
Christians, Race, and Nation in the New Republic

I. Introduction

A. In the early 19th century, Moravians in North Carolina stopped giving the kiss of peace to new African American Moravians.

1. A shift for the Moravians who had tended toward egalitarianism.

B. What the Moravian story shows about Christianity in the U.S. during the late 18th and early 19th centuries:

1. Growing number of African American were becoming Christians.

2. The Christian message could offer a critique of racial division and hierarchy.

3. Christian churches could also enact and normalize racism.

C. In this episode, we will see how African American Christians used Christianity to protest racial injustice and how Christianity could enforce racial boundaries and support racial hierarchy.

II. Growth of African American Christianity

A. History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1816) begins in the late 18th century when a group of African American Methodists attending a mixed-race church in Philadelphia were told they could not pray at the altar with white congregants.

B. Few African American converts in the 17th and 18th centuries

1. Slave owners were reluctant to evangelize

2. Missionaries told slaves to obey their masters

3. Slaves particularly and non-white people generally given little spiritual authority.

4. Continuing slave trade meant continuing influx of African religious practices

a) Religious systems did not survive the Middle Passage and the lack of communal support in the colonies, but practices did.

C. More converts during the Great Awakening (1740s)

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1. Great Awakening refers to a series of religious revivals in the colonies
 - a) Notable for the influence of evangelical Christianity, a Protestant movement that emphasized a conversion experience and the spiritual authority that came with a conversion experience.
 2. Evangelical focus on conversion made egalitarianism a potential tendency in evangelicalism, one that did not always manifest.
 3. Evangelical preaching attractive to some enslaved and free black people.
 - a) First generation of black preachers emerged during Awakening

III. Methodists and the Problem of Equality

A. Back to the African Methodist Episcopal Church

1. When Methodists came from England in the 1780s, brought an anti-slavery message and the system of circuit riders.
 - a) American Methodists kept the circuit riders, but changed their anti-slavery stance.
2. Richard Allen, born a slave and converted by a Methodist, became a circuit rider.
 - a) In 1786, Allen moved to Philadelphia and joined St. George's Methodist Church. Led to more black congregants.
 - b) After 1787 exclusion from the altar, Allen and other black congregants started Bethel Church. Led to the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

IV. Race in the New Republic

A. Thinking about the rise of racially-distinct denominations

1. Easy to assume that the rise of racially-distinct denominations is about choices, which Americans tend to like.
2. Reality not so innocent given how race functions historically
 - a) Racial categories have been used to identify who has power and who really belongs.

B. Who belongs in the United States

1. In 1790, Naturalization Act made it possible for free white persons of good character to become citizens, not people brought forcibly from Africa.
2. Right to vote not given to free black people in many states.
3. Many white people, even those who opposed slavery, saw the United States as a country for white people.
 - a) This was the logic of the American Colonization Society: free black people could not become part of the body politic.

C. Back to racially-distinct denominations

1. Not a simple matter of choice or preference
2. Not historically innocuous. Occurred in situation in which race named who belonged and who did not in the country more generally.
3. This is not a criticism of people like Allen who started such denominations.

V. Conclusion

A. Rise of evangelical Protestantism changed the landscape of U.S. religion

1. Methodists and Baptists, both evangelical groups, became the two largest Protestant groups in the country.
2. More African Americans convert
 - a) In the North, they could create their own denominations
 - b) In the South, usually had to worship under the supervision of white people.

(1) Led to “invisible institution,” secret slave worship

B. Varying white evangelical responses to slavery

1. Some white evangelicals opposed slavery
2. Some white evangelicals made peace with slavery or embraced it.