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## BECOMING ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE: EARLY MORAVIAN MISSIONS TO NATIVE NORTH AMERICANS

In the fall of 1744 Governor George Clinton of New York forwarded to the Board of Trade in London--without any explanatory comment--the New York Assembly Act of September 21, 1744.[ 1] The act officially closed the Moravian Mission to the Mahicans at Shekomeko, a settlement close to the northwestern Connecticut border in the British colony of New York, and compelled the Moravian missionaries to leave. If Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, in his capacity as sponsor of the Moravian church, had not requested an explanation, most likely the act would have gone unnoticed.

But Zinzendorf protested, charging that Presbyterian clergy and their adherents were engaged in the persecution of the Moravian missionaries. He argued that religious persecution in the Americas was a particularly grave matter since many of the people

who emigrated to the Americas were in search of religious freedom. No one--and especially not the Native Americans, Zinzendorf contended--should be hindered from joining whatever Protestant denomination he or she might choose.[ 2]

Earlier in 1744, when the act was discussed in the New York Assembly, several of its members had been in open disagreement. Assemblyman George Thomas, for example, felt it was unjust and silly. Judge Thomas Jones expressed his displeasure by sarcastically labeling it "the Persecution Act." And assemblyman Richard Stillwell shouted, with unrestrained venom, "Hang them as your fathers hanged the Quakers." [ 3] On December 23, 1744, James Hutten wrote to Count Zinzendorf from England, "May it please your Lordship ... it is with sorrow, and vexation, and shame for my countrymen, that I have seen the Governor and Assembly of New York have passed an Act of Assembly [against the Moravians].... This incivility and inhuman usage must not be attributed to the whole English nation.... I am sure an English Parliament would never have done so, except ... in such time of anarchy and confusion as unhappily beset England in the last century, when bigoted and hot headed Calvinistic preachers ..." [ 4] Following the same line as Hutten, Zinzendorf exploited an old tension between religious dissenters and the London government and made the Calvinist-Presbyterian clergy responsible for the New York troubles.

In response, the London authorities asked the governor to present reasons for the action.[ 5] In 1746 Clinton replied that the act had been adopted because ( 1) itinerant preachers had caused ecclesial as well as family divisions. ( 2) The act constituted a measure against Spanish agents who infiltrated and subverted the colonies. ( 3) The Moravians had been too closely related to Whitefield, who while in America, Clinton alleged, had collected incredible sums of money to fill his own pockets. ( 4) Referring to Zinzendorf's conciliatory stance on religious matters, the governor objected that the Moravians did not clearly distinguish between Protestants and Catholics. ( 5) Clinton was afraid that the continuous influx of Moravian settlers would soon outbalance the English subjects. ( 6) Their teachers were simple illiterate artisans. ( 7) Particularly irritating was their relationship to the Native Americans; the Moravians not only resided with the native people, they even intermarried with them. ( 8) This gave rise to the suspicion that they would seduce the Native Americans from their fidelity to the government. ( 9) The Moravian missionaries had even threatened the government with their hold on the Native Americans, intimating that the native people would follow them wherever they went. ( 10) The Moravians prevented Clinton's enlisting the Native North Americans in his army, which was especially detrimental in times of war (i.e., during King George's War, 1744-48).[ 6]

### Becoming All Things to Native Americans

The issues Governor Clinton addressed in his reply give insight into both the colonial religion and the dynamics of the early Moravian missions. Taking Paul's injunction from 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 literally, the Moravians, it appears, opted to become all things to the native people. Their level of contextualization was astounding.

One form of contextualization was rooted in the ancient Moravian peace emphasis which, on the one hand, barred them from taking up arms during King George's War and, on the other, corresponded amazingly well with a centuries-old Native American peace vision. It is obvious that these emphases were bound to collide with the religion of the English establishment and its interests.

As we shall see, however, within a few years, in response to the "Moravian persecution," the Moravians opted for assimilation into the white American ethos in order to ensure the survival of their church in North America--a "contextualization" that could not but curtail their missionary outreach to the native people.

### Moravian Mission and Colonial Religiosity

For the colonial authorities, it must have been difficult to cast the Moravian mission into traditional molds since neither their church nor their mission was officially recognized. As a fiercely persecuted Protestant minority in Europe, the Moravian church had roots reaching back to the Czech Reformation. The Moravians had taken on an identity that challenged society and government. They were nonjurors, refusing to participate in the larger society's forms of government; and many of them were pacifists and, as such, had been suppressed by both Catholics and the more militant followers of Jan Hus.

The old Moravian Unity had also absorbed Waldensian emphases.[ 7] They had been influenced by the writings of Peter Chelcicky, who, similar to the Waldensians, had taught that any kind of unity between church and state was an abomination. No state, Chelcicky argued, could possibly exist without coercion and violence. But force and violence were unchristian and therefore contrary to the Gospel. Christians were motivated by love, not by force. The Christian method of diffusing its message was loving persuasion. Everything else was evil. Consequently, it was impossible for a Christian pilgrim, who was a stranger in this world and at home in the next, to participate in the affairs of the state. Christians could never be soldiers; neither should they become magistrates.[ 8]

Out of their experience of persecution in Czechoslovakia the Moravians had come to Count Zinzendorf's estate in Saxony. Those who left Saxony for other parts of the world ventured to share the Gospel of Christ's love with other oppressed people--in this case, with the Native North Americans.

One of their missionaries wrote: "I was deeply moved about my [Native American] brothers. I saw how they stood among the white people and how the whites deal with them. They do not treat them differently from a ... [not readable] and as people without brains [die keinen Verstand haben] and with whom they can do as they like. And they cheat them at all corners. And yet they take the Native people as if it would be their obligation to work for them. That cut into my heart." [ 9] The missionaries were determined to identify with those to whom God had sent them and the plight of the native people became the plight of the missionaries.

The tensions between the religious nonconformity of the Moravians and the official religion can best be illustrated with their run-in with one of the most outstanding representatives of the established faith, missionary David Brainerd. On August 12, 1742, Brainerd stopped close to Schaghticoke, a Native American community approximately twenty miles east of Shekomeko. According to the entry in Brainerd's diary, he was spiritually at a low ebb. He wrote, "I had in a great measure lost my hopes of God sending me among the Heathen afar off." Brainerd felt surprised "that the people did not stone" him, let alone "that they would ever hear [him] preach." He continued, "Yet . . . the [Schaghticoke] people came over, and I was forced to preach. And blessed be God, he gave me his presence and Spirit in prayer and preaching; so that I was much assisted, and spake with power from Job xiv.14. Some Indians cried out in great distress, and all appeared greatly concerned. After we had prayed and exhorted them to seek the Lord with constancy, and hired an English woman to keep a kind of school among them, we came away about one o'clock." [ 10]

In spite of this amazing response, several months went by without anything further being done. It was perhaps in reaction to this uncertain interest on the part of the white Christian community that the Schaghticoke persuaded the Moravians to station resident missionaries among them for both church and school work.[ 11] When Brainerd visited Schaghticoke a second time in March 1743 to hold services, the die had been cast in favor of the Moravians.[ 12] (Could Brainerd's lifelong resentment against the Moravians have had its roots in his frustrated experience at Schaghticoke?)

It is difficult to read Brainerd's diary without being moved by his deep, intense spirituality. But it is also apparent that he wanted to build God's kingdom among the native people within the established religious and social parameters of his own society. Contrary to many of his white countrymen, who were set to wipe out the Native American communities, Brainerd firmly believed that the native people could be converted to the Christian faith. Yet Brainerd's Savior would culminate his work of grace in the hearts and lives of his brown children when they took on the manners and customs of white Christians. This assumption can be seen on the occasion of his exploratory trip into Pennsylvania, where he intended to establish a mission. According to Spangenberg's Moravian journal of 1747, the "Presbyterian Brainerd" had also visited the location where he and his companions were staying. Brainerd had admonished the native people to come together for church services on Sundays, just "as the whites do, and pray as they do. Hence he would build a house for that purpose, and stay with them two years. The Governor had given him orders to that effect, and he would be glad to see the Indians hearken to him. [But they answered him,] 'We are Indians, and don't wish to be transformed into white men. The English are our Brethren, but we never promised to become what they are.'" [ 13]

As R. Pierce Beaver has observed, "David Brainerd, too, was a colonizer." Beaver referred to Brainerd's later mission in New Jersey, where he brought the people together to be settled in a town according to the colonial pattern, thus facilitating their becoming like godly white Christians.[ 14] In contrast, the Moravians worked hard to become like Native Americans, to such an extent that at times they were taken to be native people.

Norman Pettit has pointed out that one of the determining motivators of David Brainerd's mission was to counteract the missionary work of the Moravians, which was alienating the native people from white Christianity and which, for Brainerd, could be nothing but a corrupted version of the Christian faith.[ [15](#)]

After returning to Europe from his visit in fall 1742 to the North American missions, Zinzendorf, in line with Peter Chelcicky, succinctly critiqued the methodology of the English missions: "Therefore we directly oppose the Conversion of the Heathen Nations to the Profession of the Christian Religion; and likewise the Methods hitherto made Use of in the Conversion of both Jews and Heathens. For if Christian Princes and Divines should go so far as to convert the Heathen Nations to their Customs and Ways in our Days, they would thereby do the greatest Piece of Service to the Devil. Therefore I do not in the least believe that the Devil would oppose any one in such an Undertaking, but wo'd rather help them as much as he co'd."[ [16](#)]

### Shekomeko and the Moravian Peace Tradition

The missionaries in Shekomeko operated, as far as we can tell, in accordance with the old Czech principles that discouraged the bearing of arms. Although pacifism was blurred in their own minds and therefore was never made explicit, the Moravian missionaries demonstrated a compelling philosophy of peace, which the Shekomeko Mahicans readily accepted.

Providentially, from the perspective of the methodology of missions, the Moravian peace tradition coincided with ancient Native American peace yearnings. The Iroquois prophet Dekanawideh had stated: "I, Dekanawideh, and the confederate lords now uproot the tallest pine tree and into the cavity thereby made we cast all weapons of war. Into the depths of the earth, down into the deep underearth currents of water flowing into unknown regions, we cast all weapons of strife. We bury them from sight forever and plant again the tree."[ [17](#)]

Ilse Loges demonstrates that the Native Americans understood wars to be terrible accidents that occurred outside the order of the world.[ [18](#)] In some Native American groups, holy men were prohibited from killing other humans, and warriors were barred from officiating at sacral activities.[ [19](#)] In light of the lifestyle and preaching of the missionaries, the step from prophet Dekanawideh's peace contract and the eschatological peace vision of the missionaries' Bible was small: The nations "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Mic. 4:3). Whatever the reason, and although it may contradict much of what we have heard and read about Native Americans, the fact is that the converts of the Moravian missions did not have any major difficulties in accepting pacifism. Neither did their non-Christian Native American neighbors find any essential fault with the peace vision of the missions people. The only objection they raised was the fear that some day the white people would come and murder them all.[ [20](#)]

Eventually, the Moravian converts became more pacifistic than their teachers. The Moravian leaders at the mother community in Bethlehem stressed pacifist convictions as options for individual believers; nevertheless, they drew the entire community into defending Bethlehem with arms during the French and Indian War (1754-63).[ 21] At the same time, the mission's Native Americans confessed their unequivocal commitment to their Creator and Redeemer and to his principles of preserving the life that he had created, including their refusal to go to war:

We will know no other God but the one and true God, who made us and all creatures, and came into this world in order to save sinners; to Him alone we will pray. ...

We will honor father and mother, and when they grow old and needy we will do for them what we can. ...

We will not admit rum or any other intoxicating liquor into our towns. ...

Whenever corn is needed to entertain strangers... we will freely contribute from our stores.

We will not go to war, and we will not buy anything of warriors taken in war.[ 22]

Were these biblical ethics or a constellation of a Native American peace dream? What surfaces seems to be a reinterpretation of the themes of Moravian gospel preaching and Bible reading in light of Native American peace traditions, placed into the contours of universal validity.

### Becoming All Things to the White People

To Count Zinzendorf and his missionaries, the "Moravian Persecution" in the colony of New York had been a nightmare. It included eight clashes between the missionaries and the civil authorities, with two trials in New York City. In order to avert similar incidents but also in order to assure the survival of the Moravian community on North American soil, Zinzendorf began lobbying in London and eventually achieved official recognition for his church on April 16, 1749. The bill recognizing the Moravian Church was passed in its third reading in the House of Commons. The Upper House passed the bill on May 12, 1749, and the following month, on June 6, it was signed by the king. The bill granted Moravians everywhere exemption from swearing and from serving on juries in criminal cases.[ 23] Conscientious objectors would also be exempt from military service in the American colonies.[ 24]

It is noteworthy that the outcome not only permitted Moravians to become naturalized in the Americas and exempted them from swearing and military service; now they were actually encouraged to settle in America.[ 25] This meant that they were granted much more than toleration. The Moravian church had actually achieved a more privileged position than that held by the Protestants who had persecuted them. In turn, the Moravians began to relax and to accept the society that had accepted them.

In time, the mutual acceptance became complete. Instead of being taken as a menace to government and its interests, the Moravians became valuable to the crown. For the London government, the work of building towns in Pennsylvania, together with their successful agriculture and artisanship, demonstrated that they had the skills necessary for effective colonization. And their successful missions to Native North Americans gave proof that they would also be able to "conquer Native America" by transforming its lands into European countrysides. At the same time it was hoped that they would convert the "savages" from their French allegiance to a pro-British stance. (The "French and Indian War" would erupt only a few years later.)

It must be noted that the bill for recognition faithfully reflects the discussions by the Moravian representatives in London. In their fear of further persecutions and their eagerness to become acceptable to colonial society, some of the reasons given for their recognition were essentially anti-Native North American. On his return to Europe after visiting the Native American missions, Zinzendorf had vehemently condemned all missionary work under the auspices of the government. But now, according to the London act, Moravian missions would function as a vanguard for government interests. In this exchange, Zinzendorf assured the survival of the Moravian Unity in North America but paid the high price of assimilation into the main society.

Several decades would pass before this assimilation would affect the Native North American missions.[ 26] The pivotal point would be what has become known as the Gnadenhutten (Ohio) incident. On March 8, 1782, at the end of the Revolutionary War, American militia murdered an entire Moravian mission village, including women, children, and old people.[ 27] The slaughter was carried out even though the resident Moravian missionaries, although officially neutral, had been friendly to the Revolution; missionary Heckewelder had even furnished intelligence to the American commander at Fort Pitt. To Heckewelder, as a loyal American, the massacre occurred as a tragic accident.[ 28]

To the native people, however, Gnadenhutten was no accident. There had been massacres before, and others would follow throughout the nineteenth century. Consequently, to the extent that the established order's courtship of the Moravian Church progressed, the missionary outreach of the Moravians to Native Americans waned. By the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Moravians and their missions had become reconciled to the white ethos of the newly emerging United States.

When it became apparent to the native people that the Moravians had essentially accepted the value system of those who had disowned them, despite the massacre of their Christian brothers and sisters at the Gnadenhutten mission, they turned away from the missionaries. Elma E. Gray presents evidence that many of the Moravian Native American Christians who "had fled... after the Gnadenhutten murders... lapsed into heathenism, some believing the missionaries would 'tame' them [with the Christian faith] and [then] sell them to the whites to massacre." [ 29] Native American James Lone Bear Revey draws the circle even wider. The Gnadenhutten massacre, he claims, constitutes the pivotal turning point in relations between whites and Native North Americans.[ 30] Thus,

Gnadenhutzen signals more than the end of the Moravian missions outreach. From that point onward, the native people began to seal themselves off from all Christian missions, thus marking the end of any generally effective missionary outreach to Native North America.[ 31]

### Notes

1. Eduard T. Corwin, ed., *Ecclesiastical Records: State of New York*, 7 vols. (Albany: J. B. Lyon Company, 1901-16), pp. 2861-62.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 2856.

3. Harry Emilius Stocker, *A History of the Moravian Church in New York City* (New York: The author, 1922), pp. 60-61.

4. Daniel Benham, *Memoirs of James Hutten: Comprising the Annals of His Life, and Connection with the United Brethren* (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1856), p. 171.

5. E.B. O'Callaghan, ed., *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York: Procured in Holland, England and France, by John Roman Broadhead, Esq.* (Albany: Weed, Parsons, 1853-83), 6:279 [1021].

6. *Ibid.*, 3:1022-27.

7. *The Waldensians "reject any kind of oath. Based on the absolute prohibition to kill, they condemn kings and authorities who decree the death penalty in their laws and judgments"* (translated from art. 72 from the report of Inquisitor Petrus, as cited in Jaroslav Goll, ed., *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Bohmischen Bruder*, vol. 2 [Prague: J. Otto, 1882], p. 38).

8. For a detailed discussion of Peter Chelcicky's teaching, see *ibid.*, especially pp. 22-41, and Martin Theile, "Politische Ethik aus der Liebe Gottes: Die Theologie des Bauern Petr aus Chelcice," *Unitas Fratrum* 9 (1981): 24-56.

9. Gottlob Buttner and Hagen et al., *Master Diary [of the Shekomeko Mission]*, December 31, 1739-July 25, 1746, MS Bethlehem Archives, box 111, folder 1, p. 173; see also p. 188, and box 112, folder 2, item 2, p. 4. All MSS classified with a box and folder number are kept in the Bethlehem (Pa.) archives of the Moravian Church.

10. Jonathan Edwards, *An Account of the Life of the Reverend David Brainerd...* (Edinburgh: John Gray and Gavin Alston, 1795), p. 39.

11. On the Schaghticoke mission, see Samuel Orcutt, *The Indians of the Housatonic and Naugatuck Valleys* (Hartford, Conn.: Press of the Case, 1882), pp. 150ff.

12. Edwards, *Account*, pp. 64-65.

- [13.](#) William Martin Beauchamp, ed., *Moravian Journals Relating to Central New York, 1745-66* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Dehler Press, 1916), p. 7.
- [14.](#) R. Pierce Beaver, "Methods in American Missions to the Indians in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Calvinist Models for Protestant Foreign Missions," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 47 (1962): 137.
- [15.](#) Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 30-31.
- [16.](#) From Zinzendorf's talks in London (William C. Reichel, *Memorials of the Moravian Church* [Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincot, 1870], p. 116. See Zinzendorf, "Einfaltige Gedanken in der Indianerbekruegungssache," R.14 A 16, no. 4.14, and R.15 A, no. 3.13b, of October 6, 1752: "Ich halte nichts von Nationalbekehrung" (I reject the idea of the conversion of nations). Compare R.15 A, no. 3.13b. All MSS classified under the letter R are kept in the Herrnhut Archives, Germany, under "Acta Publica Pensylvanica wie aus New York (1738-1759)."
- [17.](#) From the peace contract of the Iroquois prophet Dekanawideh, cited in Oren R. Lyons, "The American Indian in the Past," in *Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations, and the U.S. Constitution*, ed. John C. Mohawk and Oren R. Lyons (Santa Fe, N.M.: Clear Light Publishers, 1992), pp. 13-42. From a Native American political perspective, the Mahicans at Shekomeko were under the jurisdiction of the Iroquois Confederacy.
- [18.](#) Ilse Loges, "Irokesen und Delawareen im Spiegel der Herrnhuter Mission: Versuch einer vergleichenden Stammesmonographie nach den Herrnhuter Quellen des 18 Jahrhunderts" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. Gottingen, 1956), pp. 172-73.
- [19.](#) Nathaniel Knowles, "The Torture of Captives by the Indians of Eastern North America," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 82, no. 2 (1940): 207; Werner Muller, *Die Religionen der Waldindianer Nordamerikas* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1950), pp. 87ff.
- [20.](#) Which indeed happened in the 1782 Gnadenhittten massacre.
- [21.](#) David A. Schattschneider, "Moravians Approach the Indians: Theories and Realities," *Unitas Fratrum* 21/22 (1988): 43.
- [22.](#) Cited U Joseph E. Weinland, *The Romantic Story of Schoenbrunn, the First Town in Ohio* ([Ohio Historical Society], n.d.): 13, emphasis author's.
- [23.](#) John Beck Holmes, *Historical Sketches of the Missions of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen, from Their Commencement to the Year 1817* (London: Printed for the author, 1827), p. 326.

[24.](#) J. Hamilton, *The Recognition of the Unitas Fratrum as an Old Episcopal Church by the Parliament of Great Britain in 1749* (Bethlehem, Pa.:Times Publishing, 1925), pp. 22, 24-27.

[25.](#) H. Cossart and H. Horn, "Summarische Nachricht... uber Antrag und Annahme einer Parlamentsacte im Unterhaus zur Naturalisierung der Mahrtschen Bruder und anderer auslandischer Protestanten, die sich eu Gewissen machen, Eide zu schworen, London," April 6, 1747, R.14 A 11, nos. 25, 27, 32, 34.

[26.](#) Marie J. Kohnova, "The Moravians and Their Missionaries: a Problem in Americanization," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 19, no. 3 (December 1932): 348-61.

[27.](#) See note 30 for documentation.

[28.](#) Paul A. W. Wallace, *The Travels of John Heckewelder in Frontier America* (1958; reprint, Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), pp. 133, 134, 221.

[29.](#) Elma E. Gray, *Wilderness Christians: The Moravian Mission to the Delaware Indians* (1956; reprint, New York: Russel & Russel, 1973), p. 197; see pp. 197-99. See especially Lawrence Henry Gipson, *The Moravian Indian Mission on White River: Diaries and Letters, May 5, 1799, to November 12, 1806* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1938).

[30.](#) James Lone Bear Revey, "Lecture Presented at the Sun Inn Indian Symposium," *Unitas Fratrum* 21/22 (1987): 73. On Gnadenhtitten, see further Gipson, *Moravian Indian Mission*, p. 17, and William M. Farrar, "The Moravian Massacre," *Ohio Archives and Historical Society Publications* 3 (1895): 276-300. See Mary Bilderback Abel, "Massacre at Gnadenhutten," *American History Illustrated* 16 (December 1981): 28-31. The immense importance of the Gnadenhutten incident has not been adequately recognized. Also see Abel's essay on the difficulties in collecting data on the massacre; she charges, "No mass murder was ever so well concealed" (p. 30). See also Weinland, *Romantic Story*, and C. W. Butterfield, *An Historical Account of the Expedition Against Sundusky Under Col. William Crawford in 1782* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke, 1873). Butterfield justified the Gnadenhutten massacre as a military necessity. See Milo M. Quaife, "The Ohio Campaigns of 1782," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 18 (March 1931).

[31.](#) This does not mean, of course, that there was no further Protestant missionary work among the native people. In fact, future works even gained sporadic success. But as R. Pierce Beaver puts out, "The tremendous investment of lives, time, and money has produced... [only] small numerical results." Beaver argues that this was because "the missionaries sought to 'civilize' as well as convert, and assimilation to the white pattern was usually considered to reveal the reality of conversion" (R. Pierce Beaver, *American Missions in Bicentennial Perspective* [South Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1977], p. 308).

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