

The moravian missionary experience: essay



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The West Indies, Guiana and Surinam, 1732-1800 European Competition and Expansion Final Paper 17 December, 2003 I. The Moravians The Moravians were a Protestant sect that, under the leadership of Count Nikolas Ludwig von Zinzendorf und Pottendorf, experienced a strong revival in the 1720s. The doctrine of the Moravians centered on the sufferings of Christ on the cross and involved much contemplation of the various wounds he received therein. Zinzendorf began the practice of sending Brethren to minister among the heathens in the New World and Africa, and potential missionaries underwent extensive indoctrination: These missionaries, both men and women, envisioned themselves as "brides of Christ" whose father was God and whose mother the Holy Ghost. In this imagery, the church was born in the savior's side wound, betrothed to Christ in Holy Communion, making it the daughter-in-law of both God the Father and the Holy Ghost (Price, 57).

Missionaries were taught to not involve themselves with politics or commerce in the colonies, although this did not always hold true. They also accepted slavery as the status quo, and in some cases, became slave owners themselves.

II. The West Indies The Moravian presence in the New World began with the death of Frederick IV of Denmark and Norway. Count Zinzendorf, wishing to relinquish his secular title and gain some office within the Danish court, traveled to Copenhagen to gain contacts within the court of the new king, Christian VI. This protracted visit failed to gain the Count any appointed office, but his new connections within the court shed light on a problem that fell well within his realm as spiritual leader of the Moravian Brethren. A slave named Anthony, the body servant of an

acquaintance of Zinzendorf's, told the Count of "the dark moral and intellectual and religious condition of the slaves in the Danish West Indies" (Hamilton 50).

His plans for recognition within the court of the new king quashed, the Count immediately began to plan missions to the Danish holding in the New World.

Zinzendorf returned to Herrnhut, followed shortly after by Anthony, who gave his same testimony to the Brethren that the Count had heard in Copenhagen. Two young men, Leonard Dober and Tobias Leopold volunteered themselves to travel to the West Indies and serve as missionaries. The Brethren decided that Dober would travel, and Leopold would remain in Herrnhut for a while longer.

After undergoing extensive training Dober and David Nitschmann, a carpenter, set out on foot for Copenhagen in August of 1732. They set sail in October of that year, Nitschmann employed as ship's carpenter, and landed in St Thomas in early December.

Upon their arrival in St Thomas, the two Moravians were the guests of a planter. Two slaves served as contacts among the potential congregation; Anna and Abraham, the sister and brother of Anthony. Nitschmann supported the pair for four months with his carpentry skills. Dober was unable to find the clay of the necessary quality to employ himself as a potter.

When Nitschmann, as planned, returned to Europe, Dober was employed as steward of Governor Gardelin's household and tutor of his children. Although the income was steady and sufficient for his needs, Dober found his duties occupied too much of his time to allow him to minister to the slaves.

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Herresigned and found work as a watchman in town and on surrounding plantations.

Dober's religious work among the slaves was hardly appreciated by the planters. There were extremely strict regulations monitoring the movements of slaves, and subsequently harsh punishments for relatively minor infractions. Rebellions among the slaves of St Thomas and St John were bloody and often resulted in the deaths of white planters. Mistrust and general wariness were extreme, and Dober's association with the slaves earned him much of the same treatment from the planters.

In 1734, the French sold the island of St Croix to the Dutch West India Company. Count von Pless, the Chamberlain of the Danish court, and new owner of six New World plantations, petitioned the Moravian Brethren for men to act as overseers of the land and the religious welfare of the natives. Zinzendorf objected to this proposal; he did not like the idea of missionaries involved in the commerce and politics of the island, but was overruled by the rest of the Brethren.

In June 1734 Tobias Leopold and seventeen others arrived in St Thomas. Some were to remain on St Thomas, others were to colonize and evangelize the abandoned St Croix. Dober sailed back to Europe to assume the mantle of chief elder of Herrnhut.

The journey of the new missionaries to St Thomas was a horrible one.

Forced to winter over in Norway, and enduring terrible conditions aboard the ship, several of the missionaries were ill before they reached St Thomas.

Once there, they found the conditions not much more in their favor; several succumbed to yellow fever before setting foot on St Croix.

In the following six months eight of the original eighteen missionaries died, including Tobias Leopold. In February 1735 eleven reinforcements set out from Herrnhut, including physician Dr. Grottausen, who was the first to die. Within two months of landing on St Croix, four of these newcomers would fall victim to various tropical illnesses. Most of those that survived the initial illness, "during the years 1735 and 1736...returned home in a miserable plight, three of them suffering shipwreck en route" (Hamilton, 54). In December 1736 the last Moravian on St Croix traveled to St Thomas to join Frederick Martin, who had been in charge of the mission there for almost a year. Martin had found some success on St Thomas. He and his assistant had found themselves preaching, at times, to some two hundred slaves.

1736 marked the first of the Moravian baptisms on St Thomas. As Martin and his associates were not ordained, these were performed by Augustus Spangenberg. Spangenberg was a prominent member of Bethlehem, a Moravian community in Pennsylvania. He arrived in St Thomas in September and baptized what was to become the core of the first Moravian congregation in the West Indies; three slaves named Andrew, Paul and Nathaniel.

Relations between the missionaries and the planters became heated when, in August 1737, the Moravians purchased the estate of Posaunenberg.

In their anger, the planters had incited their Reform clergyman to question some of the slaves that the Moravians had been ministering to.

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The converts refused to answer clergyman Borm's questions. In turn, Borm went to the Common Council to petition for the Governor to prohibit the Moravians from baptizing their converts. The Governor refused to be drawn into this plot, so false charges of robbery were raised up against the Brethren. To clear themselves of these charges, the Moravians were required to take oath, which was contrary to their convictions. They were subsequently imprisoned.

When Count Zinzendorf arrived in St Thomas in January of 1739 to find all of his Brethren imprisoned, he immediately petitioned the Governor for their release. His wish was granted the next day, along with an apology from the Governor.

Zinzendorf and the visiting Brethren were impressed with the success of the mission on St Thomas. There were some eight hundred converts among the slaves. Zinzendorf spent his visit preaching to these new converts.

After a sensational farewell address, the missionaries accompanied Zinzendorf from Posaunenberg to town. During their absence Posaunenberg was attacked, causing much damage to the property. Upon appraisal of the damage, the missionaries lodge a complaint with the Common Council, but this only made matters worse. Relations with the planters became so strained that services had to be held in the woods under guard for fear of trouble.

In 1739, Theodore Feder and Christian Gottlieb set sail for the New World. After losing Feder in a shipwreck, and nearly dying himself, Gottlieb arrived in St Thomas. He and another young Moravian, George Weber, later left for St

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Croix to recommence the mission there. Progress was rather slow, and the first converts were not baptized until 1744, and Friedensthal, the first permanent mission station was founded in 1755.

In 1741, a pious planter on St Johns requested the presence of one of the Brethren to preach to his slaves. Baptism was first performed there in 1745, and in 1754, a resident missionary was stationed at Bethania, an estate purchased in 1749.

In 1751 the New World missions of the Moravians came under the control of the now Bishop Augustus Spangenberg. The missions came under a program of systemic development; twenty four national helpers were appointed, land on St Thomas, St Croix and St John was purchased for settlement, and resident missionaries were appointed to live on these newly purchased estates. Converts were secured as workers for these settlements in an attempt to mitigate the supposed evils of a religious order participating in rampant and exploitative capitalism. No real thought was given to the conflict of taskmaster versus spiritual advisor that these convert slaves were facing.

In 1754 two members of the English Brethren, Barham and Foster requested that missionaries be appointed to their plantations on Jamaica.

Zinzendorf was afraid that the poor financial situation of the Brethren would not allow him to send someone, but Zacharias Caries volunteered, and his Jamaican patrons were very generous with their funds. Caries had a relatively easy time of it, as compared to his compatriots on the Danish Virgin Islands. Although he didn't gain converts as easily as the others, he was well supported by the Jamaican planters and was given access to the slaves in

ways that the others hadn't. The planters provided the land for the first mission settlement of Carmel. Many were converted, and more missionaries followed, at the request of the planters, another mission settlement was added at Emmaus. Later, outposts were added at Bogue, Island and Mesopotamia, three plantations.

The 1790's were a difficult time for the West Indies and the Caribbean in general. The islands faced drought, among other natural disasters, and slave revolts in the French and British colonies. The Danish witnessed the ramifications of the successful slave revolt in Haiti, and decided to adopt a more progressive policy, to preserve neutrality and perhaps share in the major economic boon that was the slave trade. But this would also expose the slaves in the Danish colonies to insurrectionist attitudes. In an effort to preempt this, the King issued a royal order in May of 1792 "that the traffic in slaves should cease in Danish possessions from the end of the year 1802" (Hamilton, 328). At this same time, repeated requests were issued to the Brethren that they expanded the scope of their enterprise and undertake the religious and civil education of the children of the slaves. These requests, made by landowners on St Croix, were refused. The Moravians faced the financial burden of reconstructing mission settlements after a devastating series of tornadoes hit St Thomas and Jamaica. The Moravian Brethren closed out the century reconstructing settlements. They were attracting ever more converts, although at this time, their focus had turned a bit more inward.

III. Guiana and Surinam During a visit to Europe in 1734, upon the suggestion of Count Zinzendorf, the Bishop Spangenburg met several times with the directors of the Society of Surinam in Amsterdam. He pledged a Moravian

presence in the colony, agreeing to form one or more missions there. In 1735, three of the Brethren were sent to explore the area. They settled briefly on the Rio Berbice in Guiana to preach to the slaves of a Danish planter there, but found themselves thwarted by those in charge of the estates.

In 1738 two of these men, John Guttner and Christian Dahne founded Pilgerhut on a tributary of the Berbice, about 100 miles inland from the coast. The only native inhabitants of this area were Arawaks, some of whom had a small understanding of Dutch. 1739 through 1741 saw the arrival of more Moravians from Europe. The missionaries began to travel through the forest to reach potential converts. They would provision themselves for long journeys and travel to Arawak and Carib settlements. By 1748, some forty five natives had been converted, many of whom settled around Pilgerhut. In 1750, Pilgerhut received groups of Natives from the Orinoco and Corentyn Rivers that had heard of the mission through word of mouth. A number of these remained at Pilgerhut. This same year a group of white planters began to take offense at the Moravians' interaction with the Natives, fearing their enlightenment would be damaging to trade.

Manipulation of colonial government led to the impressment of two Christian Natives into the colonial militia. Military duties and taxes upon the heads of each convert were also levied against the Moravians. After these hostilities, some of the Brethren returned to Europe.

During this time, a man by the name of Theophilus Schumann had become prominent among the converts of Guiana. Called "the apostle of the Arawaks", he was a Protestant scholar that had fallen out of favor with

the church in Europe, and had found refuge with Count Zinzendorf at Herrnhut.

His arrival at Pilgerhut was the beginning of an easier time for the missionaries that had been struggling with the language of their potential converts. He translated parts of the scripture into Arawak and begun the compilation of a dictionary and grammatical lexicon. Shortly after his arrival, he was preaching in the vernacular, something that not one of his colleagues had been able to achieve.

In 1758, Schumann was forced to return to Europe on business for the mission. The man that was supposed to replace him for this period had failed to find a ship in Europe. For two years, the converts at Pilgerhut lived without one of the Moravian Brethren. When Schumann returned in 1760, he found his congregation depleted due to epidemics, raids by maroons, and general loss of discipline. Shortly after he returned to the mission, Schumann died of tropical disease. His passing marked the end of the mission at Pilgerhut.

The first Moravian mission in Surinam was in the capital of Paramaribo. Because the cost of living in the city was so expensive, and so much of their time was consumed working to support themselves, the missionaries found themselves with no time to work among the Natives. The Moravians then settled on the Cottika, a tributary of the Corentyn. They had some small successes ministering to the Arawaks, but internal divisions led to the abandonment of the mission in 1745.

In 1747, two tracks of land were purchased for the purpose of mission settlement: Ephraim on the Corentyne and Sharon on the Saramaka. In 1757 alone missionary set up residence “ on the Corentyne in the midst of an utter wilderness” (Thompson, 137). He faced innumerable hardships, but was pleasantly surprised when, after two years of his continued presence, a small congregation of Arawak, Carib and Warow converts began to settle around Ephraim. Dehne was relieved in 1759 by three missionaries; he retired to Sharon and later returned to Europe.

After making peace with the Maroons in 1764, the Government of Suriname solicited the Moravians to send missionaries to Maroon settlements on the Saramaka River. In 1765, three men were sent from Europe to serve among the Saramaka maroons; Ludwig Dehne, Rudolph Stoll and Thomas Jones, an Englishman. Brother Dehne, the leader of the group, had served for two and a half decades among the Natives of Guiana. Upon their arrival in Surinam, the missionaries found themselves courted heavily by the Governor.

He wished for them to act as agents, supplying incidental intelligence, and in return, he would provide material support. The Brethren were somewhat wary of this offer; they had been taught to not involve themselves in local politics, but would not be allowed to work among the Saramaka until they made some sort of compromise with the colonial government. The Moravians finally agreed to report any suspicious activities among the Maroons.

The chief intermediary between the colonials and the Saramaka, Postholder Dorig, introduced the missionaries to their new potential converts on the day that the Maroons received their tribute in 1765.

The chiefs among the Saramaka saw two potentials in the missionaries.

First, the white brothers, connected to the government as they were, could be used as a connection to the power structure within the capital of Paramaribo. Just as the chiefs jockeyed for favor with the Postholder, they jockeyed to have the missionaries live with them, not for prestige, but for power. Second, as whites closely associated with books, the Saramaka saw the Moravians as their entrance into the hitherto forbidden world of reading, writing and arithmetic.

The Moravians found acceptance slow among the fiercely independent Saramaka peoples. Much as with their other missions, they faced death and disease and a general mistrust among the populace of potential converts.

No real progress was made until the son of a deceased chief, Alabi, became the vocal proponent of the Moravian brothers. Powerful in his own right, Alabi was the heir apparent to his father's chiefdom, and was instrumental in gaining general acceptance for the Moravian Brethren and their gospels.

Even with Alabi's ascension to chief, and the knowledge that their chief no longer accepted to obeah faith, the Saramaka remained deeply superstitious, clinging to their old practices even after baptism.

The close of the eighteenth century saw the missions among the Arawak and other natives dwindle. Only two posts remained in Guiana and Surinam, these manned by six brothers. The missions among the Saramaka saw

some progress, but had to deal with occasional outbreaks of oboeah. Death by disease still loomed large over the European missionaries, and all of the missions of the New World were constantly replacing those who succumbed to disease.

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