FROM CHILIASM TO COMMUNITY: RELIGION AND CULTURAL CHANGE AMONG SOUTH CAROLINA SLAVES BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

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Acting from different perspectives, and with different social powers of objectifying their respective interpretations, people come to different conclusions and societies work out different consensuses. Social communication is as much an empirical risk as worldly reference. The effects of such risks can be radical innovations. For finally, in the contradictory encounters with persons and things, signs are liable to be reclaimed by the original powers of their creation: the human symbolic consciousness... Meanings are ultimately submitted to subjective risks, to the extent that people, as they are socially enabled, cease to be the slaves of their concepts and become the masters. « The question is », said Alice, « whether you *can* make words mean so many different things ». « The question is », said Humpty Dumpty, « which is to be master-that is all ».

Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985), x.

Barely past his majority in the fall of 1774, the Reverend Elhanan Winchester of Boston had already experienced the adversity that would mark his life. His first wife, to whom he had been only briefly married, took ill and died, leaving the young clergyman distraught and rootless in his native New England. Although he had remarried, he found himself uncomfortable in a world he could no longer easily explain within conventional Calvinist constructs of justice, salvation, and divine action.

To cope with the anguish of the loss and to come to terms theologically with its implications, the young Harvard educated cleric decided to take a trip along the seaboard of colonial America with the great port of Charleston as his ultimate destination. He hoped that the travel and the opportunity for reflection would nurture a peace he could not find at home. What he found instead were experiences that were so unsettling that they would utterly change his life, turning him from orthodoxy to radical religious doctrines and transforming his conception of the social role of the minister in the world. In the process, he would become a central figure, both literally and symbolically, for a sea-change in African-American religion and culture in South Carolina [1].

[1] Biographical information is taken primarily from Edwin Martin Stone, *Biography of Rev. Elhanan Winchester*, Boston 1836.

Two stops in Winchester's journey southward served as crucibles for the transfiguration of his consciousness and prepared him to play a singular role in the process of black cultural change in South Carolina. While traveling in the Middle Colonies late in the fall of 1774, he stopped for a while in Philadelphia, a city where he would eventually settle. During his stay, Winchester visited a Germantown Baptist congregation that was in the early stages of a shift away from Calvinist orthodoxy to the « heresy » of Universalism, and although the lines of the fracture that would split the church in two five years later were as yet indistinct, the nascent issues were clear enough to have a decisive effect on the young minister's troubled mind.

By the time he left Philadelphia, Winchester had begun to question the harshly exclusive doctrines of salvation held by his forebears and was ready to see religious rebirth as something open to all who professed a belief in the messianic life of Christ. The fledgling cleric nevertheless retained – and would continue to hold loyal to – a belief in an apocalyptic judgment of those who failed to make the simple profession of faith, thus rendering him, as James West Davidson has argued, the last vocal millenarian in America until the advent of the Millerites in the 1830s [2].

Around Christmastime, he crossed the border into Virginia where he found many people excited by the lingering fervor of the Great Awakening. Virginians were eager to hear him preach, and he discovered that they were especially receptive to his newly forming religious message. As he passed through the rural areas with their small farms beside great plantations, Winchester found souls crying out for salvation; but he also found social conditions that commanded his attention. As he pressed his way through the Old Dominion, Winchester observed slavery first hand, and his experience forged ideas that were not compatible with the interests of the master class. By the time he reached Fairfax, he had arrived at conclusions he expressed in a new sermon delivered there on the 30th of December.

He cast his address in the apocalyptic terms of his emerging ideology and directed it at the new things he saw about him; when he published the sermon several years later, its title expressed the lineaments of his millennial ideology: *The Reigning Abominations, Especially the Slave Trade, Considered as Causes of Lamentation* [3]. The discourse assailed the holders of and trafficers in slaves and assured those that opposed the institution that they would be treated as « mourners in Zion », preserved « in the midst of that run and total destruction » that surely faced the people who kept property in human beings « Such as are the true mourners shall be comforted », Winchester asserted,

[2] James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought in Eighteenth Century America*, New Haven 1836, 272-279.

[3] Elhanan Winchester, *The Reigning Abominations, Especially the Slave Trade, Considered as Causes of Lamentation: Being the Substance of a Discourse Delivered in Fairfax County, Virginia, December 30, 1774*, London 1788.

« they shall be set apart for God, shall be preserved in the midst of danger, shall be spared when the wicked are cut off, and though a thousand shall fall at their side, and ten thousand at their right hand, no evil shall come near to them ». « Alas! » he exclaimed, « I would chose to be in the situations of the slaves, rather than in that of their masters; for if there is a just God, he will punish those who sit against his authority; and who is able to endure his displeasure? » While offering comfort to his sympathetic listeners, Winchester gave even greater cause for his opponents to shudder in fear when he delivered the sermon at the end of 1774 and many times thereafter. He told them in elaborate detail just what a vengeful God would do to those who rejected his message and assured them that the slaves themselves would be the primary agents of the retribution.

« The slaves will at length be free », he said; « and if you refuse and rebel, you will be enslaved, or devoured by the sword; and this you may depend upon... Oh! how much blood must be shed, before such an event can take place! but remember, the blood that has been shed in Africa, this may come home, and those whom you at present oppress may be your oppressors; and be sure if that should be the case, they will render you ten-fold » [4].

Winchester thus made his position clear. In his sermon were the seeds of his evolving ideology, of his belief in a demanding and judgmental God who would visit Armagedon on a corrupt and sinful world, and of his soon-to-be fully articulated profession of universal redemption. But also in his sermon were an unequivocal attack on slavery and a profession of his belief in the sinfulness of those who participated in the system.

Shortly after delivering the discourse, Winchester left Virginia and made his way southward through North Carolina and toward his ultimate destination in Charleston. He arrived there some time in early 1775 and found a genteel community in need of religious awakening. Professing an ideology of millennial, universal Christianity, adamently opposing slavery, and possessing ordination and good standing in the Baptist Church, Winchester thus loomed as a remarkably powerful potential force for South Carolina's religiously neglected black population.

Leaders of the Baptist community prevailed upon Winchester soon after his arrival in Charleston to serve one of the oldest congregations in the colony, and he immediately departed to Welsh Neck on the Pee Dee River. By the end of 1775, the members of the church issued a permanent call, which the minister promptly accepted, sending for his spouse to join him in South Carolina. There he remained until the final months of 1779 [5]. Winchester proved to be an enormously powerful preacher for people of the Pee Dee region, gathering a following unequaled in the colony or state since the time of

[4] *Ibid.*, 1-32.

[5] Stone, *Biography*; and Winchester, *Reigning Abominations*, 13, footnote.

Whitefield in the early 1740s. The numbers responding to the minister's message were always significant during his tenure, but he met with his largest success in the summer of 1779, just before his final departure.

Evidence indicates that during June, July, and August, more than 240 new members joined Welsh Neck through the New Englander's call to salvation. However great was Winchester's broad appeal to the citizens of the Pee Dee region, his ability to solicit the sympathies of the vastly unchurched black population was greater still. Slaves predominated among his converts during that final summer when religious fervor peaked. As his biographer reported, his « known opposition to slavery recommended him to their favorable attention ». But surely of equal importance was his earnest desire to address them as fellow human beings with souls worthy of being saved. Indeed, his concern for the slaves was unique in the history of the region. As he himself remembered, « Till I came thither no attempts had been made in that settlement to convert the slaves, as I could ever learn; at least they had never proved effectual, for not one had ever been baptized there in the memory of man ».

When he first spoke with Pee Dee blacks about religion, he found « them entirely ignorant of all its doctrines, and deeply prejudiced against it, on account of their masters professing it, and yet using them so cruely... ». As he studiously avoided any involvement with the institution of slavery, and when he « judged it prudent, speaking against it, and proving [his] aversion to it by... constant practice », blacks began to come to hear him, « such as had the liberty... ». Finding that his tactics brought more and more black listeners, Winchester made adjustments in his preaching routines to accommodate his new audience. « One evening seeing a great number at the door when I was preaching », he remembered, « I found myself constrained.. to go to the door, and tell them... that Jesus Crist loved them, and died for them, as well as for us white people and that they might come and believe in him ».

His efforts were richly rewarded for he converted some thirty from one plantation who « determined from the time to seek the Lord diligently... ». The African-Americans there and elsewhere on the Pee Dee from « that very evening... began constantly to pray to the Lord, and soon continued... ». Winchester baptized that thirty and as many as one hundred more from other plantations during the summer of 1779, and when he returned for a visit in 1784, he found the vast majority of those he converted faithful to religion[6].

Winchester's opposition to slavery and his decision to speak directly to the slaves certainly played large roles in encouraging black participation in his services and the eventual conversion of many. But these two factors reveal only a part of the story. The content of the New England divine's preaching and his choice to take a message directly to potential black converts placed

[6] Winchester, *Reigning Abominations*, 25-27.

him on the seam of two religious cultures: One of the past that had direct appeal to the Africa-shaped world view of most eighteenth century South Carolina slaves; and one that merged more properly with the present and future through its identities with the evangelicalism that would predominate among African-Americans and other southerners with increasing force from the 1790s onward. Indeed, Winchester was at once both a « revolutionist » and a « conversionist » millenarian, thus straddling the great divide between eighteenth and nineteenth century black responses to Christianity[7]. He provided the message of a radical religion with roots in the English Revolution, one that cried out for social justice and was aggressively confrontational with perceived inequities and immoralities. At the same time, he rejected total reliance on challenges to the prevailing order that had been characteristic of an earlier time to speak through the terms of an evangelical Christianity that in future decades would increasingly work to construct local and extralocal institutions as the primary modus operandi of the religious community.

Blacks came to him when he preached at Welsh Neck because he described an apocalyptic Christianity that had formed the main ideological stream of African conversion in the first seventy years of their history in South Carolina; and they stayed in his congregation because his Baptist church provided the stable structure that would become the heart of a new kind of millennialism which shaped the translocal slave community within and beyond isolated plantations of the antebellum era. Winchester's tenure deserves the consideration it has received here because it opens a window both on what had been and on what soon would be.

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What had been was shaped by a series of dramatic encounters between blacks and whites beginning at the very moment that the master class decided it would be within its interests to introduce the African labor force to the beliefs, ethics, and practices of Christianity. As early as the first decade of the eighteenth century, Anglican clerics interested in evangelizing slaves discovered the « empirical risk » of such social communication. They found that

[7] The distinction is from Bryan Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium: A Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protest Among Tribal and Third-World Peoples*, New York 1973, 18-26. The revolutionist millenerian, Wilson argues, responds to evil in the world by declaring that « only the destruction of the world, of the natural, but more specifically of the social order, will suffice to save men. This process of destruction must be supernaturally wrought, for men lack the power if not to destroy the world then certainly to recreate it. Believers may themselves feel called upon to participate in the process of overturning the world, but they know that they do no more than put a shoulder to an already turning wheel and give an earnest of faith... Men have no hope except from a new dispensation, and the creation of such a new order is the intention of god or the gods ». By contrast, the conversionist millenarian sees salvation and the redemption of the world in much more personal terms. He/she believes that the individual conversion is the preeminent event in the path toward worldly perfection-that by becoming part of an individually saved community, the person redeems him/herself and contributes toward the future redemption of the social order.

the recently arrived blacks were perhaps slaves in the fields, but, to borrow further from Sahlins, refused to be « slaves of their concepts » of Christianity and instead became « masters » of their own notion of true religion[8]. The many African cultures blacks counted as their heritage served as what Raymond Williams has called a cultural residual, something « effectively formed in the past but... still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present ».

This « residual culture » helped determine how African-Americans interpreted and struggled to shape their experiences in South Carolina, and particularly how they received the Christianity taught them. That interpretation of Christianity was also informed by the « emergent » culture that grew out of the black experience as eighteenth century slaves, a culture that served as a unifying force for the black community. These residual and emergent elements interacted to fuel black cultural change with regard to religion[9]. Whites sought to direct this change through such actions as conversion or denial of conversion to the Anglican church; but neither the masters' paternalism nor their oppression could completely determine the outcome. There was a fundamental orientation emerging from the intertwining threads of black culture that led African-Americans to interpret the Christian principles and doctrines they learned in a particular way, a way that challenged the essential nature of the slave system. Whites perceived this challenge, as they so often did, and reacted to remove the threat. While their reaction had important implications for black social and cultural change, they did not demolish the resistance that was the center of black religion; they merely helped push that resistance in a direction that was less immediately threatening and therefore more tolerable. The dialectic of this struggle between black and white in the realm of religion, which had a striking parallel in the conflict between radical dissent and Establishment in seventeenth century England, transformed the face of South Carolina for generations.

While the Africans brought to South Carolina as slaves had a conception of the deity that prepared them to accept monotheistic Christianity in a fairly orthodox way, they also had some expectations of religious entitites and practices that departed radically from the Anglican comprehension of the universe. When introduced to the lifeless, affect-less English Christianity – and this applies also to the majority of the early eighteenth century dissent

[8] Marshall Sahlins, in *Islands of History*, Chicago, 1985, and in the earlier *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*, Ann Arbor, 1981, provides a brilliant discussion of the interaction of « symbol », or culture, and « structure », or social organization, in a dynamic and changing history. He is very much concerned with the use of symbols to achieve control and power on the one hand, and their interpretive flexibility in escaping domination on the other. One should also see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, 1977; and Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, London, 1977, for many of the insights that Sahlins applies in a changing historical context.

[9] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, New York, 1977, 121-127.

which had gone the way of safe, social respectability[10] – the new slaves infused it with their traditional expectations of gods and the « supernatural », understanding it in a way that returned God to an active role in the world and provided ameliorative qualities that departed radically from orthodox expectations.

Because their African cultural traditions persisted as a way of approaching religion, they saw the new faith they were encouraged to adopt as a source of power, as a means of « explaining, predicting, and controlling » the events of their lives[11]. Like the radicals of the Commonwealth, they drew a revolutionary message from their new religion, a message that promised the advent of the millennium in which all injustice would end, equality among people would reign, and the agents of darkness would be routed and punished. The religion that developed adhered closely to Norman Cohn's general typology of millenarianism: « collective » in that salvation was to come to the oppressed as a group; « terrestrial » in that the event was to occur in the world and not in some spiritual realm; « imminent » in that the millennium was believed to be at hand; « total » in that the world was to be transformed completely; and « miraculous » in that God was to intervene directly to cause the event[12]. This radical « premillennialism » was identical to what Bryan Wilson has called « revolutionist » millenarianism, and the « revolutionist » response characterized much of the black response to Christianity in the eighteenth century[13].

As soon as whites began intensive efforts to convert the slaves, they encountered « radical innovations » in the things they attempted to communicate[14]. Indeed, the first significant evangelist of the slaves, the Rev. Francis Le Jau, discovered the danger of his attempts at social communication shortly after his arrival in the colony. Le Jau understood the potential for social discord inherent in the scriptures for he had begun his journey from Catholicism to Anglicanism as a Huguenot in France before the turn of the century. Such personal history sharpened his point when he reported to his superiors at the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) that while he baptized « two sensible and honest negroe slaves » who added to the « several who come constantly to Church », all was nor well among the Christian African-Americans in Goose Creek Parish.

Le Jau wrote in a tone that clearly revealed his alarm that « The best Scholar

[10] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, New York, 1971.

[11] *Ibid.*, discusses the changes that grew out of the English Reformation for common people left without a faith that provided them access to power in the world. See the many articles by Robin Horton on African religions, but particularly, « African Conversion », parts 1 and 2, *Africa*, 41 (1971).

[12] Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, Revised and Expanded Edition, New York, 1970, 15.

[13] Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium*, 9-101.

[14] Sahlins, *Islands of History*, Introduction and Chapters 1 and 5.

of all the Negroes in my Parish and a very sober and honest Liver, thro' his Learning was like to Create some Confusion among all the Negroes in this Country; he had a Book wherein he read some description of the several judgments that Chastise Men because of their Sins in these latter days, that description made an Impression upon his spirit, and he told his Master abruptly there would be a dismal time and the Moon wou'd be turned into Blood, and there wou'd be dearth of dark and went away »[15]. Le Jau certainly knew that his « Scholar » had studied perhaps a little too closely the sixth chapter of the Revelations of St. John where the Lamb of God breaks the seven seals predicting what one recent analyst has termed the « great tribulation of the endtime ». The first five seals collectively demand justice for the oppressed, vindication for the downtrodden. The breaking of the sixth seal which contains the central image of the « moon turned into blood » puts forth the punishment of the injustices described in the first five. As Elisabeth Fiorenza argues, « The outcry of those who asked for justice and revenge of their lives is granted in this vision of eschatological well-being and salvation »[16].

Such were the subjective risks that Le Jau and others encountered when they introduced eighteenth century black South Carolinians to the texts of Christianity. Like Humpty Dumpty in Marshall Sahlins's dialogue, they found themselves wondering who would be the master of the signs and symbols they proffered. The Goose Creek cleric tried to forestall what he had set in motion through his interest in converting the slaves. When he interrogated the black man who was the source of his concern, he « ingeniously told me he had read so in a Book; I advised him and charged him not to put his own Construction upon his reading after that manner, and to be Cautious not to speak so, which he promised to me but yet wou'd never shew me the Book... ». But things had already gotten out of hand.

Le Jau reported that when his « best scholar » had spoken the few words to his master, « some Negroe overheard a part, and it was quickly blazed abroad that an Angel came and spoke to the Man. He had seen a hand that gave him a book; he had heard Voices, seen fires, etc. »[17]. Fearing the worst, Le Jau « took care to undeceive those who asked me about it » because he feared that « those Men [the slaves] have not judgment enough to make good use of their learning; and I have thought most convenient not to urge too far that Indians and Negroes ghould be indifferently admitted to learn to read, but I leave it to the discretion of their Masters whom I exhort to examine well their Inclinations. I have often observed and lately hear », he cautioned, « that it had been better if persons of a Melancholy Constitution or those that run into the Search after Curious matter had never seen a Book »[18]. While he

[15] Le Jau to Secretary, 1 February 1710, SPG A 5, XCVIII.

[16] Elisabeth Fiorenza, *Invitation to the Book of Revelation*, New York, 1982, 81-87.

[17] Le Jau, 1 February 1710.

[18] Le Jau to Secretary, 19 February 1710, SPG A 5, LXXXII.

would soon report that the event « is inconsiderable in itself », Le Jau still felt compelled to add that « I fear the consequences »[19]. Three years later, he was still referring to the problems he had encountered when African-Americans « put their own Construction » on his teachings[20].

The events of 1710 and their repercussions never turned into an open revolt, never generated a millenarian war against slavery. But we must remember that collective action is just one alternative in a group seized by visions like those of Le Jau's « best scholar ». As Bryan Wilson has argued, in the millenarian's view, the destruction of the oppressive order and the creation of the new are primarily divine actions that the worldly chosen can only assist[21]. As the great millennial revolutionary, Nat Turner, did over a century later, Carolina slaves caught up in the fervor of the black teacher's lessons may have been waiting for a sign to mount their assault. Nevertheless, African-Americans who found an apocalyptic ideology in Christianity need not have acted on their beliefs; believing them was a radical enough step in the eyes of white masters. Surely Le Jau's « best scholar » did not reject his learning just because of the missionary's protestations. He likely waited for some sign of the beginning of divine action – and shared his special knowledge with others. But we must not interpret this as acquiescence – prudence merely called on him and his comrades to prepare themselves and wait for the miraculous.

Christian blacks continued to unsettle the minds of South Carolina whites throughout the colonial period. One of Francis Le Jau's successor as SPG missionary to Goose Creek Parish reported fifteen years later that uncertainties represented by the events of 1710 persisted. A great impediment to proselytizing was the « Treacherousness of Some slaves (that have been brought over Xtianity) by secret poisonings and bloody Insurrections [that] has rendered it at present almost impracticable to convert any but here and there a favorite house slave ».

The sad fact was that the general opinion of the missionaries was a fear of « having slaves trained up for Baptism [that] arises from ye ingratitude of some bloody Villians who have returned... ye greatest of evils for ye greatest of good... »[22]. Too often, the same SPG minister claimed, blacks made « ill use of meeting to do their duty to God as to take ye opportunity at such times of seizing and destroying their owner »[23]. Such general complaints about the character of converted slaves worked against the mission of Chris-

19 Le Jau to Secretary, 13 June 1710, SPG A 5, No. 120.

20 Le Jau to Bishop of London, 17 September 1711, Fulham Palace Manuscripts for South Carolina, No. 7.

21 Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium*, 19.

22 Richard Ludlam to Secretary, 2 July 1724, SPG B 4, II, 181.

23 Richard Ludlam to Secretary, 22 March 1725, SPG A 19.

tianizing blacks in South Carolina and rendered the work of those committed to the task perilous and difficult.

In 1759, however, even the most ardent advocates of slave conversion were reminded of the struggle for control over the meaning of religious symbols that plagued South Carolina in the eighteenth century. The rector of the most prestigious parish in the colony, St. Philips of Charleston, at this time prompted a series of events that followed closely those of 1710 and others during the intervening years. The learned minister, one Richard Clarke, in March of 1759 published a pamphlet titled *The Prophetic Numbers of Daniel and John Calculated: In Order to Show the Time, when the Day of Judgement for the First Age of the Gospel, is to be expected; and the Setting up of the Millennial Kingdom of Jehovah and His Christ.* Typical of eighteenth century millenarian tracts, Clarke's pamphlet went to elaborate extremes of Biblical exegesis to calculate the exact time at which the second coming of the Messiah would occur. His perspective was clearly pre-millennial in that he expected the cataclysmic apocalypse to precede the advent of Christ and predicted emphatically that the wicked would be punished and the just rewarded. His detailed calculations worked to show that the Day of Judgment would fall some time between the present and 1765 [24]. Publication of the pamphlet eroded what had been his considerable public esteem.

As one commentor put it, « about a twelve month ago he first broke out asserting absolute universal redemption and limiting future punishment to a certain number of years; after this he proceeded to level all his artillery against the Calvinists, and then against our best Divines, and at last represented all the Commentators of the Scriptures, as ignorant or imposters; about a month ago, he declared in one of his Sermons, "that he was directed by the Spirit of God, to acquaint Mankind, that the Day of Judgement was to happen in less than five years"; and he has accordingly since published his Calculations... and the confusion occasioned by them is very great... » [25]. In the midst of this « confusion », Clarke hastily departed for England where he lived until his death in 1802. And well he should have, because his calculations and preachings set in motion events that threatened to foment rebellion among the colony's pronounced black majority.

The eye of the storm revolved around a free black by the name of Philip Jones who was arrested and brought before the Royal Council in the summer of 1759. It seems that Jones had taken to telling his friends that « you may go where you please but God almighty has given me other work to do ». At one point he had given two other blacks named Tom and Trane a piece of paper with his message from God and charged them « to carry it to all the Negroes

[24] Clarke, (Charleston, 1759), *passim.*

[25] Rev. Martyn to Secretary, 24 February 1759, SPG *Journals*, V. 14.

and show it to them... ». The note detailed a plan that was to be carried out on the 7th of June when all the « buchrass » were to be killed. When white authorities apprehended the note, Jones said it mattered little to him « for he had another and would go to Charles Town with it and would do the work God Almighty had set him about, that in six months time all the Buchrass would be killed ».

Admonitions did little to deter Jones and his followers. Some time during the summer he went into the woods for reflection and there had « a Vision, in which it was revealed to him, that in the Month of September the White People would be all underground, that the Sword should go through the land, and it should shine with their blood, that there should be no more White King's Governor or greatmen, but the Negroes should live happily and have Laws of their Own ». Further investigation revealed that Jones's prophecies had begun around the time of Clarke's preaching and writing about the millennium. After lengthy investigations, Jones went to the gallows for his prophetic vision and the threat of religiously-motivated revolution was once again quelled[26].

Events such as Jones's visions, the predictions of Le Jau's « best scholar », and others too numerous to recount here marked the history of African-American conversion in the eighteenth century. They served as constant reminders to white South Carolinians of the potential released by a sharing of religious symbols with a people from different cultural traditions mired in an oppressive social condition. Most of these episodes, however, had their roots in local areas, whether they be the rural plantations of Goose Creek Parish or the more cosmopolitan atmosphere of Charleston.

The signal manifestation of revolutionary millenarianism during the eighteenth century, though, commanded the attention of the entire colony and threatened to become a broad-based movement among blacks throughout inhabited South Carolina. As before, events emerged from a radical religious message combined with special attention given to black conversion; but this time, the fires of radicalism were fanned by the winds of the Great Awakening that swept across the colony in the late 1730s and early 1740s[27].

The principal agent of the Awakening in Carolina was the great Anglican dissenter, George Whitefield. During several visits between late 1739 and 1742, the Son of Thunder, as Whitefield was know locally, took his dramatic appeal for personal salvation – coupled with a direct attack on existing religious authorities, an imputed link between secular events and the spiritual

[26] South Caroline Council *Journals*, V. 28, 20 June 1759; 9 July 1759, British Public Records Office *Transcripts*, V. 28, 1 September 1759, all in South Carolina Archives; *South Carolina Gazette*, 1 September 1759.

[27] The Awakening in South Carolina is treated at length in my dissertation, « Across Space and Time: Conversion, Conmunity and Cultural Change Among South Carolina Slaves » (University of North Carolina, 1984), 117-163.

condition of the colony's people, and an ardent call for evangelizing the slaves – to the citizens of South Carolina. The stridancy of his call, his uncompromising attack on the established power structure, his challenge that fires, earthquakes, and pestilence were attributable to unregenerate souls, and his assertion that « servants » should be given an equal place in the Christian community threatened to overturn the social order.

All aspects of Whitefield's message concerned the authorities who saw in him potential revolution. But their fears of the master paled compared to the horrors spawned by some of his more extreme disciples. By 1742, Whitefield's followers were speaking directly to slaves gathered in large numbers on remote plantations, telling the listeners that « they must not go to work but go and seek Christ, he was their Master ». One audience of some five thousand strong near St. Helena responded, as one observer reported, « in the Height of Joy and Transport » saying that « Christ was a very good Master, if he would get 'em a Holy Day, and they would seek him every Day ». Shortly after the gathering, many « went raving into the Woods for some time till their Masters were obliged to take them under Discipline ». One of Whitefield's most enthusiastic disciples took it upon himself to link a chain of events so that he came to certain prophetic conclusions about the future of the world. According to the courts who prosecuted this man, he kept a journal wherein he recorded these predictions, among them a description of the « destruction of Charles Town, and the deliverance of the Negroes from their Servitude... ».

After a trip to the wilderness, this disciple returned to report that Charleston and its environs would be « destroyed by fire and sword, to be executed by the Negroes », before 1 April 1742. Authorities acted decisively when Whitefield's radicalism spread to the slaves and drove the cleric from the colony under the threat of prosecution. This effectively extinquished the flames of potential revolution as the preacher's diverse followers were left without leader or inspiration. But Whitefield and the Great Awakening marked South Carolina for the rest of the century. Unlike other southern colonies, evangelicalism was banished from its boundaries until a more moderate Christianity emerged during the Revolution. When a distinct alternative to established religion appeared, it came in the form of churches that did not see their

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African-American conversion during the eighteenth century presented whites with profound problems of interpretation, power, and control. It left meaning open to personal evaluation; too often blacks chose to carry that meaning to its radical and logical extension, seeing Christianity as a call for revolution, as an opportunity for divinely mediated social justice. But conversion during the reign of the established church also meant the newly Christian slaves confronted questions for which there were no easy answers. If they chose to accept the message of the SPG missionaries as it was intended, they were

primary role to be a challenge to the traditional patterns of social authority. brought into a church that was elitist, hierarchical, staid, and discriminatory toward them and their souls. In becoming Anglican, they found their social condition reenforced and its deprivation unameliorated. If on the other hand they listened closely to the message of Christianity and took the meaning of its texts literally, they found themselves in revolt against their masters and slavery. However frequently this happened – and it was the persistent theme of the first period of African-American conversion – this response could not be tolerated by whites; whenever the millennial revolution was proposed, it was readily and ruthlessly suppressed by the masters.

Even if there had been no routine suppression of millennial conversion, black South Carolinians would have found the translation of their interpretation of Christian meaning into established religious institutions problematic at best. The typical millenarian event of the eighteenth century was unequivocally charismatic both in its origins and in its realization. Movements vested with charisma and charismatic leadership such as those in colonial South Carolina are outside the everyday routines and structures of society, and, indeed, are in their very nature « antistructural » in their role and intent. People who assume charismatic leadership are gifted individuals that call upon the supernatural in a way that common mortals cannot; in turn, their power is limited to the extent that they can continue to use their special gifts to affect their ends. This creates a highly volatile situation that cannot persist for long.

As soon as the charismatic leader's power falters or appears to be flawed, the authority of the leader is called into question; by its very nature, such authority cannot tolerate questioning and the ability of the individual to lead disintegrates. If the movement is to continue, it must develop its own rules, regulations, structures, and institutions, in short, become uncharismatic[28]. Because of the political nature of the movements in colonial South Carolina, and because of the marginal place converted slaves received in the churches, this evolution was impossible and the millennial events remained inherently ephemeral, fundamentally labile. No institutions existed to channel the events into new social structures and new patterns for the black community.

Elhanan Winchester and others like him, however, were harbingers of new possibilities that would be central in the transformation of the African-American community in the nineteenth century. Their Christianity, although less radical and confrontational with traditional structures of authority than that of earlier times, still offered a distinctly different view of human relations to enslaved blacks while also providing a matrix of institutions that would give a real alternative for building a translocal African-American community.

[28] The notion of religion, structure and antistructure is Victor Tourner's in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure*, Chicago, 1969 and *Dramas, Fields and Metaphora: Symbolic Action in Human Societies*, Ithaca, 1974. For the original and most provocative discussion of charisma see Max Weber, *Economy and Society; An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Berkeley, 1968, Volume I, Volume II, 1111-1123, 1148-1150.

Throughout the South, the Separate Baptists formed the opening wedge of what would become the evangelical revival of the late eighteenth century, and they thus set the tone for critical changes in southern Christianity in the antebellum era. The Separates had been Strict Congregationalists during the Great Awakening in New England. As one recent author has put it, the « quest for a pure church » soon drove them to the Baptist faith where the rejection of pedobaptism and the affirmation of exclusively adult membership afforded greater control over the community of the elect[29]. As they followed the mass movement of population into the southern backcountry, the Separates carried their distinct brand of Christianity and spread the seeds of evangelicalism.

Wherever they went, they also « offered a way of organizing people into groups that cared for them and provided guidelines for personal as well as public life »[30]. Members of the ruling class in South Carolina attempted to mitigate the most radical elements that grew out of the Great Awakening and stood at the heart of Separate Baptism; but their effort was only partially successful. The Separates lent their style and their more immediately egalitarian ideology to the evangelical movement and forever marked it with these qualities.

Unlike the Baptists, the Methodists had their roots in the low country and were always most numerically strong there. Also, unlike the Baptist who came out of the dissenting tradition of the seventeenth century, the Wesleyanism that characterized the Methodists who eventually held sway in Carolina beginning with the end of the Revolutionary era was essentially Arminian in orientation and, as Bernard Semmel has argued, occupied a middle ground « between Establishment and Dissent... ». While it was an evangelical revival that sought to purge the church of the corrupt authority of those who had not experienced the « new birth », it also struggled against what Semmel has called « speculative Antinomianism » of the seventeenth century, the kind of Antinomianism that sought to lay aside all authority except that flowing directly from God.

In this way, Wesleyan Methodism was potentially less radical than the Whitefieldian wing of the movement, but it was still a dramatically different evangelical Christianity that offered a distinct alternative to the established order[31]. Along with the Baptists, the Methodists formed the majority constituents of evangelicalism in South Carolina.

The advent of the evangelical Baptists and Methodists heralded the birth of black Christianity on a mass scale. Evangelicals relied on the quality of the religious experience as the measure of the individual's acceptability into

[29] Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South, Chicago*, 1977, 29.

[30] *Ibid.*, 24-26.

[31] Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution*, New York, 1974, 3-37.

the congregation. They shared with the radical Whitefieldians a rejection of worldly status and a demand for the « new birth » from all of their fellow believers. But unlike the Whitefieldians, they offered a denominational structure that served as the potential foundation of a black community that transcended plantation boundaries. African-Americans realized this and eagerly accepted the new world that began to open up to them in the 1760s and 1770s.

Religious communities solicitous of blacks proliferated througout the state. As just one among many, the legacy Winchester created during the Revolution endured in the Pee Dee region. A correspondent with John Asplund's London-based *Baptist Annual Register* wrote in 1790 that he often « preached to 300 at a time, and not one white present but myself.. We have several in our church who go to the plantations, and preach to their own color on Lords-day evenings and at other times when we have no service in the meeting house »[32]. By 1796, there were 127 members of the Welsh Neck congregation with black outnumbering whites 64 to 63[33]. During the final four decades of the antebellum era, over one thousand Pee Dee slaves converted to Christianity under the influence of Welsh Neck and joined the congregation.

Many more attended regularly without making the commitment of membership. One observer reported to the Welsh Neck Association in 1841 that often « the churches are not large enough to receive them... »[34]. This Pee Dee organization of Baptist congregations recorded over 3,100 black members in the year of the outbreak of the Civil War[35]. Many of these were communicants of essentially black churches. Mechanicsville Baptist Church, for example, claimed 311 African-American Christians while their whites numbered just 23[36]. In the low country where the proportion of African-Americans in the population was even higher than it was in the Pee Dee, black church membership was greater still. Charleston First Bapist Church claimed 195 whites and 749 blacks as early as 1830. Ten years later, the black membership had risen to over 1,100 while only some 75 whites had been added[37]. Similar patterns prevailed throughout the low country among antebellum Baptists.

The Georgetown Church, to cite another exmaple, claimed a white membership of just 28 and a black constituency of nearly 1,050 in 1854; Beaufort Baptist Church reported to the Association in 1860 that it had just 162 whites in its fold while blacks numbered over 3,500[38]. Areas outside the Pee Dee

[32] John Asplund, *The Baptist Annual Register*, London, 1790, 104-106.
[33] Welsh Neck Church Book, 31 December 1796, South Caroliniana Library.
[34] *Circular Letter of the Welsh Neck Association*, Charleston, 1841, 15-16.
[35] *Minutes of the Welsh Neck Baptist Association*, Charleston, 1860.
[36] Mechanicsville Baptist Church Book, South Caroliniana Library.
[37] Charleston First Baptist Church Book, South Caroliniana Library.
[38] Beaufort Baptist Church Book, South Carolina Baptist Archives, Furman University.

and low country where African-American majorities were common also reported similar patterns, albeit on a smaller scale. In places where blacks were in the majority, or where there were significant numbers of large plantations, Baptist churches attracted impressive black constituencies. And even in areas where small slaveholdings predominated and the African-American population was thin, almost every Baptist church claimed some black members[39].

The Methodist Church, especially in lower South Carolina, quickly became predominantly black and a central institution in the slave community. By 1809, a majority of the church's membership in the low country was black and in 1917, the proportion was three quarters. In the Pee Dee and along the Savannah River, similar membership pattern emerged.

Black Mehtodists were a significant part of the church even in areas where there were smaller slave populations; in fact, in the upper piedmont, where Methodists had only moderate success attracting African-American members, slaves constituted over one-third of the congregations. By 1860, Methodist blacks were over 13 per cent of the low country black population, 11 per cent in the Pee Dee and Savannah River areas, and 11.7 per cent in the upper piedmont. Only in the lower piedmont did they fall below 10 per cent of the total number of blacks in the area[40].

African-Americans joined the evangelical churches precisely because they were treated little if any different from the white members. Coming from a society that relegated them to the lowest rung of the social ladder, they found in the Methodist and Baptist churches the same criteria for conversion applied regardless of race, class, or sex[41]. Blacks quickly realized that once they entered the churches they found a unique opportunity for escaping white direction and control.

Whites allowed – and quite often, because of their aversion to the distinctly black style of worship, encouraged – the formation of what were essentially indepedent black congregation within the interracial churches. With the official imprimatur of the whites, separate African-American meetings avoided the kind of secular purview that had always plagued fully independent black churches in the antebellum South. Fourthermore, they gained an institutional structure that could grow through the conversion of other slaves while maintaining a highly visible public visage – something the « invisible » churches of the slave quarters could not easily risk.

As early as the late 1770s, blacks entering evangelical churches moved quickly to constitute separate congregations. The nearly seventy new slave members who entered Welsh Neck under the revivalist call of Elhanan Winchester

39 « Across Space and Time », Chapter 4.
40 *Ibid.*
41 *Ibid.*, Chapter 5; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South.*

in 1778 promptly made an independently meeting church with only nominal affiliation with the white congregation. Baptists were not alone in allowing this pattern. Black Methodists in Charleston were meeting separately by 1793. Around 1815, there were over 4,000 African-American members in the Charleston area alone, and they completely governed their own affairs: They met separately in Quarterly Meetings, had their own preachers and elders, followed their own rules of worship, conducted their own disciplinary trials, and collected their own funds which they dispersed as they saw fit; in short, they were part of the white Methodist establishment in name only. Outside Charleston, the same pattern prevailed [42].

The opportunity to meet separately, the ritual freedom accompanying this independence, and the chance to develop autonomous black religious leadership all acted as attractions to potential black Christians. Each factor encouraged a fundamental shift in the nature of millenarian ideology in Africa-American religion after the 1770s. Whereas the usual response to Christianity during the colonial period had been revolutionary millennialism, slaves who were now provided with an institutional structure that they could manipulate to their own ends became most frequently conversionist in their orientation [43]. Conversion promised a truly significant change in the individual's status both in the present and in some future time. The change in the present came precisely because the individual Christian, by converting, became part of some wider community that could, at least to a significant degree, be manipulated, defined, and controled by blacks and blacks alone. This community could extend beyond the very limited confines of individual plantations to encompass whole regions of South Carolina, giving structure where structure did not elsewhere exist in the highly circumscribed slave society. And within the arena provided in this community, black social and cultural change could be more open to black determination than would be otherwise possible.

Indeed, the evidence indicates that the black church performed this function of linking local life to the extralocal community with increasing power through the antebellum era. African-American Christians most often joined the churches with members of their local slave community, indicating that the congregations united groups rather than isolated individuals from each plantation. For example, of the 72 identifiable blacks who came to Welsh Neck Baptist Church during the leadership of Winchester, 74 per cent joined with at least one other person from their home plantation. During the next

[42] See the data in « Across Space and Time », Chapter 4.

[43] According to Bryan Wilson, conversionist millennialism differs from revolutionist primarily in that it is oriented toward a different kind of social action. Rather than seeking to become an agent of the divine in destroying the world, those who take a conversionist response strive to construct a realistic alternative world that defies secular corruption and separates the faithful from evil, thereby advancing both personal salvation and preparing the world for the advent of divine intervention.

few decades, this proportion fluctuated somewhat, but after 1820, it climbed steadily so that by the 1830s and 1840s, 97 per cent of the new black converts to Welch Neck joined the church with others from their plantation.

The mean number of blacks from individual communities joining Welsh Neck increased through the antebellum period, rising from 2.6 in the 1770s to 10.4 in the 1850s. Membership in Welsh Neck and other churches like it meant that isolated plantation communities were increasingly intertwined through an institutional structure that transcended local boundaries. The communicants of other churches in the same region and throughout the state showed the same tendency to join with peers from their home plantation, and, over time, to construct a black congregtion that was a cluster of plantation communities[44]. Indeed, it might be argued that the churches became « hubs » for the religious « spokes » that emanated from widely dispersed plantation groups.

Over the eighty or so years between the arrival of Elhanan Winchester and other evangelicals on the South Carolina scene, millennial ideology had through the means of established Baptist and Methodist congregations become a more and more important factor in black social and cultural life. But it was not the episodic, charismatic, and revolutionary millennialism of the earlier decades of the eighteenth century that made such a difference. Rather, it was a millennialism that was oriented toward conversion and community building, toward the construction of a society of the black faithful that would serve as an effective counter to the oppression of slavery. The longed-for millennium became synonymous with the realization of this religiously based community. In the process, the revolutionary and apocalyptic millennium of the first years of conversion to Christianity receded into the background.

Nevertheless, it never totally disappeared from black religion and culture. Just as the eighteenth century was marked by slave prophets calling for divine retribution, the nineteenth century had its share of revolutionary religious leaders who continually served to define the outermost boundaries of African-American Christianity. Denmark Vesey is only the South Carolina figure most remembered in history. Others preceded him and others followed, up to the very collapse of slavery in 1865[45]. But it was the interplay between conversion and the always present promise of divinely inspired revolution that forged the creative tension of black religion after the 1770s.

The evangelical, extralocal community that grew around this interplay spawned the most important institutional structure for black society and culture under slavery and gave birth to the independent black church after emancipation – arguably the core of African-American life into our time.

[44] For many more examples of the same kinds of patterns, see « Across Space and Time », Chapter 5.

[45] For a lengthy discussion of this see « Across Space and Time », Epilogue, « The Unbroken Thread of Millennialism: The Black Prophetic Tradition Realized ».