⁷⁰ Ramsay, *Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves*, 141.

about race and slavery. It was made clear to Afro-Moravians that they were and would remain of lesser status. In an address to black Brethren in St. Thomas, Moravian leader Zinzendorf stated categorically that the slaves should “remain faithful to your masters and mistresses ... and that you perform all your work with as much love and diligence as if you were working for yourselves. You must know,” he continued, “that Christ himself puts each one of his children to work; for the Lord has made everything Himself – kings, masters, servants, and slaves. And as we live in this world, everyone must gladly endure the state into which God has placed him ...”⁷¹

Regarding the Moravians’ perceived lack of racial prejudice, it should be remembered that while many of the Brethren’s congregations were indeed bi-racial, they were just barely so. In North America, blacks accounted for only a small percentage of most Moravian churches. In their West Indian churches, as was true of all evangelical denominations, the proportions were reversed, with only a handful of whites (and sometimes none at all) being outnumbered by thousands of Afro-Caribbeans. In 1783, for example, in a Methodist church that had been established for twenty years in Antigua, there were fully 1,000 black and colored members but only one white male member, and he was the minister. Ultimately, one of the key reasons for the evangelicals’ success among people of African descent arose from their willingness to allow blacks to preach to their fellows and to have real power within their churches. Other factors such as the form of worship and the similarities that existed between evangelical Protestant and traditional African ritual were secondary. The need to re-establish stable and harmonious social relations within the slave community overwhelmed considerations of religious form.

Afro-Caribbeans sometimes went to evangelical churches and became members because they were coerced, not by disinterested Anglican masters, but by the evangelical missionaries

⁷¹ Frey, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 84; Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 363.

themselves. This unusual circumstance occurred because on some of the West Indian islands where they operated, the Moravians owned plantations and the slaves who worked on them. Paternal righteousness and frustration at the slow growth of their congregations drove the Brethren to this peculiar course of action. In Jamaica, where this type of coerced conversion took place, during one four-year period only four or five slaves bothered to attend church meetings regularly. The Brethren decided, thereafter, that since the slaves were at their command in the temporal world, they were justified in ordering their spiritual lives as well: they simply ordered their bondsmen and women to go to church. In one instance, more blunt instruments were employed to insure religious fealty. Old Michael, a black driver on a local Jamaican estate, and a loyal Moravian, offered to “Drives the Negroes all in the Church.” The strong-arm tactic worked, at least temporarily, in keeping the Brethren’s churches full. Coercion, however, rarely worked as a recruiting tool in the long run: Moravian churches in Jamaica continued to suffer poor attendance levels through to the end of British colonial slavery in 1834.⁷²

What drove Afro-Caribbeans to become Methodists and Moravians was a combination of functionalist and idealist motivations. When Nathaniel Gilbert, who brought English Methodism to the West Indies, died in 1774, he left a flock of some 200 Afro-Antiguans without a minister for over four years. Methodism was kept alive in Antigua (and the rest of the Caribbean for that matter) by that small flock of Afro-Antiguans who held on tightly to their faith. Why they did so blurs the sharper edges of functionalist and idealist theories about why people choose a religion or are religious. As previously discussed, some observers believe that African Americans became Methodists, Moravians, Baptists, etc. because they wanted to be associated with an

⁷² Furley, “Moravian Missionaries,” 4; *Jamaica, West Indies: Diaries: 1759-1763* (various places): October 1762, the Bogue, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

international religious movement and powerful leaders such as Zinzendorf or Wesley. Others claim that by adopting the white man's religion, slaves hoped to rise to a position of at least spiritual equality with their oppressors. But the fact that the black Methodists of Antigua, who after Gilbert's death had no further connection to international Methodism or John Wesley and little or no recognition of their Christian identity from Antigua's white rulers, continued to maintain their belief, suggests a deeper spiritual meaning. Mary Alley and Sophia Campbell had little to gain – their lives would not be made better in any material way – and yet they still held fast to their faith. Methodism for these two black Antiguans went beyond satisfaction of physical needs; it addressed a need in them for spiritual fulfillment.⁷³

The loyalty and spiritual sincerity of Antigua's Afro-Methodists sometimes astonished even the most dedicated white missionaries. In an example of the power of faith, Methodist Thomas Coke remarked that many slaves walked up to four miles to come to church-sponsored class meetings during the week, this after working all day in the fields doing back-breaking labor. Some even came as far away as ten miles to worship and socialize at Sunday services. The presence of a white pastor, moreover, was not always necessary, as the mulatto Anne Hart Gilbert discovered in 1798 when she moved to English Harbour on Antigua's southern coast. Though they lacked a minister, a small but persistent Afro-Methodist congregation continued to hold prayer meetings there despite the fact that few of them could read and they lacked a permanent meeting house. Gilbert believed this little group of 28 people would thrive if it could be kept away from what she saw as the evil influence of local white Methodists.⁷⁴

⁷³ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. I, 213.

⁷⁴ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. II, 429; Ferguson, *Hart Sisters*, 72.

The desire for contact with and comfort from the metaphysical are potent motivations for anyone confined by their mortality. Evangelical Christians, while always looking to heaven, have also always placed emphasis on living moral lives here on earth. As such, many African Americans (especially women) probably saw the practical, as well as the spiritual, benefits of converting to Protestant Christianity. By abstaining from alcohol, gambling, and extra-marital sex, a slave woman could, perhaps, save some little money and avoid abusive relationships. By maintaining a strict moral code, moreover, she might persuade or shame her husband or mate into giving up destructive personal habits that took away the already limited resources of the slave family. It should be stressed, though, that as important as these earthly benefits were, they appear to have been byproducts and not the central reason for joining a Protestant evangelical church.⁷⁵

Ethnic Consciousness and Conversion

Whether people of African descent became Protestants in America during the eighteenth century was influenced as well by their ethnic affiliations. The issue of whether Africans thought of themselves as belonging to discrete ethnic groups and whether the people enslaved and transported to the Americas brought their ethnic identities and religions with them has inspired a long-running debate. The arguments presented by scholars on these issues are important for our purposes because the level of ethnic consciousness of Africans had a direct effect on how likely they were to accept Christianity in Africa and in the Americas. The

⁷⁵ For more current discussions on the debate over functionalism and idealism in the adoption of evangelical Protestantism in Latin America and the Caribbean, see Anthony Gill, "The Economics of Evangelization," in Paul E. Sigmund, ed., *Religious Freedom and Evangelization in Latin America: The Challenge of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 70-84; Bryan Roberts, "Protestant Groups and Coping with Urban Life in Guatemala City," *American Journal of Sociology* (May 1968): 753-767; Everett Wilson, "Sanguine Saints: Pentecostalism in El Salvador," *Church History* (1983): 186-198; Elizabeth Brusco, "The Reformation of Machismo: Asceticism and Masculinity Among Colombian Evangelicals," in David Stoll and Virginia Garrard-Burnett, eds., *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 144-153; and Manuel A. Vásquez, *The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1998.

contours of the debate over the last half-century have revolved around the positions taken by three scholars: Melville Herskovits, who says that large and discrete African ethnic groups crossed the Atlantic, allowing individuals within those groups to preserve their cultures and cultural identities; and Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, who claim that Africans came to the Americas in “crowds” of individuals too ethnically different from each other to allow them to transfer intact the cultures of their fathers and mothers.⁷⁶

Over the years much evidence has been amassed supporting the contention that the cultural practices of separate and distinct African groups such as the Yoruba, for example, did survive the Middle Passage, if in somewhat modified form. Contributors to Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs’ study of Yoruba culture in America, along with many others, make convincing arguments for survival of distinct African identities on the cultural level.⁷⁷ Other scholars argue that the patterns, economics, and dislocations of the slave trade made the survival of intact African ethnic identity nearly impossible. Philip D. Morgan asserts that slaves were taken from too wide an area in the African hinterland and distributed over too wide an area (from Buenos Aires to Boston) in the Americas for ethnically homogeneous groups to form in large enough concentrations. Without adequate densities of particular ethnic groups, Morgan concludes, cultural identity could not be maintained. Africanist Donald R. Wright goes even farther, claiming that national, ethnic, and tribal identity did not exist at all in eighteenth-century Africa as we define those terms today. The people of West Africa, Wright says, organized their very

⁷⁶ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958); Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976).

⁷⁷ Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs, eds., *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004).

small polities on family and extended kinship ties, and sharing similar culture and language was not sufficient to bind one village to another.⁷⁸

Wright does not, however, address cultural similarities that might have served to mark peoples otherwise divided politically. Groups who considered themselves enemies at one time or other could still share many folkways sufficient to bind them together, especially when they were threatened by a mutually recognized “foreign” intruder. Such was the case for the Mahi people, who lived north of Dahomey in the eighteenth century. Though usually organized as independent villages, when under attack the Mahi sought allies among their ethnically-kindred neighbors. To promote unity, they employed religious rituals such as “drinking vodou” and other blood pacts. This unity, however, rarely lasted after the invaders were driven away and the crisis had passed.⁷⁹

Joseph C. Miller agrees with Morgan that the dislocations of the slave trade made the maintenance of ethnic consciousness impossible for many Africans. Miller argues that cultural and ethnic fragmentation began, however, before Africans boarded slave ships for the Atlantic crossing. Massive multi-cultural refugee communities, says Miller, were created in portions of West Central Africa by disparate ethnic groups who sought protection from marauding armies and roving bands of slave catchers. The refugee camps tended to homogenize what had been distinct ethnic groups into large polyglot communities whose members had long before lost former cultural identities before being sold into American slavery. For Morgan, Wright, and

⁷⁸ Wright, “‘No Tribes in Africa?’,” 414; Philip D. Morgan, “The Cultural Implications of the Atlantic Slave Trade: African Regional Origins, American Destinations, and New World Developments,” *Slavery and Abolition* 18, no. 1 (April 1997).

⁷⁹ Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on African Society* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1991), 114.

Miller then, the obstacles to meaningful identification of African provenances were too great to be overcome⁸⁰

Taking a middle ground position, Douglas B. Chambers says that though there is plenty of evidence for the existence and identification of separate African ethnies in the Americas, most of them were misidentified and were too few in number to be able to pass on their cultural heritages to future generations. These smaller groups banded together with other slaves of similar cultures forging new, if not completely dissimilar, ethnies than what had existed in Africa. An ethnie, according to Chambers, is “a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members.” Therefore, even many people identified as being part of a large group, like the Igbo, may not have been from Igboland proper, but may have lived in close proximity to Igbos, perhaps knowing the language and sharing several cultural traditions. Once in the New World, concludes Chambers, Africans consciously banded together, seeking out people with similar cultures and languages and accepting the names imposed upon them by whites in the Americas or by rival groups in Africa.⁸¹

John Thornton agrees with Chambers that peoples who may have fought each other in Africa came together in America because they shared the same language. The Coromantee “nation” as it was understood in America was made up of Akan speakers from the Gold Coast that included the Fante, Asante and others. All these groups had perceived themselves as separate entities in Africa, but in many instances in the New World they came together, seeing advantages in being part of a larger group. Linguistic group loyalties coming out of Africa,

⁸⁰ Miller, *Way of Death*, 33.

⁸¹ Douglas B. Chambers, “Ethnicity in the Diaspora: The Slave-Trade and the Creation of African ‘Nations’ in the Americas,” *Slavery and Abolition* 22 no. 3 (Dec. 2001): 33.

Thornton says, shaped New World celebrations such as Pinkster in New Amsterdam and organizations such as the *cabildos*, or lay brotherhoods, of Brazil whose memberships were segregated by African ethnic group.⁸²

As nuanced as the above arguments are, many scholars still believe that African cultural continuity was real. One of the more recent and eloquent defenses of the Herskovits thesis comes from longtime historian of African America, Gwendolyn M. Hall. She affirms that separate African cultures and the ethnic groups that practiced them did survive the Middle Passage and had specific effects on a creolized culture in discrete places in the Americas. The sources for identifying African provenances are, Hall says, numerous and legitimate. Identification of African ethnicities by Europeans was largely accurate, in her view, because of economic necessity. A slave trader's business depended on knowing which African groups were in highest demand in a particular market at a particular time. Traders knew their "cargoes," as did plantation owners, because they had to. Hall agrees with Barry Higman, moreover, that because there were so many African ethnic groups in the Americas, only individual slaves would have had the requisite knowledge to accurately identify themselves.⁸³

Evidence of ethnic consciousness among enslaved Africans in the Americas can be seen in a particularly bloody slave revolt on the Danish Caribbean island of St. John in 1733. The St. John revolt was fomented and led by the Amina, or more accurately the Akwamu, a single West African ethnic group, whose defeat in war led to their enslavement and transportation to St. John between 1730 and 1733. The Akwamu rebelled, it appears, not only to throw off the shackles of slavery, but also to establish hegemony over other Africans on St. John, much like they had been

⁸² John Thornton, *Africa and Africans and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 324.

⁸³ Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 23; Higman, *Slave Populations*, 21.

accustomed to in the Old World. The plan was to take control of St. John then, in conjunction with other Akwamu on nearby St. Thomas, expand their rule to other islands. That they did not succeed in this daring ethnically-based plot was the result, perhaps inevitably, of ethnic antagonism. The other ethnic groups on St. John wanted no part of an Akwamu-led polity in which they would be treated perhaps even more cruelly than they were by the Danes. Many non-Akwamu on the island either refused to cooperate in the rebellion or actively aided resisting whites. If Europeans could not always identify the ethnic identities of their African captives, the captives themselves had a clear idea of who they and other groups were, taking direct action to guard their own ethnic interests or, conversely, guard against attempts by other African groups to dominate them.⁸⁴

Further evidence that large numbers of captives from single ethnic groups came to the New World together on the same ship comes from an incident related by New York native Joseph Hawkins, an employee of a South Carolina slave trading company who made a voyage to the West African coast to buy slaves in the 1790s. After a series of potentially deadly adventures trekking through the jungles of Sierra Leone involving hostile locals suspicious of their intentions and large carnivorous beasts intent on eating them, Hawkins and his native guides finally arrived at what he believed was an Igbo village. The people Hawkins thought were Igbos, however, could not have been, considering that the distance separating Sierra Leone from Igboland is roughly 1,500 miles. The town headman, whom Hawkins again misidentified as the king of all the Igbos, had in his possession some 700 prisoners of war taken captive after a recent fight with a neighboring people Hawkins, this time correctly, identified as the Galla. Hawkins expressed some guilt at engaging in the slave trade but assuaged his conscience by claiming

⁸⁴ Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival*, 18.

economic hardship for himself and by his belief that the captured Galla warriors would somehow be better off in the Americas as slaves than as prisoners of war in Africa. Hawkins went so far as to visit the prisoners, hoping to find some among them who would “go with me voluntarily, if any could be found.” Even though he painted “as flattering a prospect of their future situation in America” as he could, Hawkins got no takers. Many of the prisoners, conversely, cried sorrowfully at the idea of being enslaved and sent to the New World. By the late eighteenth century, living and working conditions for slaves in the Americas were probably well known to many Africans. Notwithstanding the Galla’s misgivings, Hawkins bought 150 of them from the “Igbo” king. They were transported over the Middle Passage on the ship *Charleston*, and reached their intended destination of Charleston, South Carolina on December 1, 1794. With such a large number of men from the same ethnic group on a single ship, it is probable that some of them were bought by the same master, and could therefore maintain, at least during their lifetimes, some of their culture. Most of Hawkins’ slaves were imprisoned male warriors, a fact that militated against promulgation of their culture. If they could not find Galla women to marry and bear their children, the chances that they could pass their culture on to future generations would be slim. Those captives who were kept together in South Carolina, however, were probably able to maintain at least some aspects of their culture in their new home, at least for one or two generations.⁸⁵

Afro-Moravians in Antigua

Problems certainly exist involving the accurate identification of African ethnicity in the Americas. As the examples of the transported Akwamu and Galla warriors illustrate, however, it

⁸⁵ Joseph Hawkins, *A History of Voyage to the Coast of Africa, and Travels into the Interior of that Country; Containing Particular Descriptions of the Climate and Inhabitants, and Interesting Particulars. Second Edition* (Troy, New York, 1797), <http://www.galenet.galegroup.com>; Eltis, *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*; Higman, *Slave Populations*, 455.

is possible in many circumstances to identify some, if not all, of the ethnic groups that came to the New World and from where they were taken. Evidence concerning the connections between the ethnic and religious identities of African captives on the British Caribbean island of Antigua during the second half of the eighteenth century serves to confirm, in part, the conclusions of Hall and Higman that separate African cultures and the ethnic groups which practiced them survived the Middle Passage. On the other hand, it also supports the school of thought fostered by Mintz and Price that Africans came to the Americas in “crowds” of individuals too ethnically different from each other to allow them to transfer intact their natal cultures. Valuable and largely overlooked sources of information about African ethnicity in the Americas are the Moravians’ church registers for their missions on the island of Antigua. The registers cover a seventy-six year period beginning in 1757 and include information about thousands of individual church members, the vast majority of whom were of African ancestry. Information in these books include the member’s (or prospective member’s) baptismal name, the name of the plantation where they worked, when they were baptized, when they became full church members, where they went if they left the mission church, who they married, and when they died. While over half of all the people identified in the registers were designated as being “creole,” persons born in America, the rest were given some form of African ethnic, national, or geographic designation.

Table 2-1. Birthplaces of Antigua’s Afro-Moravians, 1757-1833

<i>AFRICANS</i>	
	number
<i>Senegambia</i>	
Malinke (Mandingaw)	71
Bambara	10
Senegally	50
Goree	3
Woloff (Wollock, Wolf, Wulloff, Wollof, Woolof, Bollack)	15
Bram (Bolu, Bullo, Bulu)	3

Table 2-1. Continued

Serrere	1
James Coast	1
Walo/Woolo	2
—	
	Total
	156
<i>Sierra Leone</i>	
Fulbe (Fulla)	47
Temne (Temne, Timnah, Themene, Demny)	6
Bolum (Bullom, Bulum)	13
Kissi (Kissy, Kishy, Gishy, Gissy)	28
Mende (Mende, Menda, Minde)	3
Susu (Susso, Soso, Soosoy)	35
Limba (Limba, Lemba)	5
Guinea-Bissau (Portugive, Portuguese Guinea)	2
Maton Kon	1
Manny/Manie	5
Callunka (Jalonka)	2
Bobo	1
Timbo	1
—	
	Total
	149
<i>Windward Coast</i>	
Mesurado Hinterland (Kangaw, Kangan)	241
Cape Mount	2
—	
	Total
	243
<i>Gold Coast</i>	
Elmina (Minna)	2
Gold Coast	1
Kormantyn (Coromantee)	390
Fanti (Fanty)	2
Wankyi (Wanwy, Waway, Wawey, Wawy, Wamny, Wammy, Waming)	17
Brum	1
Yawba (Yoruba)	1
—	
	Total
	414
<i>Bight of Benin</i>	
Popo (Papaw, Popah)	200
Chamba (Camba, Champah, Yamba, Gyamba, Jamba, Quambo)	20
Adda (Addo)	3
Benin	1

Table 2-1. Continued

Beeny (Edo)	2
—	
Total	226
<i>Bight of Biafra</i>	
Igbo	894
Northwestern Bantu (Mocco)	128
Brinkum (Bricum)	2
Anang (Annon)	1
Ijaw (Aijou)	1
Bana (Bama)	2
Bonny	1
Calabar	9
—	
Total	1038
<i>Central Africa</i>	
Angola	4
Kongo (Congo)	427
Gulla (Golla, Gullea)	5
Soko (Socco, Succo)	236
Pol (Pollo)	2
Bamba (Bomba)	1
Sorongo (Suronko)	2
Cameroon (Cameloon)	1
Vili (Longo)	1
Noncuba, Noncoba, Noncobal	8
Tamba (Thambah)	1
—	
Total	688
<i>Unidentified</i>	
Pocco, Poko, Pokon	14
Barra	12
Chinny	12
Shuso Kronko	10
Whollam, Woolum	10
Naar	6
Sulgar, Sulga	5
Surlong	5

Table 2-1. Continued

Sulwa	4
Abassy, Abusy; Bambral, Bambray; Kannal, Kanna, Kanally; Langan; Locko, Locka, Loko; Morray, Morry; Pullum, Pullom; Quamoo; Soo, Sue; Salong; Walkin (3 of each)	60
Agong, Antaba, Attee, AttysheW, Ayco/Acko, Balanga, Basor, Benny, Bowil/Bowel, Callunka, Carbal, Channo, Deeba, Dimini, Doggasay, Doman/Duman, Esop, Gambae/Gamby, Gampo, Gaum, Janko, Josoe, Karabaan, Keebery, Kifoy, Konnock, Madinda, Mamme, Manukka, Newly, Okoy, Obu, Prefay/Pressay, Saamo, Sallaloe, Sarlang, Shua, Soonah, Sullara, Surlow, Wackay (2 of each)	82
Acbo, Acknipon, Agete, Allen, Asassa, Awcan, Baba, Ballow, Bandy, Banga, Banka, Baroca, Barrilaar, Bass, Bello-Guinea, Berrea, Billy, Blackjnn, Bobo, Bork, Borra, Buere, Carnibo, Claako, Cochore, Cockny, Colevelo, Colky, Conebas, Cowra, Cranady, Cravally, Cullae, Cunsa, Debou, Dedy, Demny, Dimma, Doko Sse, Dombare, Domey, Domidal, Donko, Duay, Duckaway, Elephane, Febe, Finnah, Forkgay, Frambral, Galirca, Ganto, Geay, Gonergy, Gonny, Gravally, Graw, Hanva, Huban, Isaac Cape-Indian Head, Jamma, Kampan, Kankinton, Kippuna, Kongon, Kramina, Krango, Krunicky, Larraban, Laverell, Leebo, Limpan, Louban, Macamba, Mahboo, Mallatta, Mamba, Mampoo, Manikak, Mankan, Maron, Mendemo, Nallo, Neque, Noa, Nobo, Nocobae, Nogobar, Nopapaw, Orisinita, Pasity, Patunia, Raim, Roccoe, Sandome, Salloon, Seniker, Serces, Seyo, Shloo, Shodding, Soowary, Sorora, Sulka, Serrere, Surwoy, Talu, Tempel, Teuda, Tham Pong Pong, Timbo, Tollo, Uratha, Voko, Vramenjoy, Vuy, Waffy, Watty, Waycoke, Woomina, Yawba (1 of each)	121
Total	341
<i>TOTAL AFRICANS</i>	3255
<i>CREOLES</i>	
<i>British Colonies</i>	
Anguilla	1
Barbados	2
Antigua	7,894
Jamaica	3

Table 2-1. Continued

Nevis	1
Tobago	2
<i>Other</i>	
Boston	3
Methodist	1
Mustee	3
North America	12
Virginia	3
<hr/> <i>TOTAL CREOLES</i>	7,925
<i>TOTAL AFRO-MORAVIANS</i>	11,180 ⁸⁶

The Moravians in the eighteenth century, alone among Protestant denominations, took the time and effort to collect a remarkable amount of information about the people they sought to convert. Everywhere the Brethren went to spread the Gospel, be it Greenland, North America among the Amerindians, in Africa, South America, or the West Indies, they exhibited a high degree of concern for and interest in the indigenous folk with whom they lived. There are various reasons for this interest, and even empathy, in peoples generally looked down upon by Europeans as “uncivilized.” One explanation is that most Moravian Brethren were of modest means, had only marginal educations, and so were closer in class to the slaves they were proselytizing. Being poor and receiving little financial assistance from mission leaders in Germany and later Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, meant that missionaries had to work to support themselves, a situation that kept most Brethren humble. The Moravians’ history as a persecuted religious minority in Eastern Europe also gave them a greater degree of empathy for the downtrodden.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ *Moravian Church Registers, Antigua.*

⁸⁷ Sensbach, *Rebecca’s Revival*, 46; J. Taylor Hamilton, *A History of the Missions of the Moravian Church in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Times Publishing Company, Printers, 1901).

Perhaps the most compelling reason for the Brethren's keen interest in the backgrounds of individual congregants was their belief that finding God and achieving salvation could only be had by following a strict moral code. In order to make sure that church members were living up to that code, mission workers and their indigenous "helpers" needed to know as much about their flocks as possible. Most lived close to the slaves' quarters in similar habitations, making close contact, and inspection, easier than if they lived in a distant town. The Brethren visited church members and prospective members in the slave quarters on a regular basis, getting to know them as individuals and even learning their languages. One result of all this close interaction was the recording of a large amount of ethnographic information about Antigua's early black population, which is preserved in the Moravian's church registers.

Antigua's Moravian missionaries were following a by-then well established practice among the Brethren. It amounted to a classification project new to Protestantism: ethnography in the service of religion. In short, the Moravians believed that the more ethnographic information they obtained about their native catechists, the easier it would be to convert them. The Brethren may not have thought to articulate it as such, but they intuitively knew that knowledge was power. The Moravians' ethnographic work began almost immediately when they opened their first mission station in the Danish West Indies in 1732. It initially grew out of the need to communicate, at the most basic of levels, with both creolized and native African captives. The Brethren were aided by multilingual slaves who knew several African languages, as well as the fact that the hybridized Dutch Creole language was widely understood by many of the region's more acculturated blacks. Nevertheless, the Moravians believed it essential that

their missionaries be able to speak to individual slaves, many of whom were recent arrivals from Africa and therefore only spoke their natal tongue, in a language they could understand.⁸⁸

The task of learning multiple African languages was complicated by their non-Western pronunciation and because there were so many of them. C.G.A. Oldendorp, in a visit to the Brethren's missions in St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix in the late 1760s, drew up a list of European words and their African equivalents. His list included words for God, heaven, sun, moon, human, hand, foot, head, man, woman, child, father, mother, and the numbers one through thirteen, 20, 30, and 100. Even a short list like Oldendorp's grew onerous, though, because it had to be translated into 22 separate languages ranging from Fulla, Mandingo, and Amina to Mokko, Igbo, and Mandongo.⁸⁹

The information gained by the Brethren about traditional African religions also made the task of conversion easier. In his conversations with numerous people of color, Oldendorp learned that almost all Africans believed in a creator god that was superior to all others. Different peoples worshipped lesser deities as well, but even then Oldendorp saw similarities between African spirituality and Christianity. Water baptism was common practice among many African groups, as was giving the newly baptized a new name. The Moravians adopted this practice, in their turn giving new members who were slaves new names to symbolize their new lives in Christ. Another Moravian ritual that paralleled African religious practice was ritual sacrifice. The Moravians did not offer up blood sacrifices, but they did place extraordinary emphasis on the suffering of Christ on the cross. The Brethren's fascination with the sacrifice of Jesus, in all its gory and blood-spattered detail, must have resonated with some Africans who

⁸⁸ Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 200.

⁸⁹ Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 203-206.

came from cultures that sacrificed animals and even people to appease their gods. Knowing something of African ethnology allowed the Brethren to tailor their sermons and messages to specific audiences. The strategy of gathering ethnographic information about the enslaved Africans of the Danish West Indies worked. Beginning with nothing in 1732, the Moravian mission in Denmark's Caribbean possessions grew to over 5,000 black church members by 1770.⁹⁰

Moravian missionaries in Antigua, the first of whom were trained in the Danish island missions, employed the same ethnographic approach and enjoyed similar results. The number of individuals accounted for in Antigua's Moravian church registers between 1757 and 1833 totaled 11,519 persons, or roughly one-third of the island's population during that period. Most, sixty-nine percent (7,894 individuals), were designated as creoles – people born in the Americas - but even that category was broken down into component parts: creoles came from Montserrat, Martinique, St. Kitts, North America, Barbados, Virginia, and Boston, as well as Antigua; and they could be mulatto (born of black and white parents) or “mustee” (of Native American and black or white parents). Though American-born slaves were in the majority for the entire period covered by the registers, it is important to note that in the first thirty years of the Antigua mission native Africans made up nearly half of the registrants. The most numerous ethnicity or “nation” enumerated in the church registers was the Igbo with 894 men and women, which accounts for twenty-five percent of the register's non-creoles. The next most numerous group came from Congo (427), followed by Coromantee (390), Guinea (324), Kanga (241), Socco (236), and Papaw (200). Much like what Hall and Higman have found in their studies, there are a huge number of ethnic, national, and geographic designations represented in the registers, a total of

⁹⁰ Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, xix.

263 groups, but fully 89% of Antigua's Afro-Moravian congregants belonged to just eighteen of them.⁹¹

A number of questions arise from this set of data, such as who made the identifications, what motivated the slaves to join the Moravian Church in such numbers, and did issues of ethno-political religiosity influence their decisions? First, who identified the ethnicity of Antigua's black Moravians: white missionaries, Atlantic creoles who spoke both European languages and one or several African dialects and could therefore understand and categorize newcomers, or the newly-captured Africans themselves? Debate on the issue of ethnicity in pre-colonial Africa has evolved to the point where many scholars now believe that, in David Eltis's words in relation to the Yoruba, "it seems ... that identification with the term [Yoruba] developed on both sides of the Atlantic at the same time in response to similar pressures."⁹² If we agree with Eltis, then group identifications such as Igbo, Mandingo, Mocco, Succo, and Papaw did have meaning to those people so-designated both in Africa and America. Groups called Coromantee, or whose point of origin was identified as Congo, Senegally and, most certainly, Guinea, came from large and in some cases semi-continental regions, however, and tend to defy attempts to reduce them to specific locations and discrete peoples.

The very eclectic nature of Antigua's Afro-Moravians, divided as they are into multiple ethnic, national, and geographic categories, leads to two other questions: why did they decide to join the Moravian church in such large numbers, and did issues of ethno-political religiosity influence that decision? African Christianity was well established in the powerful, ethnically-united West Central African kingdom of the Kongo in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

⁹¹ *Moravian Church Registers –Antigua.* .

⁹² David Eltis, "The Diaspora of Yoruba Speakers, 1650-1865: Dimensions and Implications," in Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs, eds., *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 18.

Conversely, West Africa's political structure, according to Donald Wright, consisted of thousands of autonomous and semi-autonomous groups whose identities were far more fluid, based on extended families, clans, and even loyalty to local strongmen. Religion, along with politics, was largely local, usually centered on deities that only provided protection and solace for individuals and households. Because of this localist outlook, Christianity, with its more universal cosmology, must have seemed alien and contradictory to many West Africans. Dead ancestors and fetishes helped to protect individuals, their crops, the village where they lived, and perhaps the surrounding countryside. Such supernatural protection could not logically extend to rival villages that might (and did) instigate violent raids that killed loved ones, stole livestock, and kidnapped children. Christianity, whose God protected everyone equally, even an enemy, no doubt appeared contradictory to most West Africans.⁹³

Finding themselves enslaved in the Americas, former rivals in Africa eventually had to put aside the antagonisms of the Old World. People of similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds sought each other out when they could, and in so doing referred to themselves or were referred to by others by particular ethnic or national names. They joined the Moravian, and later the Methodist and Baptist churches, perhaps as a way to reconnect with large numbers of similar people in the one central place they were allowed to gather off the plantation – at church on Sunday. Chances were good that if a Wolof, Soso, or Kissy could not find a fellow countryman or suitable mate on his or her plantation, he would find one at a Moravian or Methodist class meeting, which attracted people of African descent from all over Antigua.

People who held on to much more small-scale identities, coming from an autonomous village unconnected to larger groups such as the Igbo, might find themselves almost totally

⁹³ Donald Wright, in “No Tribes in Africa?”, suggests that even the so-called states of Oyo, Dahomey, and Segou were held together through ties of kinship rather than ethnic or nationalist linkages.

alone. Eighteen percent of Antigua's African-born Moravians did not identify themselves with a larger ethnic or national group having, in general, only themselves or one or two other people in the church who shared their cultural and linguistic heritage. As ethnic isolates, they might have become Christians in part to integrate with a new ethnic community. Rather than submitting to the cultural hegemony of an historic enemy, individuals from single-person groups perhaps believed it better to become part of a new institution that made them equals with people from more numerous ethnicities. In the absence of direct testimony from African Christians themselves, we must speculate that African ethnicity, or the lack thereof, played a key role in the growth and development of African American Christianity. Religion is a key component of a group's culture, and as such its loss would seem to indicate a weakening of ethnic identity. Becoming a member of the Moravian church and converting to Christianity would appear an act of cultural suicide for people of African descent. Ethnic identity appears, though, to have been based upon more than religion for Antigua's Afro-Moravians. They continued to think of themselves as Igbo, Mokko, or Fulla while at the same time affirming their Christian belief. Religion may, in the context of America's slave societies, be more of a psychic rather than a social construct. The disruptions brought about by the four centuries of the Atlantic slave trade caused great fragmentation to African culture. Christian faith was a tool that some Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African Americans used to bind their communities, bodies, and souls back together again. Instead of destroying connections to Africa, membership in Antigua's Moravian church may have strengthened them.

Conclusion

By the end of the eighteenth century, Antigua's people of color had made that island the center of Afro-Protestant Christianity in the West Indies and a major center, as well, of black Protestant activity in the entire Western Hemisphere. Over 14,000 became full members of

Antigua's Methodist and Moravian churches by 1800, while more who remained uncoun­ted came regularly to hear Sunday morning sermons. The reasons why Antigua, rather than much larger colonies such as Jamaica, became the garden of Caribbean Protestantism are numerous. Its geography and economy, both of which contributed to the devastating famine of 1779, laid the groundwork for Methodism's expansion there under John Baxter. Its political institutions and history of slave discontent, along with Nathaniel Gilbert's role in both, made the island uniquely hospitable for the evangelization of Antigua's people of color.

The reasons why Afro-Antiguans embraced evangelical Protestantism are also numerous. Functionalist motives, such as obtaining a small level of protection from the vagaries of slavery or hoping to gain some benefit from observing greater moral probity, played important roles. Attempting to recreate stable societies and attain some degree of power played a part as well, as did peer pressure and even coercion from white and black missionaries. The desire for spiritual fulfillment, without the promise of earthly advantage, was also an important factor in an Afro-Antiguan's decision to be baptized and join an evangelical Protestant church.

It was the struggle for ethnic identity waged by many New World Africans, however, that played the most significant role in their conversion to Protestant Christianity. For the newly-enslaved, like the young West African woman from Mungo Park's slave coffle, the struggle to recreate an African identity in a strange land under violent and chaotic circumstances was a paramount concern. She may have established some bonds of fictive kinship during her Atlantic crossing with fellow captives, but her circumstances upon debarking in Antigua were still frightening and lonely. Torn from a village in West Africa's savannah where even there she was an outsider, it took incredible courage merely to survive, much less to reconstitute a life in the New World that had a shred of decency and meaning. Isolated from familiar geography, family,

and culture, it was only natural that this young African woman, and thousands of captives like her, would gravitate to evangelical churches. They helped to produce a new sense of extra-ethnic identity, brought spiritual salvation, replaced absent family ties, and recreated, if in altered form, what was left behind in the Old World.

CHAPTER 4
ANTIGUAN DIASPORA: THE SPREAD OF AFRO-CARIBBEAN PROTESTANTISM IN
THE AMERICAS

Having such a large population of black evangelical Protestants, it is not surprising that Antigua served as the seedbed from which Afro-Christian congregations on neighboring islands grew. Protestant people of color, proselytized, converted, and baptized in Antigua, fanned out across the West Indies in the following years, taking their faith with them and establishing new churches almost everywhere they went. The efforts and sacrifices made by white missionaries during this period were considerable and should not be forgotten, but their total numbers were never very great. Afro-Caribbean Protestants, though not sent to the region by recognized missionary organizations and never formally ordained, nonetheless were far more important for the growth of evangelical Protestantism in the West Indies. The implications of having so many black missionaries moving around the Caribbean are numerous and important. As strong and resourceful church women and men, they provided an alternative source of leadership for blacks, helped to cast doubt on slavery's legitimacy, and provided an opening wedge for the abolitionist movement. By traveling from one island to another, Antigua's Afro-Protestants also gained greater contact with the outside world, letting concerned groups and individuals know that New World slaves were not content with their conditions of servitude. Black and brown missionaries, preachers, class leaders, and "helpers" were pushed into action by complex and multiple sets of motivations. Forced to live as subordinates in a slave society, the informal black missionaries from Antigua made many compromises, but they also did work that enabled them to shape and influence, more than any other group, the development of Afro-Caribbean Protestant Christianity.

Afro-Caribbean Mobility

Afro-Methodists and Afro-Moravians from Antigua moved around the West Indies with enough regularity, in enough numbers, and with more than enough spiritual passion to allow them to found evangelical churches almost everywhere they went. Some were soldiers and sailors in the British armed forces or merchant marine sent to far-off locales to defend the empire or pursue livelihoods. Others were free blacks or mulattoes who left Antigua trying to make a living or to reconnect with previously separated family members. Most, perhaps, were slaves who in the second half of the eighteenth century found themselves moved from one island to another, following the dictates of the sugar economy and imperial fortune. It is also reasonable to assume that some Afro-Caribbean Protestants, emboldened by the zeal of the newly converted, moved from island to island to spread the Gospel.¹

The economy and geography of the British West Indies were prime catalysts behind Antigua's Afro-Protestant diaspora. As islands, Britain's Caribbean colonies depended upon marine transportation for their economic survival. As the dominant source of labor, slaves on these islands had, by necessity, to have access to, and work on, boats. They served as longshoremen, loading sugar and molasses and offloading imported foodstuffs, lumber, manufactured goods, and other uncounted necessities that were not produced in the West Indies. More significantly, they also served as crewmen and pilots in the waters around their islands, for trips to neighboring island colonies, and on longer voyages to North America, Europe, and even to Africa. Controlling the movements of enslaved and free black boatmen was a major concern

¹ Julius S. Scott, "Crisscrossing Empires: Ships, Sailors, and Resistance in the Lesser Antilles in the Eighteenth Century," in Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1996), 132. For the arming of slaves for wartime defense in the British West Indies, see Roger Norman Buckley, *Slaves in Redcoats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1979); Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 178-181.

for white government authorities, who passed numerous laws attempting to restrict it. The open nature of maritime commerce, though, conducted as it was over huge expanses of open ocean, made regulation of the people and ideas that passed over such porous borders almost impossible. Despite colonial legislation in such places as Antigua and Jamaica to the contrary, people of color dominated the coastal shipping workforce, allowing them unparalleled access to news and ideas from distant shores. Black boatmen traveling from island to island were probably, in fact, the first to spread the news about the evangelical awakening in Antigua to curious Afro-Caribbeans throughout the West Indies.²

Another catalyst for the Antiguan diaspora in the latter 1700s developed as a consequence of Britain's victory over the French in the Seven Years' War, perhaps more appropriately known as the Great War for Empire. As a result of its triumph in 1763, Great Britain took possession of the formerly French or "neutral" West Indian islands of Dominica, Grenada, St. Vincent, and Tobago. The new possessions, called the Ceded Islands, were quickly planted with sugarcane, a practice that posed a number of hardships on Britain's already established sugar colonies and the black laborers who worked them. The new source of supply brought an end to the previous decades' nicely rising sugar prices, while at the same time increasing the costs for imported timber and salaries paid white men who worked as estate managers. Some of the sting of the new developments was lessened, however, because planters on older sugar islands like Antigua and Jamaica took part in the colonization of the new ones. The slaves, as usual, suffered the most from such imperial maneuvering. Those captives who had lived and worked for most of

² W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 17.

their lives in Antigua or Nevis might find themselves in Dominica or St. Vincent clearing new land for sugar production in the late 1760s and 1770s.³

The diaspora of Antigua's Afro-Protestants, caused in part by the opening to British subjects of the Ceded Islands as well as the lower productivity of worn out soils on more established British islands, can be seen in the records and journal entries of white Methodist and Moravian missionaries present at the time. The missionaries who went to many of these new islands believed they would have to start from scratch among their supposedly un-churched black inhabitants. To their surprise, they often found already existing evangelical Protestant congregations established by black women and men, many of whom had come originally from Antigua.

That Antigua was the seedbed of Afro-Protestantism in the British West Indies and that Afro-Caribbeans were themselves central to the spread of evangelical religion is illustrated by what white Methodist leader Thomas Coke found on his first visit to the Ceded Island of Grenada in 1790. Having just arrived after a short voyage from St. Vincent, he was surprised to discover an already functioning Afro-Methodist society. A small but determined group, led by a free mulatto man, had already held prayer meetings regularly for several years before Coke came on the scene. The mulatto, a man named Painter, was a former resident of Antigua who had been converted by the Methodists in that island colony. Painter probably moved to Grenada to be near family members or for economic reasons, but it is also reasonable to conclude that he and other black evangelicals spread out across the Caribbean motivated by spiritual passion: they, like white evangelicals, were missionaries of the Gospel.⁴

³ J.R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery, 1750-1834* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 38-45.

⁴ Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History Each Island; With an Account of the Missions Instituted on those Islands, from the Commencement of their Civilization, but More*

Another white Methodist missionary, William Pattison, had a similar experience on the island of Ronde, a small colony roughly ten miles north of Grenada in the Grenadines. He found that most of Ronde's slaves were Methodists from Antigua who held religious discussions and meetings regularly, did not appear to need any assistance from white preachers, but welcomed outside help anyway. Continuing this pattern of Afro-Protestant mission work, Coke encountered a group of black Methodists in St. Vincent who he referred to as "six pious negroes." They had previously lived in Antigua where they had been members of the Methodist church before relocating to their present location. It is clear that much of the arduous work of establishing and maintaining these "new" mission stations had already been accomplished by Antigua's Afro-Protestants before white evangelicals came on the scene.⁵

Dominica also appears to have been colonized, both physically and spiritually, by Antigua's Afro-Protestants prior to the coming of white missionaries. Coke met two "old negro men" who had been members of the Moravian mission in Antigua before relocating, or being relocated, to Dominica. Given the Moravians' reputation for teaching the basic elements of Christianity to their catechumens, and the strictness with which they enforced moral guidelines, these men were no doubt more than mere nominal Christians. They did not seem to know the differences between Wesleyan Methodism and Zinzendorf's Moravian faith, but that is not surprising given the two denominations' many similarities. They were merely happy, no doubt, to rejoin a church structure that was comforting in its familiarity.⁶

Especially of the Missions which have been Established in the Archipelago by the Society late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley, Volume II (Liverpool: Nutall, Fisher, and Dixon, 1808), 68.

⁵ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. II, 78, 257.

⁶ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. II, 352.

When they first arrived in Roseau, Dominica's capital, hoping to spread the Gospel in 1787, Coke and his Anglo-Antiguan assistant John Baxter went directly to the house of a Mrs. Webley. She was a free mulatto of apparently middle-class status who had been converted to Methodism in Antigua some years before, probably by Baxter, since he knew to seek out her assistance in Roseau. Once they made contact with her, Coke and Baxter did not have to worry about finding a place to stay or having a suitable space to preach. Mrs. Webley no sooner welcomed the two evangelicals to her home then she immediately arranged for them to preach there as well that same afternoon. As a leader of Dominica's small free black community, Webley commanded the respect not only of the free people of color, but was also no doubt looked upon with esteem by the island's slaves. When she let it be known that an important preacher was going to speak at her home, all Dominica's blacks who possibly could, tried to attend. On a second visit by Coke that same year, Mrs. Webley heard of his imminent arrival via the island's "coconut telegraph" before he even stepped ashore.⁷ She quickly reserved a large room for him to preach in so he could use his short time on Dominica to the greatest effect.⁸

With the help of Mrs. Webley and other Afro-Protestants from Antigua, Coke formed a small society of 24 members. The strength and steadfastness of Dominica's Afro-Methodist church was tested throughout the 1790s as a consequence of the high mortality rate of its resident white missionaries. Years passed when no white Methodist minister resided on the island, but still a core of believers held on and even thrived. Again, it was Mrs. Webley who held Dominica's Methodist church together. Her status in the black community as a pan-Caribbean

⁷ The coconut telegraph was an informal person-to-person system of communication on and between many Caribbean islands that helped spread important (and less important) news with remarkable speed.

⁸ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. II, 352. For an account of how much the Methodists and Baptists borrowed from Moravian church organization, see F. Ernest Stoeffler, "Religious Roots of the Early Moravian and Methodist Movements," *Methodist History* 24, no. 3 (April 1983): 132-140.

religious leader also made her an alternate source of leadership separate from the slave plantation complex. Though not having the power to challenge the planter regime directly, she proved by example that black West Indians did have moral integrity and intellectual capacity, thus helping to cast doubt upon slavery's legitimacy. More immediately, she came to the assistance of beleaguered white missionaries who came to Dominica, in a sense using them to empower herself and other Afro-Caribbeans around her. When John Baxter revisited the island in 1796 to replace yet another dead white mission worker, she met him at the docks, and again did her best to shepherd and safeguard the frail white preachers in her care, knowing that they were a means to her people's salvation, and perhaps, emancipation.⁹

Antigua's position as a center of Afro-Christianity was taken note of, as well, by whites on neighboring islands who appeared to be driven by other priorities than salvation and black freedom. In a letter written in 1837 from Barbuda, an island thirty miles north of Antigua, planter John Osborne asked the Moravians to send missionaries to evangelize his black workers. He was well aware that Afro-Moravians in Antigua had a reputation for being "conspicuous for their moral conduct – their names seldom or never appeared on the criminal calendar." To achieve this squeaky-clean record, Osborne was advised that Moravian pastors maintained a "moral surveillance which pervades every station of life, and preserves a continual check over their habits and actions." As this example illustrates, Barbudan planters in 1837 were beginning to feel anxious about how they were going to control their Afro-Caribbean workers, given that the probationary period for former slaves in the British West Indies was set to expire the next year. Slavery had been abolished in Britain's empire in 1834, but most slaves were forced to serve another four years as "apprentices" as a way for them, and their former owners, to make

⁹ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. II, 354-356.

the transition to the new free labor system. The Moravian model seemed, to white planters, an ideal way to maintain order and perpetuate the old regime of patriarchal control.¹⁰

Osborn was not as enthusiastic, however, about Antigua's Methodist missionaries. He had earlier invited one to preach in Barbuda on the subject of temperance. With the anti-drinking crusade in full swing in the United States and Great Britain, this Methodist pastor had made it his primary cause, so much so that fellow Methodists worried that he neglected what they referred to as "vital religion." This parson's strict stand on temperance backfired, though, when he became violently seasick on the voyage between Antigua and Barbuda. He refused the then-current cure of brandy and water, stayed in bed, and returned to Antigua the next day without preaching a single word. Disgusted, Osborne turned to the Moravians. He and other planters probably did not care what brand of Protestantism was used, but only that it was an effective tool to keep the lower classes in line.¹¹

The wide dispersal of Antigua's Afro-Protestants throughout the Americas is further confirmed in the records of the Moravian Church. As previously noted, the Brethren were excellent record keepers and had a genuine concern about the actions and movement of all their members, current and prospective. That concern extended to tracking where their congregants went if they left Antigua. Not surprisingly, considering the time the records reflect, the most likely destination for members of Antigua's Afro-Moravian church were the islands of St. Vincent, Dominica, Grenada, and Trinidad. The need for slave labor to work the new cane fields meant migration to the Ceded Islands for blacks from around the British Caribbean. Montserrat

¹⁰ *Letters of the U.E.C. to the West Indies, etc., 1770-1840*, box # 1, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 249.

¹¹ *Letters of the U.E.C. to the West Indies, etc., 1770-1840*, box #1. On the temperance campaign in the antebellum United States, see Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 259-263.

and St. Kitts received the next largest number of Antigua's Afro-Moravians, probably because they are close at hand and conducted a lively commerce with Antigua in both wartime and peace. The Danish Virgin Islands also received a large number of Afro-Moravian Antiguans, probably because of its long-established Moravian mission, which was second only to Antigua in the number of its Afro-Caribbean membership. That only three Afro-Moravians are recorded as having run away from Antigua appears to bear out evangelical claims that the conversion of slaves made them easier to control and better, more content, workers. Moravian leaders were also probably pleased to note that only three members switched denominational allegiances, going over to the suspiciously "enthusiastic" Methodists. Of the 321 Afro-Moravians who moved or were transported against their will, 27 went to non-British possessions, a healthy 8.5 percent. If that percentage is extrapolated for the rest of the West Indies, it appears that many more slaves moved easily from one European colony to another, foreign one, than has been previously recognized. Finally, the Moravian church registers highlight the movement of Afro-Moravians from Antigua to North America, involving a total of seventeen individuals. These men and women, if they were anything like the other Afro-Antiguan émigrés who stayed in the West Indies, helped in their turn to foster Christianity among their fellow African Americans in their new home. Their movement also indicates that Afro-Caribbeans came to North America via less visible means and in larger numbers in the eighteenth century than previously thought by most scholars.¹²

¹² For a discussion of the movement of slaves from the colonies of one European colony to that of another, see Scott, "Crisscrossing Empires."

Table 3-1. Destinations of Antigua's Afro-Moravian Emigrants, 1757-1833

Ceded Islands: number

St. Vincent	89
Dominica	38
Grenada	29
Trinidad	27

Total 183

Danish Virgin Islands:

St. Croix	13
St. Thomas	3
St. John	3

Total 19

British West Indies:

Montserrat	17
St. Kitts	13
Demerara	8
Barbados	6
Jamaica	4
Tobago	4
Bahamas	3
Honduras	2
Bermuda	2
St. Lucia	2

Total 61

North America:

America	9
Georgia	6
Philadelphia	2

Total 17

Other:

sold off island	11
"goes his own way"	6
Guadeloupe	6
just a date	6
England	4
runaway	3
Methodists	3

Table 3-1. Continued

Spanish Main	2
<hr/>	
<i>Total</i>	41
<i>Total Emigrants</i>	321 ¹³

The total number of Afro-Moravians who moved or were forced to migrate as slaves from Antigua was relatively small, a total of 321 individuals, considering the total number of church members (11,519) and the period of time covered (seventy-six years). As the testimony of Thomas Coke and evidence from Moravian sources attests, however, those who did move to other islands, countries, and continents were pious individuals who took their faith seriously and in many cases started their own churches. Most did so without the help or guidance of white missionaries or the approbation of white planters, though they were usually happy to accept aid from international church organizations when, and if, it was offered. Inviting a white preacher to lead a black Caribbean church offered the benefits of some limited protection from planter persecution, the hope of education, and a connection to the wider world. No evidence exists showing that Afro-Caribbean Methodists or Moravians founded churches when they moved to North America, but lack of evidence does not make such an event impossible. Racial animosity made the establishment of independent black churches difficult in all but a few cases in the eighteenth-century South. As devout Christians, Antigua's transient Afro-Protestants surely sought out spiritual communion wherever they landed. They probably accommodated themselves as best they could to local religious practice, but they also brought their own brand of

¹³ *Moravian Church Registers – Antigua*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Afro-Caribbean spirituality with them, which in turn helped to influence the development of African American Christianity.¹⁴

Mobility, Religion, and Slavery

Itinerant black (and white) missionaries in the West Indies allowed people of African descent from different ethnic groups and various localities to gather together without regard for social boundaries to hear the evangelical message. By joining the larger imagined community of Afro-Protestantism, blacks were also able to transcend local, face-to-face, deferential relationships with hegemonic whites. Instead of looking inward, black evangelicals in the Caribbean and along the whole western Atlantic littoral were able, at least metaphorically, to attain some racial unity and break free of the plantation's restricting confines. So even if an individual slave never strayed too far from his owner's estate or never left her island, she still came into contact with ideas of black freedom and moral and intellectual achievement when a transcaribbean missionary came to preach.¹⁵

The greater awareness of and contact with Atlantic-world Protestantism empowered many Afro-Caribbeans to question, not only slavery's legitimacy, but whites' place as cultural leaders. As a result of black exposure to evangelical Christianity, moreover, the behavior of whites came under greater scrutiny by their bondsmen and women. Opposition to the missionary activity of the Moravians and Methodists by white slave owners occurred, in part, because they threatened established cultural and economic mores such as patriarchy, the inferiority of women, and the religious subordination of people of color. Evangelicals also attacked the planter lifestyle, with

¹⁴ *Moravian Church Registers – Antigua.*

¹⁵ For the emancipatory qualities of itinerant evangelicals in the eighteenth century, see Timothy D. Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itineracy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1994), 6.

its horseracing, music, dancing, drinking, gambling, and sex between white planters and their female slaves.¹⁶

Evangelical preachers in the West Indies were opposed by planters, many historians argue, because by Christianizing their slaves they threatened the master/slave relationship. While this is true, there might also be an additional explanation: white planters in the Caribbean may have felt under attack by evangelicals on a broader cultural front. West Indian planters, like their North American cousins, were famous for their lavish entertainments. A holiday frolic such as one described by Jamaican Edward Long in 1774 could include such diversions as “cards, billiards, backgammon, chess, horse-racing, hog-hunting, shooting, fishing, dancing, and music.” The new ascetic moral code demanded by evangelicals put a damper on such cavalier amusements. If left unchecked, the new Puritanism might even bar the door to the women’s slave quarters, whose inhabitants were converting to Protestant evangelicalism in growing numbers.¹⁷

The first evangelicals to criticize West Indian planter excess were the English Quakers, who first appeared in the region in the 1650s, bringing controversy in their wake. The conflict was not over slavery, since Quakers planted sugarcane and owned numerous slaves in the Caribbean at the time. What bothered white Barbadians about the Quakers was their criticism of the planter lifestyle. Friends’ caustic remarks about the “Periwiggs, Fringes, Paintings, and other wild Attire” worn by high society matrons to church made it clear that planter opposition to the

¹⁶ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 119. For an analysis of sexual exploitation of female slaves by white planters, see Philip D. Morgan, “Slave Life in Piedmont Virginia, 1720-1800,” in Lois Green Carr, Philip D. Morgan, and Jean B. Russo, eds., *Colonial Chesapeake Society* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Published for The Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 471-472.

¹⁷ Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica: Reflections on its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws, and Government* (Kingston, Jamaica: I. Randle, 2002; reprint of 1774 edition), 262.

evangelical Quakers sprang from deep cultural differences. As an alternative source of information and power, black and white missionaries were potentially dangerous. Even black critiques of white behavior, while rare, have survived to the present. West Indian planter families came under harsh criticism from one Afro-Caribbean for maintaining non-Christian superstitions. According to Afro-Methodist Anne Hart Gilbert writing at the end of the eighteenth century, white Antiguans were just as bound by their misguided belief in non-Christian magic as were their “uncivilized” African slaves. They sought the advice of fortune tellers, acquired grave dirt to protect their homes from misfortune, and in at least one instance used a sanctified pair of scissors to detect thieves. Being put on the same moral level as their slaves was disturbing to white West Indians; it could also be dangerous because any critique of white planter culture could potentially inspire servile insurrection.¹⁸

That planter transgressions and “tropical” luxury might, in turn, corrupt white missionaries was a constant concern for evangelical leaders like Methodist Thomas Coke. The generally good relations that the English Methodists enjoyed with slave drivers in Antigua was, he believed, a double-edged sword. Keeping slave owners happy allowed missionaries access to their slaves, but cozying up to planters had its hazards. Missionaries were often invited to entertainments at the “big house” of local sugar planters, which awed many of them with their “elegance and grandeur,” but the parties were, in Coke’s estimation, “not only indulgent but ... dangerous.” By becoming too friendly with local elites Coke feared that mission workers might begin to look the other way when planters indulged in vice. “Our friends who invite us to their houses,” Coke stated flatly, “entertain us rather like princes than subjects: herein, perhaps, lies

¹⁸ Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 103; Moira Ferguson, ed., *The Hart Sisters: Early African Caribbean Writers, Evangelicals, and Radicals* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 60.

part of our danger in this country.” Coke, however, viewed the Caribbean’s torrid climate as a form of divine punishment for the sinful lifestyles and ostentatious displays of wealth he encountered in the West Indies. The tropical diseases so deadly to Europeans were God’s way, Coke declaimed, of showing his displeasure with those “who are inclined to corpulence ... habitual intemperance ... an indulgence of the appetites” and “living free.” The fear that planter luxury would infect his mission workers with sin led Coke to shuffle them from one island to another every few years.¹⁹

Wherever white missionaries were assigned in the West Indies, the temptation to associate with and become incorporated into the ruling white power structure (if in vastly subordinate positions) was intense. Church leaders continually reminded their subordinates of the primary reason they had been sent into the mission field. Moravian Bishop Augustus Spangenburg, in a letter to Antiguan missionary Samuel Isles, was quite blunt about Isles’ job description: “Don’t meddle with preaching to the white people, and with baptizing their children, marrying of them, and the like. It is none of your Business, and it will hinder your work among the Negroes.”²⁰

Afro-Methodists and Afro-Moravians understood this injunction better, perhaps, than did many white missionaries. In Jamaica, Methodist Thomas Coke overheard a black man as he was walking along a Kingston street exclaim of the missionaries to a companion that, “These men were imported for us.” Less optimistically, Antiguan missionary Isles wrote of an incident in which he was accosted by several black church members who complained that: “You have told

¹⁹ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. II, 438; Thomas Coke, *Extracts of the Journals of the Rev. Dr. Thomas Coke’s Five Visits to America* (London: G. Paramore, 1793), 57; Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of Each Island; With an Account of the Missions Instituted in those Islands, from the Commencement of their Civilization, but More Especially of the Missions which have been Established in the Archipelago by the Society late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley, Volume. I* (London: Nutall, Fisher, and Dixon, 1808), 69.

²⁰ Augustus Spangenburg to Samuel Isles, June 13, 1757, *West Indies Correspondence*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

us you are come here for the sake of the poor Negroes only. Now we see so many white people come to hear you and seem to approve and commend you ... will not this incline you to forsake us ...?" Such a complaint could only have come from someone who was aware of the international Protestant mission movement and what its goals were.²¹

Isles, like other missionaries, often found that he was in the difficult position of trying to balance his duty to his black congregants, some of whom were well-informed and articulate, with the designs of local planters. One plantation mistress was direct with Isles about what she thought his role should be. She complained to him about the trouble she was having disciplining her slaves, explaining that she had "given them all the good advise possible, had demonstrated God to them and explained the 10 Commandments..." She had also used "threats, beatings etc. but declared all to no purpose." She finally turned to Isles, proclaiming in exasperation, "ah! If you could but make them good." While not wanting to offend, Isles nevertheless explained that "I was not come to Antigua to be a driver to peoples Negroes." The planter's wife, though, did not go away disappointed. His method, Isles continued, "was to preach Salvation thro' our dr. Redeemer and Savr. unto them and if this made any impression on them twould no doubt have many Happy consequences." Isles' conflict in having to balance this woman's demands with the needs of his black constituency illustrates how strong Afro-Protestants could become within certain parameters.²²

The existence of black evangelicals who moved throughout the West Indies and the creation of an international black Protestant movement helped to break down other social

²¹ Coke, *Extracts of the Journals of the Rev. Dr. Coke's Five Visits to America*, 61; *Antigua Diary, 1756-1757*, March, 1757, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

²² *Antigua Diary, 1756-1757*, March, 1757. For a discussion of how evangelicals and capitalists cooperated in the abolition movement, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 373-376.

barriers as well. Inter-racial unions were relatively uncommon in the West Indies under any circumstances, but evangelical Protestants did not shy away from them. In 1798, Antiguan and Afro-Methodist Anne Hart married a white man named John Gilbert, despite pleas by family and friends of both partners who warned of the consequences of such a match. Gilbert was part of an important Antiguan family and had taken a job as an accountant at the island's Royal Navy dockyard (as had Methodist missionary John Baxter earlier). He joined the Methodist church in 1794 and became a lay preacher and class leader three years later. He met Anne at church and fell in love. Though the match was not impossible, getting married turned out to be no easy matter for John and Anne. Gilbert's fellow militia officers disowned and attempted to court-martial him. Even one of his own relatives asked all of Antigua's clergy and ship captains in port not to marry the couple. Family connections, however, overcame public censure. They married without too many negative consequences, and in 1801 Gilbert was even promoted from junior accountant to first clerk to the storekeeper at the Royal Navy yard at English Harbour. He and Anne were no doubt shunned by white Antigua's high society, but his employment at the naval facility, controlled as it was by imperial officials whose outlook was more cosmopolitan, was secure.²³

Anne Hart Gilbert's sister, Elizabeth, also married a white clergyman, Charles Thwaites, thus cementing the Hart sisters' reputation as social pariahs in white Antiguan society. Miscegenation was rare in the West Indies, but when it did occur, a prime motivation was the couples' desire to spread evangelical religion. The Gilberts and Thwaites were all evangelical activists, John and Charles becoming Methodist preachers, while Anne and Elizabeth opened the

²³ Ferguson, *Hart Sisters*, 12.

Caribbean's first inter-racial Sunday school and carried on a lively correspondence with English Methodist leaders in London.²⁴

Other examples of how attachment to Protestant evangelical networks helped overcome racial taboos were the inter-racial marriages of Rebecca and Matthaus Freundlich in St. Thomas in the 1730s, and Joseph Phillips and an Afro-Jamaican woman in the early nineteenth century. Both couples worked for the Moravian church in various capacities but mostly employed their time evangelizing free and enslaved Afro-Caribbeans. They faced censure, imprisonment, or the threat of imprisonment, but openly married anyway because they believed their unions would further their religious goals. When religious values did not enter the equation, demography often played a role in bringing white men and black women together. Few white women could be lured to the West Indies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because of the region's well-deserved reputation as a white person's graveyard. With few white women available, white men turned to black women for companionship, and occasionally married them.²⁵

In the cases of Methodists John Gilbert and Charles Thwaites and Moravians Matthaus Freundlich and Joseph Phillips, though, the reasons for marrying black women appear to go beyond mere demographic scarcity. In all four cases, evangelical fervor seems to have overridden considerations of race. All four couples were deeply religious and committed missionaries. For the Hart sisters, true love mixed easily with the religious zeal they shared with their husbands. The union of Rebecca and Matthaus Freundlich was likely more one of propriety

²⁴ Ferguson, *Hart Sisters*, 13.

²⁵ Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 102; Ferguson, *Hart Sisters*, 21; Carl Degler, *Neither Black Nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1971), 217; Peggy Pascoe, "Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of 'Race' in Twentieth-Century America," *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 1 (June 1996): 49; Douglas Hall, ed., *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-1786* (London: MacMillan, 1989).

and necessity than of love, nevertheless, both exhibited a strong sense of commitment to each other when they were imprisoned for refusing to nullify their marriage.²⁶

Some evangelicals were wary of the effects of this extensive travel network. In a letter to his mission worker in Antigua in 1757, Moravian superintendent Augustus Spangenburg cautioned about “Negroes who have lived among the Catholics.” He worried that they had not actually been baptized, noting that many knew little about Christian dogma. Samuel Isles, Spangenburg’s missionary in Antigua, had to that point been so unsuccessful in attracting Antigua’s people of color to his ministry that, notwithstanding his mentor’s warning, he felt he had to pursue any slave that might be open to the Christian Gospel. To that end he courted “Jack ... a French Negro with whom I had spoke much concerning the savior...” Isles brought only a handful of Afro-Antiguans into his church, but perhaps the island-hopping Jack was one of them.²⁷

The Moravians were not alone when it came to experiencing the perils, and benefits, of the increased mobility of modern life. Methodist Brother McDonald found to his misfortune how true this was in 1797 on an outward journey from Liverpool, England. His ship was overtaken by a French privateer roughly thirty miles off the coast of Antigua, whose crew quickly overwhelmed the smaller English vessel. McDonald was taken to the nearby French island of Guadeloupe and thrown in jail. After a few days he was transferred to a local church that had been converted into a prison, where his cellmates were mostly drunken British prisoners of war. To his surprise, he also shared the church-turned-prison with several Afro-Caribbean Methodists

²⁶C.G.A. Oldendorp, *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, Johann Jakob Bossard, ed., Arnold R. Highfield and Vladimir Barac, trans. and ed. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987), 397.

²⁷ Letter to Samuel Isles from Augustus Spangenburg, 6/13/1757, *West Indies Correspondence*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; *Antigua Diary*, March, 1757. Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

(originally from Antigua?) who had also been captured by the French and were no doubt considered contrabands of war. McDonald ended up forming a higher opinion of them than the white Englishmen, saying he had with the black Christians “some serious conversation.” The Methodist missionary was set free after three weeks in a prisoner exchange, and after a number of other adventures that included hunger and narrow escape from recapture by the French, Brother McDonald finally set foot in Antigua, his originally intended destination.²⁸

Some Afro-Christians who moved around the greater Caribbean had more on their minds than spreading the Gospel. Slaves implicated in Antigua’s 1736 servile conspiracy that were willing to serve as witnesses for the prosecution were spared the worst punishments. In exchange for information, most were transported out of Antigua: forty-seven to North America and the rest to Hispaniola. The idea of banishment was to try to make certain that slaves infected with the virus of rebellion never again came back to poison the minds of Antigua’s remaining slave population. The hunger for slave labor was so intense that, even though the buyers of such rebellious individuals knew they were taking an incredible risk, they still agreed to take men known to be dangerous. The relative danger or safety of any group of slaves, of course, could be hard to gauge. Prosecutors of Afro-Hispanic sailors implicated in New York’s slave conspiracy of 1741 only found out after the fact that they were skilled fighters, willing to take up sword and gun to win their freedom. Nor could the submissiveness of native African slaves always be ensured, even though many were from widely different and antagonistic ethnic groups. The Stono uprising of 1739 outside of Charleston, South Carolina was instigated and led by a unified group of Kongo warriors practiced in the art of war. When they were finally subdued, many of the rebels were executed, while some faced transportation to distant colonies. Given the vagaries

²⁸ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. II, 448-450.

of the slave trade, however, white prosecutors of rebellious slaves never knew for sure where the convicts would end up. In 1759, for example, a conspirator from Antigua's 1736 slave plot showed up in St. Croix, where he was again among the leaders of a scheme to overthrow the planter regime.²⁹

Several of the seemingly trustworthy creoles who played key roles in Antigua's 1736 slave conspiracy had also been infected by their contact with the outside world. Many were trusted by their white masters in part because some of them were Christians, though of the "Romish Church." They were also well-traveled: conspirator Tilgarth Penezar had "been to Northward [presumably mainland North America] and Can read and write Say Prayers and ca." The creole slave Cudjoe, who was also condemned to die, had at one time been to Boston. Maintaining absolute control of people and ideas proved impossible in a region dominated by the constant international exchange of goods, people, and services, and populated by such a diverse set of ethnic groups and nation states.³⁰

Dilemmas Faced by Missionaries

Evangelicals were not the only transcaribbean missionaries who exhibited a sincere desire to evangelize America's people of color. Pastors employed by the Church of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, established in 1701, went to Britain's colonies with the goal of converting the slaves. The SPG's missionaries were aided in their work and enjoyed what success they did because some of the slaves were already Christians. Anglican missionary Francis Le Jau spent the first decade of the eighteenth century on the Caribbean island of St.

²⁹ David Barry Gaspar, *Bondsmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1985), 34; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 188-190; John K. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (Oct. 1991): 1103.

³⁰ Gaspar, *Bondsmen and Rebels*, 232.

Kitts before accepting a parish in South Carolina's Low Country. In both places he endeavored to evangelize the slaves under his purview, but ran into strong opposition from local whites. They were afraid, like white colonists elsewhere in British America, that baptized slaves would demand their freedom. Drawing upon his long experience in the greater Caribbean, though, Le Jau observed that "the negroes now in their possession ... came from the French or Spaniards & consequently are baptized yet they don't look upon them as free." Le Jau, no early abolitionist, was nevertheless horrified by the treatment slaves endured at the hands of their owners. He sympathized with black captives who believed that if they were baptized into the Christian church, their owners would be "obliged to look upon them as brothers in Christ and use them with humanity," instead of treating them "worse than their Beasts." In St. Kitts and South Carolina, as elsewhere, slaveholders wanted no individual or institution, such as a missionary or a church, to interfere with their power over their property in slaves. Le Jau's experiences working and traveling throughout the greater Caribbean should have reassured them that Christianity did not bar the exploitation of slaves.³¹

Wherever they went in the greater Caribbean, Protestant missionaries were followed by a shadow of death. The region's unhealthy disease environment was particularly deadly for Europeans, who died in higher percentages than did people of color. Economic necessity drove some missionaries and ministers to accept jobs in the West Indies, knowing full well the dangers involved; many of them got out as quickly as they could. Others also knew that their lives were in jeopardy working in the Caribbean field, but went there anyway, motivated by religious zeal and a genuine concern for the welfare of the slaves they were sent to convert. Concern for his family's health drove SPG missionary Arthur Holt to abandon his parish in Barbados, electing in

³¹ Gaspar, *Bondsmen and Rebels*, 133; Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, third edition, revised (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 67.

1733 to flee to the mainland in hopes of being given a church in Maryland. Holt received a church there and was happy to report that his family was doing much better. Though his new parish was large, sixty miles long by fourteen miles wide in hilly country, Holt was quite happy to be shut of Barbados. He was subsequently transferred to a church outside of Philadelphia in 1735, where he encountered another Anglican pastor from Barbados, a Mr. Johnson, who had also fled to preserve his health. Johnson went on to Philadelphia, then to New York and New England, but then, incredibly, ended up back in Barbados.³²

The rigors of preaching in the “plantations” took a physical toll, but it could also affect a missionary’s mental health. Anglican minister the Reverend Mr. Kendell, whose usual pastorate was in Bermuda, accepted an invitation in early 1703 to preach in South Carolina. While there, though, “he became distempered in the mind.” He returned to Bermuda, where after several months of convalescence he managed to regain his sanity. His period of lucidity was short-lived, however; after six weeks, Kendell “grew bad again” and was sent home to England.³³

Those missionaries who stayed in the West Indies sometimes suffered horribly from their maladies and died agonizing deaths. The Moravian missionaries of St. Thomas were near death in 1742 when Superintendent Freidrich Martin arrived there from North America. The bodies of one missionary couple, explained Martin, “were covered with boils and open wounds to such an extent that they were able to do nothing other than to wait out their afflictions,” in other words, to die. Luckily for the couple, Martin had orders to take them back to Pennsylvania, though it is not known whether they survived the journey. A trip to North America to convalesce could sometimes prove worse than the original malady, as Methodist missionary William Turton

³² Arthur Holt to Bishop Gibson, Sept. 27, 1733, *Fulham Papers*, vol. III, Maryland, Lambeth Palace Archives, London, England, 168-169, 172-173, 178-179.

³³ Governor Bennett to Archbishop Tenison, Oct. 19, 1703, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XVII, Bermuda, 7-8.

discovered when he sailed from the Bahamas to Philadelphia in June, 1816 “for the benefit of his health.” When only one day’s sail out of the Delaware River estuary, his ship hit bad weather, delaying its arrival for an additional day, leaving Turton sick for another four. After recovering from the voyage he then suffered from swelling in his legs and from a “head still badly disordered.” Turton wondered if he could continue as a missionary, though he remained stoically optimistic: “Although my body decays,” he proclaimed, “my soul will be more fit for glory, that when he calls, I may go with joy.”³⁴

The mortality rate of white missionaries in the West Indies could be fearful. In a letter delivered to Moravian headquarters in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1750, the Brethren were saddened by the “News from St. Thomas that five of our European members, including Br. Friedrich Martin, had died there.” Thirty-four Moravian missionaries, in fact, died in the West Indies station in its first decade of operation. Most of them faced death bravely, even militantly, content that they had done their duty as Christians. Many missionaries were fatalistic about their chances. When discussing the possibility of dying while doing mission work in St. Thomas, a group of Moravians in Bethlehem “talked about the death of the witnesses [missionaries] and that no one dies whose time has not yet come, whether he wants to die, or whether he dies from punishment.” At the end of the discussion, Brother and Sister Rausch, who were contemplating a mission to St. Thomas, “were quite cheerful about the matter,” and sailed for the Caribbean shortly thereafter. Another Moravian, Brother Israel, was not only cheerful but militant in his attitude about dying for God. Already in St. Thomas and on his deathbed, he declared that “My

³⁴ Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 399; A. Dean Peggs, ed., *A Mission to the West India Islands: Dowson’s Journal for 1810-17* (Nassau, Bahamas: The Dean Peggs Research Fund, 1960), 97.

brethren still do not want to believe that I am to go to my rest. Let His will be done! That is the end of it.”³⁵

Not all Moravian and Methodist missionaries, of course, were resigned to a fate of suffering silently and dying in the field. Moravian Brother Joseph Powells sent a complaining letter from Jamaica to his superiors in Bethlehem in October of 1762 pleading to be sent home. His wife, also a missionary, appeared near death and, he said, few Afro-Jamaicans showed much interest in becoming Christians anyway. Powells wrote again in November, but this time he was slightly more optimistic. Though two fellow missionaries had died, his wife was doing better, so he would continue at the station.³⁶

Women like Joseph Powells' wife Martha were instrumental in spreading the Gospel and bringing people of color into the church. They also suffered, like their husbands, a terrible toll in debilitating sickness and death as a result of working in a foreign disease environment. Work as a missionary was hard, but the women who dedicated themselves to it did not spare themselves. Perhaps the most important task missionaries assigned themselves was visiting sick, old, and disabled slaves in their homes. They helped the afflicted bondsmen and women as best they could, offering the “assurance and consolation of God’s word.” White Moravian women missionaries took on the responsibility of visiting black women, a task that could require walking five to ten miles in the hot tropical sun. Probably because the conditions were so difficult, especially for women wearing the hot, bulky clothing that modesty demanded, female mission workers were always in short supply. Paradoxically, this uncomfortable propriety was precisely

³⁵ *Single Brethren’s Diary, 1744-1752* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Historic Bethlehem Partnership, 1996), May 18, 1750; Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 405; *Bethlehem Diary*, vol. II, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 252.

³⁶ Joseph Powells to Nathaniel Seidle, Oct. 29, 1762, *Jamaica, West Indies: Letters, 1754-1764*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

the reason they were so needed. Ever conscious of the temptations open to white men in slave societies, most male missionaries thought it improper to visit and be alone with female slaves, making the presence of women missionaries essential. For all their work, women missionaries paid a terrible price. John Bohner, a Moravian who spent over forty years working for his church in St. John, St. Croix, and St. Thomas, lost three wives in the mission field. Molly Isles, who along with her husband Samuel, was the first Protestant missionary to evangelize people of color in Antigua, died after working there for only four years. Samuel remarried a Pennsylvania woman one year later, Maria Margaretha Zerb, who went back with him to Antigua. The durable Maria Isles outlived Samuel and married a second missionary in St. Thomas, who died only eight days after their wedding. In 1769, Maria married a third time, a union which lasted until 1792, when that missionary husband died as well.³⁷

More than white women missionaries, women of color were active in bringing the Gospel message to other Afro-Caribbeans in the eighteenth century. White Methodist missionary John Baxter commented that men in general were not as attached to Methodism as were women. Antigua's Methodist society had only six white men as members, only one of which employed his spare time as a lay preacher. Gender also counted in the free black community, where only one man was a member, while free black women flocked to the church. The latter, Baxter noted, were excellent exhorters, something he could not say about the men, slave or free. Missionary Thomas Richardson had a chance to witness several black women preachers in action in Antigua. After hearing rumors about the power of their preaching, he decided to conceal himself behind a curtain at the back of the local meeting house. When they began to exhort, he was immediately

³⁷ Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 435, 541; George Neisser, *A History of the Beginning of Moravian Work in America* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: The Archives of the Moravian Church, 1955), 79; Nelson, "Samuel Isles," 15, 212, 23.

astonished at “their eloquence and unction.” He proclaimed that “their abilities far exceed of most of the women” he had heard in England or anywhere else. Antigua’s Methodist missionaries, moreover, needed these women enthusiasts: they only had three or four white mission workers on the island at any one time during most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and could not have maintained their church without them.³⁸

Black and Brown “Helpers”

Methodist and Moravian missionaries depended heavily on the black and brown members of their congregations who had experience within the larger Atlantic world, in almost everything they did. An example is Cornelius, a freed-man originally part of the Moravian church in St. Thomas before moving to St. John in 1757. Besides being an expert mason, he spoke several languages, including Danish, Dutch, English, and German, as such becoming the chief intermediary between the slaves on his plantation and white missionaries. When one or more missionaries on St. John became ill, as frequently happened, Cornelius happily assumed responsibility for preaching on Sundays, and was said to deliver excellent and moving sermons. Just as important as holding forth in the pulpit was the assistance some blacks gave to white missionaries when they traveled to distant plantations to evangelize the slaves. Frequently, white preachers could get little or no reaction from groups of assembled black field hands unless they were accompanied by a “believer from their own nation.” When a white Moravian missionary, in one instance, promised “forgiveness of sins, life everlasting, and eternal salvation” to an assemblage of slaves if they “believed in the crucified Savior,” the message only seemed to make a “lively impression on their hearts when [black helpers] Andreas or Petrus joyfully confirmed his words.” Helpers Andreas and Petrus inhabited a liminal space between the Christian West

³⁸ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. II, 455, 361.

and Africa's traditional religions made necessary by the slave trade and possible because of the mobility of Afro-Caribbeans.³⁹

The use of blacks as "helpers" and exhorters benefited the cause of evangelization, but it also fulfilled the Methodist and Moravian desire for strong social control. In cases where the Moravians had large numbers of baptized members on a single plantation, they made it a practice to name "moral overseers" from among the estate's black population. These overseers had two functions: to ensure that the slaves under their purview maintained upright morals and, just as importantly, that they "faithfully performed all the duties they owed their masters." Each Saturday, overseers and other "helpers" met with white missionaries to report on the progress of their charges, discussing their worthiness for baptism or confirmation. It was hoped that this form of self-policing would put to rest planter concerns about the suspected revolutionary nature of Christianity among the slaves.⁴⁰

Despite white missionaries' efforts at control, many black evangelists in the Protestant Caribbean were able to shake off white clerical oversight and became for all practical purposes autonomous actors. Though independent, most adhered to the strict moral rules of their denominations. Samuel Painter, the free mulatto Methodist who moved from Antigua to Grenada in the 1780s, demanded close observation of an ascetic code of behavior from his small church "society." He was instrumental, for example, in the conversion of a wealthy free mulatto woman named Duchess Simmons. Prior to joining Painter's Methodist congregation, Simmons had enjoyed her money, dressing well and attending dances and other lavish entertainments. Under Mr. Painter's influence all that changed. She put away her gold and silver jewelry, and

³⁹ Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 530, 328; J. Taylor Hamilton, *A History of the Missions of the Moravian Church During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Times Publishing Company, Printers, 1901), 63.

⁴⁰ Oldendorp, *History of the Mission*, 335, 543.

assumed “the appearance of Christian plainness.” She also ended a relationship of long standing with a white man. They had lived together for a number of years but never married, an arrangement that was frowned upon by respectable white society, but that was not uncommon in the greater Caribbean. Convinced of the sinfulness of this unsanctified union, Simmons broke with her lover and spent the last ten years of her life devoting her time to church work, becoming, in Thomas Coke’s words, a very “useful” class leader.⁴¹

People of color in the greater Caribbean took control of their spiritual lives quite early, partly because there were so few white missionaries and those few were frequently ill, and also as a consequence of persecution by white planters and colonial authorities. Exposure to the international black Protestant movement also may have motivated some Afro-Caribbeans to take the initiative in building churches outside the control of white masters or the guidance and intervention of white missionaries. Black Harry, an Afro-Methodist slave from North America who had been taken to St. Eustatius sometime during the American Revolution, successfully formed his own church long before Methodist Thomas Coke came to the island in 1787. Coke’s stay was brief, lasting just long enough for him to organize several church classes and then hand them back to Harry, a slave woman also from North America, and a black man named Samuel. Black Harry’s church grew quickly. By the time Coke visited again a year later, it had 200 members and eight exhorters, despite persecution from the island’s Dutch rulers. Harry’s church in St. Eustatius, moreover, was biracial, one of the exhorters being a white man named Ryley who had been brought into the Methodist connection by “poor black Harry.” Seen as a danger to

⁴¹ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. II, 85.

white government, Harry was severely whipped and transferred to another island not long after Coke left St. Eustatius.⁴²

In St. Thomas, white Moravian Friedrich Martin found out just how independent Afro-Moravians could be during a visit to Petrus, the afore-mentioned church helper. Martin discovered that Petrus was visiting neighboring plantations without being told to do so and was presently instructing ten black students in Protestant Christianity. Not only did he and other helpers conduct independent classes, they also raised funds to buy candles for evening sessions and performed charity work among needy members of their congregations. Martin commented that the “work load of the missionaries was lightened considerably” through this type of activity, but the truth may have been that whites were not quite as essential to the enterprise as they believed they were.⁴³

Afro-Protestants took outright control of their churches when white missionaries were incarcerated or otherwise persecuted by colonial authorities. When white Moravian Matthaues Freundlich and his mulatto wife Rebecca were imprisoned by Danish colonial officials in St. Thomas in 1738, ostensibly because they had been married by an unordained minister, their black congregants immediately assumed responsibility for maintaining the mission. Two church members, Christoph and Anna Maria, continued the work of holding prayer meetings and catechism classes, as well as supervising helpers on distant plantations. They became so skilled at their self-appointed tasks that by the time Matthaues and Rebecca were freed several months later, the Moravian church in St. Thomas had grown from 450 to 650 members.⁴⁴

⁴² Thomas Coke, *Extracts of the Journals of the Late Rev. Tho. Coke, L.L.D.* (Dublin, Ireland: R. Napper, 1816), 66.

⁴³ Thomas Coke, *A Journal of Rev. Dr. Coke's Third Tour Through the West Indies: In Two Letters, to Rev. J. Wesley* (London, 1791), 9; Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 328-329.

⁴⁴ Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 353.

White Jamaicans' fears of independent black exhorters infected by ideas then swirling around the Atlantic basin and who were supposedly "ill-disposed, illiterate, and ignorant enthusiasts," led to the passage of an 1802 law that prohibited preaching without a license. Since island authorities issued the licenses, they were difficult for Dissenting preachers to obtain and had the effect of almost completely ending Methodist, Moravian, and Baptist evangelization among the island's slaves. Methodist Thomas Coke complained that the charges that lay black exhorters were dangerous to civil order and might incite rebellion were completely without merit. He may have been right regarding Afro-Methodist exhorters, who were of generally higher social and economic status than their Baptist counterparts. Many were free people of color; some, like the Hart sisters of Antigua, came from the middle strata, could read and write, and even established schools.

In Jamaica, a free man of color, Mr. Williams, whom Coke described as a person of "exemplary character" and possessing "abilities calculated for great usefulness," wanted to become a lay preacher, but fell afoul of the new law. Instead of being arrested for preaching, he was jailed merely for attending a meeting where hymns were sung. For that offense he was incarcerated for one month, though he was exempted from hard labor; a function, perhaps, of his position in the middling strata of Jamaica's free colored society. Williams was presumably literate and acquainted with Jamaica's legal system, because he was bold enough to challenge the anti-preaching law before the island's Quarter Sessions court. Though his case was thrown out by the chief magistrate with the admonition that Williams and two other preachers "ought to be committed for daring to address this court," he still believed taking his case to court was worth the risk of imprisonment. The legislators in Jamaica who passed the 1802 anti-preaching law may have had as their real target lower-class black Baptist exhorters who traveled the island's

back roads. Many of these “exhorters and enthusiasts” appeared threatening because they were not connected with any British, European, or American missionary society. They were also feared because they mixed heavy doses of African spirituality and ritual into their ostensibly Christian sermons. Despite prohibiting legislation, these so-called Native Baptists persisted, gaining so much influence that they were charged with fomenting the bloody Baptist War (also known as the Christmas Rebellion) in the winter of 1831-32, when many Jamaican slaves rose against their white oppressors. A secondary target of Jamaican lawmakers may have been black helpers and class leaders who, by frequently assuming control of Moravian and Methodist mission stations and sometimes evangelized without the knowledge of white missionaries, appeared to be acting with a worldly independence that was dangerous to the planter regime.⁴⁵

Education for Afro-Antiguans

Since it was believed that literate slaves constituted a challenge to white supremacy, education for people of color in the New World “plantations” was generally discouraged by white planters. Those blacks who managed to learn to read usually did so as a result of schools established by evangelical missionaries. The reason given for why black preachers needed to learn to read was because they needed to be able to read the Bible to understand and interpret it for the laity. In Antigua during the early nineteenth century, a white observer named Mrs. Flanagan noted the presence of a “higher order of negroes” that “bury the dead, read prayers to the sick, or preach extemporaneously.” One of these “kind parsons,” as Flanagan described him, took great pride in displaying his “skill in reading to the astonished multitude,” favoring them “with a portion from some of his favorite authors.” Formal education for people of color in the

⁴⁵ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. I, 446-447; Ferguson, *Hart Sisters*, 15; Michael Craton, “Proto-Peasant Revolts? The Late Slave Rebellions in the British West Indies, 1816-1832,” *Past and Present*, no. 85 (Nov. 1979): 112; Monica Schuler, “Myalism and the African Religious Tradition in Jamaica,” in Margaret E. Crahan and Franklin W. Knight, eds., *Africa and the Caribbean: The Legacies of a Link* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 68-70.

West Indies was pioneered, interestingly enough, in Antigua. The creolized Afro-Methodist Hart sisters, who held definite ideas about the civilizing qualities of Christianity for what they termed “savage” African slaves, opened a school for Antigua’s black and white children in 1809. Like Jacobus Capitein on the West African coast at Elmina’s mulatto school 60 years before, the Harts taught not only how to read, write, and compute; they also railed against the sins of prostitution, concubinage, and the drinking and dancing that led to them.⁴⁶

The Moravian church was, as well, at the forefront of trying to bring education to people of color in the greater Caribbean. For a select few, that meant moving from the West Indies to either Bethlehem, Pennsylvania or to any one of several Moravian settlements in Germany. Maria, an Afro-Caribbean elder in the Moravian women’s choir in St. Thomas, was summoned to the Brethren’s town of Marienborn in Wetteravia, Germany, in 1742. She had served the church faithfully and with apparent intelligence, so it was decided to continue her spiritual education in Europe. In the company of several returning white missionaries, she first sailed to Bethlehem, where she married Andreas, another Afro-Virgin Islander. He had originally been promised in marriage to yet another Afro-Virgin Islander, Anna Maria, but she had died in Europe awaiting his arrival. After their wedding, Andreas and Maria crossed the Atlantic and became members of the Moravian community in Marienborn. Their purpose in going there was to train as missionaries “before going back to their own people to serve them with blessings.” The Brethren felt, presumably, that true Christianity could only be absorbed in “civilized”

⁴⁶ Mrs. Flanagan, *Antigua and Antiguan: A Full Account of the Colony and Its Inhabitants From the Time of the Caribs to the Present Day, Interspersed with Anecdotes and Legends* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1844), 104; Ferguson, *Hart Sisters*, 125.

Europe, far away from the African influences that adulterated the “true” faith in the West Indies and North America.⁴⁷

The English Methodists, in theory at least, also believed that training people of color as missionaries was essential. Looking to Methodism’s future in foreign lands, Thomas Coke opined that “I doubt not but the day will arrive, when Negro-preachers may be found that will carry the Gospel into the Negro-land,” presumably meaning Africa. Coke’s prophecy about African Americans returning to Africa as Christian missionaries did not have to wait very long. Before the end of the eighteenth century Afro-Protestants from around the Atlantic world began returning in larger and larger numbers to their cultural homeland. In a tantalizing example of a circle being closed, black Americans would come back full of hope for their own futures and for that of a continent. They faced enormous challenges, some of which they surmounted, while others proved unconquerable.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The Afro-Protestant diaspora from Antigua was instrumental to the growth and development of evangelical Protestantism in the greater Caribbean. Without the help of Antigua’s Afro-Christian émigrés, the prospects for white missionary evangelization of the Caribbean’s people of color would have been bleak. Black Methodists and Moravians who moved around the West Indies provided white missionaries with readymade congregations, facilities within which to preach, as well as room and board. They also took responsibility for the maintenance of isolated churches when missionaries were thrown in jail by angry planters,

⁴⁷ Oldendorp, *History of the Missions*, 402.

⁴⁸ Coke, *Extracts of the Journals*, 17. For black American evangelicals in Africa, see David W. Wills, *Christianity in the United States: A Historical Survey and Interpretation* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); Lamin O. Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Walter L. Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877-1900* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

became too sick to preach, or when they died. In doing so, West Indian Afro-Protestants helped to strengthen an already existing greater Caribbean cultural and economic community that took in all of Britain's sugar island possessions and included southern portions of North America's Atlantic littoral.

White missionaries were indispensable as originators and facilitators of Protestant Christianity among the greater Caribbean's people of color, but, given the former's relatively small numbers, high death rates, and general inability to stand up against the white planter regime, African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans learned to rely on one another to ensure that the greater Caribbean's Protestant "Great Awakening" was a success. The movement of black missionaries, many of whom were from Antigua, to islands around the West Indies had important implications for the black freedom struggle. Afro-Caribbean exhorters, class leaders, and helpers supplied an alternative source of leadership for enslaved people of color who, by not fully accepting slavery on whites' terms, served to cast doubt upon the legitimacy of slavery. By creating a black leadership class, the evangelical movement allowed people of African descent to take the initiative in building social and professional networks outside the slave plantation complex. Becoming evangelical Protestants gave blacks contact with interest groups in the Atlantic world that could potentially help them. Contact with black and white co-religionists provided a sense of psychic security; contact with abolitionists in Britain gave them hope for eventual emancipation; and contact with the world of ideas gave them the intellectual tools to work for their own freedom. The Caribbean's Great Awakening also brought under greater scrutiny the behavior of local whites both as masters and as moral individuals in a region brutalized by unrestricted capitalism. The evangelical movement that began among Antigua's

people of color and spread to the rest of the British West Indies would, as we shall see, also have a lasting influence on black religion in the North.

CHAPTER 5 AFRO-ATLANTIC CHRISTIANITY IN THE NORTH

In 1736, an unlucky eight-year old Igbo boy named Ofodobendo Wooma found himself in the stinking, pestilential hold of a European slave ship on its way to the West Indies. In his West African homeland of Igbo, he had been pawned to a local merchant or other rich man by his uncle who needed a loan, perhaps to buy some goats. Another possibility is that the uncle was a slave supplier who pawned his nephew to local slave traders as security for a promised shipment of captives. When he could not produce slaves to the traders, Ofodobendo was sacrificed. As the brother of Ofodobendo's mother in this matrilineal society, his uncle was the head of the family and had ultimate power over him. The patriarch probably had every intention of repaying the loan and getting his nephew back, but somehow he failed to do so and Ofodobendo soon fell into the hands of African slave traders. They took him to a port on the Atlantic coast, probably Bonny, directly south of his Igbo homeland where the Niger River delta meets the Gulf of Guinea.¹

Two years later another young West African, this time a girl from Little Popo living close to the Atlantic littoral along what Europeans called the Gold Coast, also found herself thrown into the maw of New World slavery. Though we do not know why she was sold into bondage, warfare between Little Popo and expansionist Dahomey raged throughout the 1730s, so it is likely that she was taken prisoner as a spoil of war and traded to an English ship captain in

¹ Daniel B. Thorp, "Chattel With a Soul: The Autobiography of a Moravian Slave," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* cxii, no. 3 (July 1988): 435. On matrilineality in African culture see Claire Robertson, "Africa into the Americas?: Slavery and Women, the Family, and the Gender Division of Labor," in Darlene Clark Hine and David Berry Gaspar, eds., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), 9. For pawning in African slavery see Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, "Trust, Pawnship, and Atlantic History: The Institutional Foundations of the Old Calabar Slave Trade," *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (April 1999): 336; Toyin Falola and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds., *Pawnship in Africa: Debt Bondage in Historical Perspective* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994); Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 10.

exchange for Indian textiles, knives, or even more importantly for the warrior Dahomeans, European firearms.²

Both West Africans were quite young when they were torn from their families; the boy, who would later become known as York and then Andreas, was only eight; and the girl, later known as Beulah and finally Magdalene, was six. European slave traders usually shied away from buying young boys, and certainly young girls, because they could not be readily put to work in the fields and therefore did not command as high a price as did able-bodied adults at American slave markets. As often happened, however, children were thrown in with adults even though European slavers did not want them. They usually had no choice in the matter; their African trading partners often controlled the supply and forced white ship captains to take less desired human “cargo” so that the ships would be as full as possible for the Middle Passage. It is possible that, as mere children, Ofodobendo and Beulah did not suffer as much as older Africans during the Atlantic crossing. Sometimes young slaves were adopted by the crew, working as personal servants and thus eating somewhat better than the average captive, as well as having more freedom of movement around the ship. Both young captives were probably in better health than their fellow slaves since they had been taken from regions close to the African coast, whereas the majority of slaves were taken from areas deep within the African interior and were debilitated by the journey to the sea. However they were treated on the journey to America, Ofodobendo was first sold to a master in Antigua, who three years later resold him to another

² *Lebenlauf [memoir] of Magdalena – Beulah*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Katherine Faulk Eze, “Self-Encounters: Two Eighteenth-Century African Memoirs From Moravian Bethlehem,” in David McBride, Leroy Hopkins, and C. Aisha Blackshire-Belay, eds., *Crosscurrents: African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World* (Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House, 1998), 29; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44, 113; Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 11; A. I. Asiwaju and Robin Law, “From the Volta to the Niger, c 1600-1800,” in J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, eds., *History of West Africa, Volume One*, third edition (Harlow, England: Longmans, 1985), 453.

who then transported him to New York City. It is not known if Beulah spent any time in the West Indies because the first evidence we have of her is when she was bought by Charles Brockden, at the time the Recorder of Deeds for Pennsylvania.³

In a remarkably short period of time, both young Africans found themselves in a strange land among an unknown people. Everything about their new homes was alien. Instead of a small village filled with relatives who spoke the same language, ate familiar foods, and worshipped ancestral gods, Ofodobendo in New York and Beulah in Philadelphia were thrust into two of the largest cities in eighteenth-century North America. Suddenly they were surrounded by people they did not know who spoke unintelligible languages, ate unfamiliar food, and prayed to a foreign white god. In order to survive, they would have to adapt to their new environments, though how far they would go in their adaptations and whether that meant giving up their African identities remained to be seen. Being slaves, they had to negotiate the hazards of bondage in Britain's Northern colonies, which though generally less brutal than in the Southern colonies, still offered African Americans little hope of social or economic advancement. Both became devout Christians and therefore seemingly assimilated into white culture. They did not lose their Igbo and Papaw identities and African consciousness entirely, however. Ofodobendo and Beulah came to think of themselves as British Americans, people of color with much in common with Native Americans, laborers, Afro-Christians, gendered subjects, and in their later lives, as freed people. They had few outlets by which they could

³ On children and the slave trade see Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 75. For the relative health of captives before they left Africa, see Lovejoy and Richardson, "Trust, Pawnship, and Atlantic History," 336. Thorp, "Chattel With a Soul," 439; *Lebenslauf of Magdalena*.

continue to transmit Igbo and Papaw cultures, but they always remembered where they were born and never stopped loving, or wanting to return to, their natal countries.⁴

Both West Africans eventually moved on to the religious community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, built by German Moravian immigrants. While Bethlehem was a small place, the existence of rare, first-hand memoirs and other documents permits us to explore individual life stories (including a number of African-born individuals) to understand the complex blend of motivations, strategies, and religious impulses in the African-American embrace of Christianity. In microcosm, Bethlehem represents the coming together of black Atlantic people from many points of origin who found in this particular version of Christianity a common reference for cultural re-formation and for new spiritual and social identities. Bethlehem was an important and influential point in a multi-sided series of Atlantic connections, and even exchanges, between Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and the mid-Atlantic.

The world that Ofodobendo and Beulah stepped into, rough and tumble like most societies just emerging from their frontier stages, was particularly hazardous in the early 1740s. Britain's North American colonies, and especially New York, were then being engulfed by a number of threats to their very existence from several alleged slave plots, an actual rebellion, and a war with Catholic Spain. In South Carolina, slaves just outside of Charleston rose in rebellion in 1739, going from plantation to plantation killing their white oppressors as they made their way toward freedom in Spanish Florida. The Stono Rebellion was quickly suppressed, but not before causing widespread hysteria among whites in both the South and North. This disquieting episode was followed in 1741 by the discovery of an alleged plot by New York City's slaves and

⁴ For the relative brutality of slavery in the North see Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 11; Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 19; and Graham Russell Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665-1865* (Madison, Wisconsin: Madison House, 1997), xii.

some lower-class whites to burn the town and kill its wealthy white inhabitants. It was never clear whether this plot ever really existed, but given the fear engendered by the recent slave revolt in South Carolina and the ongoing War of Jenkins Ear (1739-1744) against Spain, most official and upper-class New Yorkers were prepared to think the worst. In the ensuing trial, numerous black and white defendants were found guilty of planning insurrection and promptly executed, either by being burned at the stake, broken on the wheel and then drawn and quartered, or by being put in cages hung in the city's public squares and left to slowly starve to death.⁵

The object of this gruesome display of punishment in 1741 was to impress upon the minds of New York's remaining slaves the terrible consequences of even planning, much less physically attempting, a revolt against white authority. The bloody executions must have terrified young Ofodobendo, who by coincidence came to live in New York the same year that the slave plot and trial occurred, and who could have looked on the decaying bodies of the alleged conspirators as a warning that he needed the protection only a strong master could afford him. Upon arriving in New York he was sold to such a man. Thomas Noble was a successful merchant who did business throughout the British Atlantic world and whose friends included some of the city's most powerful business and political leaders. Noble was also a deeply religious man whose friends included Presbyterian preacher Gilbert Tennent of New Jersey and British Anglican evangelist George Whitefield. Though he was Presbyterian, the religious revivals of the era's Great Awakening caused Noble to be open to other Protestant denominations, and he subsequently lent assistance to a small group of Moravians who came to

⁵ For the Stono Rebellion see Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), 308-309. For the New York City slave plot of 1741 see Daniel Horsmanden, *The New-York conspiracy; or, a history of the Negro plot, with a Journal of the proceedings, 1741-1742* (Negro Universities Press, 1969); Thomas J. Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt: The "Great Negro Plot" in Colonial New York* (New York: Free Press, 1985); Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

New York from Germany in 1740. Noble led his family to church every Sunday and sponsored prayer meetings in his house during the week. He also expected his new slave Ofodobendo, now renamed York, to learn the fundamentals of Christianity, which meant learning to read so that he could understand the Bible.⁶

York's decision to convert to Christianity may have been purely a matter of self-interest and self-preservation, though he may also have been following the dictates of Igbo social tradition. Sold into slavery at age eight, he may have been old enough a few years later to have undergone initiation rites to become an adult member of his clan had he still lived in Africa. Most West Africans were considered as twice-born, the second birth allowing the individual to graduate from childhood into adult status. Without this ritual coming of age, an individual was either relegated to permanent infantilism, or was not considered a full clan member. For slaves like York, transportation to America meant being severed from their clan affiliations and perhaps from the possibility of ever becoming an adult. In slave colonies with large African American populations, regaining at least fictive clan relationships and adult status through conversion to Christianity was eminently possible.⁷

New York City in the 1740s had a substantial black population, but it was dispersed throughout the city, individual slaves and freemen generally living with their owners or employers. There were opportunities for some social interaction by the city's blacks, but not enough to develop fictive kin networks. York, looking for an alternate source of security, may have tried to attach himself to his owner's family. His initial position in the Noble household was tenuous since Thomas Noble had little use for such a young slave and had only taken him in

⁶ Thorp, "Chattel with a Soul," 440.

⁷ Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 15.

on a trial basis. York knew from the start, and perhaps throughout his entire adult life, that he needed to find a way to more firmly bind himself to his new ruling clan. Embracing its religion was one way to gain a quasi-acceptance, giving him claim to at least some rights, the most important of which was not being sold away to an unknowable fate. The Noble family treated him fairly well, fed him, and even promised, as events transpired, a limited sense of belonging. Accepting their Presbyterian and later Moravian Christianity, whose requirements for attaining full communicant status were stringent, might have represented a kind of substitute for a West African coming of age ritual. Becoming a Moravian offered York a chance at second birth and a path to adulthood.⁸

Part of the initiation process for becoming a priest among many West African peoples was a new name. Slaves were, moreover, accustomed to being renamed by white masters who usually could not pronounce their African names and used renaming as a way to assert their power over their bondsmen and women. Upon baptism, Afro-Moravians were renamed yet again, signifying their new identification with the martyred Christ. For York, who might have already harbored an ambition to become a missionary, receiving his new name probably did not represent a ritual detachment from his Igbo culture. He needed the new name to become an adult member of the community so that someday he could attain some level of spiritual leadership and power.⁹

Given New York's political instability and York's personal insecurity, the young Igbo was eager to become a member of a Christian "clan." Thomas Noble had opened his home to the

⁸ Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1991), 14. For how Afro-New Yorkers built community consciousness to a greater extent at the end of the century around black churches and, just as importantly, around black controlled schools, see Robert J. Swan, "John Teasman: African-American Educator and the Emergence of Community in Early Black New York City, 1787-1815," *Journal of the Early Republic* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 331-356.

⁹ Sobel, *Trabelin' On*, 15.

Moravians for weekly prayer meetings but he became unsure about the denomination when it came under criticism by Gilbert Tennent, local ministers, and even Atlantic-world evangelist George Whitefield for their allegedly unorthodox religious views. Noble was ready to withdraw his support from the Moravians when his wife stepped forward, boldly defying both her husband and local religious opinion. Admiring the Moravians' religious principles and strict moral code, Mrs. Noble convinced her husband to continue aiding the Brethren and even goaded him into attending the Moravians' weekly prayer meetings with her. He soon came to share her admiration for the Moravian faith, so much so that when his wife died in 1745, Noble decided to move his entire family to the Moravians' new community of Bethlehem in northeastern Pennsylvania.¹⁰

By 1746, York had learned how to read the Bible and prayed with the Noble family regularly, but had still not been baptized. That Thomas Noble hesitated to take this next step may have stemmed from concern that once baptized York would think himself free. As a deeply religious man, Noble may also have questioned York's commitment to living a Christian life. For a young man, New York City offered a multitude of temptations that had to be mastered before baptism could be conferred. It is also likely that York, as a teenager, showed little interest in or understanding of Christianity, and he may also have clung to his childhood Igbo beliefs. He understood, however, the importance of pleasing his owner and began visiting Bethlehem, one hundred miles west of New York, with him in early 1746.¹¹

¹⁰ Harry Emilius Stocker, *A History of the Moravian Church in New York City* (New York: Harry Stocker, 1922), 38, 43; Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Jesus is Female: Moravians and the Challenge of Radical Religion in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 9; Thorp, "Chattel with a Soul," 41.

¹¹ Thorp, "Chattel with a Soul," 449; *Single Brethren's Diary, 1744-1752* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Historic Bethlehem Partnership, 1996), 1/9/1746.

What York discovered when he visited the Brethren in Bethlehem must have startled him. Though clearly not free of racial prejudice, the mostly German-speaking Moravians appeared far more concerned about the young Igbo's soul than the color of his skin. On three of his visits in early 1746, he was invited to "lovefeasts," so-called because the Brethren celebrated their love of God and one another in a communal ceremony in which they broke bread and prayed. York had probably not experienced this type of unconditional love and acceptance since he left West Africa. As early as the end of January, 1746, a Moravian chronicler noted that "York, the Negro, ... longs for baptism." York must have convinced the Brethren of his devotion to and knowledge of Christianity, because in quick succession he was "baptized by Br. Rauch and called Andreas" in mid February and one month later "had permission to go to communion for the first time," thus indicating that he had become a candidate for full membership in the church. Several days later he returned to New York with his master Thomas Noble, but then we find that he was back in Bethlehem two months later. His reemergence at the Brethren's town in Pennsylvania in mid May was certainly the result of the Noble families' move there, but it may also have been a matter of choice for the newly-baptized Andreas. Given Thomas Noble's religious commitment, he would probably not have forced a non-Christian slave to accompany him to a forthrightly religious settlement. He could easily have sold him in New York if Andreas had requested to stay there. It seems likely that the young Igbo voluntarily chose to accept Christianity and to live on the frontier among this new band of religious zealots. New York offered access to greater numbers of people of color, but it could also be a dangerous place. Bethlehem offered security, psychic well-being, and, given the Brethren's penchant for missionary work, the possibility of a new profession; the decision may not have been that hard to make.¹²

¹² *Single Brethren's Diary, 1744-1752*, January 1, 1746, January 29, 1746, March December 1746, March 15, 1746,

For the young female slave from Little Popo named Beulah, her master's suggestion that she move from Philadelphia to Bethlehem in 1743 was greeted with much less enthusiasm. Her owner, Charles Brockden, sent her to the Moravian settlement so that she would be "protected from the temptations of the world." Beulah was so unhappy at the prospect of going to live in Bethlehem that, according to her memoir, she "begged him [Brockden] to sell me to another person; as I was too much attached to the world and its enjoyments." In this last sentence Beulah may have been referring to the natural desire of teenage girls to be free to experience the social and sexual delights of young adulthood, though it is also possible that she was using the conventional language of many Moravian memoirs which used this standard device of saying how worldly they were before finding Jesus Christ. She may also have become part of Philadelphia's black community and feared being separated from the only sympathetic and familiar culture she knew.¹³

Despite informing Brockden that she "desired to enjoy fully" her life in Philadelphia, he asked her to at least try living in Bethlehem; if she did not like it there, he promised, she could return to her former life in the city. Beulah arrived in the Brethren's settlement in November 1743 to what she later described as a friendly reception. She was understandably one of the only people of color there since Bethlehem operated under a communal economy from 1741-1761, making private property in slaves illegal. All of the settlement's early slaves were owned by the church, which was generally suspicious of slavery in "God's community," or at least too much slavery. Pennsylvania's slave population remained small until 1754, when the beginning Seven Years' War cut off the supply of European indentured servants to the province and local farmers

May 8, 1746.

¹³ *Magdalene's Memoir*.

and artisans turned to Africa to fill their desire for cheap labor. The number of blacks in Bethlehem rose considerably in the following half century, eventually comprising some five percent of the town's population, but Beulah must have initially been quite lonely until she learned how to speak German and other people of color, such as Andreas, came to the Moravian enclave. Beulah was so dissatisfied with her new living arrangements that she purposely misbehaved, hoping to be sent back to Philadelphia. This attempt failed, either because her labor was too desperately needed or the Brethren were truly committed to her salvation. After several years she finally became reconciled to living with the Moravians, her owner having given his permission for her to remain in Bethlehem. In 1748, Beulah was baptized and received her new Christian name, Magdalene; seven months later she became a communicant.¹⁴

Religion and Equality in Bethlehem

The Bethlehem that Andreas and Magdalene stepped into was a very new settlement. It had been established several years before in the winter of 1741 as a refuge for German Moravians fleeing religious persecution in Europe. Like many frontier communities, Bethlehem's social and economic structures were not fully formed for several decades, providing even African American newcomers like Andreas and Magdalene with unprecedented opportunities. They still had to live with the restrictions put upon them by slavery, but Bethlehem's frontier and religious culture allowed them considerable room to maneuver. Living as full members of a religious settlement considered by most other white Americans as "unorthodox" could, besides offering fulfillment, also have its dangers. The Moravians of Bethlehem, as a German-speaking, radical pietist sect were looked upon with considerable

¹⁴ *Magdalene's Memoir*; Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 16. A list of African Americans in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania was compiled by Jon Sensbach and the author.

suspicion by both “old stock” English colonists and more recent settlers from Germany of more orthodox religious views. African Americans had to weigh the benefits of the greater social and economic freedom they might enjoy as Moravians against the potential costs in persecution for being not only part of a religious minority, but also a racial minority isolated from other people of color.

The settlement of Bethlehem by the Moravian Brethren, begun in late 1741, was preceded by a failed attempt by the Brethren to build a colony in Georgia. Both were part of the Moravians’ mission to convert the “heathen.” The Brethren attempted to establish a mission station just north of Savannah, Georgia in 1735. Refugee Lutherans from Salzburg, Austria, fleeing the city’s Catholic rulers, had settled in James Oglethorpe’s new colony on land between South Carolina and Spanish Florida a year earlier. The Moravians hoped to take over spiritual care of these newcomers, as well as to preach to Native Americans and local plantation slaves. The ship that carried the Brethren to Georgia coincidentally included John and Charles Wesley, who spent many long hours on the voyage discussing religion with the Moravians. John Wesley, who went on to found Methodism, later credited this early exposure to Moravian spirituality with inspiring his own religious awakening.¹⁵

However, like the Wesleys, the Moravians’ early efforts to evangelize in Georgia and South Carolina’s low country met with little success. Their unwillingness to take up arms to defend the new colony from an anticipated Spanish invasion, as well as opposition from Lutheran leader Henry Melchior Mühlberg and internal bickering among the Moravians, led to the dissolution of their Georgia enterprise. Most of the Brethren left Savannah after 1740 for

¹⁵ Folgleman, *Jesus is Female*, 107; J. Taylor Hamilton, *A History of the Church Known as the Moravian Church, or the Unitas Fratrum, or the Unity of the Brethren, during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Times Publishing Company, Printers, 1900), 80.

eastern Pennsylvania where evangelical preacher George Whitefield, another associate of the Wesleys, offered them a home on land he had recently acquired. There they built the town of Nazareth. Whitefield and the newly-arrived Moravians quickly came into conflict over religious doctrine, though, and parted company. Within months, the Brethren purchased their own land ten miles south of Nazareth on the Lehigh River. When Whitefield was forced to sell his Nazareth estate, the Moravians in turn added it to their holdings. By the middle of 1741, the Brethren in the new towns of Bethlehem and Nazareth were well on their way to building a substantial community based on strict religious moral codes, Christian brotherhood, and missionary outreach.¹⁶

The Moravians chose the Delaware Valley for other reasons aside from George Whitefield's generous offer of sanctuary. The Brethren had tried elsewhere in the previous decade to settle and evangelize, and decided Pennsylvania had several advantages over the others. First, it was run by the religiously tolerant Penn family; second, it was rapidly filling up with people who shared the Moravians' German language; third, the climate was far healthier than other Moravian outposts like Suriname, St. Thomas in the Danish West Indies, Greenland, or even Georgia and South Carolina; fourth, eastern Pennsylvania was incredibly rich farmland, making material success much easier; and fifth, the Quaker colony was strategically located midway between Europe and the Moravians' mission stations in the West Indies.¹⁷

It was vitally important to the Brethren that they choose a suitable site for their new home in North America. The Moravians who settled on the Lehigh in 1741 came there to find a better life, but an even greater concern was that the new community should further their religious goals.

¹⁶ Fogleman, *Jesus is Female*, 107; Jacob John Sessler, *Communal Pietism Among Early American Moravians* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1933), 72.

¹⁷ Fogleman, *Jesus is Female*, 1.

From the beginning, the Moravian settlements in North America, including Bethlehem and Nazareth and those which joined them later were organized as religious communes whose purpose was to provide the people and means by which missions to the larger world could be undertaken.¹⁸

The commune, or General Economy (1742-1762) as it was known in Bethlehem, was centrally organized, with representatives from each industry and dormitory-style house reporting to a central board under Moravian Bishop Augustus Spangenberg. Committees were established whose responsibilities included the growing and procurement of food, building, education and sanitation, as well as bookkeeping and general administration. All Moravians in Bethlehem during the period of the General Economy lived in dormitories segregated by age, gender, and marital status. Children under the age of eighteen months lived with their parents, but then were given over to the Nursery. At age four, they were sent either to the Little Girls' Choir or the Little Boys' Choir until they turned twelve, when they joined either the Older Girls' or Older Boys' Choir. At age eighteen, young Moravians graduated to choirs for Single Sisters or Single Brothers. If they married, they became members of the Married Peoples' Choir, and if one of the spouses died, the survivor joined either the Widow's or the Widowers' Choir. The choir system worked well in the early stages of building a settlement in a hostile land. It was also an ideal way to organize resources for the Brethren's missionary effort. With no children to care for, adults could better focus on evangelizing the unchurched. Children, living without their parents, could better focus their devotion and love more passionately on Christ.¹⁹

¹⁸ Sessler, *Communal Pietism*, 80.

¹⁹ Sessler, *Communal Pietism*, 81; Beverly Prior Smaby, *The Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem: From Communal Mission to Family Economy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 10.

The Moravians in Bethlehem were in many ways caught between two competing ideologies and two separate eras. They embraced the new technologies which allowed them to engage in worldwide evangelism, but were at odds with emerging global capitalism and the new spirit of individualism that engulfed Britain's North American colonies during the first half of the eighteenth century. The old Christian values of faith, trust, and communalism were being rapidly replaced with the rationality of worldwide commerce. The Brethren's commune in Bethlehem was built solely for religious purposes. Its inhabitants bought and sold merchandise, but strictly to support their evangelical mission. Bethlehem was a pre-modern community at odds with, and therefore viewed with deep suspicion by, the outside world. Adding to the distrust of outsiders was the Moravian practice of allowing women and blacks to preach openly.²⁰

Moravian Bethlehem's pre-modern communal organization also prompted a thoroughgoing egalitarianism among its members that extended to its people of color. Almost everyone was housed in large stone dormitories and ate at communal dining halls. New recruits deposited what money they had with the community treasury for as long as they remained residents. Their clothes and tools were supplied by the *Gemeine*, or congregation organization, and all land was held in trust for the church. To a greater degree than anywhere else in Anglo-America, the Brethren had instituted a program of equality of condition. As church members who were also the property of the congregation rather than private owners, Andreas, Magdalene, and other Afro-Moravians shared all the benefits and obligations of the *Gemeine*, substantially blurring the line between slavery and freedom. There were still obvious differences, of course: whites could leave at anytime, whereas the mobility of enslaved blacks, including the possibility of being sold

²⁰ Fogleman, *Jesus is Female*, 27.

away involuntarily, continued to be controlled by their masters. On a day-to-day level, however, the restrictions that circumscribed the lives of Afro-Moravians in Bethlehem were no more or less harsh than the ones that bound whites.²¹

Attempting to gauge how harsh or benign slavery was in the North in general and in Moravian Bethlehem in particular is complicated by a number of factors. Slavery in 1750 in rural Pennsylvania was quite different from that, for example, on an Alabama cotton plantation in 1850. Comparing slavery across international boundaries also has problems, even if the crop grown by slaves was the same. Slaves in Brazil in the mid nineteenth century, for example, grew and harvested sugar cane, as did slaves in Louisiana, but since the economic and transportation infrastructure of Brazil in 1840 was far less developed than it was in Louisiana, slaves in the latter region lived better. The prosperous economy of the United States gave planters enough profit so they could afford to feed and clothe their slaves adequately, something which did not always happen in Brazil. Access to medical care was also more available to Louisiana's slaves, in part because their owners made more money, and also because transportation facilities like railroads made access to medical care much faster and easier.²²

Further complicating the issue of the relative treatment of slaves is the very definition of treatment. When analyzing the quality of a slave's life in any given place or time, three meanings of "treatment" need to be kept in mind. The first is day-to-day living conditions: did slaves receive adequate food, clothing, and shelter, and how long and how hard did they have to

²¹ Smaby, *Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem*, 95.

²² Eugene D. Genovese, "The Treatment of Slaves in Different Countries: Problems in the Applications of the Comparative Method," 204. For comparing slave systems in the Americas, see Roderick A. McDonald, *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves: Goods and Chattels on the Sugar Plantations of Jamaica and Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Herbert S. Klein, *Slavery in the Americas: A Comparative Study of Cuba and Virginia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).

work. Second are the general conditions of life: how secure were slave families, and were they able to develop independent religious, cultural, and social lives? And third, the slaves' access to freedom and citizenship: did slaves have the chance to become free men and women?²³

Using the above mode of analysis to measure the treatment of slaves in Moravian Bethlehem and the North as a whole helps to remove the discussion from one of mere romantic speculation. Slaves and free people of color in eighteenth-century Bethlehem were, as we shall see, treated well in terms of day-to-day living conditions and the eventual possibility of freedom. Applying the second definition of slave treatment, determining whether slaves like Andreas and Magdalene really had true freedom of choice, however, becomes more difficult given the social and religious missions of the Moravians.

When Andreas and Magdalene moved to Bethlehem in the mid 1740s from New York and Philadelphia, they probably had little idea of how their lives would change. In many ways they continued to experience all the hardships and joys of most blacks in the Northern colonies, but in other ways their lives changed radically. Magdalene was immediately placed in a dormitory with five other girls who, because their races were not mentioned, were probably white. Andreas was assigned to "company 6" in the Single Brethren's Choir dormitory in September 1746. He shared his "company" with nine other young men, three of whom, Joseph, Joachim, and Johannes, were Native Americans. Though his other five choir mates were white, none of the other five companies had any non-whites.²⁴

The Moravians, with this early example of segregation in sleeping arrangements, appeared to be conforming to the racial attitudes then common among white Americans. Whatever the

²³ Genovese, "The Treatment of Slaves," 203.

²⁴ *Single Brethrens' Diary, 1744-1752*, Sept. 24, 1746; *Single Sisters' Diary, 1748*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

reasons were for this sort of separation in 1746, by the spring of 1749 another policy was instituted. In March of that year the Single Brethren's Choir was split into three classes: the first was made up of recent European immigrants; the second were those born in Europe but who had lived in America for some time; and the third class was made up of the native born, "whites, brown ones, blacks..." This later segregation appears to have been more practical and logistical than racial, allowing the newest immigrants to enter the *Gemeine* more slowly, while at the same time preventing the disruption of already formed classes.²⁵

In the years after 1746, most segregation by race seems largely to have disappeared. As of April, 1748, a "Pockon Mulatto boy, named Johann, who had been with our Brethren in Berbiza [in what is now the South American country of Guyana] several years" was "put in our Boys' Choir." In December 1748, the "Small Candidates" for a newly-constructed Single Brethren's dormitory included two people of color: Sebastian the Negro and Owen the Negro. As late as 1781, "the mulatto boy Titus...was "received into the Boys' Choir." Whether Bethlehem's dormitories were fully integrated or not, the living conditions they afforded to the Afro-Moravians were far better than those of the vast majority of black slaves on Southern plantations or even Northern households and farms. Even slaves who lived with their masters' families in the "big house" or in a city usually lived in crude outbuildings or underneath the stairs; some were forced to lie down at night looking up at the stars. The German and Anglo Moravians of Bethlehem were clearly not free of racial prejudice, as their use of suffixes like "negro" and "negress" to differentiate Afro-Moravians attests. Their commitment to religious and social equality, however, meant that the physical lives of blacks in Bethlehem were undoubtedly more

²⁵ *Single Brethrens' Diary, 1744-1752*, March 8, 1749.

comfortable than those of other people of color elsewhere. It also brought them closer than any other group in the eighteenth century to realizing true Christian brotherhood.²⁶

Of greater importance to the Moravians than an individual's physical well-being was his or her ability to know and love God. Though most of the Brethren had only modest educations, Church leaders firmly believed that all communicants should know how to read the Bible. With that goal in mind, the Brethren instituted their first schools shortly after they settled in Bethlehem, opening classrooms to all baptized Moravians free of charge and without racial restriction. A young Afro-Moravian named Abraham, who had been living with some Moravians in Friedrichstown, Pennsylvania, was brought to the Brethren's "Little Boys' Boardingschool" in early 1750. He was probably a slave, but because the Moravians believed so strongly that literacy aided salvation, Abraham was relieved of his usual work responsibilities and at considerable expense sent to Bethlehem's seminary. He was followed there by Wilhelm Beverhaut, identified as "a negro from St. Thomas" who was placed in the "Children's Boarding school" in 1756. Wilhelm was likely part of the household of Adrian Beverhaut, head of one of the leading families of the Danish West Indies at the time and a supporter of the Moravian mission in St. Thomas. Sending a slave or even a free person of color to North America to get an education was unusual, indicating how intelligent and pious Wilhelm must have been.²⁷

Moravian boarding schools were also open to young African American women. Two black girls, Magdalena the Negro and Hanna the Negro, show up on the rolls of Bethlehem's

²⁶ *Single Brethren's Diary, 1744-1752*, April 16, 1748, December 4, 1748, January 11, 1781; Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 142.

²⁷ *Single Brethren's Diary, 1744-1752*, March 9, 1750; *Single Brethren's Diary, 1753-1804* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Historic Bethlehem Partnership, 1996), July 14, 1756; C.G.A. Oldendorp, *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, Johann Jakob Bossard, ed., Arnold R. Highfield and Vladimir Barac, trans. and ed. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987), 699n.

anstalt (school) in 1766. The curriculum at the Brethren's *anstalten* became famous for the breadth and quality of their instruction. Missionaries and their children from throughout the Moravian world came to the school at Nazareth Hall to learn Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, German, English, mathematics, history, and the mechanical arts. Learning there was far more advanced than most other institutions open to young women. Most women in eighteenth-century America received what schooling they could from tutors who came to the private residences of the wealthy. The Brethren's commitment to broader-based education without regard to gender anticipated later efforts by decades and those without regard to race by considerably more. Afro-Moravian Peter Titus was one who benefited from the Brethren's educational system. He was initially sent to a school in New York City by his owner, Moravian Christian Frohlich, but merely to "sing and play" a musical instrument. He received a more formal education between ages ten and thirteen in the mid 1780s when Frohlich moved to Bethlehem, taking his slave with him. Titus attended the Brethren's school for two years where he acquired enough learning to allow him to prosper, as we will see.²⁸

For the Brethren of Bethlehem, the entire point of promoting education was to bring people closer to God. This goal was on the minds of many in North America and Europe in the 1740s and was responsible for a new outpouring of religious enthusiasm known as the Great Awakening. Renewed interest in Christianity among whites in the North during this era also opened up new spiritual opportunities for people of color, though their choices remained limited until the end of the century. Blacks in Philadelphia, New York, and other Northern cities were first exposed to Christian preaching in large numbers when Anglican evangelist George

²⁸ *Bethlehem Single Sisters*, box #1, 1744-1799, folder 1764-1767, Catalogue of the Girls at the School (Anstalt) in Bethlehem, Nov. 27, 1766, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Lindt Gollin, *Moravians in Two Worlds: A Study of Changing Communities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 83; Peter Titus, 1770-1843, *Memoir Box III, Nazareth*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Whitefield traveled through the region in 1739. Though his message was avowedly non-denominational, Whitefield seems to have persuaded many of Philadelphia's people of color to join the Church of England. Out of the Quaker city's roughly 1,400 black residents, more than 250 were baptized at the Anglican Christ Church between 1745 and 1776. Some Anglican priests were genuinely interested in converting African Americans, though many did so merely to keep them from running after what they referred to as "vagrant factious preachers" like Gilbert Tennent and James Davenport who sometimes espoused dangerous ideas about freedom and equality.²⁹

The seemingly radical hyperbole of Tennent and Davenport was less a concern for established clergymen than another group of preachers who first appeared in the area in the 1740s. Itinerant black exhorters began passing through eastern Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey on the coattails of their more famous white colleagues. Unattached to any church, they still gathered numerous and large audiences to hear them preach. They were viewed with suspicion and sometimes as threats to the prevailing social order by many whites because they tended to preach to their "own color," and often did it well. One black itinerant in New Jersey was described by a worried white observer as "a great Doctor ... and says he is a Churchman." For all their efforts, it was not until the 1780s that blacks in the North began to frequent Christian churches with regularity. Richard Allen's "Mother Bethel" church and Absalom Jones' St. Thomas African Episcopal Church both attracted people of color because they were independent of white control.³⁰

²⁹ Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 18-23.

³⁰ Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North*, 78; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 247-248.

While most Protestant congregations in the Northern colonies kept their doors closed to people of color in the eighteenth century, the Moravians in Bethlehem accepted all who were determined enough to join. And many African Americans, either voluntarily or because their owners compelled them, did go to Bethlehem to become Brethren. Part of the attraction was the Moravians' style of preaching, which like most other evangelical sermons was done in the simple language of the people. Few being university-trained intellectuals, Moravian ministers usually restricted themselves to simple narrations of Christ's atonement and personal salvation. The Brethren's faith was centered on Christ's sacrificial death and his Passion. As an exclusively Christo-centric belief, knowledge of other facets of Christianity, even the Old Testament, was peripheral. For the Brethren, faith meant internalizing the blood, wounds, and agony of the Crucifixion. By feeling Christ's agony, Moravians hoped to become more like Jesus. Graphic descriptions of the Crucifixion were presented in sermons and hymns and in the paintings of Moravian artist John Valentine Haidt. For the illiterate and barely literate whites and blacks of Bethlehem, the use of songs and pictures vastly increased their understanding of the Christian message.³¹

Many people of color who lived in Bethlehem went there because they were compelled by their owners. Some of them joined the church, became communicants, and left memoirs, while others never became part of the *Gemeine* and appear only on the congregation's account books when they were bought or sold. Still others wanted to live in Bethlehem and aggressively solicited the Brethren for the right to do so. Thomas the Negro was first brought to Bethlehem by his Moravian master, Brother Edmunds, in 1748. He came to love "the Brethren very much," noted a Moravian chronicler, "and is glad to remain here." Later that same year a "mulatto

³¹ Sessler, *Communal Pietism*, 121, 140; Smaby, *Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem*, 8.

named Antoni came for a visit” and “if allowed, would like to remain with the congregation.” Antoni was a free person of color who came to Bethlehem of his own free will, though economic need may have played a part in his recurring presence among the Moravians. In May, 1748 Antoni again came to Bethlehem, but this time he “requested the Brethren ... give him several pounds in gold to pay his debts ...” Apparently he was able to convince the Moravians of his trustworthiness, because they “let him feel our hearts’ sympathy for his poor soul, and let him take the gold along” since “one felt the Savior was desiring to win his heart.” Antoni later returned to Bethlehem to work off the debt, so the Brethren were not engaging in a completely selfless act of charity. Nevertheless, lending money to a stranger, and a black man as well, with little guarantee of repayment is a testament to the Moravians’ commitment to Christian brotherhood untainted by racial bigotry.³²

Another indication that people of color had become fully integrated members of Bethlehem society was the large number who became communicants. Being allowed to take communion put Afro-Moravians on a level of spiritual equality with white Brethren, especially since the requirements for such status were quite stringent. The first step for a non-Moravian to achieve communicant status was to ask church officials for the right to live in the *Gemeine*. If permission was given, then the applicant, depending on their behavior, joined the circle of candidates. Membership was granted by the *Gemeine*, whose decision was determined by a casting of lots. If the lot was negative, the applicant was turned away. If accepted as a member, the next stage for the neophyte was to become a communicant. Candidates were allowed to observe communion celebrations, but only after a long period in which their personal and spiritual characters were scrupulously examined could they finally become full church members.

³² *Single Brethrens’ Diary, 1744-1752*, January 22, 1748, March 22, 1748, May 8, 1748, May 24, 1748.

The whole process acted as a system of social control, since candidates only progressed to the next level if they behaved acceptably. The system, moreover, was a never-ending process, since even communicants could slide backwards, losing status if they behaved in a manner deemed improper.³³

How far people of color progressed in Bethlehem's Moravian Church depended on a number of factors, including their personal spirituality and the needs of the *Gemeine*. A native of West Africa named Coriton was brought to Bethlehem from New York in 1747 as the slave of a white Moravian. He was lodged in the Big Boys Choir dormitory and received the same religious instruction as the white boys. He did not appear to have much interest in becoming a Moravian, though, until he was close to death from consumption just a year later. Coriton then "got a feeling of the Lamb and His wounds into his heart, and asked to be baptized." His request was granted just in time because "a few hours later all unexpectedly the Lamb took him to Himself into His side hole."³⁴

Titto, another Afro-Moravian slave, followed a similar, if less abbreviated, trajectory. Born an Igbo in the late 1730s, he was made a prisoner of war at age fourteen and sold into slavery. Initially kept as a slave in Africa, Titto was eventually sold to a trader who transported him to Jamaica. He must have shown unusual intelligence because instead of being put to work in the sugarcane fields, he spent six years as a house servant before moving with his owner to New York. In 1743 his Jamaican owner died and Titto became the property of a Moravian living on Long Island. Titto visited Bethlehem for the first time with his new owner, Moravian businessman Timothy Horsfield, in 1749. Brother Horsfield liked Bethlehem so much that he

³³ Smaby, *Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem*, 22.

³⁴ *Bethlehem Church Register*, volume I, 1742-1756, *Tauf* (baptism) *Register*, 194, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; *Single Brothers' Diary, 1744-1752*, December 4, 1747, December 7, 1748, August 30, 1748.

moved his family and Titto there by the end of the year. Three months later, Titto was baptized, given the name Josua, and sent to live in the Single Brothers' House. He later moved to the nearby Moravian town of Christiansbrunn. During his time with the Brethren, Josua gained some economic success and achieved communicant status before he died of smallpox in 1761.³⁵

Many blacks who came to Bethlehem in the eighteenth century were baptized, became communicants, and lived there for the rest of their lives. Some, though baptized and made members of the church, still found themselves subject to the harsh requirements of the slave system. Thomas the Negro came to Bethlehem from New York with his Moravian owner, Brother Edmunds, in early 1748. He was apparently a spiritual person, because by as early as June of that year it was already noted that "our Negro Thomas ... had long asked and requested to be baptized..." By July, he had been baptized (Andreas being his sponsor) and was a communion candidate, finally receiving "permission to partake for the first time" as a communicant in November. Thomas's spiritual fealty did not, however, save him from being taken away from Bethlehem. In what was probably a strictly economic decision, he was sold by Brother Edmunds in 1755 to another master in New York "with permission from the Brethren." Notwithstanding Thomas the Negro's fate, people of color came, forcibly or not, to Bethlehem from various points in Africa and the Americas, were beginning to coalesce, become Christians, redefine themselves, and form a new sense of community. It is clear that black Christianity, when and where it happened, was an emerging, multicultural, and fecund product of the Atlantic system.³⁶

³⁵ *Single Brethren's Diary, 1744-1752*, January 16, 1749, November 8, 1749, February, 21, 1750; *Single Brethren's Diary, 1753-1804*, May, 11, 1761; *Memoir for Josua, a negro*, Memoirs, box 2, 1761, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; *Josua the Negro Lebenslauf*. Bethlehem Digital History Project, transcription and trans. Katherine E. Carte, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

³⁶ *Single Brethren's Diary, 1744-1752*, January, 22, 1748, June 16, 1748, July 6, 1748; *Single Brethren's Diary, 1753-1804*, April 10, 1755.

Slavery and Freedom in Bethlehem

As the example of Thomas the Negro illustrates, the Brethren in Bethlehem were clearly not averse to buying and selling human beings and in some cases even made a handsome profit from the practice. Sarah, a thirty-nine year old slave from Connecticut, was sold to the Moravian *Gemeine* in 1773 for fifty pounds “New York currency.” She was put to work at the Sun Tavern in Bethlehem where she shows up as an asset in the tavern’s account books. In the middle of 1774, Sarah contracted smallpox, so her value declined to only thirty pounds. With the help of Magdalene (from Popo) who charged three pounds for her services as a nurse, she regained her health. She must have recovered fully, because by the end of the year a Moravian accountant noted that the “Neger Wench Sarah” was sold by Sun Tavern innkeeper Just Johnson for one hundred pounds.³⁷

Not all Moravians thought that the enslavement of fellow human beings was an acceptable practice, though most of these individuals kept their opinions to themselves and certainly never advocated for abolition. Moravian Bethlehem’s administrative leader, Augustus Spangenberg, was ambivalent about slavery, stating in 1760 that the Brethren “managed to do without them [slaves] in the beginning, but the good Lord saw us through.” Spangenberg felt pressure to allow slavery because labor markets were tight in the 1750s and the expanding economy of Bethlehem needed workers. Slavery had been an important source of labor in Pennsylvania and the other mid-Atlantic colonies since the late seventeenth century, but between 1730 and 1754 heavy German and Scots-Irish immigration served to lessen reliance on African labor. Fully fifty-eight thousand Germans and sixteen thousand five-hundred Irish came to the Delaware Valley in that period, many of whom indentured themselves to local mechanics, merchants, and farmers to pay

³⁷ *General Diacony Journal*, volume 1, 1771-1780, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

for their passage from Europe. The supply of Germans slowed precipitously, though, beginning in 1754 with the onset of the Seven Years' War, forcing local employers to return to African sources of bound labor. Between 1757 and 1766, some 1,290 African and Caribbean slaves were sold to buyers in Philadelphia and across the Delaware River in West Jersey. When peace was declared in 1763, Germans again began coming to Pennsylvania, effectively putting an end to the continued importation of African slaves.³⁸

The Moravians held people of color as slaves in Pennsylvania, but even the Christian denomination most closely associated with the early abolitionist movement, the Quakers, were hardly united on the issue and took decades to finally outlaw slaveholding among its members. Though individual Quakers lobbied forthrightly against allowing church members to buy and sell slaves, the most that the Quaker Yearly Meeting would do before 1758 was caution members against the practice. In that year, however, under pressure from abolitionists such as Anthony Benezet, John Woolman, Benjamin Lay, and Ralph Sandiford, the Yearly Meeting finally outlawed the buying and selling of human beings by Quakers. Even then it was not until 1776 that Quakers were prohibited from owning slaves they already possessed. It can be said, then, that the Moravians were merely following a well-accepted practice laid down by the region's most influential group.³⁹

The Brethren also followed the Quakers' example when they freed their slaves. In some cases they allowed slaves to buy their freedom, in others the Moravians paid the owner to set a slave free, and in still others they manumitted those they believed had served the church well. In 1762, freedman Christian Anton negotiated with the *Gemeine* to buy the slave Ann Cherry so

³⁸ *Letter from August Spangenberg to Brethren in St. Thomas, 1760*. Box marked West Indies, Miscellaneous Letters, 1739-1769, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 16; Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 10.

³⁹ Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 26; Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, x.

that they could get married. Like most former slaves, Anton was not a wealthy man and so was forced to borrow from the Bethlehem congregation to buy his wife. This seeming act of largesse by the Brethren was, nevertheless, still a business transaction. His wife Ann remained a slave until the loan was paid, and if Christian defaulted, a slave she would remain. It is not known if he was able to earn the needed cash, but if he did it probably took him five to ten years of hard labor to raise the money.⁴⁰

The path to freedom for Joseph, an Afro-Moravian born in 1715, was also long but ultimately successful. Joseph probably did not know where in Africa he was born, since Moravian chroniclers identified his birthplace merely as “Guinea.” He was sold when he was twelve years old along with three hundred others to slave traders, who shipped them all to Charleston, South Carolina. Because he was very young and “very good looking,” Joseph was first taken to England for five years, then spent one year on the West Indian island of Montserrat, before being sent to Durham Furnace, Pennsylvania, in 1733. Since Durham Furnace was only two miles from Bethlehem, he became acquainted with the Moravians when they came to the area in 1741. Perhaps looking for some stability in his life, Joseph pleaded with the Brethren to accept him as a church member, though for unknown reasons they declined to allow him to do so. In 1748, he married Anna Caritas, a Shawnee woman from North Carolina then living in Bethlehem, but he was then taken away to Maryland by his masters for the next three years. He was finally allowed to return to Durham Furnace to be close to his children and his wife, who had in the interim been baptized by the Brethren. He must have proven his spiritual, and perhaps, economic worth (he appears to have been a blacksmith), because in 1752 Joseph was baptized and had his freedom purchased by the Moravians for fifty pounds. From then until his

⁴⁰ Box marked *Slaves*, June 8, 1762, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North*, 63.

death in 1781, Joseph and his family lived in the Moravian towns of Bethlehem, Gnadenthal, and finally Christiansbrunn. During their lives together, he and Anna had seven children, only two of whom lived to adulthood.⁴¹

Freedom was not always unconditional for people of color in the Northern colonies and states. Pennsylvania passed a gradual emancipation law in 1780, followed by New York in 1799, and New Jersey in 1804. Pennsylvania's law was the first of its kind in the Western world, even though it did not free a single slave by its passage. Children of slaves born before March 1, 1780 remained in slavery for the rest of their lives. Those born after that date were forced to serve as indentured laborers for twenty-eight years, ultimately meaning that the last slave was not set free in Pennsylvania until as late as 1847. New York's emancipation law was more progressive, though the Empire State's last slaves had to wait until in 1827 to gain their freedom.⁴²

For some Afro-Moravians the choices between slavery, freedom, and indentured servitude were complicated by geography, gender, and family. Rebecca the Negro was born in Bethania, North Carolina, which was part of the Moravian settlement of Wachovia, in 1809. She was a domestic servant for the Kummer family who were members of the Unitas Fratrum, or Moravians. When the Kummers decided to move to Pennsylvania, they gave Rebecca the option of staying in North Carolina where she would remain a slave, or moving to the North and becoming free. As easy as this decision appears, it was a difficult one for Rebecca to make. In 1819 she was only ten years old, both her parents still lived in Bethania, and all her friends were

⁴¹ *Nazareth Death Notices in Nazareth Church Book*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 330-331; *Single Brethrens' Diary, 1744-1752*, November 26, 1748. For an analysis of the practice of allowing black slaves to marry Native American women, see Gary B. Nash, *Red, White & Black: The Peoples of Early North America*, 4th edition (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), 308-314.

⁴² Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 111; White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York*, 13.

in Wachovia. And as we have seen, the supposed freedom that awaited her in Pennsylvania was less than straightforward, though as a child Rebecca may not have fully understood this. Despite all these complicating factors, she nevertheless decided to move north with her owners. By Pennsylvania law she was bound to the Kummer family as an indentured servant until she was twenty-four, though, as it turned out her indenture lasted the rest of her life. In 1830, the Kummers' two daughters contracted influenza, and as the house servant, Rebecca was responsible for nursing them. Up to that point she was reportedly "favored with a strong constitution, and always enjoyed good health," but in October of that year, at the tender age of twenty-one she succumbed to the disease, never having experienced what it was like to be truly free.⁴³

The Igbo Andreas and Magdalene of Little Popo both lived long enough to be manumitted by the Brethren after many years of hard work and loyal service. Magdalene was freed in 1758, though it is not clear why. Her owner, Charles Brockden, as an official of Pennsylvania's colonial government, may have been influenced or pressured by the Quakers' decision in that year to end the buying and selling of slaves. Magdalene may also have played a role in her own manumission. As an episode that occurred years later illustrates, she was a smart and determined woman who took every available opportunity to stand up for herself. In 1784, a dispute arose between Magdalene and Moravian Church authorities over monies paid for house rent by Magdalene's husband, Andreas (they married in 1762). She contended that since Andreas was a slave, he should have been exempt from paying the rent. As a result, she demanded reimbursement totaling fourteen pounds, ten shillings. Answering the complaint, a church administrator countered that Andreas had been declared free in 1771, with the responsibilities to

⁴³ *Rebecca the Negro Lebenslauf*. Bethlehem Digital History Project, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

earn a living and pay his own expenses “like another Brother.” Magdalene and Andreas had lived in “the Upper S.E. Room in the Family House, No. 25,” along with other couples. Magdalene’s claim, in the administrator’s judgment, had no merit, but it was decided to award her the fourteen pounds, ten shillings anyway “to make her easy and to get rid of her.” Perhaps it was this type of grit and determination that led to her early manumission; her Moravian owner may have been happy to make her easy and get rid of her.⁴⁴

All Moravians in Bethlehem, slave and free, lived under a set of rules that mandated and maintained obedience to a strict moral code of behavior. The Brethren had to submit to the regulation of almost every aspect of their daily lives, including when they got up in the morning, what they wore, who they socialized with, what work they did, and when they went to bed, and should they transgress the *Gemeine*’s rules, they faced humiliating punishment. For Bethlehem’s Brothers and Sisters, the day began at five in the morning when bands of singers walked through the village singing hymns to awaken the residents. Morning benediction and breakfast started at six and everyone was expected to be at work by seven. Children had a *Kinderstundt*, or Children’s hour, at nine to sing more hymns. At twelve, a noon meal was eaten where hymns were sung both before and after the meal, then they returned to work by twelve-thirty. The Brethren labored until dinner at six PM, which was followed at seven by *Gemeinestundt*, or Congregation’s hour when the entire *Gemeine* gathered for devotional services. At eight, each choir observed *Viertelstundt*, or Quarter hour meeting, followed at nine by *Abendstundt*, or Evening hour, when the entire *Gemeine* met again. The day ended at ten with the Evening benediction.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *General Diacony Journal, 1780-1788*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, November 20, 1784; Eze, “Self-Encounters,” 35, 42.

⁴⁵ Smaby, *Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem*, 14.

The communal structure of Bethlehem encouraged its development as a self-sufficient, exclusive society, largely closed to the outside world. Moravians bought and sold produce and manufactured goods to outsiders, but community life revolved around the town. Only Brethren could live on Moravian land, young men and women had to ask permission to marry, and, of course, no other church was allowed in Bethlehem. The regimentation of everyday life extended to a strictly uniform dress code. All women and girls were required to wear a cap called a *Schnepfen Haube*, because it was shaped like a snipe's bill. *Schnepfen Hauben* were kept in place by ribbons, the color of which identified the choir in which the person lived: married women wore light blue ribbons, widows' were white, single sisters' were pink, girls' crimson, and little girls' scarlet. The men's dress was even more regimented. Adult males wore straight, unlapelled dark coats, low-crowned hats, knee-buckled pants, and broad round-toed shoes. Though not as uniform in their dress as Catholic monks, the Brethren were almost monastically organized, and were indeed a holy brotherhood.⁴⁶

The social control that Bethlehem's choir system attempted to maintain did not always work, or perhaps took longer to work on certain individuals. Many young men and women, although accepted as communicants, suffered relapses of "wild," "confused," and even "filthy" behavior that caused them to be banned from communion. If the wrongful behavior persisted, the malefactor might be banished entirely from the Bethlehem commune. They could be readmitted, though only after a lengthy period during which they were observed by church officials to see if they had undergone a sincere change of heart and come to realize their sinfulness and complete dependence on Christ.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Sessler, *Communal Pietism*, 87, 97.

⁴⁷ Smaby, *Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem*, 153.

For Bethlehem's Afro-Moravian slaves, banishment could be disastrous, possibly leading to their sale out of the region, perhaps as far away as to the rice plantations of low country Georgia and South Carolina. For Moravian masters, banishment was one of their only effective forms of punishment, given that whipping appears not to have been used to coerce Bethlehem's slaves. Lacking options, however, meant that any infraction was ultimately dealt with in the same manner. Jacob the Mulatto, a resident of Bethlehem since at least 1758, found himself in trouble with the Brethren in 1767 because he repeatedly threw trash out his dormitory window. His bad behavior may have been fueled by a lingering resentment, for although Jacob had been accepted as a communion candidate, there is no record that he ever became a full church member. Church leaders decided to send him to live with "a friend of the Brethren" in New York, but at the last minute Jacob repented. That he promised to pick up the garbage and receive counseling from Bethlehem's shoemaker meant that he probably realized how limited his life options were away from the *Brudergemeine*.⁴⁸

Another Afro-Moravian appears to have faced a punishment similar to Jacob's. Given the name Titus by his original owner, he was baptized by the Brethren and re-named Petrus in 1785. In 1786, he was "not allowed in the Choir House for the time being on account of bad behavior and leading others astray." We can only speculate about what kinds of activities Petrus was engaged in that caused the Brethren such concern; anything from smoking or drinking in the dormitories to socializing with women (and perhaps white women) were all forbidden. Whatever the problem, Church leaders apparently forgave Petrus, because three weeks later he was allowed to return to the Single Brothers' house. He later married a black Moravian woman

⁴⁸ *Single Brethrens' Diary, 1762-1767*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 245-246; *Single Brethrens' Diary, 1753-1804*, October 28, 1758.

named Mary from Christiansbrunn, meaning he was accepted as a communicant since only full church members were allowed to marry.⁴⁹

Though both Jacob and Petrus integrated within Bethlehem's larger white community, there are some indications that they and other Afro-Moravians never completely identified with their white co-religionists. Josua the Negro, mentioned earlier when he came to Bethlehem in 1749, remained a slave all his life. Though to all outward appearances he enjoyed a rough equality with white Moravians, his inferior status was made obvious by his lack of a surname. Being branded as a lesser being must have grated on Josua's pride, especially since he was trilingual and equipped with an active intelligence. He may have found some comfort from his relationship with fellow Igbo expatriate Andreas. Removed as they both were by thousands of miles of ocean from their natal country, Josua and Andreas perhaps found solace in each other's company. Both spoke English and German, though they probably fell back into their native Igbo in unguarded moments when reminiscing about West Africa or telling a joke. That Josua enjoyed a good joke is evidenced by the numerous occasions when his "coarse ways and arrogance kept him a few times" from being allowed to take communion. The desire to return to his West African home burned brightly in Josua, who had been enslaved at age fourteen and was said to be "much attached to his nation." He lobbied the Brethren for the chance to establish a mission in Igboland, but perhaps because of his less than perfect record as a communicant, and his obvious love for his homeland (which may have overshadowed his love of the Moravians) he was never given the opportunity.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ *Single Brethrens' Diary, 1753-1804*, March 28, 1785, July 9, 1786, May 7, 1792.

⁵⁰ *Josua the Negro Lebenslauf*.

Work and Upward Mobility for Black Northerners

The working lives of blacks in Bethlehem paralleled those of other people of color in the Northern colonies, though some important differences existed which allowed some Afro-Moravians greater economic opportunity. Slaves in the rural North, like their free white counterparts, had to be skilled in multiple disciplines. Working on a small farm, a slave might, for instance, need to know how to shoe a horse, make barrels, do carpentry, and fish. Work on Northern farms demanded versatility. The first three months of the year were taken up slaughtering animals and curing their meat, cutting wood, quarrying limestone, and splitting rails. When spring arrived, the planting of potatoes and corn commenced, along with the castrating of lambs, mending of fences, and clearing land of trees, stones, and brush for future cultivation. During the summer, pumpkins were planted, the corn was harrowed and dressed, and wheat was put in. In the fall, the potatoes, rye, corn, wheat, and apples were all harvested. November was hog slaughtering time, followed by a short slack period in December when shoes were repaired before the cycle began again in January.⁵¹

Work for African Americans in Northern cities could also be long, arduous, and require multiple skills. Slaves in Philadelphia and New York performed a wide variety of jobs, including being barbers, masons, coopers, butchers, mariners, tanners, distillers, carpenters, shipbuilders, and blacksmiths, though they could also be transferred to the country in the autumn to help harvest crops. Many of New York City's male slaves were owned by white artisans who needed the cheap labor they provided. Black women on Northern farms were also quite versatile, mostly performing domestic labor, but they were sometimes called upon to join the men doing field labor as conditions dictated. Slave women had to know how to cook, make

⁵¹ Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North*, 45.

soap, wash and iron clothes, clean the house, and sew and spin cloth. Female slaves in colonial New York were usually employed as maids in the city's wealthier households.⁵²

Many of the same conditions that dictated work regimes on other Northern farms held true in Moravian Bethlehem, but the sheer size and breadth of the Brethren's operations and its religious component meant that there were significant differences as well. In the twenty years following first settlement in 1741, the Moravians of Bethlehem turned five thousand acres of forest into incredibly productive farm land with orchards, gardens, and hundreds of acres of wheat and corn, along with creating some fifty industries. A building campaign, instituted in 1746, eventually constructed seventeen congregation and choir houses, five schools, twenty buildings for industrial pursuits, five mills, two inns, and forty-eight farm buildings. Made from stone, a large number of these structures are still standing and being used in Bethlehem to this day.⁵³

In Bethlehem's other Pennsylvania colonies of Nazareth, Christiansbrunn, Gnadenthal, and Friedensthal, another five thousand acres came under cultivation and another fifty buildings were erected. Visitors in the 1750s and 1760s were astonished at the Brethren's industry, remarking that even North America's largest cities did not have a greater variety of mechanical arts being practiced. In 1759, Bethlehem had thirteen shoemakers, five physicians, four nail smiths, four carpenters, three stocking makers, as well as one silk manufacturer, one gunstock maker, one glazier, and one waiter among many other professions.⁵⁴

⁵² Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 21, 49; White, *Somewhat More Independent*, 11; Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North*, 49.

⁵³ Smaby, *Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem*, 86; Sessler, *Communal Pietism*, 89.

⁵⁴ Smaby, *Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem*, 86; Sessler, *Communal Pietism*, 89.

The large size and occupational diversity of the Moravians' holdings in Pennsylvania made slavery economically feasible, and ultimately quite profitable. The Brethren, like other affluent farmers in the region, owned mills, forges, and tanneries, farmed large tracts of land, and therefore utilized laborers year round. Because of this, they were more likely to own slaves than their poorer neighbors who only needed part-time workers. Most black Moravians toiled at unskilled jobs, such as wood-cutting and field work, but others learned skilled and semi-skilled jobs in the Brethrens' mills, tanneries, and blacksmith shops.⁵⁵

Peter Titus, the Afro-Moravian who first came to Bethlehem from New York in 1779 as a nine-year-old slave, is a good example of how many skills Northern blacks learned over their lifetimes. He was, also, a beneficiary of the *Brudergemeine's* more liberal policy for people of color regarding upward mobility. After completing two years of school at the Moravians' *Anstalt*, Peter Titus was put to work at Bethlehem's tannery at age thirteen. After laboring there for seven years, he was then transferred to one of the two inns that the Brethren maintained for non-Moravian visitors. He did not care for that sort of work, however, and was allowed to move to the community oil mill, where he stayed for one year until he moved to Gnadenthal to farm. He stayed there until 1796, when he relocated yet again, this time to Nazareth where he again worked as a tanner as well as becoming a mail rider for the Brethren between Bethlehem and Nazareth; on Sundays he pumped the church organ. When he died in 1843 at the age of seventy-three, Peter Titus owned seven acres of land near Nazareth, which was enough on which to build a house, plant a large garden, and perhaps run a few head of cattle or sheep. He had to work his entire life and could never have been considered a wealthy man, but owning a piece of land and

⁵⁵ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 32.

holding a responsible office in a white-dominated church was clearly an indication that he was a person worthy of respect in Moravian society.⁵⁶

Another example of the upward mobility available to Afro-Moravians is the work experience of Titus, who when he came to Bethlehem in 1749, was baptized with the name Josua. He was initially set to work in the fields as a farm laborer. As arduous as this sort of labor was, the Moravians never utilized the gang labor system where slaves worked from sun up to sun down. He was probably employed in a variety of tasks on the farm and maintained the same work regime as white labors. Sometime in the mid 1750s, Josua became the chief butcher for the “Upper Places,” a clear promotion from the unskilled and semi-skilled work he had been doing up to that point. Unfortunately, his life was cut short by smallpox in 1761, so it will never be known how far he could have gone.⁵⁷

Missionaries in North America

The Moravians who settled in Bethlehem went there for two principal reasons, the first being to secure a refuge from the religious persecution they were experiencing in Europe, and the second to develop a community that could serve as home base for, and to help fund, the Church’s missionary activity. Beginning in the 1740s, missionaries from Bethlehem evangelized the unchurched in Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Greenland, bringing tens of thousands to the “true faith” and making the Brethren the most successful Protestant missionary organization of the eighteenth century. The West Indies, with its overwhelmingly large black population, yielded the most converts, contributing almost as many new church members as the rest of the Brethren’s mission stations combined. Connections between Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and the

⁵⁶ *Memoir Box III, Nazareth, Peter Titus, 1770-1843.*

⁵⁷ *Memoir for Josua, a negro. Memoirs – box # 2 – 1761; Josua the Negro Lebenslauf; Single Brethrens’ Diary, 1753-1804, May 11, 1761.*

sugar islands of the British and Danish Caribbean were extensive, aided by the continual movement of missionaries between the two locales. The transfer of Anglo-German culture to the West Indies through these men and women was an obvious byproduct, though the influence of black culture in the opposite direction was also apparent. People of color in Bethlehem felt that influence and were inspired; one of them was so inspired that he became the first church-sponsored African American missionary in North America.⁵⁸

Missionary work was integral to the functioning of the Moravian Church, not just a subsidiary part. Virtually every Moravian was involved in some aspect of the missions, either as supporters or as missionaries. It was a “cardinal principle,” wrote a Moravian bishop, that “to be a Moravian and to further foreign missions are identical.” Most Moravians agreed. The Brethren’s enthusiasm and sense of duty were such that it was not until 1780 that a general call for volunteers to serve overseas was deemed necessary. The Moravians’ beliefs about the relationship between salvation and work also played a role. Like most evangelicals, the Brethren emphasized that personal salvation depended upon the individual’s own efforts. Hard work by itself did not ensure salvation, but salvation could not be achieved without hard work. As such, the Moravians’ work ethic was an important impetus for their missionary activities, since “good works,” more than work undirected to right purposes, led to salvation.⁵⁹

Putting faith into action took a great deal of organization, something at which the mostly German Moravians excelled. Bethlehem’s inhabitants were divided into two groups: one was called the *Pilgergemeine* or “Pilgrim congregation,” whose task was to evangelize the heathen and other colonists; the other was the *Hausgemeine* or “House congregation,” who remained in

⁵⁸ Hamilton, *History of the Church Known as the Moravian Church*, 50, 264.

⁵⁹ J.C.S Mason, *The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening in England, 1760-1800* (Woodbridge, England: The Boydell Press, 2001), 24; Gollin, *Moravians in Two Worlds*, 17.

Bethlehem tending the farms and working in the artisan shops to support their brothers and sisters in the missionary field. Beyond providing material support, Bethlehem acted as a home base where weary or discouraged members of the *Pilgergemeine* could find refuge, rest, and encouragement before heading out again to do the Lord's work. By 1759, missionaries accounted for thirty-six percent of Bethlehem's male labor force. This one profession, which included missionaries, teachers, bishops, deacons, and ministers, did not produce any salable items and were therefore wholly dependent on Bethlehem's non-missionaries for their subsistence. Added to the Moravian "dole" were the male missionaries' wives and children who were expected to accompany them to their mission stations and who also had to be supported by Bethlehem's artisans and farmers. In 1760, only five hundred people worked in jobs that produced income for the *Gemeine*. They supported another eight hundred people engaged in evangelization.⁶⁰

Of those eight hundred mission workers who called Bethlehem home, a large number were sent to evangelize the Caribbean's people of color. In doing so, they became agents of cultural exchange, bringing European Christianity to the West Indies and carrying back Afro-Caribbean influences to the mainland. While quantifying that influence is difficult, it is worth noting that the Moravian Church in the twenty-first century is, with its congregations in the West Indies, Africa, and South America, an overwhelmingly black church noted for its racial inclusiveness.

Communication between Bethlehem and the Brethren's Caribbean congregations was continuous, facilitated by the constant stream of missionaries who moved between the two locales. Each time a missionary returned from St. Thomas, Suriname, or Antigua, a special meeting of the *Gemeine* assembled to hear news from the field. The missionaries' reports were

⁶⁰ Fogleman, *Jesus is Female*, 113; Gollin, *Moravians in Two Worlds*, 159, 196.

usually filled with the ever-increasing progress of the work among the “heathen,” and the suffering of the Brethren while doing the Lord’s work because of tropical diseases. Some of the correspondence, though, told of day-to-day operations of the mission stations. One letter from St. Thomas included an entry about Afro-Moravians “Moab and Manasse” who “were excluded from the congregation,” though “two children were blessed. Brother Brucker held choir quarter-of-an-hour services and they closed with Prostration.”⁶¹

Surviving written correspondence by Native Americans and African Americans in the early eighteenth century is rare. Even more unusual are letters between them that spanned thousands of miles of ocean. Here again, the communications network established by the Moravians between Bethlehem and their West Indian mission stations proved unique. In 1749 for example, the “brown Northern Indians” of Pennsylvania sent messages of greeting to Afro-Caribbeans at the Brethrens’ mission in St. Thomas. The black Brethren of St. Thomas must have been intrigued by the letter, because later that year at a lovefeast the Afro-Moravians in attendance were merely “pleasantly entertained with news from the Brethrens’ communities in Europe and North America,” but were “especially” interested about news “from the Indian congregation.”⁶²

Black Moravians from the Caribbean returned the Indians’ correspondence. Afro-Moravians Maria Magdalena and Priscilla, both “helpers” at the St. Croix mission, gave letters to north-bound white missionaries to forward to those whom they considered their Indian sisters in Pennsylvania. In the letters, both women proved humble servants of the Lord, though they made no reference to being slaves or of owing deference to anyone but God. The existence of a

⁶¹ Vernon H. Nelson, Otto Dreydoppel, Jr., and Doris Rohland, YOB, eds., *The Bethlehem Diary Volume II, January 1, 1744 – May 31, 1745*, Kenneth G. Hamilton and Luthar Madeheim, trans. (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: The Moravian Archives, 2001), 301, 306, 284.

⁶² Oldendorp, *History of the Mission*, 443, 449.

Moravian intellectual network that connected common and oppressed people from widely scattered parts of the world is remarkable and perhaps unique. It also raises some intriguing questions for the twenty-first century reader. What did they know of each others' lives, livelihoods, and social conditions? They shared the Moravian faith, but did they share a brother and sisterhood of the oppressed, and were they conscious of their similar relationship with whites? Though the evidence is not specific, that both the black Moravians in the Caribbean and the Native Americans in North America specifically addressed their correspondence to each other is a clear indication that they thought of themselves as distinct from their white co-religionists, while still part of the larger Moravian spiritual community.⁶³

Besides establishing missions in far-flung locations such as Suriname, Greenland, St. Thomas, and Antigua, the Brethren evangelized extensively in North America. Their first missionary efforts on the mainland occurred in Georgia and South Carolina beginning in 1735. A combination of indifference to non-Moravian whites, the deaths of some of the missionaries from disease, and a general lack of slaves in the vicinity of the mission served to doom this first attempt. The Brethren tried to evangelize Georgia's people of color a second time in 1774, sending three missionaries to Knoxborough and Silkhope plantations, but one soon died from yellow fever, and the other two were forced to flee the violence of the American Revolution.⁶⁴

After 1753, North Carolina also became a major center of Moravian mission work when Church leaders bought one hundred thousand acres of land in the central part of the colony in the area of what is now Winston-Salem. There the Brethren establish the colony of Wachovia,

⁶³ Oldendorp, *History of the Mission*, 517, 518.

⁶⁴ Fogleman, *Jesus is Female*, 107; Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church*, 80, 242; Marie J. Kohnova, "The Moravians and their Missionaries: A Problem in Americanization," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 19, no. 3 (Dec. 1932): 353; Margaret Washington Creel, "A Peculiar People": *Slave Community and Religion – Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 72; Adelaide L. Fries, *The Moravians in Georgia, 1735-1740* (Raleigh, North Carolina: 1905), 201-220.

named after one of Moravian Bishop Nicholas von Zinzendorf's estates in Austria. Bethlehem supplied both the model and the resources for the new community, which became the base for the Moravian's mission to evangelize the Southern backcountry, particularly the region's Native Americans. Wachovia's African Americans enjoyed many of the same living, working, and religious freedoms as their counterparts in Bethlehem during the colony's first years. As slavery became more firmly entrenched in North Carolina in the decades following the American Revolution, though, this alternative model of Southern race relations faded.⁶⁵

Though the Moravians began their mission enterprise in the South, it quickly became clear that in North America the Mid-Atlantic colonies would become the center of most of their activities and the scene of much of their evangelical success. Taking advantage of the large German migration to the Delaware Valley beginning in the 1720s and the inattention of the Lutheran and Reformed churches, the Moravians moved quickly and in large numbers to harvest souls. By the mid-1740s, the Brethren had put more preachers and exhorters into the so-called Pennsylvania field, a region that stretched from New York to Virginia (though Moravians went as far north as Massachusetts), than both the Lutheran and Reformed churches combined. By 1754, at the peak of Moravian influence, the Brethren could count one hundred twenty-two missionaries in the Middle Atlantic colonies preaching not only to German speakers, but to Swedish Lutherans, Anglo-Americans, Native Americans, and to the region's people of color.⁶⁶

From their very beginnings in the 1740s, Moravians from Bethlehem evangelized African Americans in the Mid-Atlantic colonies. For a variety of reasons, including that New York, New

⁶⁵ Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church*, 171; Jon F. Sensbach, *A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763-1840* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁶⁶ Fogleman, *Jesus is Female*, 112; Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church*, 140.

Jersey, and Philadelphia had large concentrations of people of color, that many of the area's slaves were newly imported Africans, and because the area was in close contact with the religious excitement of the Great Awakening swirling through the Atlantic world, all three appeared to have great potential as places to bring new souls to God. Nevertheless, the Brethren encountered numerous impediments to this mission, including distrust of the supposed radical nature of the Moravian Church, white fears of slave revolt that led to legal restrictions on proselytizing blacks, and, perhaps most significantly, resistance by the recently displaced Africans themselves.

Afro-Moravian Evangelicals

One of the Moravians' first attempts to bring the Gospel to black Northerners occurred in the early 1740s in New York and was led by a black man from the West Indies. Andreas had been, according to a white Moravian observer, a particularly valued and effective "helper" and class leader at the Brethren's mission in St. Thomas, having "led many souls to Christ ... strengthened the weak, and showed the right path to those who had gone astray." Because of his reputation for godliness and his skills as an evangelist, it was decided in 1742 to take Andreas to Europe for further training, stopping off in Bethlehem along the way.⁶⁷

Though only in Pennsylvania for half a year, Andreas took part in many church activities and fully integrated himself into the church community as an equal member. Part of the Moravians' religious practice in these early years was to maintain a twenty-four hour prayer vigil, where individual Brethren took turns saying prayers for one hour each around the clock. One of the hours of prayer was observed by Andreas. He also held several positions of responsibility over the following months, including being part of the *Diener Collegium* in July,

⁶⁷ Oldendorp, *History of the Mission*, 320.

being assigned along with four other men as *Postillions* also in July, and being named the sacristan for a week in August. Andreas was an honored guest and fellow Moravian in Bethlehem; his race may have played a pivotal role in his position among the Brethren, but rather than being a handicap, his African descent gave him added status.⁶⁸

Arriving several months after Andreas on a separate ship, but closely connected to Andreas's mission, was another West Indian named Maria. She had been the vice-eldress of the "Negro sisters" on St. Thomas, and came to Bethlehem as a replacement bride for Andreas because his original spouse, another Afro-Moravian woman from St. Thomas named Anna Maria, had died in Germany while awaiting his arrival. Maria had been allowed to bring her two children with her, which was surely a gesture of humanity on the Brethren's part, though the fact that her West Indian family may have been disrupted is a possible sign that they were still slaves with little choice in the matter. The opportunity to go to Germany with Andreas for missionary training and perhaps thereby to better her children's lives may have been sufficient inducement for Maria. Whatever her possible misgivings, her reception in Bethlehem was much like that which Andreas had enjoyed. She took communion with the Brethren as a full member of the Church for the first time in October 1742. Her enhanced position within the *Gemeine* was such that, upon the leave-taking of white missionaries to their various stations, Maria participated in the ritual "laying on of hands," done to give the protection and love of the congregation. While a white Moravian man laid his hands on the male missionaries, "Sr. Maria of St. Thomas" did the same for the white female missionaries.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Kenneth G. Hamilton, trans. and ed., *The Bethlehem Diary: Volume I, 1742-1744* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: The Archives of the Moravian Church, 1971), 25, 39, 40, 89.

⁶⁹ Hamilton, *Bethlehem Diary, Volume I*, 98, 101, 110; Oldendorp, *History of the Mission*, 402.

The greatest indication of the Brethrens' high esteem for their Afro-Caribbean guests was not how they treated them in Bethlehem, as respectful as it was. In December of 1742, Andreas, in the company of a white Moravian, left Bethlehem "to itinerate among the Negroes in the New York countryside," thus becoming the first church-sponsored black missionary in Britain's North American colonies. Extant records do not specify where in New York he went, but given Bethlehem's position in eastern Pennsylvania, the large number of slaves then employed as field workers in the Hudson River valley, and the short time Andreas had to evangelize, the latter region, perhaps including Long Island with its large black population, were likely destinations. Because he was only in the field for a month before setting sail with his new wife and children for Europe, it is hard to tell how much success he enjoyed. His knowledge of the creole languages spoken by many African slaves which he had learned after years in the West Indies surely gave him advantages, though his importance was more as the pathfinder who opened the way for others who followed in his footsteps than as the catalyst of a religious revival among the North's people of color.⁷⁰

The precedent Andreas set for evangelizing people of African descent by an organized church was revolutionary, though its full effects would not be felt for many years. In the years that followed his first efforts, white Moravians continued to try to bring black Northerners into the "true" church. Counting Andreas, a total of seven Brethren, including: Valentin Lohans in 1742; Christian Rauch between 1742 and 1753; Christian Frohlich in 1745, 1747, and 1752; Jasper Payne in 1745 and 1747; an unnamed pastor on Staten Island; and the second Andreas from Igboland between 1748 and 1753, specifically targeted blacks for evangelization in Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, and Virginia. That is not a large number compared to the

⁷⁰ Hamilton, *Bethlehem Diary, Volume I*, 121, 134, 135; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 95, 208-209.

total number which the Moravians sent into the Middle colonies as missionaries, but it did represent a far greater effort than any other church at the time was making to convert African Americans. Other denominations such as the Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Reformed generally allowed people of color to attend their church services, but did not actively seek them out. The Moravians were merely following the mission set for them by Church leaders of bringing Christianity to the heathen and unchurched, regardless of race or condition of servitude.⁷¹

The relationship between white and black Moravians in the Northern colonies was complicated. On the one hand, white Brethren welcomed people of color into the Bethlehem *Gemeine* and actively evangelized them elsewhere. That they were not completely free of contemporary ideas about race may perhaps be illustrated by their giving the Igbo Ofodobendo Wooma, alias York, the same name of the last black man of note in Bethlehem, Andreas. It is also possible, however, that Church leaders may have meant to inspire him to become a missionary like Andreas, since he had shown himself to be a devout person, as well as being tough both physically and intellectually.

Whatever plans his white brethren may have had for him, the second Andreas appeared to have had his own particular agenda from a very early date. Though he only arrived in Bethlehem in January of 1746 and became a communicant several months later, by December of that year he had already let it be known that he wanted to be a missionary. In a discussion with another slave then visiting Bethlehem, Andreas proclaimed his intention “to go as a witness to his people in Africa.” Though never allowed to go that far afield, it was not long before he became part of the *Pilgergemeine*, beginning his missionary work in Philadelphia in May of 1748 from which he

⁷¹ Fogleman, *Jesus is Female*, 231-235; Stocker, *History of the Moravian Church in New York City*, 53; Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church*, 292.

returned in “good spirits and well,” followed shortly thereafter by a second itineration to the Jerseys in December. By then he had firmly established himself as a missionary, being officially known and referred to by Moravian Church leaders as “Andres the negro...Messenger to the Negroes.”⁷²

Andreas’ mission to the slaves of Philadelphia was never easy, and was made more difficult by restrictive laws passed by Pennsylvania’s colonial legislature. Concerned about the presence of seemingly large number of blacks crowding into Philadelphia beginning in the 1720s, colonial lawmakers passed a battery of so-called “black codes” restricting the actions and movement of people of African descent. A 1726 law placed heavy fines on free blacks who entertained slaves without the consent of their masters or who consorted with slaves in any way. Enforcement of this and other slave statutes was given to special courts which operated without juries and could, at their discretion, impose heavier fines than those specified by the law. The 1726 statute was reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* by Benjamin Franklin in 1751 by popular demand, proving that it was not a dead letter. That the 1726 law had to be reprinted twenty-five years later is, however, an indication that it was not always observed in practice. Slaves and freemen in the Delaware Valley managed to maintain a degree of freedom of movement for themselves throughout the era. For their masters, it was often a matter of economic necessity. They relied on slaves to pick up goods and make deliveries throughout cities and towns and to local farms or regional general stores. These short shopping or delivery trips afforded slaves the opportunity to gather with other African Americans to exchange information about the wider

⁷² *Single Brethren’s Diary, 1744-1752*, December 14, 1749, May 14, 1748, December 4, 1748.

world, and perhaps to listen to itinerant black preachers like Andreas, without exciting the fears of suspicious whites.⁷³

Andreas made numerous trips from Bethlehem to Philadelphia between 1748 and 1753 to evangelize his fellow people of color. Some of his missions lasted less than a month, while on others he remained in the field for up to four months acting largely on his own. He never brought large numbers of blacks into the Moravian Church in Philadelphia, partly because the Brethren never wanted to be in direct competition with other Protestant denominations for new members, partly because the requirements for becoming a Moravian communicant were so demanding, but perhaps mostly because many of the newly-imported Africans who crowded the streets of Philadelphia in the middle of the eighteenth century had little interest in converting to any Christian sect. However, if promoting Christianity among people of color can be counted as his overall goal, then it can be said that the second Andreas was successful. Philadelphia became a center of black Protestantism later in the century under black pastors Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, some of whose congregants must have heard Andreas preach.⁷⁴

Twenty-five black men and women show up in Philadelphia's Moravian Church registers around the time that Andreas did his mission work. Of those included, only six were identified as slaves, indicating that a large majority came of their own free will, and were not coerced into attending Moravian services by pious masters. One church registrant was an "Ibo," another came from St. Croix, while the provenances of the others were more generic, noted as being either from the "West Indies," "Africa," or "Guinea." Another five who were baptized or married by the Brethren were classified as mixed race, or mulatto. The professions of two of

⁷³ Nash and Soderlund, *Forging Freedom*, 35; David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).

⁷⁴ *Single Brethren's Diary, 1744-1752*, January 16, 1749, February 19, 1749, May 6, 1749, September 19, 1749, August 3, 1753, August 8, 1753.

Philadelphia's Afro-Moravians are listed in the registers, one of whom was a shoemaker. The other, Francis Labbadie, was one of the mulattoes from the Caribbean. Born in 1774, he had probably been a privileged slave in his youth, because he is listed as being a skilled carpenter who probably practiced that trade when he first arrived in Philadelphia. He is also described as a "seafaring man," a trade he may have been forced to adopt because many white artisans forced their black fellow craftsmen out of skilled positions after emancipation in the 1780s and 1790s. When Labbadie married in 1802, the only work he could find was as a "footman in the city." Since many of Philadelphia's Afro-Moravians were free men and women, but did not have their professions stated in the register, they were probably day laborers if they were men and domestic servants if women. Although certainly poor, their prospects for the future were better than those of many other people of color because as Moravians they had been taught how to read.⁷⁵

In between his mission work in the Jerseys and Philadelphia, Andreas found time to make several trips to evangelize people of African descent in New York City. New York was a natural mission ground for Andreas; having lived there for some five years, he undoubtedly enjoyed reinvigorating old friendships and being a part of all the excitement an Atlantic seaport town had to offer. The city was also alluring for Andreas because of its large African American population. Black slaves made up more than fourteen percent of New York's population in 1771. Some regions in its immediate hinterland were over thirty percent black, a figure that compared favorably with many parts of the slave South. New York City employed so many

⁷⁵ *Register Book of the Brethren's Church in Philadelphia, 1742-1843*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

African American slaves in the 1790s that it was second only to Charleston, South Carolina in the number of slaves it held.⁷⁶

Thirty people of color considered themselves part of New York's Moravian Church between 1744 and 1800. Though some of them died over the years or moved away, it can still be reasonably estimated that Afro-Moravians constituted a steady five to ten percent of the Brethren's New York congregation, which on the eve of the American Revolution numbered some two hundred members.

The Afro-New Yorkers Andreas evangelized in the 1740s and 1750s lived precariously, enduring the cruelties, uncertainties, and unequal treatment of slavery, obliged to find what happiness and security they could through their faith. New York could be a hazardous place for all its inhabitants, but its African Americans usually suffered more than other groups. As a seaport, it was continually exposed to exotic microbes and diseases brought by ships, travelers, newly imported slaves, and sailors from foreign lands. Added to this problem was the general lack of concern and knowledge about the importance of sanitation in America's growing urban centers, which became a recipe for disaster for New York in the second half of the eighteenth century. A series of yellow fever epidemics plagued the city in that period, one of the worst outbreaks occurring in August 1798. During that plague New York was virtually shut down, leaving some one thousand dead, including nine Moravians. The 1798 epidemic was followed by another the next summer, and a third outbreak in 1803. More prosperous citizens could afford to leave the unhealthy city in such emergencies, but the poor, which included most of Gotham's blacks, had no choice but to remain and try to survive such outbreaks of death. Eleven Afro-Moravian New Yorkers died between 1766 and 1807, some no doubt of infectious diseases, and

⁷⁶ *New York City Diary, 1748*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; White, *Somewhat More Independent*, 3.

even in death they encountered discrimination. Of those who died, nine were “buried out of town” presumably so as not to be buried in the same cemetery as whites, one was laid to rest at the Fresh Water burying ground, while only one, the still born child of Afro-Moravians Phoebe and Peter McLean, was “buried in the burial ground behind the chapel.”⁷⁷

Black Moravians in New York could find some security in marriage, though it did not always guarantee contentment. Phoebe King was born in Senegal, but by 1762 she had been enslaved and transported to New York where she was baptized a Moravian in that year. Her first husband apparently died young or was sold away to another colony, because she remarried, becoming Peter McLean’s wife sometime in the 1770s. Phoebe’s second marriage, perhaps haunted by the death of a son in childbirth, made “her life very unhappy.” She died in 1781, far away from Senegal with a husband who made her life unbearable and with no children to love.⁷⁸

What connected Phoebe McLean’s tragic life to those of Andreas, Magdalene, Josua, Peter Titus, Titto, and many other Afro-Moravians and to the larger currents of Atlantic-world history was their movement, and their acceptance of the inevitability of movement, within that world. As forced migrants, slaves’ lives were unstable, governed by the requirements of their masters, though perhaps only a little less stable than the lives of their white counterparts who were also constantly moving, usually several times during their lives. The lives of the North’s black Moravians may have been in constant flux, but they always managed to maintain a sense of identity separate from their white co-religionists. Phoebe McLean identified herself as a Senegally on church documents, Andreas and Josua identified themselves as Igbos, while Magdalene always thought of herself as a Papaw from the Gold Coast. They could not recreate

⁷⁷ Stocker, *History of the Moravian Church in New York City*, 188, 197; *New York (First) Church, Church Register, 1744-1890*, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

⁷⁸ *Church Register, New York (First) Church, 1744-1890*.

their natal cultures and were forced to adapt to, if not wholly to accept, white norms of behavior and Christian modes of spirituality. Their separate and collective sense of themselves may have been demonstrated by their near total abandonment of the Moravian Church during the early years of the nineteenth century. By the 1820s, the Moravian churches in New York and Philadelphia could not count a single African American as a member. The lure of black churches in those two cities, independent of white control, proved far more attractive than the fading social, spiritual, and economic equality that had once been a hallmark of Moravian Bethlehem.⁷⁹

Andreas appears to have ended his missionary work in 1753, six years after he began to evangelize his fellow people of African descent. Why he stopped going to Philadelphia and New York as a preacher is not clear, though he may have been prevented from continuing his mission by the initial clashes of the Seven Years' War that began one year later. In this conflict that pitted the British against the French for dominance in their colonial possessions, the Moravians were initially suspected of conspiring with the French since the Brethren's missionary work extended to Native Americans on the frontier. Though the Native American groups associated with the Moravians were not French allies, most Anglo-Americans either could not tell the difference or did not care. The Brethren were forced to curtail their evangelical work for a time, though their loyalty became less of a concern for white colonists when one of their frontier villages was attacked by a war party of hostile Indians, killing eleven Brethren. During the war, many non-Moravians streamed into Bethlehem for protection, putting considerable strain on the community's resources, but allowing the Brethren to prove that they were loyal citizens. When the war ended, Bethlehem's General Economy was dissolved, bringing an end to the town's

⁷⁹ Alison Games, "Migration," in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 44; Stocker, *History of the Moravian Church in New York City*, 219.

position as the administrative center of the Moravian's missionary activity. The Brethren still sent out missionaries, but from then on direction and money came from Europe, not from the Bethlehem *Gemeine*. As Pennsylvania's Moravians began to concentrate on individual fulfillment, rather than the collective needs of their community, the impulse to evangelize local African Americans quickly lapsed.⁸⁰

It appears clear that even when the General Economy operated and Andreas was a missionary, he and other Afro-Moravians tried to maintain some of their natal cultures. Andreas and Magdalene, he an Igbo and she a Papaw, had three children, making the continuance of at least a hybrid African culture possible. All three children died young, though, thus foreclosing that hope, however slim it may have been in the first place. Further hope for cultural continuity through Andreas, once the young Igbo Ofodobendo, ended, as well, when he died in 1779 at age fifty. His wife, once the unnamed six-year old Papaw girl later known as Beulah and finally as Magdalene, lived on until she was eighty-nine, making a home for herself in Bethlehem at the Widow's choir house until she died in 1819. Both were buried in the Moravians' cemetery in Bethlehem called God's Acre, next to white and Indian Moravians without regard for class or race.⁸¹

As African migrants, Andreas and Magdalene accepted what parts of the new culture they had to in order to survive, attempting to use it for their own ends. Never able to fully identify with white America or the Igbo and Papaw culture they had left at such young ages, they likely thought of themselves as Atlantic-world Afro-Christians, enjoying short and long-distance fellowship with other Afro-Moravians and other people of color in Africa, Europe, the West

⁸⁰ Stocker, *History of the Moravian Church in New York City*, 188; Smaby, *Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem*, 40.

⁸¹ Eze, "Self-Encounters: Two Eighteenth-Century African Memoirs from Moravian Bethlehem," 30; Gollin, *Moravians in Two Worlds*, 108; *Magdalene's Memoir*.

Indies, and throughout eastern North America. Looking east across the Atlantic and south to the Caribbean, they and others like them used religion to create a new cosmopolitan world for themselves.⁸²

⁸² For how African slaves used evangelical religion to forge a black consciousness, see James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 35.

CHAPTER 6 EVANGELICAL NETWORKS IN THE GREATER CARIBBEAN

The evangelical awakening that bound Bethlehem, New York, and Philadelphia, to Antigua, St. Thomas, and the other islands of the British West Indies beginning in the mid eighteenth century quickly grew to encompass an even larger spiritual geography by the century's last twenty-five years. Held together by networks of white and black evangelicals, this western Atlantic littoral spiritual community took in large parts of the Caribbean, the American South's Atlantic coast, the Bahamas, and even Bermuda. These formal and informal networks employed hundreds individuals who traveled between the Caribbean and America's port cities helping to spread and develop an Afro-Atlantic form of spirituality in North America. Here again, the Moravians and Methodists led the way. White and black evangelical missionaries initially stationed in places like Jamaica, Antigua, St. Kitts, Nevis, or St. Thomas later found themselves assigned or transported to churches and pulpits on the North American mainland. They brought with them certain religious folkways and notions about race and slavery that were distinctively West Indian, which together influenced the growth of African American Christianity. Afro-Caribbeans, along with their white co-religionists, could be found in America's seaport towns and in the surrounding hinterlands. It was along the western Atlantic littoral in Southern ports like Charleston, Savannah, and Wilmington, North Carolina, that an Afro-Atlantic form of Christianity took shape and then moved west with the advancing American frontier.

Black and white evangelicals found it relatively easy to move between the West Indies and North America in the eighteenth century because of the two region's close economic and political ties. The Atlantic economy was based upon trade that linked Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. While all those regions were necessary for the system to work,

the commerce between Britain's Caribbean and mainland colonies was particularly important. West Indians needed North American foodstuffs, lumber, animal products, etc., to help maintain sugar production. At the same time, an important part of North America's economy depended upon selling those products to sugar planters and the Caribbean molasses and sugar which was distilled into rum and sold on domestic and world markets to buy slaves and earn foreign exchange. Ships from both regions could always be found in the ports of the other. Planter politics also cemented the connections between the West Indies and the mainland colonies, and particularly with South Carolina. In the colonial era, Carolina enjoyed the services of no fewer than eleven governors who were either natives of, or whose families came from, the Caribbean, principally Barbados. White Caribbean emigrants can also be credited with kick-starting large-scale chattel slavery in the Low Country. When rice was introduced in the early eighteenth century, Carolina's planters grew suddenly rich, allowing them to reinstitute the top-down social and political structures to which they had become accustomed in Barbados. More than anywhere else in British North America, a West Indian social, political, and cultural ethos held sway in the Low Country: both colonial dependencies were ruled over, at least initially, by the second and third sons of Britain's aristocracy. Given the extent of their economic and political co-infiltration, it is not surprising that parts of North America and the British West Indies also shared social and cultural identities.¹

The economic, political, and social integration of Britain's American colonies helped to create, along with the imperial policies of Spain and France, a greater Caribbean community.

¹ Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 112-116; David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 227; Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), 8-9; April Lee Hatfield, *Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Somewhat diffuse, the greater Caribbean takes in an immense region that stretches from South America's northern coast, to the more recognized Caribbean basin, the Gulf coast of North America, the Bahamas, North America's Atlantic coast from Florida to the Carolinas, and extending as far east as the central Atlantic island of Bermuda. As far-flung as the greater Caribbean was, it was held together by the ties of imperial power and cultural felicity to, in this case, Great Britain.²

Quaker evangelicals were the first organized group of Protestants to take advantage of the greater Caribbean's cultural unity to proselytize American slaves, beginning their crusade in the mid seventeenth century. They traveled throughout the Caribbean and British North America on numerous and exhausting voyages, but lacked the institutional infrastructure (and perhaps the will) to maintain the kind of lasting presence in the West Indies necessary to convert many people of color. Though largely unsuccessful themselves, the Quakers and other groups of Dissenters such as the Baptists and Presbyterians put pressure on the Church of England to pay more attention to the spiritual welfare of its colonists in America. Beginning in 1701, largely in response to Dissenter competition, Anglican Church officials began sending out missionaries under the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, or SPG. Though usually under-funded and understaffed, the SPG nevertheless instituted a large network of priests and missionaries who attempted to bring the Empire's slaves into the Church. Missionaries thus employed moved easily around the greater Caribbean, taking advantage of and

² Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 50-53. For arguments against the view that North America and the British West Indies shared a common culture, see Michael Craton, "Reluctant Creoles: The Planter's World in the British West Indies," in Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Strangers Within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 314; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 335.

helping to develop a western Atlantic littoral spiritual community, while at the same time becoming some of the first trans-Caribbean missionaries.³

The SPG in the Greater Caribbean

By their very definition, missionaries of the eighteenth century were itinerants, moving from one mission station to another as they were needed and as their home organizations dictated. SPG missionaries were no exception, moving easily within Britain's Atlantic empire. Simon Smith, for example, spent thirty years working for the SPG in the "plantations," part of which time he spent as a naval chaplain. He was initially stationed in New York between 1696 and 1701 as a minister for the Church of England, but then went to work as a missionary for the SPG at Falmouth Parish in Antigua until he retired. In 1720 it was reported that Anglican minister Thomas Phillips had worked for 17 years in the Americas, beginning at Basseterre, St. Kitts before spending a "season" in Newfoundland, and finally landing in Christ Church Parish, Maryland. Reverend Mr. Bloomsfield initially came from Ireland as a missionary to Virginia. He decided to move to Kingston, Jamaica, securing a recommendation from Virginia's governor for that purpose. After less than two years in the tropics (during which time he got married), however, Bloomsfield had had enough, and wanted to return to Virginia. Unfortunately, overtaken by the hardships of his work and tropical disease, he died on the sea voyage back to the mainland. Philip Brown, another Anglican missionary, after graduating from Queen's College, Cambridge, sailed to the West Indies for the SPG, where he spent a number of years. In 1733, he was recommended to the Bishop of London for a parsonage in South Carolina. And then there was Mr. Madison who, though not a minister for the Church of England, was reported by Bermuda's SPG missionary Marischal Keith in 1795 as being a "Pastor of a Meeting House in

³ Frederick B. Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1960).

the Centre of my 2 Parishes.” Madison, Keith said, “came to this island some years ago from America in the character of a Methodist preacher, and after making a short stay revisited his native Country, from whence he returned a Presbyterian.” Whether ministers of the established church or Dissenting preachers, all of these missionaries thought of the western Atlantic littoral as home.⁴

Keith’s tone of condescension could not mask his and other Anglican’s concern about, and in many cases, outright abhorrence toward the presence and success of Dissenting ministers in their midst. Mutual animosity between the Anglican priests and groups of Baptists, Presbyterians, and later Methodists on the American frontier during the eighteenth century had its roots in competition for the loyalty of whites, and later blacks, living on the “plantations.” Anglican parsons and missionaries of the SPG came under attack from Nonconformists on a number of fronts, but the most damning charge was of immoral behavior. To most evangelical Dissenters, Church of England ministers were “fox-hunting, whist-playing, Madeira-tipping, money-grubbing wastrels” who believed that “fiddling and dancing were not criminal.” Dissenting preachers were not, of course, disinterested observers. Notwithstanding their ad hominem attacks, most Anglican divines in America led upright and spiritually devout lives.⁵

⁴ *Queries*, 1681-1749, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XIX, Leeward Islands. Lambeth Palace Archives, London, England, 119-120; *Fulham Papers*, 1720, vol. III, Maryland, 60; Gov. Edward Trelawney to Bishop Gibson, Dec. 7, 1738, *Fulham Papers*, vol. VVII, Jamaica, 281; William May to Bishop Gibson, Dec. 1, 1740, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XVIII, Jamaica, 5-6; Marischal Keith to Bishop Porteus, Oct. 3, 1795, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XVII, Bermuda, 69-70; letter to Bishop Gordon, Dec. 29, 1733, *Fulham Papers*, vol. IX.

⁵ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 11-13; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1972), 314; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 23. For a first-hand account of the conflict between Anglican missionaries and Dissenters in the American backcountry, see Charles Woodmason, *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the American Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*, Richard J. Hooker, ed. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press), 1953.

There is evidence, however, that some Anglican ministers were influenced by the less stringent moral code of the Atlantic world frontier. In 1762, Established Church minister Patrick Lunan was accused by his own Virginia vestry of “often Quarrelling and fighting,” of having “at divers and other times exposed his private parts to view in Pubick Company and Solicited negro and other women to commit the crime of Fornication and adultery with him.” To the south, an Anglican minister in Kingston complained about the general immorality existing in Jamaica in a letter to the Bishop of London in 1769. He attributed the bad moral tone of the island colony to “the Immorality and scandalous living of many of our Brethren of the Clergy, who, after having passed some part of their lives without the best of Reputations to Home, rove to foreign Climates, where they think themselves stationed beyond the reach of the Church’s Censures, and in consequence give themselves up to the most abject State of Drunkenness, Debauchery, and Profaneness.” Perhaps the worst example, according to the writer, was a recent North American émigré who, “by his own Account, was starved out” by his Virginia congregation who were repelled by his bad behavior. In Jamaica, the American continued his debauched ways, being “perhaps as abandoned a Drunkard as ever lived. Whilst he has Money he will never be sober.” A fund was subsequently raised to send him back to Virginia.⁶

Some Atlantic-world Anglican pastors were forced to leave their pulpits by outraged parishioners, but many others left for other churches within the greater Caribbean out of economic necessity. All over British America settlement was dispersed and the people rather poor, making it hard in certain circumstances for clergymen to support their wives and families. The lack of economic resources particularly affected backcountry areas that did not have access to Atlantic-world markets, but those were precisely the regions where clergymen were in shortest

⁶ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 190; Henry Penlington to Bishop Terrick, July 23, 1769, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XVIII, Jamaica. 61-62.

supply. The SPG was supposed to supplement their missionaries' wages, but sometimes the promised money was delayed for extended periods, and sometimes it never came at all.

Reverend Arthur Emerson found himself in this position, and was forced to leave Barbados for a vacant parish in Virginia. The same was true for the Reverend Mr. Ormsby, who fled Bermuda "for want of bread." SPG minister William Swift also came to Virginia from Bermuda despite orders from the bishop of London to remain at his island post. Virginia's Governor William Gooch was suitably impressed with him as a gentleman, however, and so gave Swift a parish in Hanover County. Swift gave as a reason for leaving Bermuda so precipitously that the cost of living was too high while his salary was too low.⁷

A relative poverty of the colonies kept some Anglican pastors from going there in the first place. Reverend William Guy, whose regular pastorate was in Charleston, South Carolina, accompanied the Bahamas' British Royal Governor Woodes Rogers back to New Providence in 1731 to perform clerical duties since no Anglican minister worked in the Bahamas at the time. While there, Guy preached every Sunday, read prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays, visited most of the island's families, married three couples, buried one woman, and baptized 130 children. He reported that all the people professed allegiance to the Church of England and desired a minister, but that there were certain obstacles to attaining that goal. The people, he said, are "poor and indolent, subsisting mostly on salvage from wrecks and fishing." Political tensions between Governor Rogers and the people, moreover, were so intense that no laws could be passed and no subscription for the support of a minister could be agreed upon. The governor,

⁷ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 217. For a discussion of rural poverty in colonial America, see John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Published for The Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 269; David D. Oliver, *The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The North Carolina Historical Society, 1910), 18; Governor William Gooch to Bishop Gibson, May 26, 1728, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XII, 124-124.

stated Reverend Guy, “requires anyone who would be his friend to quarrel with all his enemies.” Rogers became royal governor of the Bahamas in 1718. He was already famous for capturing the Manila Galleon and rescuing Alexander Selkirk (the inspiration for Robinson Crusoe) from Juan Fernandez Island, and was appointed governor at Nassau, in part, to clear out the pirates who infested the island chain. Poor relations between the governor and his subjects soon flared into open hostility, though, because many (even a majority) of Bahamians were pirates, and if not, made money selling food, rum, and other provisions to the corsairs and were hurt financially by their suppression. As Rogers’ enemies included many of the island chain’s elite, such as they were, Reverend Guy concluded that any clergymen who ventured there would be hard pressed to establish a successful church. He went home to Charleston.⁸

Complaints from ministers about low pay, politically unstable provincial governments, and parishioner’s complaints about clerical corruption sometimes occurred simultaneously. In the case of the SPG missionary Brian Hunt and his rebellious Carolina parishioners, mutual dislike had quickly deteriorated into vituperative attacks. Hunt wrote to the Bishop of London from Charleston in 1723 begging to be reassigned to a church in Philadelphia. Barring that, he was willing to accept any office in the West Indies. His reason for wanting to leave South Carolina, at least initially, was that his parishioners did not pay him enough for the support his large family. The wardens and vestrymen of Hunt’s St. Johns parish wrote to church authorities in London with a different story. His behavior, they claimed, “hath been Altogether unworthy of his Sacred function and Character.” Hunt was guilty, they said, of “Repeated vices and immoralities of Drunkenness Quarrelling ... Lying Insolent Abusive and Scurilious (sic)

⁸ Alexander Garden to Bishop Gibson, Charleston, South Carolina, July 24, 1731, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XV, 74-75; Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People, Volume I: From Aboriginal Times to the End of Slavery* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), 115.

Language.” In a third letter, Hunt defended himself more vigorously, relying upon commonly held opinions about the character of American colonists to gain favor with his English superiors. He was, he said, merely defending the “Divine right of Bishops” in a dispute with what he termed “French Calvinists.” “I exercised myself,” he said, “towards all persons in this factious country both in respect of Church and State. Tis a country of almost Polish Liberty.” The real source of the dispute appears to have been over whom should exercise more power in the parish: the minister or the vestry. Hunt demanded that all his vestrymen be communicants, something the congregation refused to comply with and promptly overruled. In a weak attempt to bolster his position, the embattled pastor even charged that one of his opponents was the grandson of “one of the court which murdered K[ing] Charles the first.” Hunt’s request for a transfer was finally granted in 1729; he retreated to Jamaica, where he hoped the parishioners were more obedient and less litigious than the rebellious Americans.⁹

As Reverend Hunt and other ministers of the Church of England discovered, British colonials in North America and the West Indies had definite ideas about power, authority, and virtue. If imported ministers did not respect local political and social mores, locals were not above using slander or resorting to “starving them out” to get rid of preachers they did not like. Charges of villainy and immoral behavior in one case in eighteenth-century North Carolina, though, betray the time and place in which they were brought. Reverend Mr. Blacknall was brought before a local magistrate in 1712 for conducting an illegal marriage. He had sanctified the union of “a white man and a mulatto woman,” an act which the writer of a pamphlet

⁹ Brian Hunt to Bishop of London, 1723-1729, *Fulham Papers*, vol. IX, South Carolina, 131, 202, 204.

published in 1910 called “not very creditable to him.” Blacknall was compared, moreover, with another clergyman, a Mr. Bailey, who was referred to as “a former drunkard and a rowdy.”¹⁰

Some Anglican clergymen were indeed guilty of the charges laid by Dissenters and others, taking advantage of their easy access to the Atlantic littoral spiritual community and the greater Caribbean to engage in fraud. A particularly outrageous example of abuse by an Anglican missionary was the case of Reverend Richard Marsden, who appears to have been more an international conman than a man of the cloth. Marsden traveled extensively in the Atlantic world in his capacity as a minister, but his peripatetic behavior seems to have been motivated more by a need to stay one step ahead of his creditors and the law than a desire to save souls. He made his first appearance as an Anglican missionary in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1727, showing up at a meeting of the province’s clergy. At that conference, missionary James Blair was impressed by Marsden, referring to him as a man of “good sense.” To give himself credence, Marsden provided several letters of introduction, one from “my Lord of Canterbury” and another from the bishop of London. That these letters were forgeries did not occur to Blair, at least initially. His suspicions should have been aroused by Marsden’s itinerant career that in the previous five years had led him from South Carolina to Barbados, and then to New England before relocating to Virginia. While moving from place to place was not particularly uncommon in the eighteenth century, his character should have been examined more closely given that a “Statute of Bankrupt” was taken out against him, causing his sudden departure from England “this last time.” Marsden used this black mark on his record, however, to explain to the credulous Blair why he did not have letters of ordination. Fleeing his creditors, he claimed, had made it impossible for him to obtain the required documents from the bishop of London. He promised,

¹⁰ Oliver, *Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in North Carolina*, 16.

as any good conman would, to write the bishop for them as soon as he could. In the meantime, Blair announced that “the Governour has given him leave to officiate in one of our parishes.”¹¹

The first inkling that Marsden was in the ministry for other than spiritual reasons came in 1729 when Blair wrote to Bishop Gibson that once again “Marsden is fled out of this Country for debt.” Somewhat duplicitously since Marsden’s past financial irregularities were well known to him, Blair claimed that if “it was known that he was under censure, I dare say the Governour would not have admitted him here.” He next showed up in Cape Fear, North Carolina, claiming to be the region’s new commissary. The SPG appointed commissaries for districts in Britain’s colonial possessions as administrators, field coordinators, and to distribute missionary stipends and other resources. As such, they were powerful and respected leaders of the Church in America. Cape Fear’s resident Anglican minister, John LaPierre, was immediately suspicious, though, of Marsden’s claim to the office, having not heard that another commissary had been named for the Carolinas exclusive of Alexander Garden in Charleston. Marsden soon abandoned his pretensions as commissary and went into international business, traveling to Portugal at least once before returning to eastern North Carolina. Doubtless perturbed by the return of the scoundrel, LaPierre opposed Marsden’s seemingly generous offer to serve as Cape Fear’s minister without compensation. As a consequence, parishioners stopped paying LaPierre’s salary, forcing him for a time to “work as a slave in the field for my living.” Marsden must have been an excellent, charming, and persuasive preacher, because when he left Cape Fear, he immediately secured another parish in New Bern, North Carolina.¹²

¹¹ James Blair to Bishop Gibson, Oct. 18, 1727, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XII, Virginia, 114-115.

¹² James Blair to Bishop Gibson, July 5, 1729, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XII, Virginia, 138-139; John LaPierre to Bishop Gibson, Nov. 19, 1732, *Fulham Papers*, vol. VI, North Carolina, 240-241

Whether by guile or by constantly shifting his places of residence, Marsden was able to retain his status as a missionary, drawing a salary from the SPG for at least twelve years. He was forced in 1738, however, to once again defend himself against accusations made upon his character and financial dealings, this time while serving as a minister in Jamaica. In a letter to the bishop of London, he claimed that he had always worked hard under difficult circumstances and had never engaged in illegalities. As proof of his upright character, he said he bought a plantation in North Carolina through his own industry (and the generosity of his chief creditor). He dismissed the charges of fraud brought by John LaPierre of Cape Fear, opining that personal animosity was to blame since he “got along with LaPierre until they quarreled.”¹³

Marsden’s financial legerdemain appears to have finally caught up with him by 1739. In that year the real commissary of the Carolinas, Alexander Garden, stated in a letter to Bishop Gibson that he was “astonished at the Society’s employing a Person of so notoriously vile a Character as Marsden.” He had, wrote Garden, “fled almost every Colony in America for Crimes.” In Barbados, Garden continued, Marsden was accused of “some very foul actions against a fellow clergyman. In Jamaica, he was accused of bigamy. He left a bad reputation in New England, Maryland, and Virginia.” And finally, Marsden was said to have, in Garden’s words, “cheated merchants in Lisbon, London, and Chester.” There is no record, however, of any official action being taken by the Church of England or the SPG to discipline or remove Richard Marsden. Part of the problem was that there was no bishop in America to police rogue ministers. Though Church officials in England may have been partially to blame for this deficiency, it was really Church laymen in America who kept a bishop from being appointed because they feared a loss of autonomy. The need, moreover, of the Anglican Church for

¹³ Richard Marsden to Bishop Gibson, June 20, 1738, *Fulham Papers*, vol. VI, North Carolina, 242-243.

ministers was so great, especially in the thinly populated backcountry, that clerical applicants willing to go to America were usually asked few questions.¹⁴

Richard Marsden was not the only adventurer to rove the West Indies and North America using clerical robes as a disguise with larcenous intent. In a later defense of his conduct, John Mitchell wrote about how he and a friend had initially sailed from England to Virginia in the early years of the eighteenth century with the intent of settling there. Mitchell's friend subsequently died, leaving him penniless and stranded, so he decided to try his luck in the West Indies. In Jamaica, still without a means of supporting himself, he proclaimed himself a clergyman. The young adventurer was no doubt educated, given the ease with which he convinced his Jamaican auditors of his clerical status, but he was also weighed down by a troubled conscience. According to Mitchell, he had no intention of practicing in a church, but the governor of Jamaica happened to be a family friend and so procured for him a parish on the island. Though initially accepting the position, the young dandy soon got cold feet about his imposture. In the meantime, however, he had married the daughter of the resident Anglican minister, Samuel Colby. Taking a liking to his new son-in-law, perhaps wanting to provide a secure future for his daughter, or just trying to avoid scandal, Colby forged ordination papers for him, anointing him a minister in Jamaica. Later obliged to confess his imposture to the bishop, Mitchell was brazen enough to request that he receive official recognition and be continued in his West Indian parish; a list of parish ministers in Jamaica in 1715, however, indicates that Mitchell was not kept on.¹⁵

¹⁴ Alexander Garden to Bishop Gibson, May 4, 1739, *Fulham Papers*, vol. IX, South Carolina; Oliver, *Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in North Carolina*, 12; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 5-6.

¹⁵ John Mitchell to the Archbishop of Dublin, July 31, 1711, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XVII, London, 103-104.

Some Anglican divines found the independent-minded churches in the mainland colonies so loathsome that they willingly risked death in the Caribbean rather than stay in “factious” North America. An example is Anglican minister Joseph Blumfield, who was assigned to a parish church in Virginia during the early 1730s. He did not, however, like the “footing the Clergy are in in this Colony.” The vestry, he complained, refused to accept him as their minister, despite orders to do so by the bishop and the governor. In the face of such opposition, Blumfield asked to be transferred to Jamaica, where even though the disease environment might be deadly, the “Advantage of Bettering my Company and Living in a thick inhabited Country where the parishes are Small, make to my mind Sufficient amends for any Difference in the Climate.” Besides not receiving adequate training or support from the Church of England or local vestry, SPG missionaries and priests like Joseph Blumfield appear to have been more interested in making a living than proselytizing Afro-Caribbean and African American slaves. However maladroit as evangelizers, Anglican missionaries provided a model which their Methodist cousins later expanded into a far-flung network of black and white evangelical preachers and exhorters.¹⁶

Evangelicals in the Greater Caribbean

White British Methodists, learning from mistakes made by the SPG, were among the most successful trans-Caribbean missionaries. They not only evangelized people of color in the West Indies, but because they frequently traveled between the Islands and North America, they also acted as agents of cultural transmission, spreading Afro-Atlantic Protestantism to the northern mainland. The Methodists’ first steps into the Caribbean mission field had been bold ones, though their ultimate triumph there was hardly assured. Not only had they to overcome political

¹⁶ John Blumfield to Bishop Gibson, Sept. 3, 1737, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XII, Virginia, 257-258.

opposition and racial bigotry, but also hazardous environmental conditions that killed even the hardiest. As noted earlier, many missionaries fell victim to tropical diseases as well as to the hazards eighteenth-century travel. The dangers were multiplied for those sailing the North Atlantic's treacherous and icy waters. That is exactly where Methodist leader Thomas Coke found himself in December of 1787. For three solid days the ship carrying Coke and three assistants was pounded by an immense storm that made it seem, in Coke's words, as if "the clouds, the air, and the water, were all mixed together." The end seemed near. Remarkably, Coke and his associates survived the late-season hurricane and made it to dry land. However, instead of Halifax, Nova Scotia, where they had planned to evangelize black Loyalist refugees brought there by the British after the American Revolution, they were blown thousands of miles to the south, finally making landfall on the Caribbean island of Antigua.¹⁷

Coke's stated intent in going to the West Indies and North America was to evangelize enslaved and free people of color. His early attempts at establishing African American Protestantism, though, especially in the new United States, encountered a number of serious roadblocks. Trans-Caribbean missionaries like Coke were confronted, most importantly, by the growing association, by white U.S. Americans, of American identity with "whiteness." In the years following the American War for Independence, many Euro-Americans began to draw sharp distinctions between what they viewed as North America's democratic republic governed by virtuous white citizens, and a decaying Caribbean still ruled over by corrupt imperial masters politically and economically, and by blacks culturally. At the same time, many leaders of the early republic such as John Adams and Caribbean native Alexander Hamilton believed that the future of the new Republic depended upon continued trade with the West Indies. They and other

¹⁷ Thomas Coke, *An Extract of the Journal of Rev. Dr. Coke's Second Visit to America*, American Culture Series, microfilm reel no. 452.1, 55.

leaders of the Revolution, especially ones in Southern ports like Charleston and Savannah, wanted commercial intercourse with the British, French, and Spanish Antilles, but no ideological or cultural discourse. The task for white U.S. Americans was to disassociate themselves from what they saw as the degenerate creole label, stained as it was by its connection with people of color, while at the same time reestablishing trade with sugar island planters who had been such good customers before the late war. Disentangling the consequences of a commerce in goods from that of one in culture required some intellectual sleight of hand, a trick they were ultimately unable to pull off.¹⁸

African Americans living along the United States' western Atlantic littoral viewed the situation differently. Increasingly cut off from African culture because of the imminent end of the international slave trade and enslaved and disfranchised in North America, they looked to black-dominated West Indian Christianity for cultural touch points as well as personal and collective identity. Especially in Low Country parishes and Southern port cities where the population was majority black and the economy was still tied to the Caribbean, African Americans thought of themselves as citizens of a larger trans-Caribbean cultural and spiritual community. The spiritual guidance and cultural support that connections to the West Indies afforded African Americans lasted for most of the eighteenth century. After 1800, the United States continued its trade relations with the Caribbean, but as the nineteenth century unfolded Americans began looking inward to the vast Western frontier for cultural inspiration and commerce. When the end of the international slave trade in 1808 banned their importation, Africans and Afro-Caribbeans no longer provided African Americans with culture and folkways.

¹⁸ Sean X. Goudie, *Creole America: The West Indies and the Formation of Literature and Culture in the New Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1-20.

By then, however, an Afro-Atlantic Christianity had taken root which, along with other influences, helped to create African American Protestantism.

Thomas Coke was one of the first trans-Caribbean missionaries to broker this conflict between trade and culture, but while he traveled the world to spread Wesleyan Methodism, his intellectual frame of reference was always England. After any journey into the mission field, he always returned home to Britain. For other Atlantic world itinerants, though, the “field” was their home. William Hammet, one of the mission workers who accompanied Coke to Antigua on their storm-tossed voyage of 1787, committed himself to a new life in the Americas and became the quintessential trans-Caribbean missionary. Born in Ireland and ordained a Methodist minister in 1786 by John Wesley, Hammet enjoyed a reputation as a “fire and brimstone” preacher, but that he was also a literate and thoughtful man is evidenced by the several pamphlets he authored in later years. Little is known of his childhood or early career in Ireland. Though Hammet’s spiritual integrity should not be questioned, economic necessity was probably a factor in his decision to become a missionary. He was no doubt one of the many educated but poor Irish and Scotsmen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who, when given the opportunity, made the reluctant but measured decision to try to better their fortunes in the Americas.¹⁹

¹⁹ Thomas Coke, *An Address to the Preachers Lately in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley; Containing Strictures on a Pamphlet published by Mr. W. Hammet; Intituled, “An Impartial Statement of known Inconsistencies of Rev. Dr. Coke, &c.”*, School of Oriental and African Studies. University of London, 2. Besides the above pamphlet made note of by Thomas Coke, Hammet published *A rejoindre [sic] being a defense of the truths contained in An appeal to truth and circumstances: in seven letters addressed to Reverend Mr. Morrell* (Charleston: I. Silliman, 1792); *An appeal to truth and circumstances* (Charleston: printed for the author, 1792); *A sermon preached in the parish of St. Thomas, at the house and on the death of Mr. John Singletary in April, 1791* (Charleston: William Price Young, 1791). All of these publications were part of a pamphlet war between Hammet, who later split from mainline Methodism, and the American Methodist Episcopal Church. For Irish and Scottish emigration to the West Indies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Nicholas Canny, “The Marginal Kingdom: Ireland as a Problem in the First British Empire,” Eric Richards, “Scotland and the Uses of the Atlantic Empire,” and Maldwyn A. Jones, “The Scotch-Irish in British America,” all in Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Strangers Within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill: Published for The Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by The University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Hilary McD. Beckles, “A

Shortly after arriving in the tropics, Hammet was stationed on the island of St. Kitts. His work there went well; so well that in less than two years church membership in St. Kitts had shot up to over seven hundred mostly black congregants. Hammet probably did not start from scratch, given the large number of Afro-Christians in the Caribbean from all over the Atlantic world. Nevertheless, his ability to bring so many of the faithful into his church was remarkable – a feat that was, as Coke later exclaimed dramatically, “almost unexampled in the history of modern times.” During that time, he also trained four people of color as lay exhorters to aid him and continue proselytizing in his absence. Word quickly spread about the new pastor and it was not long before Hammet received an invitation to minister to the slaves on the neighboring island of Nevis. The request was made by a member of Nevis’ colonial assembly, William Brazier. Brazier was so enthralled by Hammet’s preaching that he quit the legislature and his law practice soon thereafter and became one of Hammet’s closest and most faithful protégés, as we will see. On the heels of his success in St. Kitts, Hammet was temporarily stationed in Tortola and then St. Croix to help jump-start missions on those islands before being reassigned to a larger and more prestigious post in Jamaica.

Although he preached in the region for only four years, the charismatic Hammet created a “cult of personality” of sorts around himself. No sooner did he arrive in Jamaica than his recruit from Nevis, William Brazier, followed him there and became his assistant. Coke later recognized Brazier as an official Methodist missionary, but the loyalty of the former attorney from Nevis clearly belonged to Hammet alone. Although personal ambition appears a prime

‘riotous and unruly lot’: Irish Indentured Servants and Freemen in the English West Indies, 1644-1713,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 47, no. 4 (Oct. 1990): 503-522; Trevor Burnard, “European Migration to Jamaica, 1655-1780,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 53, no. 4 (Oct. 1996): 769-796; Bruce Kercher, “Perish or Prosper: The Law and Convict Transportation in the British Empire, 1700-1850,” *Law and History Review* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 527-584; Ned C. Landsman, “Nation, Migration, and the Province in the First British Empire: Scotland and the Americas, 1600-1800,” *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (April 1999): 463-475 .

motivator for William Hammet, the work that he and other white missionaries did had far-reaching effects. Because of the efforts of people like Hammet and Brazier, as well as the many white and black missionaries of the Moravian Church already there, fully one quarter of the population of the British West Indies were converted to Christianity by emancipation in 1834. Together, they made the Caribbean a major center for Afro-Protestantism in the Americas and a source of and inspiration for African American Christians throughout the Atlantic world.²⁰

Spreading the Protestant faith was not without its dangers. For whites and blacks alike, the West Indies was an epidemiological nightmare. Yellow fever, malaria, dysentery, cholera, and a whole host of other afflictions debilitated and killed tens of thousands over the course of four centuries. For African captives, especially newly-imported saltwater slaves, the crowded conditions of slave ships, exposure to putrid water and disease-bearing insects, as well as insufficient diets and crushing workloads led to high mortality rates. Incidentally, since whites knew the dangers of working in the Caribbean and refused to go there in large enough numbers to satisfy labor needs, this became a justification for African enslavement. Hammet himself made numerous entries in his journal about episodes of ill health. In July 1789, he complained that he had “sore eyes” so that he “could not preach.” On his first day in Jamaica he was again too sick to give a sermon, and had to wait until the next day to address his new congregation. Between bouts of illness Hammet was able to build an impressive Methodist meeting hall that fronted Kingston’s main parade ground and brought hundreds of mostly black Jamaicans into his church. It was sickness, though, as well as persecution by Jamaica’s whites that finally drove the

²⁰ Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History Each Island; With an Account of the Missions Instituted on those Islands, from the Commencement of their Civilization, but More Especially of the Missions which have been Established in the Archipelago by the Society late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley. Volume II* (Liverpool: Nutall, Fisher, and Dixon, 1808), 59; Thomas Coke, *A Journal of Rev. Dr. Coke’s Third Tour Through the West Indies: In Two Letters, to the Rev. J. Wesley* (London, 1791), 11; Barry W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Kingston, Jamaica: The Press, University of the West Indies, 1995), 105.

young Irishman from his Kingston pulpit. He became ill in late 1790 and Coke, visiting Jamaica at the time, decided to take his ailing missionary along with him to Charleston to recuperate. The plan was for Hammet to spend several months in South Carolina recovering his health, then return to his duties in the West Indies. It quickly became apparent, however, that Hammet enjoyed his new surroundings and, much to the consternation of Coke and other American Methodist leaders, had no intention of returning to Jamaica.²¹

South Carolina's people of color had worshiped God with other Methodists before William Hammet came on the scene in 1791. Methodism, however, did not come to Charleston and the Low Country until rather late. An attempt was made to establish a church in 1773, but John Wesley's stand against slavery and Methodism's association with England during the American Revolution made the denomination unpopular to most Carolinians until the mid 1780s. In 1785, Methodist leader Francis Asbury journeyed to Charleston and was able to establish a fledgling congregation consisting of thirty-five whites and twenty-three blacks by the end of that year. By 1787, church members managed to erect a meeting house, but continued on occasion to gather for services at public markets and city squares. In a replay of the treatment Methodists received in Jamaica, these assemblages were often attacked by roving gangs made up of the sons of the gentry as well as being subject to arrest by authorities for supposedly disturbing the peace.

²¹ *William Hammet's Journal*, Library of Caroliniana, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina; D.A. Reily, "William Hammett: Missionary and Founder of the Primitive Methodist Connection," *Methodist History* 10, no. 1 (Oct. 1971): 34. For mortality rates among slaves in the West Indies, see Kenneth F. Kiple, *The Caribbean Slave: A Biological History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Michael Craton, "Jamaican Slavery," in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 267-268.

When Hammet appeared in 1791, the Methodists were still considered dangerous abolitionists, a reputation the young evangelist had to meet head on.²²

As it turned out, Hammet's move to the Palmetto State was a fateful one for both American Methodism and the spread of Caribbean Afro-Protestant Christianity to the United States. As noted earlier, William Hammet was a fiery orator and because of this ability quickly gained a large and loyal following in Charleston. With almost half of the city's Methodists behind him, half of which were African Americans, he felt emboldened to break with mainline Methodism. Citing cases of neglect and physical abuse that he and other missionaries had allegedly received in Jamaica at the hands of Bishop Coke, and the very fact that the Methodists were beginning to make use of such "popish" titles as bishop, Hammet took action. In one of the first schisms of the Methodist Church, Hammet formed his own Primitive Methodist Church in Charleston and began establishing sister churches throughout low country South Carolina and Georgia, coastal North Carolina, and, interestingly, in the Bahamas. Hammet was not the only Methodist divine to feel the Era of Revolution's influences toward independence and republicanism. In Virginia, James O'Kelly also decided to break away from the American Methodist Church, forming the Republican Methodists in 1794. Taking thirty ministers and 20,000 church members with him who also could not abide being ruled over by a bishop, O'Kelly's Virginia Methodists eventually merged with a group of republican-minded Calvinist Baptists from Massachusetts led by Elias Smith in 1809 to form the Disciples of Christ denomination.²³

²² Margaret Washington Creel, *"A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 139; Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

²³ William Hammet, *An Impartial Statement of the Known Inconsistencies of the Rev. Dr. Coke, in his Official Station, as Superintendent of the Methodist Missionaries in the West Indies: With a Brief Description of one of the Tours through the United States* (Charleston: W.P. Young, 1792), 8; Reily, "William Hammett," 38; Jerry O'Neil,

The Charleston that Hammet came to was an exciting and dynamic place, filled with many opportunities for young, ambitious men like himself, though it also had its share of challenges. The opportunities that attracted him included a vibrant economy, the city's close connection to the greater Caribbean, and a new air of religious toleration. Its disadvantages included political instability, an unhealthy disease environment, Methodism's ambiguous stance on slavery, and the desire by the city's people of color for greater freedom. The catalyst that set all the other factors in motion was the resumption of trade between the United States and Great Britain after years of embargo following the American Revolution. Increased trade in the 1790s made Charleston a boomtown as products from the Carolina hinterland, such as rice, tobacco, lumber, and, thanks to Eli Whitney, cotton, were all funneled through South Carolina's major port before being shipped to markets around the Atlantic basin making the port city's merchants and traders rich. Many of the Federalist-era mansions that distinguish Charleston's streets to the present day were built from the profits of this period's unparalleled prosperity²⁴

Besides enriching Low Country planters, the city's middle and lower-class mechanics, merchants, and sailors found ready markets for their wares and skills. Many of these lower and middling folk were the very people who found John Wesley's egalitarian message so appealing. Fostering social mobility, Methodism appealed to the petty bourgeoisie who strained against Charleston's static hierarchy of inherited wealth whose representatives still filled the city's Anglican churches. We can get a snapshot of early Carolina Methodism by looking at who rented pews at Hammet's new Charleston church. Like many early Methodist congregations,

"The First Schism in American Methodism: A Study of the Movement Begun by the Reverend William Hammet in 1791 in Charleston, South Carolina," senior research paper, The Divinity School, Duke University, 1963. For the O'Kelly schism, see Nathan O. Hatch, "The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People," *The Journal of American History* 67, no. 3 (Dec. 1980): 548-549.

²⁴ Walter J. Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!: The History of a Southern City* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 180.

they came mostly from the middling ranks of society, including in 1793 and 1794 four shopkeepers, one baker, one mariner, three carpenters, one shoemaker, one merchant, two bricklayers, one schoolmaster, and one blacksmith; of the sixteen people who rented pews at Trinity Methodist Church in those years, only one was listed as a planter. Though troubling, Methodism's anti-slavery stance probably did not disturb them greatly because for many white artisans the city's black slaves were unwanted competition, taking away jobs they wanted for themselves. Given his congregation's attitudes about race and Charleston's newfound prosperity, it is not surprising that Hammet chose the Low Country capital for his new pulpit.²⁵

Over half of Hammet's church members were people of color, most of whom were probably free blacks or privileged slaves who were striving to better their circumstances. In December 1793, Hammet or one of his assistants married free blacks Joseph Morton and Martha M. Kensey. George Bampfield, "a free mulatto," was married to Barbary Maia Cole in November 1791 at Trinity Church. Miss Cole's race was not identified, leaving open the possibility that she was white. In August 1798, James Creton married "Bella Engles, free black," again leaving open the possibility that the groom was white. The race of one woman at Hammet's church who married a man from another race was confirmed when "James Lacklair (free coloured man)" tied the knot with "Cat'ne Sheily (white woman)" in a ceremony in November 1793. Mixed-race marriages, though not common in South Carolina, were more accepted there than in other parts of the South because of the state's cultural links to the

²⁵ Loren Schweninger, "Slave Independence and Enterprise in South Carolina, 1780-1865," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 93, no. 2 (April 1992): 101-125; *Trinity Church Pew Renters, 1793-1794*, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 40; Nathan O. Hatch, "The Puzzle of American Methodism," *Church History* 63, no. 2 (June 1994):180.

Caribbean where racial mixing was more accepted. Marrying a white person was one way for blacks in Charleston to move up the social ladder.²⁶

If the ethnic makeup of blacks in Hammet's church resembled that of Antigua's Moravian mission, then its membership would have been composed of roughly two-thirds creole and one-third native African. Given South Carolina's relatively lower rate of slave importation compared to the West Indies (especially between 1793 and 1803 when South Carolina imposed an outright ban on buying foreign slaves), the number of saltwater blacks in Hammet's church was probably considerably less, perhaps as low as ten percent. Taken as a whole, South Carolina's people of color were an ethnic hodgepodge, coming from all over West and West Central Africa. It is believed, however, that between 1733 and 1807, at the height of the slave trade into Carolina, fully forty percent of the colony's and state's slaves came from Angola. Another twenty percent were shipped to the region from Senegambia, with sixteen percent coming from the Windward Coast and thirteenth percent from the Gold Coast. The remaining ten percent were sold from the coasts of Sierra Leone, the Bight of Biafra, and the Bight of Benin. Given these statistics, it is not surprising that facets of Angolan culture have survived in South Carolina to the present day, though they were probably greatly diluted in the more culturally diverse atmosphere of Charleston.²⁷

Economic considerations aside, it is still surprising that Coke brought Hammet to Charleston rather than to a more northerly city to recover from tropical illness, considering that Carolina's epidemiological environment was little better than the Caribbean's. The SPG, for

²⁶ *Trinity Church Register, 1793-1803*, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina; *Trinity Church Marriage Register, 1791-1802*, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

²⁷ Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 24; Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 156-157.

example, sent 50 missionaries to South Carolina between 1700 and 1750. Within five years 38 percent had died of disease or were forced to resign because of serious illness. If the time period is extended to ten years, the figure rises to 52 percent, and for fifteen years, 68 percent. Though no city in North America was considered healthful in the late eighteenth century, Charleston was subject to special problems which made living there hazardous, particularly during the summer months. As a major port, it was the debarkation point for many foreign-borne diseases brought from distant shores. Slave ships, especially, brought dysentery, yellow fever, and malaria along with captive Africans. Adding to the problem of exotic disease was the population's disdain for public sanitation in the eighteenth century, though Charleston's Board of Health did promote vaccination against smallpox, mandated a healthy dose of lime for coffins and privies, and prohibited the keeping of pigs and goats within the city's limits. The huge coastal swamp that surrounded Charleston, moreover, was a breeding ground for swarms of disease-carrying mosquitoes and other insects, making it a naturally unhealthy place to build a city. The problems, though, were apparently never severe enough to overcome Charlestonians' dislike of the taxes necessary to pay for comprehensive solutions. Taken together, these problems made Charleston one of the most deadly places to live in the United States. Between 1800 and 1860, for example, no fewer than 25 yellow fever epidemics ravaged the city, killing hundreds, and causing all those who could afford the expense to flee during the warm and deadly summer months.²⁸

As deadly as Charleston could be at certain times of the year, its importance as the South's major port of entry continued to draw people from around the Atlantic world to its docks and

²⁸ John Duffy, "Eighteenth-Century Carolina Health Conditions," *The Journal of Southern History* 18, no. 3 (Aug. 1952): 301-302; H. Roy Merrens and George D. Terry, "Dying in Paradise: Malaria, Mortality, and the Perceptual Environment in Colonial South Carolina," *The Journal of Southern History* 50, no. 4 (Nov. 1984): 533-550; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 189.

markets. Because of this, Charleston's population was far more heterogeneous than Dixie's rural hinterland. It was home to multiple European ethnicities and religious groups, as well as West Indian émigrés and Africans. People of diverse backgrounds mingled in close proximity and were exposed to and influenced by exotic ideas, products, and customs. Charleston's heterogeneity and position as an entrepot, therefore, makes it an excellent place to study trans-Atlantic religious movements. The Church of England, since the beginning of colonization in 1670, had been the faith of the Low Country's ruling classes. By the 1790s, however, the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians had made inroads and were beginning to push into the lead, especially after the American Revolution discredited the Anglican Church. As a consequence of South Carolina's new constitution of 1790 that instituted freedom of religion, not only evangelicals, but also Charleston's Catholic and Jewish congregations came out of hiding and began to expand during the 1790s. Very quickly, the city housed the largest Jewish population anywhere in the United States, and Catholics after 1791 flocked to attend services at St. Mary's Church and to socialize at the Hibernian Society. In part because of its ties to the Caribbean and the wider Atlantic world, Charleston had become one of the new country's most cosmopolitan cities.²⁹

Charleston's religious, ethnic, and racial diversity were not perceived as unalloyed blessings by many of the city's whites. Anxieties about race relations were heightened by the arrival in 1792 of five hundred refugees fleeing the Haitian Revolution, and many more descended upon the region in the following years. While most of them were white, a sizable group of light-skinned free people of color as well as black slaves crossed into the American

²⁹ Cynthia M. Kennedy, *Braided Relations, Entwined Lives: The Women of Charleston's Urban Slave Society* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 2-4; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 179; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 267.

South from Saint Domingue as well. Lower South states tried to bar the entry of West Indian free coloreds, but were largely unsuccessful. By the late 1790s, Charleston and Savannah suddenly found themselves home to large free black populations. Having so many free blacks in their midst, moreover, aroused the hopes of local slaves for their own emancipation, either through manumission, suing masters, or running away.³⁰

Slaves from anywhere in the Caribbean were usually looked upon with suspicion by white U.S. Americans, and with good reason. Though the mainland colonies and states had experienced a number of slave revolts and conspiracies up to 1800, the number of actual revolts was quite small compared to the West Indies where servile insurrections occurred with stunning regularity. Slaves implicated in many of these revolts, if they escaped execution, were usually sold out of their colonies, often to North American buyers. With this history, it is little wonder that Charlestonians looked on with some trepidation as the refugees from Saint Domingue off loaded at the city's docks. In 1795, whites became even more anxious when rumors began to circulate that "a vast number of French Mulattoes and Negroes [were] ready for any mischief and since arriving in the city there [had] been three or four different attempts to set the town on Fire." The atmosphere became so fearful for whites that in 1797 three slaves were executed for conspiring to burn down the city and kill its white population. As with many so-called slave conspiracies, however, the evidence against the accused was flimsy or nonexistent.³¹ The controversy touched Reverend Hammet directly in the early 1790s when one of the black members of his church, a slave named Peggy, asked him for a pass so she could move about the city unhindered. Because of white fear of independent blacks, and Hammet's own insecure

³⁰ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998) , 35.

³¹ Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982); Kennedy, *Braided Relations*, 59; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 184.

position as a member of a denomination with an ambiguous position on slavery, he denied the request.³²

Religious Dilemma over Slavery

Even though American Methodists retracted their anti-slavery position almost as soon as they proclaimed it in 1784, individual preachers in the South and even in the West Indies continued to voice their opposition to the “peculiar institution.” Given the close connections between the two regions, how Methodists in the American South dealt with the issue affected Church policy in the West Indies, and vice versa. The issue became heated in the Bahamas in 1803 when a Methodist missionary in New Providence, Brother John Rutledge, married a woman who owned slaves. Rutledge came under fierce criticism from fellow missionaries, but held onto both his wife and her slaves without receiving censure from Methodist leaders in London or elsewhere. Bahamian Methodist minister William Turton wanted him to leave the ministry, calling him “a hypocrite, a deceiver,” and adding that “whatever excuse he may make, it was Mrs. Glover’s money he married and nothing else.”³³

Some Methodist leaders did, however, advocate for abolition, even when they went into the field. In 1784, trans-Caribbean missionary Thomas Coke and American Methodist leader Francis Asbury were bold enough to meet with George Washington at his Mount Vernon plantation to discuss the issue. They carried with them a petition for the abolition of slavery and asked him to sign it. Washington received them cordially, entertained them at dinner, but in the end refused to officially lend his name to the cause. He said that though he was in favor of emancipation, it would be improper for him to formally sign a document to that effect. As a

³² Kennedy, *Braided Relations*, 61; Hammet, *Journal*.

³³ Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 650; Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 154; A. Dean Peggs, ed., *A Mission to the West India Islands: Dowson’s Journal for 1810-17* (Nassau, Bahamas: The Dean Peggs Research Fund, 1960), 80-81.

national political figure, he knew that he walked a fine line on such a divisive public issue, regardless of his personal feelings. Though a slave owner himself, Washington stated that he refused either to buy or sell slaves, “as you would do cattle at a market,” emancipated all his slaves in his will, and “provided for apprenticeship and tenancy for the able-bodied and lodgings and pensions for the aged.” While Washington was not completely alone in his pro-emancipation sentiments, most slave owners in Virginia felt otherwise. Coke had initially attacked slavery and slave holders while preaching in the South. Under increasing threat of bodily injury, however, Coke was forced to change the way he evangelized while in the Tidewater. When addressing mixed-race congregations there, he was forced to first address the “Negroes in a very pathetic manner on the Duty of Servants to their Masters,” because only then would white members listen to the rest of his sermon without molesting him.³⁴

For Hammet and the Methodists in Charleston during the 1790s, the issue of abolition was just as explosive as it was in Virginia, if not more so. As a city divided in the postwar decade between loyalists and patriots, rich and poor, Low Country and backcountry, planter and artisan, as well as native and immigrant, white Charleston found unity only in the perpetuation of slavery and the subordination of all people of color. The Methodist’s threw fuel on the flames in 1795 at a church conference in Charleston, calling for immediate emancipation. Tensions boiled over again five years later, this time in the shadow of Gabriel Prosser’s slave conspiracy in Virginia, when two of the denomination’s preachers were forced to flee Charleston only steps ahead of an angry mob. They were suspected of encouraging servile insurrection, though once again the evidence against them was flimsy. The fear of being tarred as an abolitionist had probably been one of Hammet’s primary reasons for splitting with mainline Methodism in 1791. He quickly

³⁴ Coke, *Extracts of Dr. Coke’s Journal*, 37, 45; Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 112.

came to believe, perhaps rightly, that his continued association with a church that advocated emancipation, no matter how tepidly, was all but suicidal for a minister in the Lower South.³⁵

Though his firm pro-slavery stand endeared him to the Charleston mob, some of his parishioners, and the city's rulers, Hammet did not escape criticism entirely and felt the need to defend his stance on the peculiar institution. Of all the subjects Hammet commented upon in his journal, he wrote more about his rationalizations of slavery than any other. Most of the standard arguments appear: that slavery was the custom of the land; that slave labor was needed because white servants were scarce; that anyone who sells a slave will spend the profits on extravagant and sinful living; and that St. Paul had sent a slave back to his master rather than freeing him. As transparent as these platitudes were, they found ready audiences among increasing numbers of evangelicals in the 1790s. Not all of his fellow preachers, however, succumbed to slavery's logic. Hammet later complained that John Phillips, one of his own missionaries who subsequently broke with the Primitive Methodists, had said that "he could hold no communion or fellowship with me because I was a member of the freemasons and on account of my having a slave in my possession." Though anti-slavery (and anti-elitist) sentiment lingered in the South, as reflected in the establishment of the American Colonization Society in 1817 which raised funds to ship free blacks back to Africa, most Southern whites hardened their attitudes toward abolition as the nineteenth century progressed. Methodist ministers went along with the prevailing social climate: by 1843, 1,200 Methodist preachers owned some 1,500 slaves, and 25,000 church members kept 208,000 people of color in bondage.³⁶

³⁵ Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 184-187; Kennedy, *Braided Relations*, 57; Frederick E. Maser and George A. Singleton, "Further Branches of Methodism are Founded," in *The History of American Methodism, Volume I* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 618; James Sidbury *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1997.

³⁶ Hammet, *Hammet's Journal*; Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 651, 661.

How evangelicals throughout the greater Caribbean and elsewhere rationalized slavery, or came to oppose it was influenced, according to some scholars, by the changes wrought by global capitalism. Historian Thomas Haskell theorizes that the growth of long-distance trade and communication throughout the Atlantic world and an increasing sense of human interconnectedness served to undermine slavery. Building on Haskell's ideas, David Eltis contends that the enslavement of Africans was made possible because they were seen by Europeans as outsiders since they were not Christians. Only when whites began to enlarge the group whom they considered insiders to include all human beings did black emancipation become conceivable. Conversely, Ellen Meiksins Wood argues that the efficiency and rationality of the capitalism that was emerging in the seventeenth century had an opposite effect and helped to justify the dehumanizing effects of racial slavery. Capitalist entrepreneurs, says Wood, recognized the rough equality of buyers and sellers in the marketplace, but only among those people who had something to sell, making African slaves just another commodity.³⁷

Missionaries like Thomas Coke and William Hammet tried to reconcile capitalism's positive and negative aspects. By converting pagan Africans to Christianity, they felt they were making them worthy of better treatment and perhaps even freedom. Long exposure to the ruthless logic of plantation slavery, however, made Atlantic world evangelicals more willing to accept slavery as completely rational and inevitable. Though seemingly contradictory, many Protestant missionaries in the eighteenth century were well-attuned to the individualism of

³⁷ Thomas Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility," part I, *American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (April 1985), and part II, *American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (June 1985); David Eltis, "Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: An Interpretation," *American Historical Review* 98, no. 5 (Dec. 1993): 1399-1423; Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Capitalism and Human Emancipation," *New Left Review*, no. 167 (Jan.-Feb. 1988), 7.

capitalism, while at the same time retaining their traditional communalist and paternalist sensibilities.³⁸

Trans-Caribbean missionary Thomas Coke, perhaps because he had such an unparalleled opportunity to observe plantation slavery in its numerous settings, was particularly torn by the philosophical problems and inconsistencies modern capitalism posed for Christianity. Addressing the eternal theodological question of how God could allow evil to exist, in this case the evil of New World slavery, Coke initially appeared to decline into mysticism, asserting that God's ways were inscrutable. But his acceptance of the unknowable design of an all-powerful deity did not mean that Coke condoned slavery or passively accepted its legitimacy. Though trusting in God, he believed slavery "affords to the contemplative mind one of the most questionable forms in which the providence of God can, perhaps possibly, appear." As a former lawyer whose education was influenced by the Enlightenment, Coke saw the world as basically rational and orderly. In writing about slavery, he seemed to be pleading with himself and with his readers to make sense out of non-sense. Instead of praising the God of love and mercy, Coke struggled to divine the "wisdom and equity of God" which was "enveloped with shadows and involved in mysteries" that "still lies buried in a vast abyss." Only when mortal men ascended to heaven, he concluded, would a "scene ... open in which he shall justify his ways to man." Coke reveals, in his anguished contemplations of slavery, an internal conflict he and many other Methodists experienced over their firmly held belief in Arminian self-salvation as opposed to the attractions of Calvinist predestination. Though eager to believe that sin and sinners were

³⁸ Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 13, 19, 20, 40.

instruments in God's plan, the brutality of slavery in the West Indies and much of the American South tested Coke's faith.³⁹

The decline of the authority of biblical scripture caused by the advent of Enlightenment rationalism made Coke's and other missionary's work in the American plantations more difficult. Prior to the eighteenth century, scripture had usually been interpreted to emphasize monogenesis, with all of humankind's roots descending from the sons of Noah after the Flood. Seventeenth-century antiquaries pointed to Noah's grandson Gomer as the precursor of the Celts, while the forefather of the Germanic peoples was Gomer's son Ashkenaz. The children of Shem were the distant though direct progenitors of the Abrahamic line, as the sons of Ham were thought to be the ancestors of black Africans. By collapsing race into lineage, the Old Testament served to inhibit racial prejudice. At the same time, however, the Bible was sometimes interpreted as to ascribe the dark color of Africans to the divine curse supposedly placed on the descendents of Ham to exacerbate negative attitudes toward the racial Other. Since sacred anthropology served to both diminish and exacerbate racism, those evangelicals, like Coke, who leaned toward abolition found only a welter of confusion on the subject in the Bible, making it difficult to condemn slavery without reservation. Conversely, Coke and other New Lights knew that if they rejected the fundamental unity of the human race they would undermine the very essence of the Christian story. The transmission of original sin from Adam to the whole human race as well as Christ's atonement would not be possible if polygenesis became accepted. As the

³⁹ Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History Each Island; With an Account of the Missions Instituted on those Islands, from the Commencement of their Civilization, but More Especially of the Missions which have been Established in the Archipelago by the Society late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley, Volume I* (Liverpool: Nutall, Fisher, and Dixon, 1808), 39-40. For the accommodation by evangelicals of scientific rationalism with spiritual mysticism, see James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 72; John Saillant, "Antiguan Methodism and Antislavery Activity: Anne and Elizabeth Hart in the Eighteenth-Century Black Atlantic," *Church History* 69, no. 1 (March 2000): 86-115.

nineteenth century dawned, scientific inquiry into the roots of mankind gained the upper hand over theology in the popular imagination. The scientific drive to classify all things gave new legitimacy to polygenesis which in turn made racial slavery and racism much easier for theologians and church goers to accept.⁴⁰

Primitive Methodism in the Greater Caribbean

William Hammet, if he spent much time contemplating the theological harm that chattel slavery did to Christianity, did not let those concerns get in the way of an aggressive program to expand his church connection. In 1794, only three years after proclaiming his denomination's independence, Hammet's Primitive Methodist Church counted twelve ministers and missionaries sent into the field to found new congregations. All the new churches were intentionally built facing the Atlantic Ocean. Hammet identified with the greater Caribbean world and wanted his new church "connexion" to remain within that intellectual and geographical orbit. As other religious denominations moved into the trans-Appalachian West following the tide of American migration, he chose to expand along the familiar western Atlantic littoral, close to the seaports of the American South and the West Indies. Hammet may have also recognized that most African American Protestants, a group vital to the success of his church, were city dwellers who lived close to or directly on the Atlantic coast. In the Carolinas and Georgia before 1800 most black Methodists lived in and around Charleston and Georgetown in South Carolina, Wilmington, North Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia. Total numbers of black Methodists in those urban enclaves were impressive. In Charleston, the city's 1,800 Afro-Methodists comprised fully twenty percent of the African American population of 11,000. By 1817, Charleston's 5,699 black Methodists made up forty-five percent of the port city's blacks. Many of them were free or

⁴⁰ Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19-22, 25.

privileged slaves who had the time and the resources to attend and support churches of their own. As a proportion of the entire African American population, though, the number of black Christians in North America was quite low. As late as 1830, only twelve percent of African Americans went to Christian churches on Sunday. As these statistics reveal, North American Afro-Protestantism was a coast-hugging, Afro-Atlantic faith, influenced by the people and ideas that came floating in on the ocean currents.⁴¹

Knowing that many of his potential converts lived within sight of the ocean and being personally inclined toward staying close to the Atlantic anyway, Hammet built two churches in Charleston. The first was Trinity Primitive Methodist Church, which he led after the split with Francis Asbury's Methodist Episcopal Church in 1791 with the assistance of Nevis native William Brazier. The other schismatic church, St. James, was built in the Charleston suburbs and was led by yet another trans-Caribbean Methodist missionary from Jamaica, Brother Israel Mund. His first church outside of Charleston was in Georgetown, South Carolina, a port town fifty miles up the coast from the low country capital. Like its sister church in Charleston, Georgetown's Primitive Methodist Church was overwhelmingly black, with 195 people of color sharing Sunday services with only 85 whites in 1795. The church in Georgetown was followed soon thereafter by one in Savannah. It was led by yet another veteran West Indies missionary, Phillip Mathews, who in 1787 had been one of the first Methodist ministers to preach in the Georgia capital after the Wesley brothers left four decades before.⁴²

⁴¹ Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and the British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 157; Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 256.

⁴² Richard Cote, *Renegade: The Reverend William Hammet, 1756-1803*, unpublished manuscript, 1982, 107, 133; J. Gordon Melton, *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African American Methodism* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 156.

The next Primitive Methodist mission was established twenty miles south of Savannah, in the coastal community of Sunbury, Georgia in 1795. Its minister, Reverend Mr. Wefley, began his career in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in England, followed by a sojourn in the West Indies as one of Thomas Coke's missionaries, before he accepted an invitation from Hammet to take over his new church in low country Georgia. Liberty County, where Sunbury was situated, had a black to white ratio of 4:1 in the 1790s. Though records for the Sunbury Primitive Methodists have not survived, it is reasonable to conclude that many of its members were people of color. Hammet probably chose Sunbury as a site for one of his churches because its large black population, its role as the second most busy port in Georgia behind Savannah, and because of its ties, as a port of transshipment, with the West Indies. He undoubtedly knew of the southeast-Georgia town when he lived in the Caribbean and believed it was an ideal place to extend his trans-Caribbean ministry. Hammet may also have read and appreciated William Bartram's description of Sunbury, which the Philadelphia naturalist said was "defended from the fury of the seas by the north and south points of St. Helena and South Catherine's islands; between which is the bar and entrance into the sound; the harbour is capacious and safe, and has water enough for ships of great burthen."⁴³

Hammet's Wilmington, North Carolina church was established in 1795 specifically to minister to that port city's African Americans. Blacks in the area surrounding Wilmington had originally come from South Carolina. Through ties of family, friendships, and travel between

⁴³ Cote, *Renegade*, 107; Coke, *Extract of the Journals of Rev. Dr. Coke*, 78; Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 82; Charles C. Jones, Jr., *The Dead Towns of Georgia* (Savannah: Morning News Steam Printing House, 1878), 157, 171; Paul McIlvaine, *The Dead Towns of Sunbury, Ga. And Dorchester, S.C.* (Ashville, North Carolina: Groves Printing Company, 1976), 5-68; William Harden, *A History of Savannah and South Georgia, Volume I* (Atlanta: Cherokee Publishing Company, 1913), 149-150; Haygood S. Bowden, *History of Savannah Methodism: From John Wesley to Silas Johnson* (Macon, Georgia: Press of the J.W. Burke Company), 46; Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2005), 21-22; William Bartram, *The Travels of William Bartram*, Mark Van Doren, ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 32-33.

the two regions, blacks in Wilmington probably heard about Hammet from kin who lived in Charleston. Communication by people of color between the two cities was made easier, moreover, because a relatively large number of Afro-Carolinians were sailors who traversed the inland waterways that intersected the entire low country. Reverend Luke Rushton was named to this mission to keep him employed following his failure as a Primitive Methodist missionary in the Bahamas. William Meredith, who had been a colleague of Hammet's in St. Kitts under Thomas Coke in the 1780s, joined his former comrade as a minister first in the Bahamas and then as a replacement in Wilmington for the continuingly incompetent Reverend Rushton. Though initially successful in building membership in his all-black church, Meredith soon fell afoul of Wilmington's white rulers. In 1798, exactly one hundred years prior to another spasm of racial violence in this Cape Fear city that killed scores of local African Americans, his church was attacked and burned to the ground by an angry white mob; Meredith was lucky to escape with his life. In a veritable pogrom, white terrorists continued their persecution of Wilmington's Afro-Methodists for several days, in the course of which the black quarter of town was put to the torch and almost completely destroyed. As a veteran of similar treatment in the West Indies, William Meredith, and his black parishioners tried to pick up what remained of their church and begin again, but the obstacles proved too great to overcome. They had attempted to establish a black church separate from white control, but quickly found how impossible that was in North Carolina in the 1790s.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Cote, *Renegade*, 110; Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 81; W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 21-23; W.L. Grissom, *History of Methodism in North Carolina from 1772 to the Present Time*, Vol. I (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1905), 222; David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, eds., *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and its Legacy* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

The attack on African America congregations in the South which tried to separate themselves from white control, of which the burning of Wilmington's Afro-Methodist church is an example, may be seen as an attempt by local whites to secure the "whiteness" of the early republic's identity. Although led by a white Caribbean minister, the Afro-Methodist congregation in Wilmington was a direct challenge to white hegemony and identity. Meredith died in 1799, and with him went the aspirations of Wilmington's Afro-Methodists for a measure of autonomy and separate black identity for the next one hundred years. Despite their persecution, people of color continued to dominate Wilmington's Methodist Church, outnumbering white members 360 to 60 in 1801. Seven years after the church was destroyed, Methodist leader Francis Asbury visited Wilmington and exclaimed approvingly over the large Methodist chapel which held "1500 hearers" filled this time, however, "with both colors."⁴⁵

Defeat in Wilmington failed to dampen Hammet's missionary zeal. He first heard about the need for missionaries in the Bahamas from Joseph Paul, a black Methodist who had migrated to the Bahamas as a Loyalist refugee during the American Revolution. It was Paul, in fact, who first brought Methodism to the Bahamas. The Afro-Methodist exhorter moved from South Carolina to Abaco in 1783, relocating to New Providence a year later. Well educated, he soon opened a school for blacks and coloreds in Nassau, followed shortly thereafter by a Methodist chapel. That Paul chose to ask Hammet in Charleston for assistance rather than Thomas Coke in London or Francis Asbury in Baltimore is significant for a number of reasons. First, it is an indication of the uncertainty many people felt about the Methodist Church's future; with John Wesley dead in 1790 and various factions splitting away, who knew if it would survive? Second, it is a testament to both Hammet's reputation and the close ties that wedded the low country to

⁴⁵ Grissom, *Methodism in North Carolina*, 222; Melton, *A Will to Choose*, 164.

the British West Indies. Finally and most significantly, Bahamian Afro-Methodists had the freedom to choose their own ministers and felt empowered to exercise that choice without asking white authorities for permission.⁴⁶

It is probable that Paul learned of Hammet from a black woman on New Providence Island (Nassau) whom a later missionary identified as “Old Mrs. Wallace.” This Afro-Methodist woman had led an adventurous and well-traveled life, if involuntarily. Born an Igbo in West Africa, she was sold into slavery as a young girl and transported to Jamaica. She spent many years there, probably working in her owner’s house as a domestic servant, because she subsequently followed her owners to Pensacola, Charleston, St. Augustine, and finally, New Providence. While it is unclear when or where she became a Methodist, it is likely that other Afro-Methodists circulating throughout the greater Caribbean brought her into the church.⁴⁷

The Primitive Methodists sent four missionaries to the Bahamas during the 1790s at the behest of Joseph Paul and Mrs. Wallace. Hammet’s first missionary was a free black exhorter from Charleston named Samuel Hunt, who went to New Providence in 1793. Nothing is known of his work in the Bahamas or his subsequent fate, but Hunt is significant nonetheless as one of the first African Americans to be sent on a foreign mission by an American denomination. William Hammet, after years of being exposed to remarkable black exhorters in the West Indies, appeared to have had complete confidence in Samuel Hunt’s ability to act independently and evangelize the people of color in the Bahamas. Unfortunately, his ministry in the Bahamas was brief, perhaps cut short because Hunt, as a free black Methodist from the United States who preached to predominantly enslaved congregations, may have been considered a threat to the

⁴⁶ Peggs, *Dowson’s Journal*, 48; Whittington B. Johnson, *Race Relations in the Bahamas, 1784-1834: The Nonviolent Transformation from a Slave to a Free Society* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: The University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 61.

⁴⁷ Peggs, *Dowson’s Journal*, 49.

Bahamas' system of white supremacy and racial slavery. White Bahamians probably considered him an unwanted and dangerous intruder whose departure, or even re-enslavement, was deemed necessary. Whatever his fate, Hunt was replaced the following year by James Johnstone, whose stay in the Bahamas was even shorter than Hunt's. Reverend Johnstone quickly fell afoul of his congregation, in part, because of his wife. She was a woman of alleged inconstant chastity and apparently considerable physical strength who was said to regularly drag him "on the house floor by the hair of his head." Johnstone was forced to leave New Providence, however, not because of his domestic troubles, but because he had conducted several marriage ceremonies without a state license, thus falling afoul of Governor Lord Dunmore and Bahamian law. It may also have been the case that his black congregation dismissed him, preferring a person of color like Samuel Hunt as their pastor. Whatever the reasons for Johnstone's fall from grace, after he lost his pulpit he fell on hard times and it was rumored that he "was under the necessity of going a-privateering" to keep bread on his table.⁴⁸

The next Primitive Methodist preacher sent to the Bahamas was the afore-mentioned Luke Rushton, who like Samuel Hunt was a free black exhorter from South Carolina. According to a later white missionary, Rushton was an abusive alcoholic who repeatedly beat his parishioners, but the fact that he was black may have been the true cause for his dismissal. White Bahamians, already nervous in the mid 1790s about the presence of autonomous blacks in their midst because of the successful black-led revolution in nearby Saint Domingue, did not want a local black church led by a free person of color who could not be so easily controlled. Though Rushton may have been, as his critics alleged, a second-rate preacher, fear of servile insurrection was probably the cause of his flight and hasty removal to North Carolina. Though the next

⁴⁸ Johnson, *Race Relations in the Bahamas*, 61; Peggs, *Dowson's Journal*, 48.

missionary William Hammet sent to the Bahamas, William Meredith, was white, the suspicions of local white authorities by that time were so intense that he was also forced to abandon his mission. Meredith left New Providence in 1795 for his ill-fated assignment in Wilmington, the last Primitive Methodist Hammet sent on an overseas mission.⁴⁹

Meredith's departure in 1795 did not mean that Methodism was dead for blacks in the Bahamas. After the last of Hammet's American missionaries had left, trans-Caribbean evangelist Joseph Paul reassumed leadership of his small church. He and other local Afro-Methodists then petitioned Thomas Coke for a replacement, but it was five years before an acceptable successor came to New Providence. In the interim, the black Methodists of Nassau persevered, raising up within their church three people of color as exhorters and preachers. Though considered by whites potentially dangerous, such independent action by people of color in the Bahamas was not new. In 1792, local Anglican priest William Gordon observed the presence and activities of black Methodists in New Providence. He discovered that many of them were originally from New England and included among their number several "Negro preachers." Gordon knew two of the black exhorters, calling them "conscientious and as sensible Negroes as any in the Bahamas." The New England Afro-Methodists in New Providence were probably Loyalist refugees who came via New York City after it was evacuated by the British army in 1783. Most of the black Loyalists who left the new United States from New York went to Nova Scotia, but about a thousand sailed south to the Bahamas between August and November of 1783. Most were free people of color, having gained their freedom through service to the British army or through manumission. Later claims by whites that these

⁴⁹ Cote, *Renegade*, 113; Peggs, *Dowson's Journal*, 48-50; Johnson, *Race Relations in the Bahamas*, 61.

new immigrants were not free people, though, were backed by British Governor Dunmore and led to the re-enslavement of many of them.⁵⁰

By the time a missionary from the English Methodists arrived on the scene in 1800, New Providence's Afro-Methodist church had split in two. One faction was led by Anthony Wallace (the husband of "Old Mrs. Wallace"), a free black from South Carolina who had enough resources to procure a place to live for the newly arrived missionary, William Turton. Wallace handed over to Turton control of the sixty-member church he and his wife had led between 1796 and 1800. The ease with which Turton assumed control of Wallace's New Providence church probably stemmed from the fact that Turton was himself a person of color. The son of a white Barbadian planter who impregnated one of his female slaves, the mulatto Turton found himself in a netherworld, not quite black, but also rejected by white society. Turton made his situation even more unstable when he married a local white woman, thus making himself *persona non grata* to white officials in Nassau. Only after the English Methodists sent two white missionaries, John Rutledge and William Dowson several years later, did the denomination gain official sanction.⁵¹

The other faction of New Providence's Afro-Methodist society was led by Joseph Paul, and after his death in 1802, by his two sons Joseph, Jr. and William. Perhaps as a reaction against the missionaries sent by William Hammet, but also because of close ties to the local Anglican Church and a desire to maintain some autonomy, Paul and his sons steered their small

⁵⁰ Coke, *History of the West Indies*, vol. III, 201; William Gordon to Bishop Porteus, Sept. 7, 1792, *Fulham Papers*, vol. XV, Exuma, Lambeth Palace Archives, London, England, 87-93; Craton and Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*, 182, 185-186. That Dunmore freed the slaves of disloyal Virginians who joined the British army in 1775 and his subsequent role in re-enslaving many blacks in the Bahamas points up the political expediency of his "Proclamation," see Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Published for the Omhundo Institute for Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 133-163.

⁵¹ Craton and Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*, 331.

congregation away from the Methodists. For over twenty years the Pauls' church remained an adjunct of Nassau's white Anglican Christ Church, but was never completely subsumed within it. Throughout the 1810s and 1820s, William Paul and his successor Joseph G. Watkins routinely held Sunday worship services that included an opening prayer, the recitation of several psalms, and a sermon. After completing his own service, Paul then led his congregation down the road to Anglican Christ Church to hear another sermon and to take communion. In an oppressive slave society, the Pauls were able to find a middle way that did not threaten white hegemony and yet still allowed for a measure of independence.⁵²

Denmark Vesey and West Indian Influence

Denmark Vesey, one of the most famous trans-Caribbean missionaries, probably did not think of himself as an agent for cross-regional evangelization and extra-nationalism, though he did believe in an independent black church. As an example of the influence of Afro-Caribbean religion on the United States, it is interesting to note the connection that linked Joseph Vesey to William Hammet and the larger world of Afro-Caribbean Protestantism. A certain J. Vesey appears on Hammet's Charleston church register as a pew renter. If he was not the historical Joseph Vesey, then he was probably a close relation. Joseph Vesey was a ship captain who sailed to ports throughout the Atlantic basin. Until 1800, he owned a slave named Telemaque, whom he employed on his ship in various capacities. We do not know if Denmark Vesey, as Telemaque later called himself, ever attended church with Captain J. Vesey, but given his later career as a preacher in Charleston's African Methodist Episcopal Church, the chances were good that he had some contact with fellow West Indian Hammet. Denmark Vesey, moreover, was born or had at least spent his early years on the Danish West Indian island of St. Thomas, which

⁵² Johnson, *Race Relations in the Bahamas*, 62.

since 1732 was home to a large and flourishing Afro-Moravian mission. Though the Moravians supported slavery, they also encouraged their black members to be independent, autonomous actors within the church. The example of black leadership that Vesey no doubt witnessed in St. Thomas could well have influenced his later life. Besides his experiences with the Brethren in the Danish West Indies, Vesey made numerous voyages to the Caribbean as a cabin boy and certainly had the opportunity to soak up the region's Afro-Protestant culture, as well as its notions of rebellion against white rule.⁵³

In the 1822 slave conspiracy that inflamed Charleston, Vesey allegedly planned to burn the city, then board one of the ships in Charleston's harbor and sail to the black republic of Haiti. Though it is unclear whether Vesey actually planned to destroy Charleston, kill its white inhabitants, and free its slaves, it is clear that more closely identify himself with his greater West Indian roots and with his Methodist faith than with Charleston's regime that enslaved and oppressed people of color. William Hammet also viewed himself as a citizen of the greater Caribbean and as a Methodist rather than as an American or Briton. He rejected both the American and English Methodist churches, and also looked with some ambivalence on the people of his adopted home, calling Carolinians "as changeable as the sand which blows over their soil." As Carolina's whites wrestled with their own identities as citizens of the United States, something they continued to do all the way to the Civil War, so did the white and black West Indian Christians in their midst. The dissemination of Afro-Caribbean Protestantism by leaders such as Denmark Vesey, Joseph Paul, and William Hammet helped to sow the seeds of

⁵³ *Trinity Church Pew Renters, 1793-1804*; Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 190. On Vesey's life, conspiracy, and trial, see Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wisconsin: Madison House, 1999); David Robertson, *Denmark Vesey* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999); Edward A. Pearson, ed., *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 1999.

the black church in the United States which nurtured the spiritual, if not the physical freedom for many African Americans. It also fertilized other, more explosive, expressions of emancipation.⁵⁴

Were men like Joseph Paul and William Hammet merely opportunists, pushed forward by ego-driven personalities and ambition to separate from established churches and to form “connexions” centered upon themselves? To better understand why they challenged church leaders like Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke and split from mainline Methodism, a number of factors should be considered. The Methodist Church was undergoing rapid growth and change during the final decades of the eighteenth century, making it appear somewhat unstable. Potential schismatics could not fail to note the American Methodists’ partition from the English mother church in 1784, partly as a way to separate itself from a hated former enemy and partly because many U.S. Methodists were becoming increasingly uneasy with John Wesley’s stand against slavery. The Methodist Church’s stability was further brought into question by the death of its founder John Wesley in 1790. The organizational structure that Wesley put in place proved strong enough to continue and even thrive after his death, but the denomination’s future may have seemed questionable at the time. The very fact that Wesley never separated from the Church of England, and that there was no such thing as a Methodist church in England until its founder passed from the scene might also have motivated Hammet and Paul to think of themselves as independent agents, unattached to a central organization. The American branch, moreover, remained a rather small, marginal denomination during its first decades. In 1770, Wesley could count only 1,000 parishioners in all of North America. By 1800 that number had

⁵⁴ Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 58, no. 4 (Oct. 2001): 916; Genovese, “From Rebellion to Revolution,” 48; Hammet, *Hammet’s Journal*.

grown considerably, but still only ten percent of all Southerners considered themselves evangelical Christians of any stripe, Methodist, Baptist, or Presbyterian.⁵⁵

Though other considerations may have motivated Hammet, it appears that he believed the Methodists were moving in the wrong direction after Wesley's death, and that he was merely trying to adhere more closely to the founder's original doctrines (excluding, of course, his stricture against slavery). Just as importantly, by separating themselves from both the American and English Methodists, Hammet, Paul, Vesey, and their majority black and all-black congregations were consciously trying to forge new identities and a sense of autonomy for themselves. They lived in an era of political and religious revolution, and took advantage of unstable governments and the shifting sands of political and religious loyalty to create, at least for a time, a new Afro-Caribbean faith that crossed international boundaries. The Hammetites, along with many other Afro-Caribbeans, traveled throughout the greater West Indies in the final decades of the eighteenth century as religious and cultural ambassadors. From their beginnings in the South's port cities and towns, Afro-Caribbean Christians, and those influenced by them, then moved west with the frontier, making significant contributions to the development of African American Christianity.

The black and white evangelical Protestants who came to North America from the West Indies brought with them a number of ideas, folkways, and attitudes distinctive to the Caribbean which influenced the development of African American Christianity. For white missionaries like Hammet, Coke, and Meredith, their years in Britain's sugar island colonies changed them profoundly. After long exposure to slavery, Coke and Hammet, who had initially been firm abolitionists, seemed to come to an accommodation with it. Hammet embraced the "peculiar

⁵⁵ Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 265; John H. Wigger, "Taking Heaven By Storm: Enthusiasm and Early American Methodism, 1770-1820," *Journal of the Early Republic* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 167.

institution”, bought a slave, and separated from a church that, at least through the end of the eighteenth century, looked upon slavery as, if not sinful, then an unfortunate necessity. Coke kept slavery at arms’ length, believing it encouraged extravagance, luxury, and hedonism among slave owners, and sexual license among the slaves. He could not, however, entirely escape its influence. In 1787, the thought struck him that, after years of preaching in the American “plantations,” he had acquired a “peculiar gift for speaking to the Blacks.” He took it as a sign that he should eventually proselytize in Africa, although he never did so. Thomas Coke spent the final quarter century of his life trying to improve the lives of African Americans, but it seems likely that Caribbean and North American blacks influenced him as much as he did them.⁵⁶

It is not surprising that white ministers were affected by black culture, considering that most of the congregations in the greater Caribbean that eighteenth-century evangelical missionaries preached to were majority black. The early Methodist church in Charleston appears to have been overwhelmingly African American. Coke noted in 1787 that the new church building held up to 1,500 people, and when services were held at five o’clock in the morning, 300 showed up. Holding church at so early an hour suggests that many of those attending were slaves, forced to attend to religion before their workday began. Coke also commented on how astonishingly fast the new chapel was constructed, considering that there were “no more than forty whites here in Society.” By 1791, more whites had joined Charleston’s Methodist Cumberland Church, but people of color still dominated, with 119 members to only 66 white members. Racial balance came closer for Hammet’s Primitive Methodist church in Charleston by 1798, but he still counted only 100 whites in his church, compared to 114 blacks. These numbers reflect the overall racial diversity of Low Country South Carolina. In 1791, African

⁵⁶ Thomas Coke, *A Farther Continuation of Coke’s Journal: In a Letter to Rev. J. Wesley* (London, 1787), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>, 4.

Americans outnumbered whites in Charleston county 34,846 to 11,801. Within Charleston's city limits the numbers were not quite so skewed, but blacks still enjoyed a majority of 8,831 to 8,089 whites in the census of 1790. Early Methodist churches in the entire South were indeed largely black institutions, while white-controlled Southern Baptist churches in the eighteenth century had large black memberships. There were some independent black Baptist churches in the Savannah and Augusta, Georgia areas as well, as we shall see.⁵⁷

Demographics aside, that the majority of Primitive Methodists were black may also have been a product of West Indian influence. When Hammet sent William Meredith to Wilmington, North Carolina in 1795, he was able to raise a small congregation of the city's blacks, but no whites. Perhaps this was so because the Methodists were generally frowned upon in this Cape Fear River town which still had a strong Anglican church. It may also have been Meredith's intention. Meredith, as a veteran of mission work in the Caribbean, was accustomed to all-black congregations and may have been observing Thomas Coke's admonition to evangelize only among the slaves, to the exclusion of whites. Ministers who had worked in the West Indies, moreover, probably took away from the experience a rather jaundiced opinion of planters and their white subordinates. Long exposure to the Caribbean master class motivated many to preach only to people of color.⁵⁸

The influence that Afro-Caribbean religion had on people of color in North America is strong and clearly defined. Blacks who moved within the greater Caribbean region possessed a heightened sense of and desire for separation from white culture. The Afro-Methodists of

⁵⁷ Coke, *A Farther Continuation*, 4; Hammet, *Hammet's Journal*; Reverend John O. Wilson, *Sketch of the Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, 1887*, Library of South Caroliniana, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina; Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 178; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 137; J. Gordon Melton, *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African American Methodism* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, Publishers, Inc., 2007), 26-28.

⁵⁸ Grissom, *History of Methodism in North Carolina*, 222.

William Meredith's Methodist church in Wilmington faced persecution and ultimate destruction when they split from the white church, but still chose to do so. In New Providence, Bahamas, Joseph Paul refused to give up his church to white English missionaries in 1800, since Bahamian blacks had successfully maintained their church without white help even before the advent of the first white mission in 1792.

Denmark Vesey was perhaps the most outstanding agent of greater Caribbean evangelism. He merged easily into Charleston's well developed West Indian culture, becoming a leader of the city's free and enslaved black society. He helped to build its first separate black church. When Charleston's African Methodist Episcopal Church was shut down by fearful whites in 1819, it was Vesey's exposure to Afro-Caribbean spirituality that inspired him and his comrades to move forward with their plans for the insurrection of 1822. Having traveled throughout the West Indies during his youth, Vesey no doubt picked up important features of the African-derived and communally-oriented myalist religion. Problems like poverty, corruption, illness, and oppression were, many black West Indians believed, the product of sorcery which myalism could eradicate. As such, myalism was a powerful force in opposition to white values and control, and was at the heart of political protest. Myalism was a force for change, moreover, because it placed far more emphasis on solving the problems of this world, rather than the "otherworldly" salvation and peace that white Protestant evangelicals were offering as a panacea for slavery's brutality. Though Denmark Vesey had many sources of inspiration, his exposure to Afro-Caribbean myalism certainly played a role in pushing him to take action in 1822.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Monica Schuler, "Myalism and the African Religious Tradition in Jamaica," in Margaret E. Crahan and Franklin W. Knight, eds., *Africa and the Caribbean: The Legacies of a Link* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 69.

Waning of the Atlantic Littoral Spiritual Community

The dissolution of William Hammet's Primitive Methodist Church, and to some extent the western Atlantic littoral spiritual community in the early nineteenth century, came as a result of the inherent conflicts between their Afro-Atlantic roots and the emergence of white North American evangelical Protestantism. Important as well was the character and personality of Hammet, whose oratorical skills in the pulpit which had propelled him to the pinnacle of success were not matched by organization skills.

Most of the Primitive Methodist churches in the greater Caribbean were dependent upon people of color as preachers, missionaries, and parishioners. Hammet, however, attempted to reconcile his congregation's Afro-Atlantic character with the growing identification of American Protestantism with "whiteness." Making his task more difficult was the fact that the evangelical movement had always suffered from internal divisions because individual evangelicals varied so widely. Broadly speaking, though, they all shared two ideas: first, they believed in the primacy of biblical scripture; and second, they attached overwhelming importance to a direct experience with God. Sharing these two concepts, evangelicals split on many other questions into elite and populist camps. The former group tried to modify traditional church practice to fit evangelical norms and was generally paternal and intellectually oriented. The latter group had no use for tradition, was anti-intellectual, and radically disestablishmentarian and egalitarian. Hammet brought to his churches in South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and New Providence a European cosmopolitan intellectualism tempered by West Indian culture and the blood and sweat of Afro-Caribbeans. He attempted to recreate in North America what existed in the West Indies,

but the late eighteenth-century crisis of white identity in the United States made such reconciliation impossible.⁶⁰

Another reason for the demise of Hammet's greater Caribbean church resulted from his emotional, charismatic style of preaching. Many of his parishioners initially enjoyed and found fulfillment in his fire and brimstone revival meetings. He discovered, however, that it was difficult to maintain such fever-pitch enthusiasm over the long run without greater institutional support. John Wesley had found that revivals and the revival style engaged in by men like Hammet, though of great value in the short run, were not good tools with which to build a lasting church of dedicated believers. People who attended revivals like those given by Hammet, and before him, George Whitefield, might be inflamed by the oratory, but when the revival ended their enthusiasm usually ebbed. Wesley's genius, and Asbury's and Coke's as well, was his ability to build the institutional infrastructure necessary for success over the long term. Violent outbursts of collective spiritual excitement had their place, but ministers like Hammet who relied on that sort of preaching could not expect to prosper for long. Wesley observed that the "showers" or "torrents" of grace that occurred in the initial stages of Methodism's establishment in a given area often burned brightly for a while, but then subsided. Upwellings of spirituality were to be encouraged from time to time, he concluded, but the real work of evangelicalism lay in reaching out to the denizens of dingy villages and seedy backstreets on a continuing basis.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Mark A. Noll, "Revolution and the Rise of Evangelical Influence in North American Societies," in Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 129-131.

⁶¹ John Walsh, "'Methodism' and the Origins of English-Speaking Evangelicalism," in Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 33.

Given his experience with sickness and early death from tropical disease in the West Indies, Hammet knew he had to accomplish his work quickly. Taking advantage of an already existing western Atlantic littoral spiritual community, he built a missionary society that stretched from Charleston and Savannah in the south, to Wilmington, North Carolina in the north, and across the Gulf Stream to New Providence in the east. As powerful as his voice and personality were, both his body and the historical forces that created the greater Caribbean spiritual community were giving out at the same time. After a period of physical decline brought on by years of exertion and heavy drinking, William Hammet died in 1803 at the age of 48. Lorenzo Dow, a self-ordained itinerant Methodist preacher, claimed of Hammet that “it appears he died drunk.” Dow was subsequently sued by Hammet’s son for publishing that remark, and though found guilty, it became apparent during the trial that his accusation was largely true.⁶²

Though Hammet’s alcoholism and lack of administrative ability played a part in the dissolution of the Primitive Methodist Church, another cause is also compelling. In 1800 and 1803, South Carolina’s legislature passed laws prohibiting black Methodists from attending religious meetings between sunset and sunrise. Afro-Methodists were also forbidden the right to meet during daylight hours without being in the company of a majority white congregation, and even then the church doors had to be left open. Since slaves and free people of color worked during the day, the new laws made their participation in weekday prayer meetings impossible and greatly reduced black attendance at Sunday services. As the backbone of Hammet’s church, Charleston’s blacks helped to define Atlantic world Afro-Protestantism. Their forced absence signaled an end to the connections that bound the Afro-Caribbean to North America. Upon William Hammet’s death, his protégé and former assistant from Nevis, William Brazier, who had

⁶² Maser and Singleton, *History of American Methodism*, 621.

left the Primitive Methodists to pursue a law practice in Columbia, South Carolina, returned to Charleston to assume leadership of Hammet's church. Brazier lacked the charisma of his former patron, though, and quickly returned to the law. Without a magnetic leader, most of Hammet's churches in the South returned to Francis Asbury's American Methodist Church, though several maintained their independence for another five years. His church in the Bahamas, though affiliated with the Primitive Methodists and receiving four missionaries from them, can more truthfully be said to have been run and directed by local Afro-Methodists such as the Pauls and the Wallaces.⁶³

It is merely coincidence that William Hammet died the same year that the United States took possession of the Louisiana Territory from Napoleonic France. Though a chance occurrence, that both events should happen in the same year is symbolic of the changes that North Americans were undergoing. During much of the eighteenth century, British colonists in the West Indies and North America viewed themselves as citizens of, and traders in, the busy Atlantic world. On the mainland, Anglo-Americans had barely begun their westward migration, clinging to the eastern coast until the very end of the century. During that period they not only traded goods and labor with Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean, but also shared the Protestant Great Awakening's new religious enthusiasm. In doing so, white Euro-Americans and enslaved Igbos, Mandingos, Angolas, Coromantee, and black creoles had created an Atlantic littoral spiritual community. This religious community, instituted primarily by the Methodists and the Moravians, grew and flourished as long as commerce, communication, and the international slave trade remained open between Africa, the West Indies, and North America. Symbolic of the new internal focus of the new century, though, was the Great Kentucky Revival at Cane Ridge in

⁶³ Creel, *"A Peculiar People,"* 147.

1801. Thousands of white and black Americans flocked to this giant tent meeting in America's hinterland to hear the word of God and be cleansed of sin, turning their backs on the outside world.⁶⁴

When President Thomas Jefferson bought Louisiana in 1803 and oversaw the end of the importation of slaves in 1808, many former connections became less vital. Though foreign trade was still important, Americans began increasingly to focus on the trans-Mississippi West and to rely on domestic sources for spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. As planters and lower-class whites moved into what would become the new "cotton kingdom" of the Lower South, however, they took with them black Americans who had absorbed an Afro-Protestant religion shaped and influenced by Afro-Atlantic spirituality. These black Americans embraced evangelical Protestantism because other people of color in far away Africa and the closer West Indies had embraced it, modified it, and made it their own. The product of this rich heritage was a unique African American Christianity. Though white and many black Americans refocused their attention toward the country's vast interior, some Afro-Protestants, riding the wave of change wrought by the American Revolution, continued to look to the Atlantic for sources of cultural identity.

⁶⁴ Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 49, 50.

CHAPTER 7: AFRO-CHRISTIAN DIASPORA IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTION

The movement of people of African descent throughout the Atlantic world during the latter part of the eighteenth century became a major catalyst for the growth of African-American Christianity. In their brutality, the slave trade and the demands of plantation agriculture uprooted the vast majority of Africans and African American creoles, who then became agents for cultural exchange. For many black Christians, the desire to escape their bonds, reconnect with family members, and evangelize their new faith also motivated them to travel to neighboring districts and distant shores. What caused the relocation of more people of color than anything except slavery, however, was the American Revolution, which helped to extend Afro-Atlantic Protestantism and culture to new and unexpected places. The conflict between Britain and most of her North American colonies, besides providing slaves with unprecedented opportunities to free themselves, served as well to legitimize the ideal of liberal individualism which was the basic tenet of evangelical Christianity and the infant, yet burgeoning, movement for abolition. Black Americans were attracted to the new revolutionary ideals because they were both uniquely conservative and radical, providing them with a liberation theology while also giving a sense of comfort, community, and stability to help counter the continuing brutalities of chattel slavery.

On the eve of the American Revolution, and after over three decades of evangelization since the Great Awakening, there were still not that many people of color in North America who had embraced Christianity. Those who did convert lived mainly on the Atlantic littoral in cities and towns and were either free or, like Andres the Negro and Magdalene of Moravian Bethlehem, were somehow “privileged” slaves. In the Southern backcountry, a small minority of religious planters brought their slaves to church or allowed them to attend services by themselves by the 1760s and 1770s. Most, however, kept their “people” away from Anglican and the

dangerously egalitarian Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian services. Anxious masters believed that in traveling long distances to attend church on Sundays, their slaves would be too exhausted by the journey to garden and hunt to help feed their own families. More ominously, by gathering together to hear sermons about Christian liberation, though only of the soul, slaves would be given both the motives and opportunities to rebel. White ministers who advocated the religious instruction of black captives countered that by doing so they would become more obedient and hardworking, but most planters were not won over by this argument.¹

Some white masters, particularly in Georgia's low country who had been converted by New Light preachers like George Whitefield in the 1740 and 1750s, actively encouraged their bondsmen and women to embrace Christianity. The few black preachers who were the product of this inter-racial religious outreach were in their turn quite successful in bringing more people of color into the church. Thus was formed the nucleus of what later became an international black Baptist movement. Of necessity, black ministers in the South preached obedience to the plantation regime's status quo, and would have been ruthlessly suppressed if it had done otherwise. Nevertheless, as the winds of war began to blow across Georgia's flooded rice fields, it was almost inevitable that black preachers like George Liele and David George would begin to combine the themes of salvation and prophetic redemption with that of liberation in their sermons. All these biblical mandates, lying dormant for several decades, would be unleashed by the Revolution.²

¹ Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730-1775* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), 160-161.

² Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 161-162; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982), 61, 171.

Revolution and Diaspora

Afro-Atlantic Christianity and the black freedom struggle were indeed advanced, if haltingly, by the chaos and violence that attended the American War for Independence. When white Virginians appeared to be throwing their support to the rebels in Massachusetts in early 1775, the province's royal governor, John Murray, the earl of Dunmore, issued a proclamation offering freedom to all slaves of rebellious owners willing to take up arms to defend British rule. Thousands of Afro-Virginians accepted Dunmore's offer, a cohort that eventually swelled, according to Thomas Jefferson, to over 30,000 by the end of the war. Initially frowned upon by Crown officials as irresponsible, Dunmore's Proclamation was duplicated four years later by British Commander-in-Chief Henry Clinton in New York when he issued the Philipsburgh Proclamation which also promised freedom to all slaves who rallied to the British standard. As a result of British promises of freedom, blacks throughout the colonies began to reassess their lives in slavery, and many took hold of this unprecedented opportunity to make better futures for themselves. In the Deep South, the number of blacks who either left Georgia or died as a consequence of the American war has been estimated at anywhere from 4,000 to 10,000. The lower figure is based upon British evacuation records for Savannah, but they do not take into account wartime losses due to battle and diseases, as well as partisan bands and ship captains who spirited away an unknown number. The total loss to Georgia's slave owners may have amounted to nearly two-thirds of their prewar human property. Taken together, some 100,000 North American blacks are thought to have absconded during the eight year period between 1775 and 1783, making the American Revolution the largest slave revolt in the Western Hemisphere outside of Saint Domingue. Many of that number ended up the property of fleeing white

Loyalists, though up to 25,000 freed themselves and expected their new status to be protected by the British army.³

After the fighting ended in 1781 the British were in no hurry to evacuate their former North American colonies, the last troops only leaving East Florida four years after the cessation of hostilities at Yorktown. They utilized that extra time to gather Loyalist property and settle claims with the Americans, though the lag between the end of the fighting and final departure also allowed the losers to take many more slaves and freed people than the winning Americans intended. From Savannah the British took over four thousand people of color, while from Charleston they evacuated six thousand, and from New York they left in 1783 with another four thousand. British-controlled East Florida became a refuge for many Southern Loyalists during the war. By 1783, some 5,000 whites and 8,300 blacks had overwhelmed the resident population of 2,000 whites and 3,000 blacks. Most of these refugees were forced, when Britain retroceded Florida to Spain in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, to go elsewhere; many returned to their former homes in the United States. Some people of color also fled west and south from St. Augustine, finding refuge among the Seminole Indians who at the time occupied much of the fertile farm and hunting land of north-central Florida. Others took advantage of a 1693 Spanish decree that offered freedom to any English slave who came to Florida and converted to Catholicism. After signing affidavits promising fealty to king and church, as well as proving that they had found

³ Lamin Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 1999, 31; Sylvia R. Frey, *Water From The Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 174; James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for the Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (London: Longman, 1976), 1-2; Vincent Carretta, *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 203; Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 309-311; Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution on Virginia* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 133-163; Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

work, 251 black Georgians and South Carolinians were manumitted by Spanish Governor Vincente Manuel de Zepedes under the sanctuary provisions. Even after the end of hostilities runaway slaves continued to stream across the border from Georgia, causing strained relations between Spanish officials and American planters living on the border. The situation concerned local planters so much that they petitioned Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson to pressure Spain to end the seventeenth-century sanctuary law. Though the law was nullified in 1790, blacks continued to cross the frontier, at least in small numbers, and were one of the reasons why the United States acquired Florida from Spain in 1821.⁴

Added to the blacks who freed themselves in Florida were thousands who were carried away by the United States' French allies and perhaps equal numbers taken by the British directly after their defeat in Virginia. Tragically, when supplies ran low for the British during the siege at Yorktown while waiting for a relief fleet, British commander Lord Charles Cornwallis ordered many of the sheltering blacks ejected into No Man's Land where many, perhaps most, were slaughtered by American forces or died of smallpox. Many of the black Loyalists lucky enough to survive the chaos of the war's waning days ended up in the West Indies. Between 1775 and 1787, the black population of Jamaica jumped by some sixty thousand, a remarkable figure considering that natural increase by native blacks did not begin until after emancipation in the 1830s and that importation of more slaves from Africa had been almost completely disrupted by the American war. The only other source for the increase was from slaves shipped to the island from North America during the course of the war. Another three thousand accompanied over

⁴ Jane Landers, "Free and Slave," in Michael Gannon, ed., *The New History of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 175; Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 87; Jane Landers, "Black Community and Culture in the Southeastern Borderlands," *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 126-129; Tolagbe Ogunleye, "The Self-Emancipated Africans of Florida: Pan-African Nationalists in the New World," *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 1 (Sep. 1996): 24-38.

twenty-seven thousand white Loyalists to Canada, several hundred made their way to England and Europe, while a handful were transported as convicts to British Australia.⁵

There is no way to know how many of the fleeing black Loyalists were evangelical Protestants, though the large number who quickly joined newly-formed black churches in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and elsewhere in the British Empire suggests that many had been Christians before the evacuation or were at least familiar and comfortable with the faith. Paradoxically, this exodus of large numbers of Afro-Christians, some of whom had been licensed ministers and lay exhorters, may have retarded the growth of black Protestantism in the new United States. So many people of faith leaving for distant shores effectively cut the head off a then growing black church movement. Without the leadership and energy that these émigrés provided, the rate of black church attendance stagnated and would not reach its potential until well after the Civil War. At the same time, this diaspora provided an energetic group of leaders who sparked the movement throughout the Atlantic.⁶

One of the thousands of black Loyalists who left America for the British West Indies was Christian evangelist and Baptist minister George Liele. Born a slave in Virginia in about 1750, Liele was taken by his owner to a plantation in Burke County, Georgia, just south of the Savannah River town of Augusta, when he was in his early twenties. His master Henry Sharp brought him to services at the local Baptist church, though it appears that Liele was already a

⁵ Carretta, *Equiano the African*, 203; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 10-12; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973), 172-177; Barry W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Barbados: The Press University of the West Indies, 1995), 72; Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* (London: BBC, 2005), 123, 152; Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 89-102, 123-138, 157-168. For a far more conservative estimate of the number of American slaves who fled to British lines during the War for Independence, see Cassandra Pybus, "Jefferson's Faulty Math: The Question of Slave Defections in the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 62, no. 2 (April 2005): 243-264.

⁶ Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 256.

Christian through the influence of his father who, he said, was “the only black person who knew the Lord in a spiritual way in that country.” Liele nevertheless gained valuable lessons from Sharp’s small church, imbibing the atmosphere of spiritual equality and brotherhood that the biracial Buckhead Creek Baptist Church offered him. Burke County’s frontier character in the early 1770s, like other frontier districts in the South in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, may have made his relationships with local whites outside of church more collegial as well.⁷

Given the egalitarian nature of his frontier church, the passion he felt surging inside him, and his apparently ample abilities as a public speaker, Liele quickly realized that his calling in life was as an evangelist. He began by singing hymns with other slaves on Sharp’s plantation, but he must have caught the attention of the leaders of Buckhead Creek’s church, because within a year of his joining he was granted a license as a probationary preacher. After two years, the power, sincerity, and usefulness to the ruling planter class of his sermons inspired Henry Sharp to manumit Liele as well as make him a fully ordained minister in the Baptist church. With his certificate of freedom, Liele was allowed to go further afield. He instituted an itinerant circuit of sorts, visiting slaves at the nearby plantations of Silver Bluff and Brampton, and on estates owned by Jonathan Bryan, George Galphin, and his former owner Henry Sharp.⁸

⁷ George Liele, *An ACCOUNT of several Baptist Churches, consisting chiefly of NEGRO SLAVES: particularly one at Kingston, in Jamaica; and another at Savannah in GEORGIA*, reprinted in Vincent Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 326; Thomas J. Little, “George Liele and the Rise of Independent Black Baptist Churches in the Lower South and Jamaica,” *Slavery and Abolition* 16, no. 2 (Aug. 1995): 188; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 115; Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), 95-130.

⁸ Liele, *An ACCOUNT of several Baptist Churches*, 326; Little, “George Liele and the Rise of Independent Black Baptist Churches,” 190; John W. Pulis, “Bridging Troubled Waters: Moses Baker, George Liele, and the African American Diaspora to Jamaica,” in John W. Pulis, ed., *Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 191; Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 115-116.

One of Liele's most fruitful venues was George Galphin's Silver Bluff plantation on the Savannah River, located several miles south of Augusta. He and a white preacher traveled frequently to Silver Bluff in the mid 1770s, inspiring the slaves there to build a church and raise up another future pioneer of Afro-Atlantic Christianity, David George. In 1775, as a result of fears of slave insurrection and guerrilla activity caused by the coming war, it became unsafe for Liele to travel his circuit. In response, the black itinerant moved closer to the safety of Savannah, preaching at the plantation of Jonathan Bryan in a Low Country parish just south of the Georgia capital. While there he raised up another black preacher, Andrew Bryan, who went on to establish several vigorous independent black churches in the area in succeeding years. As the war dragged on, Liele took advantage of the British occupation of Savannah to found the First African Church of Savannah, from which much of the early black Baptist movement later emerged. He was aided in this endeavor by his friend David George, who had left Silver Bluff when his Loyalist master was forced to flee ahead of Patriot troops. During the Revolution, Liele and George continued to minister to Savannah's African American population, whose numbers had swelled when the British occupied the city in 1778 and local slaves flocked there seeking emancipation.⁹

When the British pulled out of Savannah in 1783, Liele and other blacks had to choose whether to stay in America or go with the British to the West Indies, Canada, or England. Liele's former master, Henry Sharp, had died of battle wounds during the war, and though Liele was a free man, Sharp's relatives had him imprisoned for a short time in an attempt to re-enslave him. Staying in the United States, therefore, did not seem a wise option, and he ultimately chose to relocate his family to Jamaica. Liele must have been aware that slavery in Jamaica was even

⁹ Little, "George Liele and the Rise of Independent Black Baptist Churches," 193; Pulis, "Bridging Troubled Waters," 191; Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 116.

more entrenched and brutal than in Georgia, placing severe restrictions on civil and human rights on all people of color, slave and free. Yet he still elected to move to the West Indies rather than to Nova Scotia, England, or some other part of North America.¹⁰

In making this decision, Liele had several factors to consider. Many of his past patrons in Savannah, southern Georgia, and South Carolina were white Loyalists who were themselves fleeing to Jamaica, so the black evangelist may have felt that his future livelihood depended upon staying close to them. Being a free black man closely associated with known Loyalists, moreover, might have made remaining in the United States difficult and his future as a preacher problematic. The options of moving to Canada or Britain were probably not very appealing either, given the frontier conditions, cold climate, and small number of blacks in the former and the expense and uncertainty of traveling to the latter. Jamaica, on the other hand, had much that Liele might have found attractive. Besides the promise of employment from his white patrons, Liele and other free black Loyalist refugees could find comfort in living in a largely black society. The island's political and economic life may have been controlled by whites, but people of African descent dominated Jamaica's culture. Perhaps most importantly, Liele was motivated by a desire to spread the Christian Gospel to the slaves of the West Indies. For him, moving to Jamaica was merely the next logical step in an evangelical career that began in Burke County, Georgia, spread to Silver Bluff, the Low Country, and Savannah, and it was now time to become an overseas missionary for the Afro-Baptist faith he had helped create. By going to the West

¹⁰ Little, "George Liele and the Rise of Independent Black Baptist Churches," 194; Pulis, "Bridging Troubled Waters," 193. For the treatment and legal rights of slaves in North America, the Caribbean, and Latin America, see Paul Finkelman, *Defending Slavery: Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South: a Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003); A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: The Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Stanley J. Stein, *Vassouras: A Brazilian Coffee County, 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957); Elsa V. Goveia, *The West Indian Slave Laws of the Eighteenth Century* (Barbados: Caribbean Universities Press, 1970); Douglas Hall, ed., *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-1786* (Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press, 1999).

Indies in the 1780s to evangelize he was furthering an Afro-Atlantic religious awakening that began in the 1730s in the Danish Virgin Islands, spread to Antigua and North America, and was about to cross the ocean to Africa.¹¹

Once in Jamaica, Liele immediately began his ministry, preaching in private homes and open fields “to a good smart congregation” while making plans to build a chapel for his expanding congregation. Constructing a church took money, and Liele’s success as a minister stems in part from his business acumen. He and his family initially earned a living hauling freight around the island; he later took up selling goods as a petty merchant, and was finally able to acquire land to become a farmer. Over the course of the decade beginning in 1795, Liele and his family leased fifteen hundred acres to grow plantains and coffee, gaining for the elder Liele the title of “planter” in local legal documents. All this economic activity gave Liele the resources to purchase six acres on the road leading to Kingston for the construction of his church, which came to be known as the Windward Road Chapel. His relative prosperity also allowed Liele to purchase the freedom of several fellow blacks. In 1792 he bought and manumitted James Paschall for one hundred fifty pounds, along with another one hundred pound bond to ensure that Paschall did not become a ward of the state. Along with Paschall, Liele bought and freed three other people who were elders in his church, James Cargill, Ann Lindsay, and Eliza Gordon. The cost associated with freeing these people was considerable, putting a

¹¹ Liele, *An ACCOUNT of several Baptist Churches*, 327. For an account of early Afro-Caribbean evangelism, see C.G.A. Oldendorp, *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, Johann Jakob Bossard, ed., Arnold R. Highfield and Vladimir Barac, trans. and ed. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987).

strain on Liele's personal finances. He was happy and even eager to do it to help free the enslaved and to further the work of his Afro-Atlantic church.¹²

Liele's congregation grew rapidly in its first years, attaining a membership of over eight hundred mostly black and enslaved parishioners by 1793. Though the future appeared bright for the young church, there were several cleavages between the faith that George Liele was preaching and what the more Africanized Jamaicans were willing to accept. Many of Liele's congregants were transplanted Americans like himself who might well have been more literate and certainly more acculturated to Anglo-European society than most of Jamaica's field hands, many of whom were African born. Though Liele's Sunday services were undoubtedly influenced by African cultural forms, the Baptist sermons he brought with him from North America were probably closer to those given by white Georgians than what later Afro-Jamaican ministers and exhorters would preach. Though Low Country Georgia was majority black in the late eighteenth century, it could not compare to Jamaica's 9:1 ratio of blacks to whites and the consequently greater degree of African cultural influences. As late as 1817, there were still almost 127,000 African-born slaves in Jamaica, fully 37 percent of the entire slave population of the island. Liele's status as a prosperous and free person of color may also have served to drive a wedge between him and the majority of the island's black slaves, though the relationship between free blacks and slaves was complex.¹³

¹² Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 177; Pulis, "Bridging Troubled Waters," 200-204; Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press, 1982), 11; Liele, *An ACCOUNT of several Baptist Churches*, 328.

¹³ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 11; Little, "George Liele and the Rise of Independent Black Baptist Churches," 194; Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica*, 75. For cleavages between free blacks and slaves, see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 325-357; C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 263; David Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of San Domingue, 1793-1798* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 20-21.

While Liele and other African Americans such as George Vineyard, John Gilbert, and Moses Baker attempted to bring an orthodox Baptist faith to the West Indies, they found it difficult to do so without outside help. That help was not soon in coming. Britain's Baptist Missionary Society, organized in 1792, did not send a single white missionary to the region until 1814. Lacking guidance from orthodox Baptists from England or the United States for over thirty years, the churches that Liele and Baker founded, along with other chapels that split off from them, integrated many African and Afro-Caribbean religious forms. A leader among the splinter groups who would later be called "Native Baptists" was George Lewis, yet another black preacher from North America. He seceded from Liele's Kingston church in the early 1790s because he and like-minded parishioners, over-wrought at some church services, began to speak in tongues and interpret Baptist teachings in a way that Liele found "visionary and absurd ... abounding with superstition" and "false notions."¹⁴

Jamaica's Native Baptists worried Liele, Baker, and other North American Baptists, but political and military events in the early 1790s served to retard the growth of Afro-Christianity on the island even more than their schisms. In 1791, the Haitian Revolution sent shock waves around the Caribbean and particularly alarmed white Jamaicans since Haiti was only ninety miles to the northeast. There had reportedly been plans for a slave revolt during that year's Christmas holidays, but preventative measures taken by Governor Adam Williamson considerably weakened its chances for success. Besides an unprecedented show of strength by Jamaica's militia, the island's whites were protected by a strong garrison of British army troops and by loyal Maroon companies in the mountainous interior. The unity of the white population, along with the cooperation it secured from the island's free coloreds, almost completely

¹⁴ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 131.

guaranteed that Jamaica's whites would be safe from the fate that befell their French neighbors in Saint Domingue.¹⁵

Despite these security measures, slave insurrections in St. Lucia, Dominica, St. Vincent, and Grenada still frightened many Anglo-Caribbeans. In 1795, the Trelawny Town Maroons, one of Jamaica's five Maroon communities, rose in rebellion, and were suppressed only after the use of particularly bloody tactics including artillery and hunting dogs. In this atmosphere, all preachers to the slaves were looked upon with suspicion since church services gathered together what were considered dangerously large numbers of blacks whose ultimate purposes could only be guessed at by terrified whites. Planter reaction was swift and punitive: Jamaica's Methodist missionaries were threatened with death and their chapel in Kingston was almost destroyed. Black Baptists Liele and Baker suffered arrest for allegedly preaching sedition and were thrown into prison, though both were eventually set free.¹⁶

Problems with his personal and business finances also slowed Liele's evangelical pursuits. Though he received some monetary aid from Baptist congregations in Britain and the United States, it was not sufficient to pay all the expenses of keeping a church going as well as buying the freedom of its parishioners. After defaulting on several loans, Liele was imprisoned for debt in 1797 for three years. Following his release in 1800, things appeared to be returning to normal

¹⁵ David Geggus, "The Enigma of Jamaica in the 1790s: New Light on the Causes of Slave Rebellions," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 44, no. 2 (April 1987): 277

¹⁶ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 13; Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 134, 199, 203; Michael Craton, "Jamaican Slavery," in Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 250, 258, 271. For the Maroon War of 1795, see Alan E. Furness, "The Maroon War of 1795," *Jamaican Historical Review* 5 (1965): 30-49; Edward Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982); Richard Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery* (Mona, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies (1980-1985), II); Mavis C. Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990), 209-249.

when in 1801 international conflicts again brought legal restrictions upon black evangelizing. When a French naval squadron sailed to the West Indies in 1802 in an attempt to retake Haiti from its black liberators, white Jamaicans feared that they, too, were about to be invaded. The island's assembly responded by passing a law which forbade work by "unqualified" preachers. Though the legislation did not outlaw mission work altogether, it required all preachers to obtain state licenses from local magistrates. Since the magistrates were usually local planters, the licenses were difficult for white missionaries, much less black preachers, to obtain.¹⁷

The 1802 law slowed but did not stop Jamaica's black church, particularly because it was quickly disallowed by the British Parliament. An ordinance promulgated in 1807, however, proved harder to overcome. Enraged by the imperial government's decision to end Britain's involvement in the international slave trade in that year, Jamaica's lawmakers passed legislation that made all missionary work illegal. Though they had always maintained a neutral, and even a pro-slavery stance, the island's missionaries suffered from their connections to evangelical Christian groups in Britain who had successfully pushed the anti-slave trade bill through Parliament. The Jamaican law of 1807 was also subsequently disallowed by the crown, but white Jamaicans' control of the purse forced the royal governor to acquiesce to another law that effectively closed down all Dissenter missions on the island between 1804 and 1814. Afro-Baptists George Gibb and Moses Baker somehow managed to keep their congregations going with the help of sympathetic white planters, but George Liele appears to have ended his career as a preacher in 1807. Though he never admitted it, Liele's reason for not continuing as a minister when allowed to after 1814 may have been his reluctance to accept the more highly Africanized form of Christianity that was growing popular in Jamaica in the early decades of the nineteenth

¹⁷ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 15; Little, "George Liele and the Rise of Independent Black Baptist Churches," 200.

century. He became so disenchanted with the Native Baptist preachers, whom he and others referred to as “Christian obeahs,” that when the British Baptists invited him to visit England in the late 1810s he accepted, remaining there until he died in 1822.¹⁸

The work that North American black evangelicals like Liele began in Jamaica in the years following the American Revolution, though fraught with dangers, proved quite important for future of Afro-Atlantic Christianity. From a beginning of preaching in the open air in 1784, the number of Afro-Christian congregations in Jamaica grew by 1840 to over sixty churches with thousands of members. Besides his tremendous impact on his own island’s spiritual development, Liele initiated an evangelical network which kept him in contact with Afro-Baptists throughout the Atlantic world. By maintaining contacts through his extensive letter writing, Liele discovered that Andrew Bryan’s church in Savannah had grown to over 850 members by 1802. He also kept in touch with old friends in Silver Bluff, South Carolina. One of his close associates there, Jesse Peter, had reconstituted the Silver Bluff Church after the war and served as its pastor until 1793 when he moved upriver to establish the First African Baptist Church of Augusta.¹⁹

Even more interestingly, Liele maintained a correspondence with black missionaries who evangelized Afro-Christianity beyond his own arena in the American South and Jamaica. Liele protégé Brother Amos went with the British to New Providence in the Bahamas, where he formed a new church which by 1812 numbered 800 parishioners. Amos was joined there by

¹⁸ Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 16; Pulis, “Bridging Troubled Waters,” 205; Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 131.

¹⁹ Pulis, “Bridging Troubled Waters,” 205; Little, “George Liele and the Rise of Independent Black Baptist Churches,” 198; Liele, *An ACCOUNT of several Baptist Churches*, 328. For the growth of Andrew Bryan’s churches in Georgia, see John W. Davis, “George Liele and Andrew Bryan, Pioneer Negro Baptist Preachers,” *The Journal of Negro History* 3, no. 2 (April 1918): 124-127; Allan Gallay, “The Origins of Slaveholders’ Paternalism: George Whitefield, the Bryan Family, and the Great Awakening in the South,” *The Journal of Southern History* 53, no. 3 (Aug. 1987): 393; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 24, 38, 268, 288, 314, 316.

Frank Spence, who came to the Bahamas with white Loyalists from Florida in 1780. Spence was able to buy his freedom, and like Liele tried to buy the liberty of some of his parishioners. In 1806 he was able to buy a parcel of land in Nassau, and built a church that came to hold 1,000 Afro-Baptists by 1834. Another black North American, Prince Williams, emigrated to the Bahamas in 1790 after escaping slavery in Charleston and sailing across the Florida Straits from Spanish St. Augustine. He began preaching immediately and organized the Bethel Baptist Church the same year he arrived.²⁰

Black Christians in Nova Scotia

Venturing even further afield was Baptist David George, who after helping Liele build a church in Savannah during the Revolution, moved with other black Loyalists to Nova Scotia. There he founded a new church before moving on again to Sierra Leone in 1792. George's decision to move to Canada rather than Jamaica like George Liele might have been motivated by his experiences as a slave. In a short account of his life that he related to an English Baptist correspondent, George very pointedly begins with a description of slavery's brutality. As a young man he had seen his sister Patty "several times so whipped that her back was all corruption, as though it would rot." After his brother's flight and recapture, he was "hung up to a cherry-tree in the yard, by his two hands... with his feet about half a yard from the ground...After he had received 500 lashes, or more, they washed his back with salt water, and whipped it in, as well as rubbed it with a rag; and then directly sent him to work..." George also received several beatings, but his greatest grief came, he said, when he "had to see them whip my mother, and to hear her, on her knees, begging for mercy." As a refugee in Savannah when the

²⁰ Pulis, "Bridging Troubled Waters," 205; Little, "George Liele and the Rise of Independent Black Baptist Churches," 198; Clement Gayle, *George Liele: Pioneer Missionary to Jamaica* (Kingston: Jamaica Baptist Union, 1982), 37; Liele, *An ACCOUNT of several Baptist Churches*, 328.

British held that city, George was a free man, able to earn money as a butcher. He used that money to buy passage for his family to Charleston and then Nova Scotia when the Americans forced the British out. While George Liele never remarks about receiving harsh treatment, David George had brutal memories of slavery burned into his consciousness at an early age. Treated humanely by the British, it is little wonder that he decided to escape the horrors of any slave society, be it in Georgia or the West Indies, for the relative freedom of Nova Scotia.²¹

During the near decade he was in Canada, George continued to preach the Gospel, commencing church services in Shelburne on a piece of open land in 1784 even before a chapel could be hastily erected. Though Nova Scotia was not a slave society, George and his fellow Afro-Christians endured terrible persecution as they pursued their religious goals. In July 1784, white soldiers, rioting because they had not been paid and angry with the area's blacks for accepting low wages and therefore keeping whites' wages down, attacked homes in black communities, tearing down George's house and beating him. Forced to flee to the surrounding woods, he finally made his way to neighboring Birchtown where he hid for four months until he could safely return to Shelburne.²²

George was joined in his migration to Nova Scotia by 27,000 Loyalists, 3,000 of whom were black refugees evacuated from New York and Charleston. Just like their white compatriots, black Loyalists were promised land in Canada with which to earn a living, though ultimately many blacks received no land and those lucky enough to obtain some found their allotted parcels

²¹ David George, *An Account of the Life of Mr. DAVID GEORGE, from Sierra Leone in Africa; given by himself in a Conversation with Brother RIPPON of London, and Brother [Samuel] Pearce of Birmingham*, reprinted in Vincent Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 333, 336. For an account of the black Loyalist evacuation from New York City in 1783, see Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 59-69.

²² George, *An Account of the Life of Mr. DAVID GEORGE*, 338; Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad*, 75-77; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 74-75; Mary Louise Clifford, *From Slavery to Freetown: Black Loyalists After the American Revolution* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1999), 21; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 200; Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 234-235; Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 146.

small, infertile, or too far away from major settlements to be viable farms. Many were forced to become tenant farmers or sharecroppers, some eventually had to sell their meager possessions and become indentured servants, while a few free blacks were even kidnapped and sold into slavery in the West Indies. Having fled the oppression of slavery in what became the United States, black Loyalists faced continued social and political discrimination in Canada. They were refused the rights to suffrage and trial by jury, and suffered severe restrictions on their ability to gather socially for such activities as dances and parties. The penalties for transgressing the law were sometimes draconian and unfair, being more severe for blacks than for whites who committed the same offense. When a white Nova Scotian stole, assaulted, or slandered, the penalty was usually a fine. The same crime when committed by a person of color was almost always punishable by whipping, imprisonment, or both. That the freedom that awaited black Loyalists in Canada was less than perfect should not have taken them by surprise, considering that Nova Scotia still allowed slavery and many white Loyalist refugees had previously been slave owners who saw little reason why they should not continue the hierarchical system based on racial suppression of blacks that they had formerly enjoyed.²³

Facing an uncertain future in a new land, the black Loyalists of Nova Scotia united around their churches, the only institutions that promised them the chance to safely gather for social occasions, while also providing spiritual strength and cultural autonomy. Though many had not been Christians when they lived in the thirteenth southern colonies, some were, and they all flocked to black churches in Nova Scotia precisely because they were controlled by blacks. Many hundreds were also baptized into the Church of England, but suffered, as they did in the

²³ Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad*, 39; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 55; Frey, *Water From the Rock*, 194; Quarles, *Negro in the American Revolution*, 178; Wallace Brown, "The Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone," in John W. Pulis, ed., *Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 106; Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*; Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 219, 222.

south, segregated worship halls and even exclusion from white congregations. In Canada's new wholly black settlements like Brindley Town, black Anglicans met in private homes and held services without the benefit of ordained priests. In these cases black exhorters preached on Sundays and even baptized children and new converts and administered communion. Too far away from white Anglican churches with ordained priests, black congregations were forced to strike out on their own, something they found increasingly easy to accomplish.²⁴

Wesleyan Methodism also became firmly established among Nova Scotia's black Loyalist refugees. By 1790, fully twenty-five percent of the province's 800 Methodists were black. Of that number, the vast majority were under the care of black preachers, including Moses Wilkinson, Boston King, and John Ball. As early as 1784, when the first white Methodist missionary came to the area, Wilkinson had already gathered over 200 parishioners and organized fourteen classes in his Birchtown chapel. Canada's early black Methodists, like their black Anglican neighbors, received little white supervision and were therefore free to govern themselves as they saw fit and to interpret doctrine to fit their particular needs and African-influenced traditions.²⁵

The experience of living along the Atlantic littoral shaped the lives and outlooks of many religious people of color, and none more so than evangelist John Marrant. The future ocean-hopping preacher was born to free parents in New York City in 1755, but was moved by his mother several times as a young man before settling in Charleston, South Carolina. His mother must have had at least moderate resources, because when young Marrant expressed a desire to become a musician, she signed him up with a Charleston violin instructor at the considerable cost

²⁴ George, *An Account of the Life of Mr. DAVID GEORGE*, 339; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 64.

²⁵ Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 73; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 201; Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 146-147.

of twenty pounds for eighteen months of instruction, which a poor woman could never have afforded. At the school he learned how to play the violin “very fast, not only to play, but to dance also.” He was, he says, totally unconcerned about spiritual matters until he happened to hear Atlantic-world evangelist George Whitefield preach in Charleston on one of his American tours. Intending to disrupt Whitefield’s sermon by blowing on his French horn, Marrant was suddenly “struck to the ground” by Whitefield’s admonition that he “PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD, O ISRAEL,” where he “lay both speechless and motionless near half an hour.” Marrant was not alone in his reaction to the Anglican itinerant’s message and its mode of delivery. In 1739, Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia noted that one of Whitefield’s outdoor sermons could be heard clearly by 30,000 listeners and that after hearing him preach, even the rationalist Franklin admitted that he “emptied” his “pocket into the collector’s dish, gold and all.” The less worldly Marrant, with this sudden conviction of his own sinfulness, sought spiritual fulfillment by wandering like a prophet through South Carolina’s backcountry. For weeks he sustained himself by eating only grass. Most of his sojourn in the wilderness was spent evangelizing the region’s Native Americans, which he did for almost two years before returning to Charleston.²⁶

During the American Revolution, Marrant claims that he fought on the British side in the Royal Navy, though there is no evidence from the muster lists of the ships he says he served on of his presence. His principal reason for fabricating his war record, if he did indeed fabricate it, was to be able to relate a colorful account of his sins and his redemption in an episode where he

²⁶ John Marrant, *A NARRATIVE OF THE LORD’S wonderful DEALINGS WITH JOHN MARRANT, A BLACK, (Now going to Preach the GOSPEL in Nova-Scotia) Born in NEW-YORK, in NORTH-AMERICA. Taken down by his own Relation, ARRANGED, COLLECTED, and PUBLISHED By the Rev. Mr. ALDRIDGE. The Fourth Edition, Enlarged by Mr. MARRANT, and Printed (with Permission) for His Sole Benefit, WITH NOTES EXPLANATORY,* reprinted in Vincent Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 112-123; Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad*, 85; Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 136-137.

was washed overboard several times in a storm only to be saved from certain death by the hand of God. Whatever his war experience, his sympathies were with the British, going to London in 1781 where he lodged with a sympathetic merchant for three years. In 1784, Marrant received a letter from his brother in Nova Scotia asking him to return to Canada to become his community's pastor. With the help of Lady Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, who like John Wesley maintained her own church but was still associated with the Church of England, Marrant was ordained a minister and set sail for Nova Scotia in 1785.²⁷

Once in America, Marrant founded a Huntingdonian chapel in the black community of Birchtown comprised of forty families and then began an evangelical preaching tour of the countryside. As an ordained minister of an established church, a title none of the other black preachers in Nova Scotia could claim, Marrant spoke with greater authority and garnered a great deal of respect among the area's Afro-British people. In his sermons he asserted that Canada's people of color were a chosen people, that Birchtown was a covenanted community, and that he was its prophet. He seemed to accept the toil, hardship, and discrimination that blacks had to endure in a fatalistic way, believing that God's plans were unknowable, though he in no way accepted the brutality of whites. A strict Calvinist, Marrant preached that good works could not overcome the evils of the world but that oppression was not the consequence of insufficient efforts but rather part of the process toward gaining redemption. The message that their covenanted community could suffer persecution yet still be granted salvation was a source of

²⁷ Marrant, *NARRATIVE OF JOHN MARRANT*, 126, 132, n.61; Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad*, 86; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 71-72.

comfort and satisfaction for blacks living on the dreary rock and ice covered fields of Nova Scotia in the 1780s.²⁸

Though enjoying great success in this crusade, Marrant was ultimately forced out of Nova Scotia by Arminian Methodists who objected to his Calvinist theology of predestination and by a lack of monetary support from the Countess of Huntingdon. After recovering from a six-month bout of smallpox, Marrant moved to Boston where he became chaplain for a lodge of African Masons established by Prince Hall in 1784. He remained in North America for several more years before returning to England to defend himself against charges that he had squandered church funds. He had made plans to join his Nova Scotian followers in Sierra Leone, but died while waiting in London in 1791 at the age of 35. Though John Marrant died young, his influence on the growth of Afro-Atlantic Christianity was far-reaching. Besides preaching the Gospel in the American South, Canada, and Britain, while in Nova Scotia he instructed two fellow black Charlestonians, Cato Perkins and William Ash, who traveled to Sierra Leone several years later and founded a church associated with the Countess of Huntingdon's "Connexion."²⁹

Oludah Equiano and London's "Black Poor"

On his initial arrival in England during the Revolutionary War, Marrant became part of an already established black Loyalist settlement comprised of several hundred people. Most of London's black refugees were desperately poor, eking out livings from what menial jobs they could find and from the philanthropy of concerned abolitionists. They joined a previously established Anglo-black community whose population has been estimated at between 5,000 and

²⁸ Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 89-105.

²⁹ Cedrick May, "John Marrant and the Narrative Construction of an Early Black Methodist Evangelical," *African American Review* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 553; Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 147-148.

20,000, many of whom were either seamen or domestic servants. The plight of the new refugees, along with London's poor blacks in general, was soon taken up by a group of philanthropically-minded London businessmen who were alarmed at the growing presence of large numbers of black beggars on the City's streets. After several years of dispensing food and money to the American blacks, the businessmen, who called themselves the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, decided in 1786 on a plan to resettle their charges in West Africa. Many of London's blacks were unenthusiastic about the idea of moving to Africa since most had been born in America or had lived most of their lives there, knew little about Africa, and considered themselves Americans rather than African. They were also concerned about being transported to a region of slave catchers and slave-trade factories. Other plans by the Committee called for the refugees to be relocated to the island of Great Inagua in the Bahamas or in New Brunswick, Canada. Black leaders, however, forcefully rejected both ideas, rightfully believing that a return to the West Indies or North America would be tantamount to being re-enslaved.³⁰

Those blacks who ultimately decided to go to Sierra Leone were finally convinced by offers of free land and self-government. Their confidence in the venture was also enhanced by the presence of former slave and abolitionist Olaudah Equiano as one of the chief organizers of the expedition. Though the Sierra Leone scheme occurred several years before the publication of his famous *Narrative*, Equiano was already a well known figure in London's black community, as well as in white abolitionist circles. Though the place of his birth is not entirely certain, Equiano spent most of his life living, working, and traveling throughout the Atlantic world and was deeply influenced by his experiences. He had been a slave, a sailor with the Royal Navy, a

³⁰ Carretta, *Equiano the African*, 203-216; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 96; Brown, "The Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone," 103; Frey, *Water From the Rock*, 194; Mary Beth Norton, "The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution," *The Journal of Negro History* 58, no. 4 (Oct. 1973): 407.

merchant seaman, a domestic servant, an Arctic explorer, a plantation overseer, a hairdresser, an abolitionist, and an author. He was also a deeply religious man, though it took half a lifetime of hardship to bring him to a sense of spiritual awareness. Having witnessed Anglican evangelist George Whitefield preach in Savannah, Georgia, had piqued his interest, but he did not become “awakened” until a close encounter with death in the Arctic in 1773 forced him to reassess his life. Casting about for a church, Equiano ultimately chose the Wesleyan Methodists, finding their emphasis on salvation through faith rather than works most compatible with his straitened economic circumstances. He may also have been attracted by John Wesley’s firm stance against slavery, though other Methodists like co-founder George Whitefield harbored no such scruples and Equiano himself had yet to become an abolitionist. The Methodists’ use of lay ministers also opened up opportunities for black preachers and authors like Equiano, Jupiter Hammon, John Marrant, Ottobah Cugoana, and Boston King.³¹

His spiritual awakening as well as his experiences in the West Indies led Equiano to a career as an abolitionist and to becoming a key organizer of the first attempt to settle Afro-Britons in Sierra Leone. His desire to bring what he believed were the blessings of Christianity and European civilization to Africa had earlier led him to petition the Church of England to ordain him a priest with the object of being sent to Africa “to prevail upon his countrymen to become Christians.” The bishop of London may have been tempted to accede to Equiano’s request, but in the end turned him down. The SPG had previously sent two missionaries, Thomas Thompson and Philip Quaque, to West Africa, but to little effect. Church officials had

³¹ Olaudah Equiano, *THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO, OR GUSTAVUS VASSA, THE AFRICAN. WRITTEN BY HIMSELF. NINTH EDITION ENLARGED.* London: PRINTED FOR, AND SOLD BY THE AUTHOR, reprinted in Vincent Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 257-258; Carretta, *Equiano the African*, 162-168; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and William L. Andrews, eds., *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment* (Washington, DC: Civitas Counterpoint, 1998), 83-182.

had especially high hopes that Quaqua, a West African native, would find success among his own people, but he failed in part because he had forgotten his natal language. The bishop may have believed that Equiano was similarly linguistically handicapped and would likewise fail. Equiano appears, however, to have had a facility with languages claiming that as a young man in Africa he had been multilingual and that many of the languages of coastal West Africa “did not totally differ, nor were they so copious as those of the Europeans.” During his years as a slave and sailor in the West Indies, moreover, Equiano had no doubt picked up many of the creole languages spoken by Afro-Atlantic slaves, and may have been better able to communicate with coastal Africans than someone like Quaqua who had been sequestered in England for a considerable length of time.³²

Equiano got another chance to return to Africa because of his efforts to save a friend from being sent back to the West Indies from England as a slave in 1774. He sought the help of abolitionist Granville Sharp in the affair, and though they were unable to help his enslaved friend, Equiano and Sharp became well acquainted. Because of this connection to one of London’s leading white abolitionists, in 1792 Equiano was offered the position of commissary for the Sierra Leone expedition. The commissary’s duties included supervising the acquisition and distribution of supplies and victuals, including arms and ammunition. More importantly, commissary Equiano was to be entrusted with negotiating with local African rulers for the purchase of land for the settlement, and was as such in a pivotal position of responsibility. He appears to have been perfectly competent in his new job, but came into conflict with a fellow

³² Equiano, *INTERESTING NARRATIVE*, 200, 280; Carretta, *Equiano the African*, 196-199; Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself*, with related documents, second edition, Robert L. Allison, ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007).

expedition organizer whose duties overlapped with his. The rancor between the two slowed the operation's preparations and the decision was made to dismiss Equiano.³³

Another explanation for Equiano's summary exclusion from the Sierra Leone operation may have had more to do with British paternalism and white racism than with concerns about managerial harmony. As a freeman in Britain he was remarkably successful in raising public awareness about the sin of slavery. Besides his attempts to save his friend from West Indian slavery, Equiano had played a major role in alerting the British public in 1783 to an incident in which the captain of the slave ship *Zong* threw 132 African captives overboard to drown so that the ship's owners could fraudulently claim insurance compensation. His remonstrances against this act of barbarism shook the public out of their apathy toward slavery and nudged the humanitarian movement into action. Equiano is best known, however, for his literary contributions to anti-slavery. It is probable that he collaborated with Ottobah Cugoano in the latter's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evils of Slavery*, a fierce indictment of slavery that exposed the hypocrisy of those who claimed that slavery was acceptable because it helped to spread Christianity. Equiano is most noted for his own anti-slavery tract, *Life of Olaudah Equiano*, which gave one of the first unflinching accounts of New World slavery by a former slave. The work was an instant best-seller and made him famous, but failed to give him much stature in the newly-founded abolition movement. White Britons were not ready to allow an articulate, intelligent black man to achieve a leadership position in a cause that preferred to think of all Africans as uncivilized victims of superior white arms and culture.³⁴

³³ Equiano, *INTERESTING NARRATIVE*, 259, 283; Carretta, *Equiano the African*, 223; Stephen J. Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London's Blacks and the Foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement, 1786-1791* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994), 149-160.

³⁴ Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad*, 25; James Walvin, *Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Short Illustrated History* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 58; Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the*

With Equiano no longer part of the project, the plan to transport London's poor blacks to Sierra Leone proceeded, though haltingly and with less enthusiasm. Initially it was hoped that over 700 black Londoners would make the trip, but in the end only 350 left Plymouth in April of 1787, arriving on the West African coast a little over a month later. Sierra Leone had numerous advantages for the colonists, including one of the best natural harbors in West Africa, though this attribute also made it a major slave-trading entrepot. French slavers had a base on Gambia Island while the British occupied Bance Island, both of which were mere miles from the new black Loyalist settlement of Granville Town. Besides this apparent distraction, the transplanted Americans encountered numerous other roadblocks in attempting to establish their new colony. Because they arrived in late spring, the crops they planted were almost completely washed away by the region's torrential downpours once the rainy season began in June. The tropical climate promoted diseases which took a terrible toll, and life for those who survived was made almost unbearable by vicious insects, large poisonous snakes, and voracious predators. Within a year only 268 people still remained alive in the colony, and many of them fled, taking work, ironically, at the nearby slave trading depots as clerks since most of them knew how to read and write. The settlement's final destruction came at the hands of neighboring Temne chief King Jimmy, who after several confrontations with the Americans decided to burn Granville Town to the ground in December of 1790.³⁵

Only 64 original settlers remained cowering in a swamp next to the English slave trading post at Bance Island when a relief ship came from England in 1791. Whether Olaudah Equiano could have made this initial attempt at black repatriation a success is difficult to assess. West

Inhabitants of Great Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa, reprinted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and William L. Andrews, eds., *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment* (Washington, DC: Civitas Counterpoint, 1998), 83-182.

³⁵ Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 141-142.

Africa's tropical climate and disease environment had precluded European conquest of the continent up to that point, and the blacks from North America and Britain did not fare much better. Nevertheless, Equiano's race and his experiences as a sailor, linguist, and businessman in the rough and tumble world of Atlantic commerce might have equipped him with the diplomatic skills necessary to negotiate with local African leaders like King Jimmy, thereby making the settlement's continued existence at least possible. As it was, other veterans of the Afro-Atlantic world would be charged with making Sierra Leone's promise a reality.³⁶

Black Loyalists Leave Nova Scotia

While London's "black poor" struggled to survive in their new West African home, those black Loyalists who had hoped to remake their lives in British Canada were faring only moderately better. Discouraged following their eviction from land they had appropriated when government agents failed to provide promised farm lots, Nova Scotia's blacks decided to appeal to British authorities in London. In 1790 they deputized a former sergeant of the Black Pioneers who had served with the British in the American war, Thomas Peters, to carry a petition to Parliament asking that something be done to redress their grievances. The petition stated that while Nova Scotia's blacks were genuinely interested in obtaining their due allotment of land in Canada, they were also willing to relocate "wherever the Wisdom of Government may think proper to provide for them as free Subjects of the British Empire." Once in England, Peters tracked down his former commander, Sir Henry Clinton, and obtained from him a letter of introduction which allowed him to see abolitionist William Wilberforce and anti-slavery activist Granville Sharp. The doors to London's humanitarian community thus opened wide, Peters was able to persuade British lawmakers that Canada's blacks needed to be relocated somewhere

³⁶ Carretta, *Equiano the African*, 231; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 96-100; Brown, "The Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone," 103-106; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 195.

beyond the reach of slavery. Having already established a colony in Sierra Leone several years earlier that had failed miserably, it is somewhat surprising that the directors of the newly formed Sierra Leone Company believed that another attempt at the same location was practical or even advisable, but they did. On the strength of Peters' testimony, the British government offered to pay for the passage of what turned out to be over 1,100 black Nova Scotians to Africa.³⁷

The 1,100 black Loyalists who migrated to Sierra Leone in 1792 were motivated to take this step by multiple causes. The desire for land, freedom, and political autonomy were powerful reasons for a group of people who had lived most of their lives bereft of these rights, privileges that were largely taken for granted by America's whites. The desire to spread Christianity, however, was also a motivation. The church in Nova Scotia had become, as it later became in the United States, the center of black community life, making black preachers natural leaders in not only spiritual matters, but in civil and political affairs as well. A small but influential minority of black Loyalist refugees had been devout church-going Christians before they came to Canada, but once there, many more converted because they found hope, solidarity, and inspiration in the mostly Baptist and Methodist congregations that grew up around black preachers. Some of these preachers, like David George, were closely connected with wider Atlantic-world evangelical networks that served to tie blacks in maritime Canada to co-religionists in South Carolina, Georgia, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and, eventually, Africa. America's Afro-Atlantic preachers came to feel that it was their mission to bring the undoubted blessings of Christianity and European civilization to the continent of their forbearers. An example of their missionary zeal is black Loyalist preacher Boston King, who had been the

³⁷ Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 94; Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad*, 50; Clifford, *From Slavery to Freetown*, 26; Quarles, *Negro in American Revolution*, 177-178; 106-107; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 195; Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 148-149.

property of the Ball family, one of the largest slave owners in South Carolina until the American Revolution. After escaping to the British and subsequently evacuating to Canada, King had secured a job that supported his family so that by the early 1790s he could have remained in Nova Scotia. He was still moved to cross the Atlantic, though, so that he could “commiserate my poor brethren in Africa,” especially when he considered “that we who had the happiness to be brought up in a Christian land, where the Gospel is preached, were...involved in gross darkness and wickedness.” What a wretched condition, concluded King, “then must be those poor creatures must be in, who never heard the Name of GOD or of CHRIST.”³⁸

The white humanitarian supporters of the second Sierra Leone settlement had reasons of their own for backing the project. Most of the directors and subscribers of the new Sierra Leone Company were abolitionists who believed that slavery could be eliminated if “legitimate” trade in Africa was substituted for the “illegitimate” trade in slaves. If Africans could be induced to sell their farm produce to Europe, it was hoped, they then would no longer be so ready to sell their fellow Africans. English merchants would likewise come to realize that they could make just as much money selling manufactured goods to the agrarian Africans as they did trading in slaves. The introduction of British manufactures would also have the added benefit of introducing Africans to the English way of life, “civilizing” them and allowing Christianity to gain new converts. What was needed for this scheme to succeed was a free black Christian group willing to relocate that was also large enough to survive the first trying years of settlement. The black Loyalists of Nova Scotia appeared to fit these requirements perfectly.³⁹

³⁸ Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad*, 74; Brown, “Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone,” 108; Boston King, *Memoirs of the Life of BOSTON KING, a Black Preacher. Written by Himself, during his Residence at Kingswood-School*, reprinted in Vincent Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 359; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 243-283; Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 215.

³⁹ Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 102-105; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 195; Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 142.

Not everyone in the British government was enthusiastic about the prospect of moving some 1,100 mostly young, productive people from Canada all the way across the Atlantic Ocean to West Africa where their labor would not serve their purposes. Secretary of State Henry Dundas was particularly hesitant about the project, preferring instead that black veterans of the American war re-enlist in the British army for service in the West Indies. A handful of black Nova Scotians accepted his offer, but the vast majority of those who chose to leave Canada remained committed to beginning new lives in Sierra Leone. Many white Nova Scotians also wanted the black Loyalists to stay where they were. Besides providing local white landowners with cheap labor, Nova Scotia's blacks were prime customers for locally made products and farm produce who would be sorely missed. The prices that merchants charged declined markedly once their formerly "captive" market had departed. Local whites became so alarmed at the impending loss of so many laborers and customers that they resorted to violence on several occasions in an attempt to intimidate blacks into staying. David George observed with irony that the "White people ... were very unwilling that we should go, though they had been very cruel to us, and treated many of us as bad as though we had been slaves. They attempted to persuade us that if we went away we should be made slaves again." As it turned out, economic power proved a more effective weapon than physical coercion for keeping blacks subservient and in Canada. Only one-third of Nova Scotia's people of color decided to move to Africa; more would have, but were prevented from doing so by debt, or being apprentices, sharecroppers, or indentured servants with contractual obligations that made leaving impossible.⁴⁰

The responsibility of gathering together and organizing those black Loyalists from Nova Scotia who could leave was initially given to John Clarkson, a lieutenant in the British Royal

⁴⁰ Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 116, 120-121; Brown, "Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone," 107; George, *An Account of the Life of Mr. DAVID GEORGE*, 340.

Navy and the brother of English abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. Lieutenant Clarkson arrived in Halifax in October 1791 and immediately realized that the most efficient way to achieve his goal was to enlist the aid of local black preachers. To that end he contacted and quickly allied himself with Baptist David George, Huntingdonians Cato Perkins and William Ash, and Wesleyan Methodists Boston King and Moses Wilkinson, all of whom then devoted their considerable communications and personal networks to spread the word of the coming exodus. The influence of these ministers became evident when entire congregations decided to move to Sierra Leone. Black churches were sources of power and autonomy that many immigrants realized would continue to help them maintain their independence from white control when they relocated. Clarkson made David George one of three official black organizers of the evacuation and expedition. Along with his family of six, George's influence brought 49 members of his churches in Birchtown and Shelburne with him to Sierra Leone. Boston King and Moses Wilkinson also persuaded most of their parishioners to join the exodus to West Africa. The power preachers and churches had over black community life was further illustrated by the way individual congregations ensured that they stayed together on the trip across the Atlantic. When they arrived in West Africa many petitioned to be given neighboring house lots, so insistent were they upon maintaining a sense of connectedness.⁴¹

Those who made the journey from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone needed all the emotional and spiritual support their faith could muster. It took fifteen ships with a cost 15,500 pounds sterling to the British government to transport the 1,190 immigrants, their possessions, and food to the new settlement. The voyage was grueling, with stormy weather aggravating already poor

⁴¹ Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad*, 77; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 118, 126; Quarles, *Negro in the American Revolution*, 180; Brown, "Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone," 107; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 195, 201; George, *An Account of the Life of Mr. DAVID GEORGE*, 340; King, *Memoirs of the Life of BOSTON KING*, 363; Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 149-150.

health conditions to cause the deaths of 65 passengers before the convoy finally weighed anchor at Kru Bay in March 1792 after seven weeks at sea. The death toll for this eastward voyage was roughly the same as for westward traveling ships of comparable size which transported slaves from Africa to the Americas; however, the emotional health and future prospects of the free migrants were presumably far better than those of the new captives. The free migrants had good prospects for success in their new home because they in many ways were the flower of Nova Scotia's black community. They were the ones who were smart and hard working enough to avoid going into debt or being forced to indenture themselves to white farmers. It would indeed require plenty of nerve and ambition to make the hazardous journey to Sierra Leone and even more to survive in such an alien land.⁴²

When the survivors of the Atlantic crossing stumbled ashore at the site of the abandoned Granville Town, they found that they had to start almost from scratch in a largely untamed wilderness. Though they had been told by the project's organizers that land had been cleared and was ready for planting, all the weary travelers saw when they looked inland from the sandy beach was a dense mat of tropical forest. Undaunted, they quickly unloaded what supplies they had, constructed crude huts to protect them from the area's burning tropical sun and torrential rain, and began clearing land for planting. Eventually they rebuilt Granville Town, renaming it Freetown, referencing, perhaps, their commitment to the ideals of freedom and democracy and their new optimism about the future of their new home.⁴³

⁴² For the decline of mortality rates among slaves on slave ships in the late eighteenth century, see James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 302-304. Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad*, 77; Quarles, *Negro in the American Revolution*, 180; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 196; George, *An Account of the Life of Mr. DAVID GEORGE*, 340; Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom*, 151.

⁴³ Quarles, *Negro in the American Revolution*, 181; Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 197.

Once established in Freetown, the black preachers who had been responsible for organizing the exodus from Nova Scotia continued to play important roles as spiritual guides and community leaders. They occasionally acted in more overtly political modes, though ultimate power in Sierra Leone resided in a white governing board and a British governor. Friction between officials and subjects was perhaps inevitable in the early years of the colony, given the difficulties of building a new settlement from almost nothing and the generally patronizing and not so subtle racist assumptions held by most of the white leaders. Black ministers like Moses Wilkinson and David George, moreover, were viewed with distaste and sometimes alarm by some British authorities who saw religion as a pillar to support the political establishment. Preaching by black Dissenters so shortly after the American Revolution concerned white officials who believed that such evangelizing was “American,” “republican,” and would lead to insubordination. Black churches, moreover, were interested in greater autonomy. The bond between Lady Selina, Countess of Huntingdon and her church in West Africa led by William Ash and Cato Perkins, once so strong, was severed in the early years of the nineteenth century as black leaders took firmer control of their spiritual destinies.⁴⁴

The ideals of freedom, autonomy, and democracy that many of the transported American blacks had cultivated in their churches and imbibed in this revolutionary era boiled over and found political expression when many of their expectations were not met in the first years of settlement. The Nova Scotians were determined to keep the right to self-government that had been promised them when they were first recruited in Canada. Black settler Luke Jordan complained to former Governor John Clarkson, for example, that “we wance did call it Freetown but since your Absence We have a Reason to call it a Town of Slavery.” A major concern for

⁴⁴ Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad*, 80, 86; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 5.

men like Jordan was the proximity slave trading forts and slave traders to the so-called Province of Freedom and the Sierra Leone Company's seeming acceptance of their presence. Jordan and fellow black settler Isaac Anderson were dismayed that the "Governor allows the Slave Traders to come here and abuse us," going so far as to fire black employees who spoke against them. In early 1794, Jordan and Anderson wrote about an incident where a slave ship ran aground off the Freetown coast. The ship's captain came ashore and "began to threaten some of the people working at the wharf & saying in what manner he would use them if he had them in the West Indies." When the dock workers objected to the captain's abuse, though, "the Governor thought proper to turn them from the Company's service..."⁴⁵

Another concern voiced by Sierra Leone's new settlers had a distinctly American twist. Though not advised of this provision when they were being recruited by Clarkson in Nova Scotia, the Company expected them to pay quit rents on all land they were granted. When the directors of the Sierra Leone Company tried to enforce the collection of this land tax in the late 1790s, they were refused. In 1800, discontent over lack of self-government, taxes, and other broken promises boiled over into open revolt. The rebellion was successful in its early stages, but was quickly quashed by the timely arrival of British troops and a contingent of emigrating Jamaican Maroons, though the fighting was at times desperate. At the conclusion of hostilities white authority was re-established, leading to the execution of three rebels and the banishment of another 32. All seemed to have calmed down by late 1800, but within a year two attacks by the exiled rebels and local Temne tribesmen left the colony in disarray. Only after the nearly bankrupt Sierra Leone Company bequeathed the settlement to the Crown did it settle down,

⁴⁵ Christopher Fyfe, ed., with a contribution by Charles Jones, *'Our Children Free and Happy': Letters from Black Settlers in Africa in the 1790s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 42-43.

enjoying for the next several decades a measure of stability and prosperity as a British administrative center and staging area, after 1807, for the fight against the slave trade.⁴⁶

Despite their true lack of autonomy, Nova Scotia's black refugees remained a powerful force in Sierra Leone's society and politics for decades. The churches they built became vital centers for political organization and their preachers prime actors in shaping public opinion and government policy. To further the colony's interests, David George was chosen to travel to England in 1793, where he met with numerous humanitarians and philanthropists. While in Britain, he secured a great deal of goodwill which served the colony well in coming years when various natural and man-made disasters struck that threatened the settlement's survival. The most trying was a raid by a French fleet in 1794 which almost completely destroyed Freetown, "killed all the cattle, hogs, goats, sheep, and fowls," and left its inhabitants bereft of basic necessities. George immediately wrote his fellow Baptists in England, describing how the French "took away all the clothes from everybody, whites and blacks," and asking for aid. He was not disappointed. By the following year he was able to write a letter thanking "the goodness of christians in London" for the clothing and other supplies they had sent.⁴⁷

Boston King also went to England seeking support. He had established a school shortly after arriving in Sierra Leone for the children of the black Loyalist refugees and for native Africans. He was particularly interested in attracting the sons of local West Africans to his

⁴⁶ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 197; James Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 27-28; John Peterson, *Province of Freedom: A History of Sierra Leone, 1787-1870* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 33-34; Campbell, *Maroons of Jamaica*, 241, 257. For the paternalist attitudes of many white abolitionists involved in the Sierra Leone experiment, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 382-383.

⁴⁷ Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad*, 80, 100; George, *An Account of the Life of Mr. DAVID GEORGE*, 343-344; Sierra Leone Company, *An account of the colony of Sierra Leone, from its first establishment in 1793. Being the substance of a report delivered to the proprietors. Published by order of the directors* (London, 1795), <http://galenet.galegroup.com>

school, believing that the offer of education was the surest way to interest their young minds in Christianity. He petitioned to be sent to the Company's plantation across the river from Freetown on the Bullam Shore to teach native children how to read. His request was granted, and after some initial hesitation from local parents, soon had twenty pupils attending his classes. King's efforts to proselytize native West Africans were probably smoothed by the presence of Signor Domingo, a Luso-African Christian previously mentioned in Chapter Two. As an influential local chieftain, Domingo supported, at least in a qualified way, his newly-arrived black Christian cousins from America. Domingo sent one of his daughters to England for an English, Christian education, thus continuing the African Christian tradition of mixing religion with business and diplomacy.⁴⁸

Officials of the Sierra Leone Company quickly recognized the value of King's efforts, offering him a chance to further his schooling at the Methodist Kingswood School in Britain. He spent two and a half years in England, during which time he not only became an excellent scholar, but also learned to forgive his former white oppressors. Having been treated with kindness and affection by such British Methodists as missionary leader Thomas Coke, King found that he had "a more cordial love to the White People than I had ever experienced before." Up to this point, he had always looked upon whites "as our enemies," and even after being transported to Sierra Leone "still felt at times an uneasy distrust and shyness towards them." At Kingswood School, King found that there were some white people who were not solely dedicated to making money at the expense of the suffering of other human beings. For Boston King, Atlantic-world Christian networks opened up new possibilities for a future without slavery

⁴⁸ Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 349.

and economic oppression, guided by new conceptions of universal brotherhood brought by an expansive New Light evangelical religion.⁴⁹

For newly transplanted Americans such as Boston King, Lazarus Jones, Henry Beverhout, and David George, an integral part of the Sierra Leone project was bringing African American Christianity to the land of their forbearers. King's almost sole motivation for making the Atlantic crossing was to convert "the Africans". He did not leave Nova Scotia out of economic need, since he was already in "a comfortable way, being employed by a gentleman, who gave me two shillings per day, with victuals and lodging," so that he could easily provide for his family's future. He went to Sierra Leone, "not for the sake of the advantages I hoped to reap in Africa, ...but from a desire that had long possessed my mind, of contributing to the best of my poor ability, in spreading the knowledge of Christianity in that country." King and David George pursued their evangelical missions with vigor, though they usually "laboured under great inconveniences" related to the language barrier, the perceived reluctance of "the old people" to "abandon the evil habits in which they were educated," and because often "the natives" were "at war with one another, though they are at peace with us." The black Americans' sometimes contemptuous attitude toward native Africans did not cause them to abandon the missionary field, however. After returning from England in late 1796, King recommenced his teaching in Freetown, but soon after decided to do missionary work one hundred miles to the south among the Sherbro people, where he maintained a ministry until he died in 1802. George continued as a Baptist pastor in Freetown, evangelizing immigrant Americans and native-born Africans alike, with some success, until he died in 1810.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 201; King, *Memoirs of the Life of BOSTON KING*, 365-366.

⁵⁰ Brown, "Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone," 118; King, *Memoirs of the Life of BOSTON KING*, 363, 364-365, 368, n. 41; George, *An Account of the Life of Mr. DAVID GEORGE*, 345, 350, n. 82.

By the third quarter of the nineteenth century the descendents of the first black Nova Scotians in Sierra Leone had intermarried with the descendents of London's black poor, along with those of the Jamaican Maroons who had been transplanted in 1800, and with the so-called "recaptives", those slaves who had been returned to Africa from slave ships captured by the British Royal Navy after Parliament outlawed the slave trade in 1807. This amalgamated group formed a black bourgeoisie that has dominated Sierra Leone's social, political, and economic affairs to the present. They enjoyed great success as businesspeople, artisans, lawyers, and civil servants and traveled throughout West and Central Africa as Christian missionaries spreading the Gospel. That gospel, a blend of African, European, West Indian, and African-American religious, economic, and political influences, was disseminated by black ministers and people whose movement within the Atlantic world brought all these disparate elements together in their churches and meeting halls. If men like David George, Boston King, and Moses Wilkinson in Sierra Leone could not always communicate with people like George Liele and Moses Baker in Jamaica, Brother Amos and "old Mrs. Wallace" in the Bahamas, Andrew Bryan in Georgia, Denmark Vesey in Charleston, or Andreas the Negro and Magdalene in Bethlehem, they nevertheless felt the ties of kinship. That kinship was forged from the shared experience of brutal slavery and the desire to find a meaningful way to understand the new world into which they had been thrust. Those lucky enough to survive took courage and inspiration from the connections they formed with other Afro-Christians in the seaports and coastal villages that encompassed and defined the Atlantic world. In the process, they created a vibrant and meaningful new type of Christianity which thrives to this day.⁵¹

⁵¹ Brown, "Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone," 127.

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

On a cool spring day in 1744, a young black woman hurried north through the verdant and half-wild countryside of eastern Pennsylvania to the town of Bethlehem on an urgent mission. She had come on foot all the way from Conestoga, some eighty miles to the south, to beg the Moravian Brethren to take in her ten-year-old son who was then held either as a slave or an indentured servant by a Mennonite family in neighboring Germantown. One of her other sons, the older boy's eight-year-old brother, had already been accepted by the Brethren and was living in a dormitory with other boys his age in the community's Little Boy's Choir. She hoped to reunite her sons, perhaps move to frontier Bethlehem herself, and thereby keep her small family at least close to one another, if not living under the same roof. She also believed that her sons' opportunities to live better lives would be greatly enhanced if they came north to live in the *Bruedergemeine*. In many ways her efforts were typical of other black women and men of the era in North America. Working as a domestic servant, she was not able to care for her sons, much less buy their freedom. Desperate to keep her family together, she knew she had to find some sort of alternative. For most poor people in Pennsylvania, regardless of race, that meant placing them in the home of a more wealthy family where they would be fed, taught a trade, and hopefully treated well, though none of that was guaranteed.¹

¹ For discussion of apprenticeship and indentured servitude, see David Galenson, *White Servitude in Colonial America: An Economic Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 117-140, 141-168, 172-180; John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 244, 329; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Martha Ballard and Her Girls: Women's Work in Eighteenth-Century Maine," in Stephen Innes, ed., *Work and Labor in Early America* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 91-92; David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 437, 484, 571; David G. Hackett, *The Rude Hand of Innovation: Religion and Social Order in Albany, New York, 1652-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 16.

As a free woman of color living in colonial Pennsylvania, this young woman's experiences were broadly representative of many Afro-Atlantic Christians who struggled to build families and communities in hostile, white-dominated, societies. As far as can be discerned from the limited evidence that remains, her story begins in the Caribbean island of Antigua, where she was probably a domestic servant for a merchant, lawyer, or ship captain. She was most likely born on the island since she did not identify herself as an Igbo, Kongo, Papaw, or other African group. As an Atlantic creole she most certainly enjoyed advantages that "saltwater" slaves did not, including the less taxing employment of being a maid, cook, laundress, or live-in mistress in the master's big house. While living with her owners, she had learned something of their faith since her Moravian interviewer remarked that "she can talk a good deal about the Christian religion." Her close relationship with her owner's family and her apparent embrace of Christianity may have been the fortuitous reason why she and her two young sons were transported half a world away to colonial Pennsylvania. As a multilingual personal servant, she would have been a valuable member of any household and would therefore have accompanied her owners to the mainland colonies when they moved. If she and her sons had been common field hands, they probably would have stayed in Antigua to toil away their fatigue-shortened lives under the hot tropical sun.²

² For discussions of mortality, natality, and fertility among American slaves and the relative importance of material, cultural, and epidemiological factors, see Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 139-162; Robert Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989), 29-33, 123-153; Barry Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Kingston, Jamaica: The Press, University of the West Indies, 1995), 347-354, 374-378; Michael Tadman, "The Demographic Cost of Sugar: Debates on Slaves Societies and Natural Increase in the Americas," *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (Dec. 2000): 1534-1575; Kenneth Kiple, *The Caribbean Slave: A Biological History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Robert Dirks, *The Black Saturnalia: Conflict and its Ritual Expression on British West Indian Slave Plantations* (Gainesville, Florida: University Presses of Florida, 1987); A. Meredith John, *The Plantation Slaves of Trinidad, 1783-1816: A Mathematical and Demographic Enquiry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

But that was not their fate. It is unclear exactly when or how she came to Pennsylvania or how she gained her freedom, but by 1744 she was free and working for a Mennonite family in Germantown, the same family that owned her son. The first group of Mennonites to move to the area came in 1683 at the invitation of proprietor William Penn. Though they were pacifists and their first minister, Francis Daniel Pastorius, was one of the Quaker colony's first abolitionists, the Mennonites initially did not view slaveholding as anathema to Christian values. Most were farmers who, because they lived in close proximity to the Maryland border, came into contact with slaves fairly regularly and had become accustomed to the "peculiar institution." Conversely, the Afro-Antiguan woman had seen enough of slavery in the West Indies and wanted desperately to move her sons as far away from the plantation South as possible.³

Living in the overwhelmingly white Northern countryside, this small Antiguan family was forced to expand and redefine its social and intellectual landscape. They had to become, like many other enslaved people of color in the eighteenth century, citizens of an Atlantic world culture. As members of a German Mennonite household for several years, they came to speak, as the Moravian chronicler noted, fluent German. Coming from the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society of Antigua where they regularly conversed in English and the local island creole meant, however, that having a facility with languages was a necessity that most Atlantic creoles took for granted. This Antiguan family's mobility and exposure to vastly different cultures along the western Atlantic littoral also widened their perspectives and provided them with the skills they needed to survive. The Moravians had not yet begun their mission in Antigua in the early 1740s when they left the island. Because of the informal but extensive web of communications

³ Vernon H. Nelson, Otto Dreydoppel, Jr., and Doris Rohland, eds., *The Bethlehem Diary, Volume II, January 1, 1744 – May 31, 1745*, Kenneth G. Hamilton and Lothar Madeheim, trans. (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: The Moravian Archives, 2001), 84; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1972), 232.

maintained by the Caribbean's people of color, though, the Antiguan mother probably knew of the Brethren's work among the slaves in the Danish Virgin Islands, which began in 1732. Her knowledge of the Moravians' reputation for outreach to and acceptance of blacks at their West Indian missions was probably her foremost motivation for wanting to move both of her sons from Germantown to Bethlehem. To her, the Moravian form of Christianity was a liberation theology.

To further ease her family's way into the main currents of the new Atlantic culture and thereby achieve their emancipation, she quickly realized the importance of becoming Christian. As a servant in what was probably an Anglican household in Antigua, she had undoubtedly picked up bits and pieces of the white faith. Her knowledge of Christianity grew even more in the devoutly religious household of her Mennonite employers in Germantown. Her acceptance of and commitment to evangelical Protestantism may have been conditional, however, and less than total. The Antiguan woman's Moravian interviewer seemed somewhat skeptical about her intentions, commenting that she could only "talk a good deal about the Christian religion," with the implication that she was something less than a true Christian. Perhaps he could sense in her a reserve and cosmopolitan unwillingness to commit whole-heartedly to any single cosmology, a position that grew out of her liminal Atlantic-world experiences. She had embraced Christianity, but a hybrid Afro-Atlantic Christian religion that incorporated the African and Afro-Caribbean themes of liberation and earthly, rather than just heavenly, equality and justice.

Many other black Christians in British America faced similar dilemmas and used similar strategies as they attempted to take back a degree of control of their lives from white oppressors. Afro-Protestants were, first and foremost, a people on the move. Initially as unwilling migrants out of Africa, they subsequently became evangelists and emancipators who traveled and worked

throughout the Atlantic world. If they could not move from one locale to another, then they took advantage of black evangelical networks to send information and receive news from kindred spirits in places as far removed as New York, Pennsylvania, Charleston, St. Thomas, Antigua, London, Germany, Amsterdam, Cape Coast, and Elmina. Multilingual and cosmopolitan, they understood the limitations the slave system imposed, yet still created enough breathing space to establish multiple black Atlantic cultures.

Black Protestants in British America were restless and ready to grasp what few chances for advancement that came their way, but they were not mere opportunists who converted to Christianity for strictly material reasons. Like the Antiguan matriarch, Andreas and Magdalene in Bethlehem, or Old Mrs. Wallace in New Providence, many black Christians consciously or unconsciously blended their desire to survive Atlantic slavery with deeply-held needs to re-establish personal and group identities in the new setting. As people of African descent, moreover, they did not always separate the sacred from the secular world. By embracing black Atlantic Christianity the Antiguan migrant woman tried to simultaneously receive spiritual fulfillment and gain comfort from the world's temporal hardships.

Living in close proximity to the Atlantic littoral as they did, British and American Afro-Christians benefitted from its dynamism and therefore had greater faith that change for the better was possible. As long as the connection with the spiritual and intellectual currents of the wider world remained open they could view Christianity as an emancipatory faith. George Liele, Boston King, and Rebecca Protten all lived within an open Atlantic system and benefitted from the connection. By the early years of the nineteenth century all this changed. The United States withdrawal from the British Empire and, paradoxically, the ending of its participation in the Atlantic slave trade, led to fundamental changes in African American Christianity. Cut off from

the Caribbean and Atlantic Africa, black Protestantism in North America turned largely inward, reflecting the movement of many black captives away from the Atlantic coast to the interior regions of the cotton South. Without access to the potentially liberating ideas of the outside world, it became less threatening and therefore more acceptable to whites. Instead of being the faith of a coastal minority based upon separation from whites and the chance for emancipation, by the 1830s and 1840s Christianity became a way for a majority of people of color to cope with slavery. Alternatively, those Afro-Christians who were imbued with the spirit of Atlantic freedom and lucky enough to maintain their mobility instituted a reverse diaspora. Leaving slavery behind after the American Revolution, a handful of black Christians went to places like the West Indies, Canada, Europe, and West Africa as individuals, families, and in church groups. If they did not always achieve freedom, they set emancipatory precedents that were catalysts for a growing black Atlantic culture.

Sadly, the Moravians turned down the Afro-Antiguan mother's request. The Brethren declined to take her boy because, they said, his Mennonite master's price of twenty English pounds was too high. Digging deeper, however, it becomes apparent that other factors may have been involved. Twenty pounds was a considerable amount of money in 1744, but the Brethren had spent that much on slaves before. Bethlehem's leaders, like many white slaveholders, might have been disturbed by the worldliness, independence, and complexity of this Afro-Atlantic Christian woman. The very qualities of courage and resilience, gained in the Atlantic's cauldron, that allowed her and many other Afro-Christians to survive, made her too dangerous to be accepted into a white church. Before whites in North America felt comfortable accepting large numbers of persons of color into their churches and before blacks accepted the offer, the Atlantic's umbilical cord to Africa and the Caribbean had to be cut. It never was completely

severed, of course. Early Bethlehem's Afro-Antiguan mother undoubtedly continued her struggle to unite her family, and, like other Christians of African descent, kept her faith.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in the southern California coastal town of Ventura in 1960, I moved to Boca Raton, Florida with my family when I was thirteen years old. Subsequently relocating to Orlando, I received a BA in political science and history from the University of Central Florida in 1983, then went to work in the insurance industry. Not completely satisfied in the work-a-day-world, intellectual curiosity compelled me to go back to school in 1989. After five years of working during the day and taking graduate courses at night, I earned a Master of Arts degree in history in 1994, also at the University of Central Florida. With the help and inspiration of my wife, Tracey, and my two beautiful step-daughters, Amanda and Heidi, I completed my PhD in early American history at the University of Florida, graduating in August 2008.