Review Of "A Separate Canaan: The Making Of An Afro-Moravian World In North Carolina, 1763-1840" By J. Sensbach

Yvonne Patricia Chireau
Swarthmore College, ychirea1@swarthmore.edu
"Indeed, as Sensbach shows, they resolved their ambivalence over the questionable morality of purchasing human property by drawing lots, securing a positive sign from God that He would bless their endeavors."

In examining the lives of those Africans and African Americans who were immersed in the web of spiritual, familial and economic relations that structured this interracial community, Sensbach situates his study within the context of the shifting configurations of race and slavery between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He utilizes a vast compilation of documents that includes diaries, church minutes and conference proceedings from the Moravian archives in North Carolina, as well as a rare collection of short memoirs called Lebenslauf, third-person autobiographical testimonies that were solicited from all converts. Sensbach is most successful when he relates the life-histories of his Afro-Moravian subjects by creating a sub-narrative with these sources, as he does in a chapter that follows an African soldier who is taken captive as a slave to the French West Indies, Virginia, and eventually to North Carolina in the 1770s. At the heart of his study, Sensbach details the motives and methods by which African Americans entered into the redeemed Christian community, a process that was replicated in biracial Protestant congregations throughout the South. Furthermore, he highlights dimensions of the cultural and religious assimilation of Africans and African-Americans as they adopted the language, beliefs and values of their German-Moravian brethren. Most intriguing is Sensbach's treatment of
potential areas of black-white religious syncretism, the African-based practices and traditions which may have facilitated the slaves' embrace of Moravian Christianity.

The Moravian church offered black members an opportunity to form enhanced kinship networks that allowed for greater family cohesion, as well as the protection of converted spouses and their children from sale and forced separation. Church rituals, also, afforded Afro-Moravians a measure of equality in the spiritual arena which offset their social subordination. Sensbach characterizes the Moravians' relationship to African Americans as "fraternalistic;" they were "nominal spiritual equals" who each "owed allegiance to a higher authority, Christ." (120) Within the bounds of their spiritual association, at least for a time, black and white church members existed upon common ground. Much would change, however, with the third generation of Moravians in the nineteenth century, who were committed to acquiring even greater numbers of slaves, money, and land. As the region shifted to a more labor-intensive plantation economy, work relations became more stratified, racial hierarchies became more inflexible, and the relative egalitarianism that had characterized black and white religious life in the earlier period eroded.

_A Separate Canaan_ is a study that will reward general readers in American religious history. Jon Sensbach provides us with a glimpse into the world in which Africans and African Americans and German immigrants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries lived, worked, worshiped, and struggled together to realize their respective visions of religious freedom and spiritual equality. Ultimately, the failure of both groups to effect those visions was a sad consequence of both the inevitable expansion of racial slavery, and the limits of Christian fellowship.

Yvonne Chireau, _Swarthmore College_

© 1998 by _The Journal of Southern Religion_. All rights reserved. ISSN 1094-5234