

The Emergence of a New Black Religious Identity in New York City and Eastern New Jersey, 1624–1807

The cosmologies that African captives brought to the Hudson Valley formed the core of their identities. These newly enslaved populations encountered alternative religious systems during the period of the legal trans-Atlantic slave trade that lasted in this country from the seventeenth century until 1807. By the end of this period, most overtly religious blacks in the region had assumed new religious identities as Christians. But this new identity formation must be understood as a synthesis resulting from two sets of oppositions: the challenge between white missionary advances and African attempts to preserve their own belief systems, and the confrontation between black enthusiasm for Christian baptism as a means to liberation from slavery and white slave owners' (especially Dutch Reformed) reluctance to proselytize because this prompted slave expectations of manumission. In reshaping the new religion they eventually embraced, black Christians in the Hudson Valley connected to those evangelicals, pietists, and rituals proven most friendly to African worship styles. Moreover, the black converts established independent black churches as a critique of segregationist practices in white denominations.

The Dutch West India Company was unsure about the legality of enslaving Christians permanently . . . and wanted all residents of the colony to accept Christ. Ostensibly, the Reformed Church was the sole permissible denomination in the colony. In the original terms of settlement in 1624, the Dutch West India Company announced that the Reformed Church should be the official

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theology of the colony, though that dictum soon proved impossible to enforce. After the arrival of the Walloons, other European pietist denominations, including Lutherans, Swedish Reformed, Puritans, and others, settled in the colony. Many of them came from rural provinces of Holland or from other countries where popular attitudes maintained that Christianized slaves should be freed. The Angolans had probably converted to Roman Catholicism before their arrival in New Amsterdam. The Reformed faith did have a monopoly in one area: only the religious edifices of its church were allowed in New Netherland until the 1650s. Some dissidents quietly joined the Reformed congregation. To keep the peace and allow some observance of other creeds, the Reformed Church used a concept of the "hidden church" to allow other denominations to borrow time in the sanctuary. Because religion was the clearest avenue to freedom and civil equality, the first blacks in New Netherland sought membership in the state church.¹

Because the Synod of Dort² permitted local ministers the right to refuse baptism and allowed clerics to own slaves and deny them Christian fellowship, slavery gained a de facto legality in New Amsterdam, thereby opening clerics to pressure from their parishioners to do little about the fate of Africans. . . . [T]he Dutch West India Company seeking to reconcile the Synod of Dort's mandates on pagan baptism with the allure of the slave trade, saw no contradiction in the purchase and sale of Christians. In contrast, pietist settlers, while eager to obtain slaves, remained anxious about converting their chattel and possibly losing them. . . . Dutch families arriving in New Amsterdam surely recognized that this conflict worked against their self-interest. In the future, settlers would solve this problem simply by refusing to let their slaves anywhere near a church pulpit.

Initially Dutch Reformed Church efforts to convert Africans in New Amsterdam depended heavily on the dominie, or minister, who was an employee of the Dutch West India Company. . . . As the company imported more blacks as lifetime slaves and sold them to private owners, Reformed clerics became leery about performing a rite that had powerful social and legal consequences. Also, although clerical reports suggest that blacks were eager to be baptized, the requirements included a solid understanding of the basic beliefs of the Reformed Church and patience with the solemn, unemotional sermons. The orthodoxy issued from the Synod of Dort ensured a strict hierarchical order in which blacks were far down the ranks. Blacks owned by patriarchal masters had the tough task of convincing the family head of the necessity of catechism and church membership. Together, these reasons were early signs that Christian denominations would make only partial headway in converting African Americans. Public anxiety over the black equation of baptism and freedom curbed the willingness of Dutch Reformed members to catechize their slaves. . . . As the Dutch curbed baptism of blacks to avoid the threat of emancipation,

Africans became unrecorded spectators in the Reformed churches. The Reformed Church discouraged lay preaching and approached theological disputes in a distinctly paternalist manner, diminishing any black contributions.³ Blacks' participation in religious affairs became limited to annual public rituals. The liturgical year in New Netherland was richly celebratory and preserved traditional pietism in the church. In particular, the Dutch observed Pinkster, their version of Pentecost, as a sanctified revival of the early Christian church. Pinkster was already known to Africans. Even before arriving in New Netherland, Africans were exposed to Roman Catholic instruction from missionaries. Kongolese royalty became Catholic during the sixteenth century after conversion by Jesuits and Capuchin clergy, and so slaves exported from Luanda in the seventeenth century had been exposed to Christianity. Catholic missionaries in the Kongo regarded all aspects of the culture of the target country that were not directly contrary to the fundamental doctrine of the church as immaterial and left them unchanged. Thus blacks in New Amsterdam coming from Angola lead a syncretic rather than an assimilated understanding of Christianity.⁴ This alchemy is visible in the anxieties European divines expressed over African use of the holiday. The Capuchin monk Denis De Carli baptized several Angolans on Pentecost Sunday, then watched with apprehension as "They fell a playing upon several instruments, a Dancing and Shouting So Loud that they might be heard half a league off."⁵

Pinkster was celebrated in New Amsterdam as early as 1628. In the New World, Pinkster celebrants met on Sunday and Pentecost Monday and kept Tuesday as a holiday, creating a long weekend holiday for slaves. Pinkster was a time of interracial celebration when African and Dutch music and dance intertwined and wine and ale flowed freely. Sundays were also free times for slaves. New Amsterdam was not as determined as New England to keep the Sabbath holy. Although the Dutch did attempt to cease all work, amusements, and drinking during worship, the city magistrates refused to publish Stuyvesant's decree that the entire 24 hours of the Sabbath be holy, declaring it to be too severe and contrary to the rights of the homeland. . . .⁶

The Sunday gatherings are direct evidence of the survival of African traditions. Though arriving from disparate parts of Africa and the Caribbean, enslaved blacks formed "nations" or cultural units fusing religious beliefs and customary behaviors.⁷ These units were similar to those travelers found in Africa. Nathaniel Uring, visiting Luanda in 1701, observed young blacks carousing and dancing on Sundays. Uring noted that "the young men and women often meet together in small companies by moon-light and Sing and Dance most part of the night, which they choose for coolness, it being too hot during the day for those kind of diversions. This custom of dancing is kept up in all our American plantations. On Sundays when they have leave to visit their friends they get together in small companies in the streets." Similarly, blacks in

Barbados, the source for many New Jersey slaves in this period, reveled on Sundays and on special feast days, whether African or European.⁸

These events often occurred on European holy days. Among Africans there was no clear division between the sacred and the secular. As Jon Sensbach has observed, religion suffused and dominated every aspect of life. Accordingly, what Europeans saw as blasphemy of holy days was to Africans religious observance. Moreover, the European religious community in the region lacked consensus on Sabbath behavior. Presbyterians, an important denomination in East Jersey, did not keep the Sabbath. The Society of Friends regarded strict Sabbath-keeping as a relic of authoritarian New England. The Dutch often frolicked on Sundays and invoked order on the Sabbath only to corral their unruly servants.⁹

Black Sunday romps continued through the 1690s. The grand jury in Kings County complained on November 10, 1697, of “great concourse and Mobbing of Negroe Slaves from Yorke and other places to this Place on the Sabbath Day . . . to the horror of the majority of His Majesty’s Loyal Subjects.” The court accused John Norton, ferryman, of transporting slaves from “yorke on the Sabbath Day” and urged that he be fined for each and every slave. Frustrated by similar problems the following year, the same court urged that “no Negroes, male or female, shall presume to go out their Majesty’s habitations from one town to another without a Ticket on the Sabbath Day, under penalty of a whipping.” In 1702 Lord Governor Bellomont (Richard Coote) asked the Board of Trade for a law regulating slaves, which “is become so necessary through the great insolency that sort of people are grown to.” By 1706 in New York black frolics grew so threatening that Bellomont’s successor, Viscount Cornbury (Edward Hyde) issued a warrant to the justices in Kings County giving them authority to break up illegal assemblages of blacks and including “the extraordinary command that if the negroes could not be taken they might be fired upon and killed.”¹⁰

Such turbulent behavior convinced English authorities that local slaves need greater instruction in servility. When whippings and executions failed to cow the slave populace, the English turned to religion. There was much to be done. Neglect by the Dutch Reformed Church and lack of interest by newer congregations in the region left Africans virtually unchurched in Christian mores. In 1730, David Humphreys, reviewing the efforts in New York of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), the missionary wing of the Church of England, reported that in the last decades of the seventeenth century, “the Negroes were much discouraged from embracing the Christian religion. . . . Their marriages were performed by mutual consent only, without the blessings of the Church; they were buried by those of their owne country or Complexion in the common field, without any Christian office; perhaps some ridiculous Heathen rites were performed at the Grave by some of their owne

people. No notice was given of their being sick, that they might be visited, on the contrary, frequent Discourses were made in Conversation that they had no souls and perished as the Beasts.”¹¹

Humphreys’s descriptions indicate that over a half-century after the arrival of the first nonindigenous settlers in the region, African religious practices were still prevalent among the colony’s slaves and that little effort had been made to Christianize them. Newly arrived enslaved Africans had either been exposed to Catholicism, which the English loathed, or lacked any Christian experience. Religion, which James Axtell has termed “the invasion within,” was the most potent tool for acculturation. In English society, as in other Protestant nations, baptism was a foremost ritual in any person’s life cycle. Although the ceremony of baptism was fraught with ambiguity and ideological debate, there was no disagreement about its fundamental importance as the foundation of Christianity. Blacks coming into contact with Christian nations shared this view and regarded catechism and baptism as powerful steps toward free membership into society.¹²

The Church of England made the strongest institutional effort to convert Africans in the New York region. In contrast to the flagging or timorous efforts in the West Indies and the southern colonies,¹³ the educational missions of the SPG in New York and New Jersey at first were powerful attempts at acculturation. Anglican efforts in North America began in the 1680s, employing the rite of baptism as the doorway to salvation for Africans. Theologian Morgan Godwyn took pains to assure nervous colonials that baptism did not require emancipation. Godwyn was emphatic about bringing Christianity to slaves; failure to do so, he argued, invited a secular, licentious reading of the Bible and God’s intentions. Secret instructions to royal governors contained orders to “facilitate and encourage the Conversion of Negroes and Indians to our Christian religion.” The principal support for proselytizing blacks came from wealthy New Yorkers and Crown officials but from few other colonists. Puritans in particular had deep reservations about the lasting value of the baptism of pagans.¹⁴

That the Church of England was quite weak outside of New York City was evident early on. For example, when the Dutch briefly recaptured the city in 1674, magistrates instructed residents of surrounding towns to nominate a representative of the Reformed faith. All residents were ordered to worship according to the tenets of the Council of Dort. Extreme Labadist pietists attempted to ban celebration of Pinkster. Even after the English retook the colony in 1675, Dutch pietism gained strength in rural parts. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, English clerics determined to stamp the Anglican faith on the colony but had little success. Charles II’s policy of awarding large grants of land to his supporters and the ensuing desire to populate proprietary colonies like New York and New Jersey required appealing to diverse groups of

immigrants. Crown mercantilist legislation inevitably came into conflict with the established church by encouraging an environment open to dissenters. Thwarted, Anglican missionaries took aim at Indians and Africans.¹⁵

In 1703, the SPG's plans bore fruit when Elias Neau opened the first Anglican school for New York's blacks. . . . Neau identified masters' fear that baptism mandated emancipation of slaves as the key problem for the school. He suggested that Parliament pass a law clarifying the issue, "according to the example of the French and Spanish who baptize all slaves without giving them temporal liberty."¹⁶ Together with the Reverend William Vesey, the Trinity priest, Neau lobbied the New York Assembly to duplicate earlier laws in other colonies, which "confirmed the rights of masters over their slaves after baptism . . . for without that they will not suffer them to be instructed, for fear they should be baptized without their knowledge." Neau reported that masters threatened to sell slaves who asked to attend the school to Virginia and the West Indies.¹⁷ In fact, Vesey did baptize enslaved blacks without their masters' knowledge. In 1706 and again in 1712, he acknowledged that "those who were baptized had it done to them without consent of their masters and there are . . . [some] who wish me ill and many negroes come to catechism unknown to their masters."¹⁸

Neau's first success came across the North (Hudson) River. In 1704, the New Jersey Assembly, led by Lewis Morris, proclaimed that "the baptizing of any Negro, Indian or Mulatto slave shall not be any reason or cause for setting them or any of them at liberty." Two years later the New York Assembly tacked onto general tax legislation a law that intended to end the "groundless opinion that hath spread itself throughout the colony" that baptism of slaves meant "that they would become free and ought to be set at liberty." Rather, the legislation declared that baptism "shall not be any cause or reason for the freeing them." Further, the law inscribed the lineage of slavery, providing that a child "shall follow the state and condition of the mother." An additional clause ordered that "no slave whatsoever in this colony shall at any time be admitted as a witness against any freeman" in any judicial matter.¹⁹

The laws showed the contradictions of Anglican liberalism. Intended to open the church to potential black adherents, they reduced blacks to the status of non-citizens, permitting the act of baptism to become a justification for racial bondage. . . . Despite Neau's efforts, the SPG worried that "the greatest part of the black people in New York remain unbaptized, thro' the indifference of their masters, notwithstanding the good laws that have been made . . . and the subsequent services of the Society." Neau turned to the governor for help. Responding to the schoolmaster's request for an endorsement in early 1712, Governor Robert Hunter issued a proclamation "to the effect that all slaves should be sent to Neau's school." On the eve of a slave conspiracy that rocked the colony, Trinity rector William Vesey refused to read the proclamation in church (although it

was distributed widely), indicating sharp political disagreements toward black instruction, which could not have escaped notice among the enslaved population. On April 25, Neau reported that “Vessey refused to baptize a mulattress tho’ she had a letter directing [him] to baptize her.” The black woman was then baptized by the chaplain of the fort in his chapel. Baptism was a major issue in the revolt a few weeks later, after which the Reverend John Sharpe noted that “What is very observable the Persons whose Negroes have been found guilty are such as are declared opposers of Christianizing Negroes.” Following the conspiracy, Elias Neau retreated to his rooms, canceled classes, and worried about possible involvement of his scholars: “(only one, Hendrick Hooglandt’s slave, angry at his master’s refusal to allow him baptism was involved).”²⁰ After the revolt was repressed, Neau reopened his school. Governor Robert Hunter and his wife endorsed Neau and his students with several visits. Without Hunter’s patronage, it is unlikely that Neau’s school would have survived.²¹

Neau’s efforts to inculcate Christian religion in African slaves had mixed effects. His sincerity and willingness to allow Africans open admission surely gave the Church of England a better reputation among slaves than it deserved. It cannot be argued, however, even so early in the century, that his teachings reached all enslaved Africans locally or convinced them to submit docilely to their fates. In New York, he worked virtually alone. Though backed by the London bishopric and by the governor, he was opposed and disliked by other colonial clerics. His historical reputation is perhaps larger than his contemporary success. Jon Butler has contended that Anglican missions caused a holocaust of African religions in America.²² Certainly, it is true that open worship was impossible because it threatened theological hegemony and undermined the authority of slave masters. It is possible, however, that local observers did not understand how blacks used Neau’s classes for their own purpose. The eagerness of transient blacks to attend classes and grab reading material for their own purposes combined with the explicit threat of the weekly or holiday African celebrations and Neau’s failure to erase them are perhaps the strongest, immediate contradictions of Butler’s argument.

Other European faiths did not match Anglican efforts. The Dutch Reformed Church, easily the second strongest denomination in the region and in rural areas the most powerful, rejected its earlier efforts to proselytize among blacks. The church split at the close of the seventeenth century between urbanites willing to compromise with the official Church of England and pietists who resisted Anglicanism fiercely. Pietism was most influential in the Dutch counties of Bergen in East Jersey and Kings in New York. In Bergen County, a pietist personality emerged in the aftermath of the Liesler Rebellion, which shook New York in the early 1690s. During the brutal repression by English authorities, Dutch pietists fled to Bergen, which was already overwhelmingly Dutch. As Randall Balmer has suggested, the rural pietist personality emerged

among people of peripheral social status, and its ecstatic religious expression derived from inner light conversion. Proof of conversion was necessary for membership in churches governed by parishioners who valued charisma over learning and illumination over doctrine. Sacraments were reserved to the faithful, though they were incidental to spirituality. Identity was local and dependent on an “inner elect” who had withdrawn from the outer world. These qualities helped Bergen slaveholders resist Anglican calls to catechize their slaves. Elias Neau recognized this problem, explaining: “I have not catechized [in New Jersey] because they are almost all Dutch there and for they that live in town are afraid that their slaves may demand their freedom after Baptism, the country people certainly believe there is some other design upon them, besides depriving them of their slaves.” No law passed by English authorities would convince these Dutch to ignore customary beliefs that baptism mandated emancipation. It was better, they decided, to keep slaves out of church and share religious experiences with them only at festivals, especially the ecstatic moments of Pinkster. For blacks, this meant that they would not receive the religious instruction given by Neau (with its concomitant gift of literacy), but they would be able to maintain their own religious faiths and encounter the Dutch and Huguenots in the magical days of Pinkster.²³

As the African population grew, political need for acculturation to Christianity increased. For Anglican purposes, the slave revolt of 1712 was a disaster. Elias Neau now had to work under a cloud of suspicion, with William Vesey and Anglican colleagues regarding his methods as dangerous. In the aftermath of the revolt, missionaries reported distrust of baptism for political reasons.²⁴

Tensions over his mission to blacks ended with Neau’s death in 1722. He had sustained the school despite social and bureaucratic opposition. For slaves, Neau was the epitome of godly governance. Although Neau did not question slavery and helped pass a law that protected the system, his school was a sympathetic world in which blacks could experience Christianity, learn the precious skills of reading and writing, and practice their beliefs openly and collectively.

In the decade after Neau’s death, Anglicans gave little assistance to blacks.²⁵ Most missionaries felt little obligation toward slaves and believed Neau succeeded largely because of his proximity to urban slaves. In a typical letter, John Thomas of Hempstead reminded the society that Neau’s “business is wholly with the slaves at New York City where they live contiguously and where they come to his house.” Even after Neau’s death, despite the reluctance of local missionaries to catechize blacks, the London offices of the SPG kept up a steady stream of instructions. In 1730 the bishop of London appealed to colonial clerics and slave owners to consider blacks “not barely as slaves and upon the same level with laboring beasts but as Men-Slaves and Women-Slaves, who have the same Frame and Faculties as yourselves and have Souls Capable of being made eternally happy, and Reason and Understanding to re-

ceive Instruction to it.” Once again, imperial edicts conflicted with local perceptions and fears.²⁶

Missionaries learned to accommodate local anxieties while fulfilling the orders of the faith. The Reverend Richard Charleton operated the Trinity Church school from 1733 until 1747. . . . Seventy black students attended Charleton’s school, and 15 to 20 baptisms occurred annually. The skills required of candidates for baptism included literacy, memorization, and public theological explication. After Charleton’s recovery from illness in mid-1744, he was assisted by Joseph Hildreth, who taught literacy through study of the Bible and psalm-singing. In 1747 Charleton, exhausted by his endeavors, transferred to Staten Island, where he served as cleric for St. Andrew’s. He baptized blacks only occasionally in the years before his death in 1777.²⁷

Blacks encountered various other European faiths. Members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), a denomination with heavy representation on Long Island and in mid-Jersey and influential in New York City, continued to use slaves on farms and in households. Although radical Friends such as John Hepburn and John Sandiford initiated a campaign to cleanse the church of slavery in this period, most Quakers kept their slaves. Indicative of this pattern is the fact that over half of the members of the Shrewsbury Meeting in Monmouth County bequeathed slaves to relatives before 1741. Quaker reforms were still in the future.²⁸

Two European faiths were sufficiently open to black membership as to be considered interracial communities. The Lutheran Church, in particular, attracted rural blacks. Separated by language and culture from Anglican influences and strongly pietist in rural regions, Lutherans gave free blacks high-ranking positions in their churches. Arie Van Guinee came to New York City from Surinam as a free man in 1705 and, with his wife, joined the Lutheran congregation in New York City under the Reverend Justus Falckner. A few years later Van Guinee moved to the Raritan Valley in New Jersey, where he hosted the first recorded Lutheran service in the area in 1714. Van Guinee assisted in the baptisms of his niece and nephew. He and his family purchased sizable plots of land over the years, and he became a man of considerable means and influence in the church. In 1735 he married a second wife, Margareetje Peters, granddaughter of Solomon Peters, in Hackensack.²⁹ Lutheran liberality attracted other descendants of the original free blacks. Families whose children appear in church registers include the Matthys, Anthonys, Franciscos, and Peterses, whose ancestries can be traced to the first Angolans in the mid-seventeenth century. Other important Lutheran free black families included the Jacksons and Cromwells.³⁰

The Moravian Church, whose American territory lay largely in Pennsylvania and North Carolina, permitted black conversion in East Jersey. Andrew, the communicant member of the Moravian church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania,

prepared a memoir telling of his capture from the Igbo nation in what is now southeastern Nigeria and sale to a merchant in New York City in 1741. After being resold to a Moravian merchant named Thomas Noble, Andrew learned to read the Bible and finally convinced Noble to allow him to be baptized. The ceremony was held in Bethlehem, where Andrew joined the communal congregation and its choir. He married a free black Moravian named Magdalena with whom he had three children. He died in 1779.³¹

The Dutch Reformed Church was far less liberal. Cultural divisions between the urbane Church of England and rural Dutch pietism widened. Dark suspicions that slave baptism inspired the revolt of 1712 darkened Dutch pietist attitudes toward English rule and Anglicanism.³² In rural East Jersey, Theodore Frelinghuysen's evangelical movement emphasized spiritual rebirth, but older beliefs such as predestinarianism restrained Dutch confidence in blacks' spiritual potential. Suspicion of Anglican missionary efforts centered around customary beliefs about baptism and emancipation.³³

The observance of Pinkster created a momentary equality and community among Africans and Dutch and was a safety valve for household tensions. More important, it served a greater purpose for Dutch and Africans. Ecstatic moments of the "Holy Wind" and speaking in tongues were a form of spiritual conversion which replaced church baptisms. Dutch slave owners could accept their slaves into the sanctity of the faith without apprehension about the effects of Anglican baptism on slaves' expectation of emancipation. Among slaves, moreover, Pinkster ceremonies sustained promises of sacred equality and nurtured their spiritual sensibility. Pinkster resembled the pietistic ceremonies at Elias Neau's school, differing from later Anglican education, which emphasized acculturation. Pinkster services did not require perfect English, literacy, or command of Scripture. Observed in nearly all the denominations in the mid-Atlantic, Pinkster or Whitsuntide became a social conversation among English, Dutch, German, and African cultures, a union possible only in New York and New Jersey.³⁴

Blacks could also use Pinkster for their own purposes. A satire that appeared in the *New-York Weekly Journal* in 1737 noted use of African musical instruments during Pinkster. Africans from the Guinea Coast in particular were adept at drums and stringed instruments. Bangars, rattles, and fiddles were common at Pinkster festivals. Performance on the fiddle was very different from European methods, with a highly percussive style in which the musician plucked the bow energetically. Pinkster songs, with their emphasis on role reversal, complemented African songs and dances of derision. Finally, the use of several instruments at Pinkster created an orchestral style akin to the music of an African festival.³⁵

The article noted that blacks were forming according to their "nations." Such nationhood did not allude to specific African ethnicity but to associations

of blacks formed on shipboard or in the Americas. Most common in Latin America, nations were associations of people from similar African cultural areas who typically came together to bury the dead and conduct festivals. In a large celebration such as Pinkster, when the whole African American community might assemble, blacks divided up by these nations, which served otherwise as rudimentary self-help organizations and even as governments. . . .³⁶

The cleavages between paternalist and patriarchal masters and their enslaved blacks [continued in the late eighteenth century and this] was no more apparent than in religion. The paternalist Church of England maintained its limited relationship with a few privileged slaves. The Reverend Samuel Auchmuty succeeded Charleton as instructor to the slaves at Trinity. He remained as catechist at Trinity until 1784, a term that brought further growth and stability to the school. Between 1747 and 1762 Auchmuty, though hampered by illness and the recalcitrance of slave masters, averaged about 50 baptisms each year. Auchmuty reported that his students “make no small proficiency in the Christian religion.” He instructed his scholars by making them “repeat their catechism . . . also I endeavor to make them sensible of the true meaning of every question, which naturally opens and discovers to them the Christians scheme and the Duty and Obligation they are under to live as Christians.” Auchmuty’s students learned to read from books using symbols and pictures to give meaning to words. Pupils memorized maxims broken into syllables. One key proverb exhorted “ser-vants to be o-be-di-ent unto their Mas-ters. . . . Ser-vants o-bey in all things your master ac-cording to the Flesh.” The messages may have preached docility, but the Anglican persuasion that all humankind was equal before God was a powerful antidote to the dismal slave condition. In short, the Anglican schools and their curricula became carefully constructed steps toward black initiation into white society. . . .³⁷

For those few men in Anglican classes, church training could advance their status. Accepting the tenets of Christianity, these slaves prepared for leadership, usually as ministers in the black community during the Revolution and afterward. . . .

Politically, Anglican missionary efforts had important consequences. As the official church, its teachings stressed the prestige of royal and imperial bonds over local governance and the importance of sacred power over the temporal. Inadvertently, because of the better treatment received by the slaves of paternalist Anglicans and the occasional emancipation stemming from baptism, the church’s behavior sustained the folk custom that admission to the church mandated freedom for slaves, an axiom still held by local blacks and pietist whites. Implicit in this tenet was the understanding that refusal of this rite placed slave masters in opposition to God and instilled among blacks a critique of slavery.³⁸

As the Great Awakening disturbed religious orthodoxy in colonial America, the Dutch needed a stronger buttress against slaves’ claims for equality. With

very rare exceptions, Reformed churches still refused to baptize free or enslaved blacks. Members or not, blacks were constant, if rowdy, listeners at Sunday services. The Awakening's evangelical methods loosened the church's hierarchy and doubtless made black adherents question their lowly status.³⁹

However Reformed members inculcated doctrine among slaves, salvation usually occurred outside of the church. This may be seen in the slave narrative of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, who came to New York City as a slave from his home in Bournou, in the interior of the Gold Coast. After serving a Mr. Van Horne of New York City, Gronniosaw was sold to the Reverend Theodores Frelinghuysen of the Dutch Reformed Church, who instructed him in Christian prayer. . . . Gronniosaw found God while sitting under a tree one day: "A light inexpressible darted down from heaven and shone around me for the space of a minute." Rather than receiving God within the boundaries of a church and community, Gronniosaw got his revelation in the open air near a tree, a symbol of the presence of divinity in African culture. His private conversion enabled him to live as a slave in a white-dominated religion. At the same time, his inner light stemmed from an African conception of salvation.⁴⁰

The attitudes of Dutch Reformed congregations toward slaves and chattel bondage created subtle effects. Their staunch opposition to slave baptism, church membership, and emancipation imparts the impression that the Dutch believed slaves had no souls. In the late colonial period, for example, the master of John Jea, a rural slave, informed him that Africans lacked souls.⁴¹ At the same time, the intimacy and magical powers of the Pinkster experience performed within the home ensured compelling spiritual effects. The paradox of public refusal to convert slaves while sustaining sacred occasions at home generated a combination of European pietism and barely disguised Africanisms.

The Lutheran Church generally sustained its liberal inclusion of blacks. Lutherans held marriage ceremonies for free black families around Hackensack in Bergen County. Ceremonies included the rites of the marriage of Willem Smidt and Barbara Fransen of Hackensack and the marriage of Caspar Francis Van Sallee, the grandson of Anthony the Turk, and Johanna Cromwell, a free black, at Hackensack in 1746. By performing such rites without requiring deep personal investment, the Lutherans showed far greater liberality than any other denomination. The Lutherans also performed interracial marriages. On June 6, 1741, James Elsworth, an Englishman, and Mary Jorga, a "free Portuguese baptized negress who had received liberty of her mistress to marry," did so at the home of Nicolaus Emmings in Highland, New York. . . .⁴²

By the mid-eighteenth century, other European denominations questioned the morality of slavery. Chief among them were the Society of Friends, who earlier had been unrepentant slave owners and traders.⁴³ In 1758 the Philadel-

phia Meeting voted to move against slavery and to visit member slave owners to convince them to manumit their slaves and end any involvement with the slave trade. John Woolman, the leading Quaker abolitionist, visited New Jersey Friends in 1761 to encourage them to free their slaves. Another leading Friend, Daniel Stanton, spoke out against slavery in large meetings in New Jersey and New York in the early 1760s. Such meetings were more open than regular services, and it is likely that slaves attended and heard the debate. Quakers worried greatly about abolitionists encouraging possible slave revolts. . . . East Jersey Quakers, influenced by the conservative New York Meeting, lagged behind Philadelphia Friends on the issue of slavery. Although Friends increasingly manumitted their slaves by will in Monmouth County, they usually required a term of years or cash payments as forms of quitrents. Even in the Revolutionary era, only after numerous visits did the Quakers finally excommunicate three Shrewsbury slave owners who refused to manumit their slaves. That they waited until their own deaths and even then required payments by the slave to their heirs shows that Quaker slave owners were determined not to lose money over conscience. Their policies anticipated the gradual emancipation laws of the late eighteenth century.⁴⁴

The importance of the Quakers lies not in their congregation with blacks but in their equation of slavery and immorality. The question of Christians enslaving fellow believers had arisen before, but the Anglicans and Dutch Reformed dodged the issue. The Quakers met it head-on, determining to erase slavery from their faith. What is important for our concerns is that blacks listened with great interest to Quaker debates in public and, privately, during visits to recalcitrant Friends. During the Revolution these visits had severe consequences.⁴⁵

If the Quakers were reluctant to view blacks as potential equals at prayer, the rising evangelical sects embraced Africans as brothers and sisters. Blacks attended the love feasts and mass rallies of the Great Awakening to hear messages of personal and bodily salvation. Outside of New York the Great Awakening animated greater Presbyterian efforts among blacks. The "sacramental season," which occurred in late fall, included fasting and lengthy family orations and prayers. Like Pinkster in the Dutch Reformed Church, the Presbyterian sacramental season was uncharacteristically egalitarian. Love feasts, open to all, instilled a temporary equality before God. At the same time Presbyterians held a cautious and hesitant attitude toward criticism of slavery in the colonial period.⁴⁶

Methodism, unlike earlier European religions, did not require catechism before baptism, making it very attractive to the great masses of unlettered whites and blacks. The Wesleyan church, making its greatest impact in America in the prerevolutionary decade, was still a wing of the Church of England. Early leaders considered themselves Anglicans. They combined the liberal paternalism with the Pentecostalism inherent in pietist sects. Their difference

from the latter was the absence of the patriarchalism that characterized the Dutch Reformed, Huguenot, and even Presbyterian Churches. Of primary interest to theologically marginalized groups like blacks were the Methodists' methods, which emphasized universal salvation, experiential religion, and sanctification. Church fathers promoted the faith in person. Benjamin Abbott, his mentor Francis Asbury, and George Wesley himself counseled American Methodists. Asbury preached in New York City in 1771 and itinerated on Long Island and in New Jersey in 1772. Of one gathering in New York Asbury characteristically wrote: "To see the poor Negroes so affected, to see their sable countenances in our solemn assemblies and to hear them sing with cheerful melody their dear Redeemer's Praise, affected me much and made me ready to say of a faith I perceive God is no respecter of Persons." Asbury also counseled slave owners about freeing their bondsmen. Methodism gained more than 5,000 converts in 1775. In New York, black women were among the first members of the Methodist Church. The beloved church sexton was Peter Williams Sr. Blacks flocked to Methodism in its formative years because it was openly antislavery, respected African spirituality, focused on immediate salvation, and sponsored a nascent black ministry.⁴⁷

The black religious impulse was still masked by slavery. Unlike the South, where historians have found ample remains of African survivals, evidence of African religious traditions in the North has been scanty. Africans did adapt Christianity to their own uses within the structures of European religions; black leaders and audiences appear through the interstices of Protestant rituals. There are glimpses in the colonial period of the creation of a black ministry, which arose like a phoenix after the American Revolution. Runaway notices provide evidence of black preachers. Andrew Saxon, who fled from Jacobus Van Cortlandt of New York City, "professeth himself to be a Roman Catholic." He marked his shirt and coat with a cross. Simon, who escaped from James Leonard of Middlesex County, New Jersey, in 1740, was accused of having "Pretended to be a Doctor and very religious and says he is a Churchman." In 1775, Major Prevost of Bergen County advertised for Mark and Jenney. Mark was "a preacher, short, black, and well set and speaks slow; the woman is rather lusty, has a cast in one eye, bad teeth, smooth tongued and very artful." Other fugitive blacks passing through the region were described as "professors of religion," "preaches to his color;" and "makes a great show of religion, on which he has much to say."⁴⁸

Runaway notices offer fragments of black autobiographies, and those shreds are filtered through suspicious white eyes. By the 1750s, blacks recorded their own stories and conversions to Christianity, narratives that offer the contours of a developing African American Christianity. In their narratives, blacks who lived or passed through New York and East Jersey displayed a powerful cynicism about life, understandable in anyone kidnapped from a

homeland in Africa and enslaved in America. Hope and conversion occurred in several ways. The luckiest received schooling, as in the case of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, who was fortunate to live in the household of Theodore Frelinghuysen. More commonly, as in the instances of Katy Schenck of Monmouth County and John Jea of Brooklyn, religious instruction came only from deep personal conviction and effort. Helping their desires was a newfound absorption of radical views of human duty and destiny which characterized evangelical thought. A particularly radical idea, which appears in Jea's narrative, and the works of Boston King, Venture Smith, and John Marrant, was that Christian conversion was a vehicle for gaining freedom. Implicitly understood since the days of Dutch rule, this affirmation at once helped blacks endure slavery in the North and forced them to confront their masters and demand freedom.

Before that could happen, however, salvation was necessary. Most narrators recalled African life with the sadness of an exile. The reverence for African religion was replaced in virtually every colonial black narrative with a deep awe for the Christian ritual and the doctrine of reconciliation. Their religiosity, shown most cogently in Jupiter Hammond's poetry and in Jea's narrative, was overwhelming, quickly replacing godliness for loyalty to a master. The word of God appeared to each outside of a church, usually in a field or road, and inspired the narrator to ecstasy. The emotions expressed demonstrate that blacks felt that Christianity, if properly followed by true adherents, would lead to bodily freedom.⁴⁹

[During the Revolutionary War] as in the colonial period, alliances between the British and blacks were built on religious foundations. Although the war seriously hampered religious observance, blacks and whites worshiped together. In 1776 as the American army fled New York City, a wounded British soldier observed returning Loyalists, particularly Anglicans, "mother and children, grandfather and grandchildren, etc. down to the black children of the slaves, hugging and kissing each other." Anglicans were generally loyal, particularly in New York and New Jersey, where support for the SPG and a bishopric was strong. While black and white Anglicans celebrated British control, a plot to destroy the city was afoot. Charles Inglis reported to his SPG directors in London in 1776, "Several rebels secreted themselves in the houses. . . . The weather being very dry and the Wind blowing fresh on Saturday, they set fire to the city in several places at one time, between 12 and 1 o'clock in the morning. The fire raged with the utmost fury and its destructive Progress consumed about one thousand houses, or a fourth part of the city."⁵⁰

The fire destroyed Trinity Church and its charity school for blacks and forced Anglicans to borrow the Dutch Reformed Church for their services. The school for blacks reopened: "Mr. Hildreth opened his school, his scholars collected and. . . . The Number of Negroes is the same." Inglis reported to the SPG

that "Mr. Bull regularly catechizes the Negroes on Sunday after the Evening Service, and the Reverend Mr. Walters, a worthy clergyman from Boston, generally gives them a Lecture or Sermon at the same time." Bull reported that many of the black refugees became communicants. By 1778 the rebuilt Trinity Church began to hold marriage ceremonies for freed slave couples. Another Anglican missionary, Abraham Beach, used flags of truce to travel from a refuge in New York City to New Brunswick, New Jersey, where he baptized six blacks each year.⁵¹

The fusion of Christian and black religion continued apace. One example was the free black leader Stephen Bleucke, who arrived in New York City in the late 1760s with his wife, Margaret, and became the head of the black Loyalists in the wartime city. Bleucke, described as an impressive, educated man, was the culmination of Anglican missionary efforts toward blacks. A member of the church and the leader of his people, Bleucke became very important in British postwar plans for black Loyalists. . . .⁵²

In the years after the American Revolution, the reorganized Episcopal Church stayed in the vanguard of black conversion. Trinity Church in New York City became a center for black marriages. After conducting a few ceremonies during the Revolution, Trinity Church clerics Samuel Provoost and Benjamin Moore officiated at 30 to 40 marriages between blacks annually through 1806. Some of the ceremonies joined together free blacks and slaves given permission to marry by their masters.⁵³

Despite the blessings of such rites, African Americans felt stymied in the Anglican faith. Although Episcopalians strongly believed that blacks were capable of true understanding of Christian faith, they were very reluctant to promote black leaders. For example, Peter Williams, Jr., trained by the Episcopalians in the 1790s, did not become a priest until 1826, despite his obvious erudition and high status among blacks. As part of their mission effort to retain black interest, Trinity and the uptown St. Paul's Parish of Bloomingdale opened Sunday schools for blacks with the purpose of "influencing many children who would otherwise be but profane violators of the sanctity of God's Holy Day." But desegregation of Episcopal Church ritual was not universal. Episcopalian parishes, including St. Mark's in the Bowery, St. Peter's Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey, St. George's, and Christ Church of Flushing, Long Island, baptized very few blacks in the years after the Revolution.

The Episcopalians did, however, create an institution for blacks with far-reaching implications. The African Free School, founded in 1789, was a direct descendant of the charity schools administered by Anglican missionaries in the colonial period. Within four years 160 students were enrolled; by the close of the century, about 140 students of both sexes stood for examinations. The African Free School was supported by city tax revenue. In the next few decades it became the foremost vehicle to success for aspiring blacks.⁵⁴

Reform occurred, however gradually, even in the Dutch Reformed Church. Officially segregated since the 1660s, the church began accepting black communicants soon after the Revolution. The church constitution of 1792 resolved that “no difference exists between bond and free in the Church of Christ; slaves or blacks when admitted to the church possess the same privileges as other members; their infant children are entitled to baptism and ministers who deny them any Christian privilege are to be reprimanded.” In the early postrevolutionary years, black members were usually servants or slaves of white worshippers. Several new communicants, however, were free blacks, with certificates of membership from Dutch Reformed parishes in outlying regions. The Dutch Reformed Church also performed marriages either among slaves, between slaves and free blacks, or among free people, and the Dutch Reformed cemetery accepted several black burials. Still, black membership in the Dutch Reformed Church, though far greater than in the colonial era, remained small compared with the number of African Americans owned by the Dutch. Colonial-era splits between rural pietists and urban paternalists affected this reform. The new liberalism was largely confined to the city.⁵⁵

The experience of one slave demonstrates how contentious the issue of baptism remained between Dutch masters and their bondsmen. John Jea, an African who preached in New York and New Jersey in the 1700s, claimed that an angel taught him to read the Bible in Dutch and English. Following this miracle, Jea, who lacked permission from his master, persuaded a Presbyterian minister to baptize him. According to Jea, the laws of New York State required his Dutch Reformed master to emancipate him. His master, who had informed Jea that he did not need religious instruction because he lacked a soul, became enraged at this event though he eventually freed Jea. No such law existed, of course, but Jea’s error demonstrates how contentious an issue slave baptism remained after the Revolution.⁵⁶

Presbyterian churches in New York City and New Jersey welcomed several free blacks during the 1780s, while other Presbyterian churches waited until the second decade of the nineteenth century to admit blacks. In South Hempstead, Long Island, Christ’s Presbyterian Church neither admitted nor married blacks until 1810. More active was the Old Tennant Church of Freehold, New Jersey, which accepted around five slaves and free blacks as members in the first decades after the Revolution. Significantly, however, the Old Tennant Church created a new plan for seating in 1790 and permitted no blacks on the main floor. Black Presbyterians’ anger over “negro pews” kept African American membership low. Racist ministers also plagued the Presbyterians, especially in New Jersey, where the southern-oriented Princeton Theological Seminary produced most church leaders. Ashbel Green, one of the most respected members of the Presbyterian Synod, declared slavery “a gross violation of sacred rights” but argued that the “number of slaves, their ignorance

and vicious habits, render immediate emancipation inconsistent alike with the safety and happiness of masters and slaves.” The New York Synod also flinched at the idea of immediate emancipation. There, Presbyterians worried that newly freed blacks “may be in many respects more dangerous to the community” than slaves. The synod encouraged masters to provide “such good education as to prepare them for the better enjoyment of the future.” If emancipation was gradual, freedom would best occur in Africa, an early sign of the colonization movement that would dominate church policy in the antebellum period.⁵⁷

The Methodist Church, whose English founders were abolitionists, gained numerous black adherents in the last years of the colonial era and continued to accept blacks after the war. The Methodists combined American Revolutionary egalitarianism with their own evangelical “conscience” concerns, and, in 1782, passed a rule excluding slaveholders. The Methodist Church attracted charismatic black preachers, licensed and otherwise. The limitations of the Methodist Church, easily the most liberal toward blacks, are indicative of the difficulties Protestant sects had with a black membership. As Nathan O. Hatch has argued, the Methodist Church’s position toward blacks was torn by the paradox of its egalitarianism on the one hand and its racism on the other. Increasing white discomfort with black membership meant less tolerance following the Revolution. In the 1790s, Methodists amended the constitutional ban against slaveholding to apply only when slavery was “contrary to the laws of the state.” Methodist ministers and their flocks in the South and West welcomed masters but excluded their slaves. The Methodists limited the authority and status of black ministers.⁵⁸

The limited leadership of the parent church notwithstanding, Methodism offered African Americans the greatest room for growth and religious self-expression. In 1795, the John Street Methodist Church in Manhattan had 155 black members enrolled in eight worship classes; only two of the classes included men, a total of 34. As in other denominations, female adherents were most numerous. Class number 31, led by a white preacher, Cornelius Warner, was filled with black men who soon would found the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church. The roster included James Varick, Abraham Thompson, William Miller, William Hamilton, Francis Jacobs, Thomas Miller, George Moore, George White, Thomas Cook, David Bias, and Samuel Pointer, whose words and writings became significant instruments in the formation of the black community in New York City and beyond.⁵⁹

The first indication of a separate black religious organization came in New York City in 1795 when a group of free blacks, calling themselves the African Society, petitioned the Common Council for assistance to purchase land in the seventh ward for a burial ground. The group’s leaders complained that they were not allowed to incorporate as a religious body. They petitioned for assistance to

“procure a place for the erection of a place of divine worship and the interment of the People of Colour.” This last request hit a positive note with the council, which for seven years had been vexed by speculators’ encroachments on the Old Negro Burial Ground behind the almshouse on Bowery Lane. Land investors had chipped away at the cemetery, in operation since the 1640s, and the city wanted closure of the problem. It granted £100 to the African Society to create a new church and graveyard. The same year, angered by continued white racism against the Haitian revolution and by the incessant irritation of “black pews,” Peter Williams, Sr. led the black congregation out of the John Street Church to hold separate meetings. Six years later, this group of dissident black Methodists constructed the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church on a lot at Church and Leonard Streets. The church obtained a charter from a bishop, James Varick.⁶⁰

The creation of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1796 led to other black congregations. The first of these in New York was the Abyssinian Baptist Church, formed by former members of the Gold Street First Baptist Church in 1807. The Reverend Thomas Paul, founder of the First African Baptist Church in Boston, mediated the split between white and black worshippers at Gold Street and became the first minister of Abyssinian Baptist when he led four men and twelve women plus three new members out of Gold Street to form the new church. In 1810 the congregation selected Josiah Bishop of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, as its minister.⁶¹

African American churches provided emotional support in the face of uncertainty and disappointment and enforced the norms and values of society. Black churches in the early nineteenth century engaged in gospels of moral improvement, charity, and benevolence. They offered peace, hope, and tranquillity through Christ. They used religion and the Scripture in black protest against slavery and racial caste and to emphasize the universal equality of humans.⁶²

The careers of two black ministers in this era demonstrate the parameters of black religious zeal. George White, who arrived in New York City in the early 1790s, took part in a famous class for black leaders at the John Street Methodist Church and preached on Long Island and in Westchester County and rural New Jersey. His goal was to be licensed by the Methodist Church as an ordained minister. During this pilgrimage he suffered many disheartening rejections from the Methodist hierarchy, gaining his license only after a dozen years of trying. He remained, however, very faithful to the Methodist faith. In contrast, John Jea, a less educated but more charismatic preacher, itinerated throughout rural New Jersey in the 1790s, preaching to crowds of enslaved and free blacks. Jea preached a theology of rebirth by linking the story of Lazarus with the aspirations of an emerging free black congregation. Jea disdained denominational affiliation and eventually left the New York area for crusades that took him to South America, the Far East, England, Ireland, and France. His prophetic messages appealed to blacks and whites; his methods anticipated the

Pentecostal styles popular among black male and female preachers around New York from the 1830s on. Unlike White, Jea refused to be confined by the judgments of the Methodist hierarchy.⁶³

Black churches were intrinsic parts of a developing black community. Concentration of blacks enabled the growth of black churches as did their imposed segregation in the lower classes. Independent black churches were part of an overall construction of benevolent societies, literary and political forums, and occupational structures. An important reason for independence was that the black ministry was engaged in the struggle to end slavery, a process that brought cooperation from few sympathetic whites. In contrast, blacks warmly embraced the radical views of man's destiny and duty which characterized evangelical Christian thought in this era. Unlike the South, however, where such theology also enabled blacks to endure slavery precisely because doctrine promised eventual deliverance without the demands of resistance, blacks in the North employed their beliefs as proof of equality and requisite liberty.⁶⁴

Notes

1. For pietist settlers, see David Steven Cohen, *The Dutch-American Farm* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), pp. 16–18; Keith Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism: A History of English and Scottish Churches of the Netherlands in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982, pp. 53, 111, 292–296, 364; Arnold J. F. Van Laer, ed., *Documents Relating to New Netherland in the Henry E. Huntington Library* (San Marino, California: Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 1924), p. 2; John Webb Pratt, *Religion, Politics, and Diversity: The Church-State Theme in New York History* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 3–24.

2. In 1618, at the Council of Dordrecht (Dort in English) in Holland, European Protestants gathered to hammer out a theology that would greatly affect the future of Dutch settlement and the texture of race relations in North America. This was the last general meeting of Reformed churches and included representatives from the Netherlands, England, Scotland, the German states, and Geneva. Decisions made at the Council of Dort strongly affected New Netherland.

3. For discussion of the conservatism of the Dutch Reformed Church in New Netherland, see George L. Smith, *Religion and Trade in New Netherland: Dutch Origins and American Development* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 79–82, 131–155.

4. For discussion of the syncretic nature of religion in Kongo, see Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The Bakongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 200–208; John Thornton, “The Developments of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of the Kongo, 1491–1750,” *Journal of*