

**Servants of the Heavenly King: Colonial Clerics,
African American Slaves, and the Concept of Spiritual Equality,
1696 – 1757**

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With the wrath of a vengeful Puritan god, modern scholars have scourged colonial ministers for their complacent acceptance of slavery. Writing from a theological age in which ministers as diverse as Al Sharpton and Desmond Tutu take similarly proactive stances on questions of social justice, scholars are rightfully puzzled by the actions of eighteenth century churchmen. At a time when they could have used their pulpits to vilify injustice and oppression, most colonial clerics gave their blessing to America's unforgivable social sin. Expressing an opinion widely held among historians, noted scholars Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith write that eighteenth century ministers "not only reaffirmed the appropriateness of slavery as an institution, but gave it cosmic status solidifying its position in America."¹ Similarly, historian H. Shelton Smith angrily notes that ministers "affirmed the inferiority of the [African] race and defended the traditional regional pattern of white supremacy."² Such historiographical indignation is fueled by the fact that, with minimal exceptions, colonial ministers of varying theological persuasions universally condoned the concept of human bondage. Indeed, by 1750, every major Anglo-American Christian denomination, including the Society of Friends, sanctioned the institution of slavery. Their outright acceptance of temporal inequality has understandably tainted the historiographic reputation of colonial ministers.³

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¹ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24.

² H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But...Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1810*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), vii.

³ For more on the historiography of eighteenth century clerics see: Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Albert J. Raboteau, "The Rule of Gospel Order: Religious Life in the Slave Community," in *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*, ed. Larry G. Murphy (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford

In their rush to damn eighteenth century clerics for their acceptance of slavery, however, historians have neglected to look for any saving grace in clerical actions. Indeed, modern scholars have preferred to judge ministers based upon what they failed to do, (i.e. attack slavery or achieve abolition) rather than what they managed to accomplish. While clerical acceptance of slavery was inhumane, ministers should not be condemned to the flames of historiographical iniquity based upon this sin of omission. By dismissing ministers as sycophantic supporters of slavery, modern scholars have failed to recognize other, more radical aspects of clerical thought. Indeed, while ministers affirmed human bondage, they simultaneously advanced the cause of freedom. Through their persistent insistence of the sanctity and equality of the enslaved soul, ministers helped elevate the status of African Americans everywhere. While they may have damned themselves by maintaining the status quo of social inequality, in a sense they liberated their souls through their advocacy of spiritual equality. Nearly universal in their acceptance of slavery, ministers were equally united in their impassioned pleas for the intrinsic equality of all people before God. Focusing upon the concept of spiritual equality, a heretofore little known aspect of Anglo-American clerical thought, this essay contends that colonial ministers were far more radical than historians have previously assumed. Rather than chide them for their sins of omission, this essay examines their revolutionary acts of commission.

Eighteenth century clerical thought on African American slavery was characterized by the coexistence of two seemingly contradictory intellectual positions. Like most of their parishioners, ministers openly accepted the social inferiority of enslaved peoples. Unlike many congregants, however, most clerics affirmed the spiritual equality of all human beings. Consequently, ministers stressed both temporal inequality and spiritual equality. In other words, slaves who were debased and reviled on earth possessed the spiritual potential to be the heavenly neighbors of their white masters. In ministerial eyes, slaves were both the social children (i.e. inferiors), and the spiritual brothers and sisters (i.e. equals) of the master class. While such an intellectual dichotomy preserved white social superiority, it far exceeded contemporary conceptions

University Press, 2001); Donald Blake Touchstone, *Planters and Slave Religion in the Deep South*, (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1993); Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

of race relations. Indeed, few masters were willing to admit the existence of a shared spiritual communion linking them to their bonds-people. Fearful that the admission of any form of equality (spiritual or otherwise) would infringe upon their ability to exercise authority, many masters rejected the clerical notion of spiritual equality and denied ministerial attempts to catechize their slaves. This polarizing struggle between ardent clerics and their recalcitrant parishioners reveals the radicalism inherent in ministerial conceptions of spiritual equality.

In sermon after sermon, colonial ministers shamelessly maintained the inherent spiritual equality of all people. In a series of messages delivered between 1696 and 1706, noted Puritan divine Cotton Mather told his Boston congregation that “God hath made of one Blood, all Nations of Men.” Therefore, the four hundred African slaves living in the “City on a Hill” were undeniably created by the same God that Puritans devoutly worshipped. Spiritually, Mather contended, slaves were “our Brethren on the same level with us.”⁴ They “have the same God, and the same Grace, and the same Hope...and [they] sit at the same Table of the Lord.”⁵ Furthermore, just as whites were susceptible to the Calvinistic call of God, so too were enslaved peoples. Expressing a healthy dose of predestinarian skepticism, he remarked, “Who can tell but that [these] Poor Creature[s] may belong to the Election of God?” For Mather, slavery did not disqualify a person from spiritual election. “The God who looks on the Heart,” he wrote, “is not moved by the Colour of the Skin.”⁶ True to his Puritan roots, Mather maintained that God, and not human beings, placed restrictions upon salvation. God would call whom God would choose regardless of skin color or social status.

Farther south along the rutted post roads of colonial New England, in the city of New York, the Anglican missionary Elias Neau espoused similar views on the intrinsic spiritual worth of African slaves. Observing Neau’s cathetical work, New Yorker John

⁴ Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized, An Essay to Execute and Assist that Good Work, The Instruction of Negro Servants in Christianity* (Boston: B. Green, 1706), 5, 28.

⁵ Cotton Mather, *A Good Master Well Served A Brief Discourse on the Necessary Properties and Practices of a Good Servant In Every-Kind of Servitude: And the Methods that Should be Taken by the Heads of a Family to Obtain such a Servant* (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1696), 36.

⁶ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 3, 24-25.

Sharpe wrote, that in contrast to urban masters who “confidently upbraided [slaves] that they have no souls,” Neau showed “care and concern for their salvation.” Unlike Mather’s bombastic sermonizing, however, Neau manifested his belief in spiritual equality through action instead of words. Truly affirming the spiritual value of his pupils, Neau “crep[t] into Garrets, Cellars and other nauseous places, to exhort and pray by the poor slaves when they [were] sick.” According to Sharpe, such “constancy and unwearied...labours” alarmed whites but earned Neau the respect and devotion of the slave community.⁷

Although he did not possess Elias Neau’s unique, hands-on missiological approach, Anglican rector Thomas Bacon used a series of sermons to assert the spiritual equality of slaves living in his Maryland parish. In Bacon’s view, slaves possessed a spirituality equivalent to their owners. Africans, he contended, “have souls...as well as us” and are equally capable of salvation. “Christ,” he maintained, “died for all men” and paid “as great a price for their souls as for any of ours.” Slaves, therefore, “have an equal share with ours in [Christ’s] most precious blood,” and are “consequently...equally dear to him.” For Bacon, God was the “common parent and protector of mankind,” loving and accepting all regardless of color or social rank. As a result, he wrote, “whatever distinction may be fit and necessary between us and them in temporal affairs...there is none in spiritual matters.” For Thomas Bacon, the social gradations so necessary upon earth were nonexistent in heaven. “When we die, and are laid down in the common bosom of the Earth,” he reminded his hearers, “all outward distinctions vanish.” Indeed, in a stunning use of eschatological imagery, Bacon asked his parishioners:

If it shocks our fancied superiority to appear as their spiritual relations...how much more shocking must it be to appear naked and upon the level with them before the face of God in Judgement; nay, perhaps, to see many of them preferred before us, and entering into the kingdom of Heaven in a far higher state of favour and exaltation than ourselves?⁸

⁷ Joyce D. Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664-1730* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 128.

⁸ Thomas Bacon, *Four Sermons Upon the Great and Indispensible Duty of all Christian Masters and Mistresses to bring up their Negro Slaves in the Knowledge and Fear of God* (London: J. Oliver, 1750), 36, 33, 56, 123, 31, 123.

Despite his theological and geographical distance from Thomas Bacon, Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies expressed similar views on the spiritual equality of African American slaves. In a 1757 sermon preached before his Hanover County, Virginia congregation, Davies affirmed that slaves and masters were completely equal in the eyes of God. For the dissenting parson, slaves, like their white masters, were “creature[s] formed for immortality.” Furthermore, their intrinsic spiritual worth gave them “a kind of infinite value;” it placed them “upon a kind of equality with kings and princes.” Created by a common God, slaves possessed the same spiritual potential as their owners; the “meanest slave,” Davies contended, “is as immortal as his master.” Although despised and mistreated by the planter class, in matters of spirituality, slaves were “upon an equality with their haughty masters.” For Davies, differences in social status or ethnicity were meaningless in an eternal religion in which “all men stand upon the same footing.” Preaching an ecumenical spirituality that cut across racial lines, Davies contended that “a black skin does not disqualify a man from the blessings of the gospel.” Christ died “in ignominy and torture” for “Africans as well as Britons...for the contemptible Negroes; as well as Whites.” Looking out upon his incredulous congregation, he announced, “Yes, for poor Negroes and Slaves [Christ] thought it worth his while to shed the blood of his heart.”⁹

Like Bacon, Davies relied upon vibrant eschatological imagery to convince his audience that social distinctions “do not reach beyond the grave.” Indeed, the Presbyterian parson argued that slaves, whom many “treat[ed] as...brutes,” were immortal beings who would one day “perpetually ascend, in an endless gradation, from glory to glory, from perfection to perfection, in the scale of blessedness.” Those that whites continually debased would one day be “sharer[s] with angels in their highest prerogative and dignity.” For whites, this startling image must have represented the world turned upside down, the inversion of every treasured socio-cultural more. Even more alarming, was Davies prediction of what would happen to whites who withheld the

⁹ Samuel Davies, *The Duty of Christians to Propagate their Religion among Heathens, Earnestly Recommended to the Masters of Negro Slaves in Virginia* (London: J. Oliver, 1758), 7, 8, 23, 26, 23, 15, 17, 18.

Gospel from their slaves. “What do you think,” he queried, “of being shut up with them, in the same infernal prison, without any distinction or superiority?”¹⁰

American preachers were not the only voices advocating the spiritual equality of African American slaves. In a 1711 sermon, Anglican Bishop William Fleetwood declared that slaves “were equally the workmanship of God.” Like their white masters, they were “endued with the same Faculties, and intellectual Powers; Bodies of the same Flesh and Blood, and Souls as certainly immortal.” Directly addressing his readers, Fleetwood reminded them that “Christ died” for slaves “as well as you...They were bought with the same Price, purchased with the Same Blood of Christ [our] Common Saviour and Redeemer.”¹¹ In 1743, another English cleric, writing anonymously, addressed a letter to newly converted slaves in South Carolina. Addressing the new converts as “My very Dear Brethren in Christ,” the writer reminded them that their conversion made them “Fellow-Citizens...of the Household of God.” It was for South Carolina slaves, the cleric argued, as well as “the rest of us Gentile Sinners” that “the Lamb’s Blood was shed.” Without regard to earthly distinctions, the writer continued, God has “joined us all into one Fold.” Slaves and their masters, the author concluded, were joined in “mutual fellowship” as “Members of the same Body...[and] Branches of the same Root.”¹²

Clerical conceptions of spiritual equality differed drastically from contemporary lay opinion. While ministers advocated the existence of common spiritual ground between whites and African Americans, most slaveholders demanded complete temporal and spiritual superiority over their bonds-people. Believing that any form of equality was detrimental to the maintenance of plantation authority, most masters resisted ministerial efforts to convert and catechize slaves according to a gospel of spiritual equality.

¹⁰ Ibid., 23, 26, 24, 26.

¹¹ William Fleetwood, “A Sermon Preached Before the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts at the Parish Church of St. Mary-Le-Bow on Friday the 16th of February, 1710/11 Being the Day of their Anniversary Meeting,” in *Anglican Humanitarianism in Colonial New York*, Book 2, ed. Frank J. Klingberg (Philadelphia: Church Historical Society, 1940), 203-204.

¹² Anonymous, *A Letter to the Negroes Lately Converted to Christ in America and Particularly to those, lately Called out of Darkness, into God’s Marvelous Light, at Mr. Jonathan Bryan’s in South Carolina, or A Welcome to the Believing Negroes, into the Household of God* (London: J. Hart, 1743), 3, 4, 7.

Expressing an objection to slave conversion common among his slaveholding parishioners, Anglican cleric Thomas Bacon noted, “Should we teach them that God is to be obeyed rather than man, they might...call our commands into question.” If we “instruct them that there is a God in Heaven,” he continued, “they will no longer perhaps look upon us as Gods upon Earth.”¹³ Similarly, during his 1739 tour of colonial America, noted English revivalist George Whitefield, commented “I have great Reason to believe that most of you on Purpose keep your Negroes ignorant of Christianity... The general Pretence for this Neglect, is That teaching them Christianity would make them...unwilling to submit to slavery.”¹⁴ Rather than risk compromising their authority and lucrative plantation profits, most planters actively resisted proselytization. A heathen slave, that masters could regard and treat as unequal in every respect, was easier to control than one exposed to the humanitarian and egalitarian influences of Christianity.

Throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, clerics who attempted to convert slaves as spiritual equals, encountered strong resistance from their slaveholding parishioners. In sharp contrast to the missiological zeal expressed by Mather, Neau, Bacon, and Davies, most slaveholders remained apathetic to the call for catechesis and conversion. As early as 1696, Cotton Mather struggled with a Boston congregation seemingly deaf to the religious needs of slaves. Addressing his Puritan parishioners he wrote, “You [have] poor Negroes under you, and you expect and extract Revenues of profit from them” but do nothing for their conversion.¹⁵ Further south in New York City, Anglican missionary Elias Neau encountered strong ambivalence from the master class. In a 1706 letter, he counted “above 1000 slaves in the city,” but ruefully noted that masters “do not send me a quarter of the slaves that are here.” Although the small religious school Neau kept in his Manhattan attic drew some pupils, most masters remained inimical to the religious education of their slaves. Neau’s friend and colleague, John Sharpe, observed that that slaves “who have been Seasoned with principles of Religion...are but a small number...in comparison of the many hundred that are in this

¹³ Bacon, 86.

¹⁴ George Whitefield, *A Letter from the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield to the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina* (Savannah: 1740), 3.

¹⁵ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 17.

place.” Even New York’s royal governors commented on the apathy of the master class. Lieutenant Governor Thomas Dongan remarked that masters “take no care of the conversion of their slaves.”¹⁶ While Neau struggled to minister to slaves in New York, another Anglican missionary Dr. Francis Le Jau encountered stiff resistance in South Carolina. Describing the apathy of his planter parishioners, Le Jau noted that they “take no care at all of the souls of their slaves, and as little as the[y] can of their bodies.”¹⁷ Most masters, he continued, “oppose[d] that [their slaves] should know anything of Christianity.” Writing in 1713, Le Jau expressed exasperation at the “absolute unwillingness” of masters who would not allow their slaves to “hear anything of God and Jesus our Savior.”¹⁸

The apathy prevalent among slaveholders early in eighteenth century remained strong at its midpoint. Writing in 1746, Thomas Bacon noted that “a great many poor Negro slaves, belonging to Christian masters and mistresses, [are] living in as profound ignorance of what Christianity really is...as if they had remained in the midst of those barbarous Heathen Countries from whence they...had first been imported.” Remarking that owners took great efforts to teach their slaves plantation tasks, Bacon marveled that “no such pains are taken [to Christianize them]. They are generally left to themselves, whether they will serve God or worship devils.” Neglected by their masters, slaves were “wandering in the mazes of sin and error.”¹⁹ Similarly, Samuel Davies found the Christianization of slaves in his Virginia church “most scandalously neglected.” From his Presbyterian pulpit, Davies asked his parishioners, “Are there not some among you, and are there not thousands in our country, who must be conscious of their willful negligence; nay who, perhaps, are rather instrumental in hardening their slaves in sin...than in promoting their conversion to God?” Angered by planter apathy, Davies

¹⁶ Goodfriend, 127, 126.

¹⁷ Dr. Francis Le Jau, “Slave Conversion on the Carolina Frontier,” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, 2nd ed., ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 31.

¹⁸ Dr. Francis Le Jau, *The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis Le Jau 1706-1717*, ed. Frank J. Klingberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), 116, 126.

¹⁹ Bacon, iv, 92, vii.

asked, “Has he imbibed the Spirit of the Christian religion who can keep, perhaps, half a score of heathens under his roof, and oblige them to drudge and toil for him all their lives; and yet never labours to gain them the faith of Christ?”²⁰

From Cotton Mather’s Boston to the South Carolina frontier, two distinguishable intellectual polarities emerged in ecclesiastical approaches to slavery. Colonial clerics, long reviled for their social acceptance of slavery, were actually quite progressive in their ecumenical espousal of spiritual equality. In contrast, the eighteenth century laity expressed a far more conservative approach to forms of conversion and catechesis which centered upon spiritual equality. Indeed, when these contemporaneous, yet dialectical, views are compared, clerical understandings of spiritual equality seem impressively radical. In an age which desired to marginalize and subordinate African Americans in all levels of social and religious life, ministers adamantly asserted and defended the intrinsic spiritual worth of enslaved peoples.

Although radical in comparison to contemporary lay opinion, it is important to recognize the limitations of clerical conceptions of spiritual equality. While ministers openly believed in a common spirituality linking masters and slaves, they fell short of abolitionism. As modern historians have been quick to point out, most clerics accepted slavery without reservation and many, including Cotton Mather, George Whitefield, and Samuel Davies, were themselves slave owners. Nevertheless, ministerial belief in the inherent equality of all souls before God left an impressionable mark on the institution of slavery.

Despite the resistance they encountered from their parishioners, colonial clerics remained stalwart in their insistence that enslaved peoples were the spiritual equals of their white masters. Over time, the pressure of hundreds of clerics, of which the ministers surveyed here represent a small sample, helped precipitate a radical change in lay conceptions of African American spirituality. Eventually, planters reluctantly assented to a clerical view of slavery, acknowledging both the temporal inequality and the spiritual equality of their bonds-people. Although colonial clerics incessantly argued for this transformation in lay opinion, the true fruition of eighteenth century conceptions of spiritual equality came in the early years of the nineteenth century.

²⁰ Davies, 8, 17.

In contrast to the apathy confronted by colonial ministers, the nineteenth century was characterized by the founding of plantation churches and missions, often with the consent and participation of the master class. As Christianity, and its attendant doctrine of spiritual equality, moved rapidly through plantation slave quarters, the fears of eighteenth century lay people proved justifiable. Just as colonial parishioners had predicted, the concept of spiritual equality had a negative impact upon plantation authority. Despite their best efforts, masters could not harness the egalitarian impulses implicit in the doctrine of spiritual equality. Communicant slaves latched on quickly to the concept of an empowering spirituality and used it to their advantage. As a result, the Christianization of slaves led inexorably to the ordination of black ministers and lay leaders and to the establishment of separate black churches. As early as 1775, A Charleston slave named Jemmy reported that fifteen black leaders were preaching a gospel of Mosaic deliverance “to Great crouds of Negroes.”²¹ Two generations later, in 1840, the Baptist Sunbury Association in Georgia listed more than 4,000 African American members attending seven black-led churches. Describing the phenomenal autonomous growth of African American spirituality, noted scholar Albert Raboteau writes, “The problem with including slaves in church fellowship was that it was difficult to control their efforts toward autonomy.”²²

While colonial ministers did not open the gates of freedom, they did raise a window, allowing the sunlight of equality, albeit spiritual equality, to fall on the shoulders of African slaves. By affirming the intrinsic spiritual integrity of African American bonds-people, they pressured masters to change their attitudes towards slaves. Although they neither desired nor expected to reap the harvests of the Sunbury Association, colonial ministers planted the seeds of Christian equality that led to the increased spiritual, and eventually temporal, autonomy of African American slaves.

Far from the complacently conservative parsons described by modern historians, eighteenth century ministers approached slavery from a position which, although it

²¹ Peter H. Wood, “‘Liberty is Sweet:’ African American Freedom Struggles in the Years before White Independence,” In *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 167.

²² Albert J. Raboteau, “The Rule of Gospel Order: Religious Life in the Slave Community,” in *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*, ed. Larry G. Murphy (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 56.

affirmed human bondage, allowed for a progressive and even radical interpretation of the sanctity and equality of the human soul. The intellectual and social ramifications of the concept of spiritual equality led, inexorably to an assertion of the common humanity and spirituality linking all peoples in divine communion. When seen from this perspective, colonial ministers, while certainly far from saints, were not the devils described by modern scholars.

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