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REVIEW ESSAY

Africans' Religions in British America, 1650-1840

JON BUTLER

Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830. By Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xvi + 285 pp. \$49.95 cloth; \$16.95 paper.

Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry. By Philip Morgan. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1998. xxvi + 703 pp. \$49.95 cloth; \$21.95 paper.

Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790. By Robert Olwell. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998. xvi + 294 pp. \$49.95 cloth; \$17.95 paper.

A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763-1840. By Jon F. Sensbach. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1998. xxvi + 342 pp. \$45.00 cloth; \$17.95 paper.

The transformation of African religious belief and practice in the British mainland colonies has had a long and checkered interpretive history. Nineteenth-century Christian evangelists, black and white alike, often treated slave Christianization as either the ultimate justification for slavery or its singular fortuitous achievement. In the mid-twentieth century, debate shifted to Melville Herskovits's argument about "African survivals," laid out in his *Myth of the Negro Past* (Harper and Brothers, 1941) and later answered by E. Franklin Frazier's book *The Negro Church in America* (Schocken, 1964). Since 1978 Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 1978) has dominated the topic, surely one of the most successful revised doctoral dissertations ever published. Raboteau developed a middle ground between Herskovits and Frazier, stressing the demise of the old African religions in the second chapter, titled "The Death of the Gods," while emphasizing African influences. These ranged from the "ring shout" to conjuring and voodoo and blended with or stood alongside the Christianity overwhelmingly adopted by Africans in the United States by the late nineteenth century.

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More detailed studies have supplemented Raboteau's synoptic work. Books like Mechal Sobel's *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Greenwood, 1979), her history of eighteenth-century southern Baptist revivalism and proselytization, explored the practical mechanics, and character of African Christianization in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century America. When Sobel's book added to important books on antebellum African-American religion in the North, such as Carol V. R. George's *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840* (Oxford University Press, 1973); Nell Painter's *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (W. W. Norton, 1996); Lawrence Levine's influential *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1971), which went beyond the confines of traditional church history; plus recent books on the explosive growth of postbellum African-American-led Christian denominations, including Paul Harvey's *Redeeming the South: Religious Culture and Race Identities among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Daniel W. Stowell's *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863-1877* (Oxford University Press, 1999) and especially William E. Montgomery's synoptic *Under Their Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1919* (Louisiana State University Press, 1993), one can scarcely doubt the growth in our understanding of Africans' Christianization in America. The new books by Frey and Wood, Sensbach, Olwell, and Morgan sometimes dramatically expand our knowledge of the African religious experience in colonial, early national, and early antebellum America. They raise intriguing questions about familiar and unexpected permutations in the relationship of religion and slavery before 1840. And they expose serious deficiencies in our knowledge, especially about the destructive cultural and personal foundations upon which Christianization among Africans proceeded.

Why has the topic of Africans' religions in America attracted so much interest? The outpouring of books and articles on religion among Africans in America now virtually outstrips the attention American historians formerly paid to Puritanism. The immediate cause of the late-twentieth-century interest stemmed from the political motivation of historians eager to support the civil rights struggle after 1950. The work that actually dated back into the nineteenth century. The intrinsic interest rests in the story's most elemental fact: between 1600 and 1800 the dominant religious focus of the millions of Africans who lived in Britain's mainland colonies shifted from African religions to Christianity. No other peoples in America, already known in the eighteenth century for its extraordinary religious diversity and toleration of

religious difference among Europeans, traversed such a path of profound religious transformation under any circumstances, much less under the circumstances created by slavery. Understanding this transformation takes historians to the far edge of cultural and spiritual boundaries, beyond anything else in American religious history save possibly the history of Native American societies. Simultaneously, it reveals human repression, adaptability, and creativity that few histories match.

Frey and Wood limit themselves to the interaction in both the British mainland colonies and the Caribbean of Protestantism and Africans, while voodoo, Catholicism, and Islam, stories intellectually important in Raboteau's history, make little appearance here. Frey and Wood begin with an unusually deft account of traditional African religions. The plural is important and reveals one of the authors' great advantages—the development since 1980 of a substantial literature on sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century African religions.

Frey and Wood do not overturn Raboteau's broad account of African religions, however, but they add a richness, depth, and complexity impossible two decades ago and emphasize the variety and plasticity in traditional African religions before 1800. Certainly, they argue for some common features, especially the spiritualization of nature and the emphasis on divine intervention in human affairs. But they stress variety and intellectual complexity in the religions practiced by Africans before capture and transportation to America with a clarity and weight that give their account exceptional depth.

The heart of the book resides in its assessment of Protestant proselytizing in America from the mid-eighteenth century to 1830. Frey and Wood do not practice revisionist history. They join other historians in dating the beginnings of substantial achievement in Protestant Christianization among Africans from mid-eighteenth-century evangelical revivalism. What is new in this story? Scope and detail for one thing. Without drowning in the sometimes delicious detail of accounts like Sobel's *Trabelin' On*, Frey and Wood offer deft, compelling descriptions of an extraordinary range of African and European revivalism directed at Africans, especially just before and then after the American Revolution.

But Frey and Wood also shift the traditional emphasis on Protestant evangelicalism by opening up previously unexplored features of the evangelical and African religious experience after 1750. They emphasize women's roles as "religious specialists" in Africa and later in America and stress the importance of women's spiritual leadership in the New World, particularly when European Christians so clearly limited the potential leadership roles of male preachers in the southern

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colonies and states. Especially in the rural farming and slavehold colonies, women exercised wide-ranging spiritual leadership among Africans in America in healing and medicine, church discipline, and revivalistic enthusiasm and energy that previous histories have accentuated.

Frey and Wood also stress the social function of Protestant Christianity, even in the eighteenth century when the number of African Christians remained extremely small. They emphasize the value disciplinary proceedings in supporting and sustaining personal commitment to both congregations and family life. They emphasize financial demands that congregational commitment placed upon both individuals and families. And they emphasize the support congregations furnished when slaveholders split families, bridging but not closing gaps of unspeakable difficulty.

Finally, they document African leadership, both male and female, spreading evangelical Protestantism throughout the southern colonies after 1780. No, this is not a wholly new point. But it is laid out here with an energetic sweep and detail that makes it clear just how few Africans in the southern colonies and states began to shape their own independent or at least autonomous religious organizations and I after 1780. In all, then, Frey and Wood open important new vistas African-American Protestant evangelicalism even as they confirm the broader outlines of older, less detailed histories.

Jon Sensbach's extraordinary book takes readers into an almost bizarre religious and social world, one almost turned upside down. On the surface, it could be wondered if there is a subject here at all—the relationship between North Carolina Moravians and fewer than several hundred Africans they owned between 1760 and 1840, a small number of whom became full members of several North Carolina Moravian congregations. The attraction of the subject therefore lies its position at the outer edges of the African and European religious experiences in America, not its representativeness. It opens up intriguing possibilities in African-American Christianity, if only momentarily and for very few people.

The Moravian encounter with Africans began in the eighteenth century with missions to the Caribbean, which the Moravian leader Count Nicholas Zinzendorf, visited in 1739. These Moravians were saving African souls for Christ, not seeking to abolish the institution that brought Africans to America, and the Moravians who settled North Carolina in 1753 improved on this mix not a bit. Any Moravian doubts about slaveholding centered on its threat to community and individual self-sufficiency, not on slavery's morality. African slave soon appeared in individual North Carolina Moravian households

but a more pressing question centered on whether communal Moravian settlements should own slaves collectively. Moravians used lots to settle many important matters, it being God's way of signaling his choice, and in 1769 the use of a lot opened the purchase by the Wachovia settlement of an African laborer named Sam. Tellingly, the Moravians hoped Sam would not only labor for them but would "become the property of the Saviour" (quoted on 65).

In 1771 the Moravians baptized Sam after the African conducted a two-year campaign for Moravian membership in a ceremony sealed with the "kiss of peace," the traditional Moravian ceremony modeled on the words of Paul in Rom. 16:16. Conversion and membership proved relatively easy for Africans as it had for Germans: Moravians emphasized Christian love and experience, not doctrine. As Sensbach writes, "there was not even a formal theology to be mastered. One merely had to feel a direct flood of Christian love in the heart" (106). For more than three decades thereafter, Moravians baptized and admitted African men and women into their congregations, involving them in congregational activities including discipline and helping them write the autobiographies authorized by all Moravians as they lay near death, rare and affecting documents that Sensbach uses to superb effect.

Africans acted in their own self-interest, spiritually and materially, in pursuing membership. Sensbach stresses the deliberateness of Sam's successful pursuit of Moravian church membership. "By laying claim to the masters' covenant, slaves would undercut the supposed differences between them, chipping away at the rock of racism on which slavery rested." Baptism and membership recognized the Africans' humanity as well as their need for and desire of worship. Since Moravians emphasized that Christ died for all, their conversion satisfied both their rejection of slavery's barriers and their desire and claims for spiritual fulfillment.

Yet the Moravians would finally become Americans, not just displaced German-speaking religious immigrants. Africans who worked for or were owned by Moravians probably received better treatment than did Africans owned by English neighbors, but Wachovia was not without its difficulties for Africans. Moravians quickly dispensed with recalcitrant or difficult Africans, either as hired laborers or as slaves they owned themselves. They punished and whipped disobedient Africans. They worried about revolts and rumors of revolt from the 1770s into the 1830s. Pacifists, they stocked gunpowder in 1775 "because we do not know whether the Negroes may try to rise in rebellion" (88).

Spiritual equality and the integration of Africans into Moravian

congregations also shipped away. As early as the 1780s some Moravian congregations attempted to seat black listeners on back benches, prompting demands from Moravian authorities that "not the slightest distinction between whites and blacks can be made in matters of spirit" (183). Spurred by discovery of a slave revolt in North Carolina in 1802, Moravians encouraged Methodist and Baptist preachers to speak to African slaves and laborers in their midst. Tension arose as Moravian efforts to arrange marriages among Africans. In 1808 Moravians at Bethania received an African couple into membership vately "as it would not be seemly to give Negroes the kiss of peace public service" (201). By 1822 the African Moravians had been signed to a separate congregation with a white minister where, instead of the kiss, a handshake will be deemed more suitable proper."

Sensbach's powerful account derives its authority through the she tells and his extraordinary skills in research and writing. Fortunately, *A Separate Canaan* is not a trendy book; no tortuous "hermeneutic" analysis appears here. Instead, Sensbach so deftly weaves together stories of the promise and fall of the Moravian experiment with African converts that one can only feel sadness at the result: a rural enclave of German-speaking Africans and Europeans as river-race prejudice as those living around them. The Moravian promise never lodged in some earlier golden age free from bigotry and appeal of secular authority. But it was a promise nonetheless, and whose loss was all the more tragic.

Owll and Morgan tell their stories about religion in the context of larger studies of colonial American slaveholding. Owll's on South Carolina, Morgan's on South Carolina and the Chesapeake colonies, Maryland and Virginia. Owll's is the more confined study, a revised doctoral dissertation focusing on the exercise of power by slaveholders in a unique colony. In a chapter on the Anglican Church and slave Owll describes the general interest of the colonial Anglican clergy in proselytizing among Africans, especially between 1700 and the 1770s. But the South Carolina laity remained anxious about proselytizing; baptism. As the Anglican minister Charles Martyn put it in 1752, white slaves were baptized and admitted, masters believed that African slaves "become lazy and proud, entertaining too high an opinion of themselves and neglecting their daily labour" (128).

The Anglican Church and its laity stressed hierarchy and so order to solve this problem, to the extent that they solved it at all. Anglican clergymen linked the church closely to the powerful South Carolina planter elite and its would-be members. The clergy stressed the biblical rightness of a master's authority and everywhere quo

the apostle Paul on the need for "servants to be obedient to their own masters" (112). In this context, they permitted some slaves to be baptized but backed away from the universal Christianization of slaves that some ministers believed was desirable, at least in theory. O'well argues that African converts sought membership in and identification with the dominant culture and that this both frightened and appalled slaveholders. In this regard, the Church of England's status as the colony's legally established and culturally dominant institution hobbled its work with Africans even as it shaped the dominant themes of African Christianization in South Carolina and elsewhere.

Morgan's massive comparative study—his book runs to 700 closely packed pages—is the most impressive single book on American slavery since Winthrop Jordan's *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (University of North Carolina Press, 1968) and Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (Pantheon, 1974). Its extraordinarily full notes belie enormous labor, and its complexity evinces a subtlety of description and interpretation that borders on the staggering. Within its broad comparative perspective, religion twice emerges as a major theme, in a chapter on black-white interaction, and in the final major chapter on emerging African-American cultures in the Chesapeake and the South Carolina Lowcountry.

Morgan generally agrees with Frey and Wood that Protestant evangelicalism increased successful Christianization among Africans in both the Lowcountry and the Chesapeake. He also stresses that substantial traditional African religious practice survived in both the Chesapeake and the Lowcountry. Although Morgan argues that "the vast majority of eighteenth-century Anglo-American slaves lived and died strangers to Christianity," the book outlines an impressive growth in the extent and range of Christianization among Africans after 1750. The activity of Hugh and Jonathan Bryan in South Carolina (notorious because Hugh Bryan once prophesied on "the destruction of Charles Town and the deliverance of the Negroes from their Servitude"), the preaching of the conservative Presbyterian Samuel Davies and the Anglican revivalist George Whitefield, the arrival of Baptists like Elhanan Winchester, the occasional use of African preachers such as London-trained David Margate or, later, "Black Harry" Hosier, a Methodist, all won increased African following for Christianity.

Yet this rise in Christianization among Africans and both white and black involvement in it limned important tensions in the Chesapeake and Lowcountry, some of it relating to religion generally. In Baltimore someone attacked the Methodist itinerant Freeborn Garrettson be-

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cause he preached so freely to Africans. Increasingly Africans and Europeans headed for separate congregations. At the same time, so Christian observers could find little difference between Europeans and Africans in their ignorance of Christianity. One traveler saw "very little religion, either among the clergy or laity," and the Methodist Francis Asbury lamented that if Methodists had preached "only to Africans, we should probably have done better" (435).

Morgan also denies that Africans suffered a major demise in traditional collective religious practice. In the absence of large-scale Christianization, Africans turned to more traditional African practices. Morgan quotes Melville Herskovits on the importance of magic among New World Africans that ranged from sorcery used for retribution poisoning and healing lodged in Africans' knowledge of herbs and magical rituals. The recovery of glass, beads, animal bones, and cow shells in graves and in house walls raises the suggestion of regularized African rituals ranging from sorcery to cunning and divining practices, sometimes used for the benefit (either positive or negative) Europeans as well as for Africans. Morgan stresses a growing syncretism among Africans, and in an especially effective discussion describes the wide variety of funeral practices among Africans that drew on traditional African belief and practice as well as the nascent Christianity increasingly found among Africans in both the Chesapeake and the Lowcountry, despite important regional differences slaveholding and African culture in these two regions.

These books simultaneously advance our understanding of religious practice and belief among Africans and raise intriguing questions and a major conundrum. One problem concerns the character and ambivalence of evangelical Protestant proselytizing. None of the books confronts or cites Stephen Stein's 1973 article on George Whitefield's authorship of an anonymously published epistle, *A Letter to Negroes Lately Converted to Christ in America* (London, 1743). This is in a merely picky point. Stein's analysis goes to the heart of the Probstants' divided mind on the problem of African Christianization. Whitefield's *Letter* not only defended slavery (despite his criticism of slaveholders' behavior, Whitefield later actually campaigned to legal slavery in Georgia) but offered a compelling demand for obedient that prefigured Thomas Bacon's *Six Sermons, on the Several Duties Masters, Mistresses, Slaves, &c.: Preached at the Parish Church of St. Peter in Talbot County in the Province of Maryland* (London, 1751) and the rigid ideology about slave obedience that followed. Grappling with Whitefield's hidden labors for slavery might have helped explain contradictions that remain peculiar in the evidence often discussed by Frey, Wood, and Morgan, as in the behavior of the Virginia Presbyterian

Samuel Davies, who seemed intent on proselytizing yet whose reluctance to admit Africans to Communion, much less membership, appeared to take root in more than mere planter opposition. The behavior of both Whitefield and Davies goes to the heart of these ministers' motivations in supporting Christianized Africans. Whose cause were they serving?

But Christianized from what? Frey, Wood, and Morgan especially describe traditional African beliefs and practices at some length. Still, readers might wonder what happened to these Old World religions and how conversion to Christianity crossed loss of inherited faith. The decades emphasized in these studies exacerbate these questions. In the main, these books stress the years from 1740 to the late eighteenth century, with much evidence coming from the 1760s and later. The focus on the later eighteenth century, on Christian proselytizing, and African Christianization all reinforce a tendency not only to emphasize the new religion practiced by Africans in America but to abridge the discussion of religions lost.

One does not need to adopt an argument about an "African spiritual holocaust," which the author forwarded in *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Harvard University Press, 1990), to suggest that one of the profound differences between African and European experiences of Christianity in America hinges on the process by which Africans came to Christianity in America. Think of it this way. What if we were writing about the disappearance of almost all English Puritanism in America except a few remaining gravestones, an occasional page from books of pious sayings published for lay consumption, and a page or two from the Geneva Bible stuck inside the walls of a few remaining colonial New England homes? My guess is that we would have spent the past two centuries ransacking New England to discover the answer to this mystery. Moreover, we also would have looked assiduously for culprits. If we were to turn Raboteau's chapter title "The Death of the Gods" into a question about the Puritans, we would want to know who killed them, with what means, over what period of time. Of course we would want to know how their children worshiped later, but we would not have bypassed the spiritual homicide that went before.

The question of the death of the African gods only increases in importance as we learn more about syncretism and the apparent survival of at least some African ritual practices even among dispersed African settlements in the Chesapeake. As each author here allows, the vast majority of Africans in America simply did not follow or practice Christianity even though we now know much about these latter few. How did slavery change traditional African practice? Did it make

sorcery more important than it had been at home, the vindictiveness slavery poisoning even traditional remedies used to resist it? What do most Africans do to satisfy their spiritual life? How did they do it? Could it be that vast traditional African religious practice, if indeed regularly practiced in America, left so few remains? Why did Christianization proceed so slowly before 1865 then rush to fulfillment between 1865 and 1900, as Montgomery describes in *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*?

Have we thought too narrowly and, frankly, too naively about the extent of African religious practice in America and not nearly enough about the more difficult and depressing questions about losses? Christian Africans worshipping in America were not equitable with, say Huguenot refugees in eighteenth-century America who freely moved to other Protestant denominations, sucking the life from the feeble Huguenot congregations that remained. Africans suffered real losses of major proportions that the discovery of shards and beads cannot mask. Until historians better understand the devastating process by which traditional African religions died in America, they will not understand the meaning of Christ and Christianity for Africans whose New World conversions to Christianity signified crises European then and historians now still prefer to bypass.