

H-Net Reviews

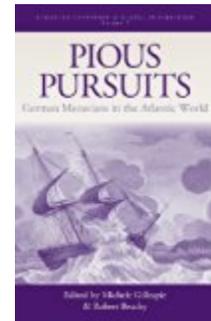
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michele Gillespie, Robert Beachy, eds. *Pious Pursuits: German Moravians in the Atlantic World*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. 278 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-339-8.

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Piety and Commerce in the German Atlantic

This volume brings together fifteen essays on the role of German Moravians in the Atlantic system of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It had its origins in a 2002 conference at Wake Forest University in Winston Salem, North Carolina, the place of one of the earliest Moravian settlements in North America which also features prominently in this book. Originating from the small village of Herrnhut in the German region of Upper Lusatia (1722), the Moravians or Herrnhuters quickly spread all over the world, concentrating on missionary work, pious community life, and successful economic enterprises. Their spiritualist piety, rooted in a christocentric, “ecumenical,” and rather eclectic theology, developed under the charismatic leadership of Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, as well as their particular forms of social life (such as their organization into “Choirs” according to gender and age or their practice of decision making by lot in certain cases), have attracted the attention of scholars from within as well as outside the community.

For more than one hundred years now, the Moravians have been considered part of the German “Pietist” movement, which has for the most part been associated with August Hermann Francke’s foundations centered in Halle. However, there were probably as many significant differences with German, and especially Halle Pietism (the episcopal system of the Moravians, their educational or gender principles, and so on), as there were similarities (missionary work, introspective, self-assessing piety). On the one hand, and perhaps most strikingly in

terms of a contrast to Halle Pietism, the Moravians developed their own historical tradition, shaped in interactions with Czech and German faith communities. Some of their early members came from evangelical groups in the Bohemian lands, which connected them to the Czech reformer Jan Hus and the educational philosopher John Amos Comenius. On the other hand, Count Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravian Church in Germany, always saw his community as part of the Lutheran Church. When the position of the Moravians was seriously challenged by conservative German church authorities in the 1730s, they resorted to overseas mission, which turned out to be a great success. Today, while remaining only a rather small church in Germany, the Moravians can count millions of members from all over the world.

The essays of the present volume all address the question of how this success came about. They provide a non-European view and deal with the connections between American and European Moravianism in the eighteenth century, focusing on Moravian piety and its commercial success in North America, and on more general aspects of gender and class in the relationship between religious immigrant communities and political authorities.

The fifteen essays, all written by distinguished scholars on Moravian and/or eighteenth-century transatlantic history, are arranged in four sections. Part 1 treats the “Birth of Moravianism”: a “Moravianism” largely understood as a transatlantic phenomenon and not too much associated with the “birth” of the Unity of

Brethren/Moravian Church in Germany. The importance of this section lies in the ways that the essays connect the European with the American strands of the Moravian experience, which has long been neglected by North American and European researchers alike. Mack Walker suggests that the origins of Moravian theocracy and communal organization derived from a culture of German baroque nobility as well as from the structure of smaller imperial states in Central Europe. He raises the question of the extent to which these European phenomena were transferred to the Atlantic world by the Herrnhuters. Robert Beachy looks at the impressive transatlantic communication system of the Moravians, which was based on handwritten reports. This rather anachronistic practice in an age of print contributed to the simultaneous preservation of group identities for Moravian communities and at the same time deliberately secluded the Moravians from the print market and from public scrutiny. Craig D. Atwood follows the influence of particular “Zinzendorfian” theology in the North American communities. He puts the Moravian “sifting time” of the 1740s and the worshipping of the side-wound of Jesus Christ on the cross in a larger context deriving from Catholic piety, and thus reevaluates a crucial period of Moravianism, which has long been seen as a radical aberration and has been the subject of intense scholarly discussion (see, for example, Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Jesus Is Female: Moravians and the Challenge of Radical Religion in Early America* [2007]). Renate Wilson follows the lives and practices of Moravian physicians in North American settlements, which were initially based on European models, but also, increasingly, on the flexible, sometimes improvisational, culture of medical care in the colonies.

For a long time, historians of eighteenth-century evangelicalism have been hesitant to concede that economic prosperity was no contradiction, but rather a necessary prerequisite for pious life and works for these groups. Thus, the essays of the second section raise questions that have not yet been sufficiently answered in the context of other religious denominations active in the Atlantic system. This is the focus of the section entitled “Culture and Society: Identity and Assimilation,” which addresses life in the North American settlements of the Herrnhuters and the implications of trade and the market economy on spiritual well-being in Moravian communities. Implicit in all its chapters is the relationship between Moravians and the colonial, “outside world.” Elisabeth Sommer’s essay underlines the important role of Moravian dress regulations as a means to transcend class boundaries. Disregarding the social background of in-

dividual community members, all women had to dress in a peasant style with a characteristic head cap in order to prevent an addiction to worldly fashion. While considered radical in the 1740s, this Moravian approach to women’s dress became the forerunner of a particular North American dress fashion at the turn of the century. S. Scott Rohrer places the Moravians into a mixed, English- and German-speaking, colonial culture in the Wachovia region of North Carolina. He underlines the willingness of English-speaking settlers to join German settlements, demonstrating that, in their minds, a shared religion was a more important factor in determining cultural integration than a particular ethnic background. Katherine Carté Engel follows the Moravians’ role in the Atlantic economy of the eighteenth century. One reason for their spiritual success in the colonies, as she sees it, was their economic creativity. With ships of their own, they actively participated in transatlantic trade and no longer had to rely on other commercial or political enterprises as other evangelical groups had to. Emily Conrad Beaver then shows the outcome of Moravian economic strategies. One of the reasons for the growth and prosperity of the Salem community in North Carolina, she argues, was the ability of its members to take part in trade with both sides in the War of Independence. The Moravians’ economic flexibility did raise suspicions among political activists in the conflict. Yet, opening their self-sustaining and spiritually secluded communities seems to have been a deliberate and necessary strategy. Indeed, it sometimes even challenged the very social stability of Moravian communities in the early nineteenth-century industrialization period, as Michael Shirley’s contribution shows.

The final section addresses the complications that arose in the Moravian Church around race and gender. Its chapters deal with topics that have become quite prominent in the scholarly literature in recent years, such as the role of women among Moravians or their attitude toward slavery and toward native peoples. The essays raise the overall question about a presumed Moravian exceptionalism, compared to other evangelical groups. Beverly P. Smaby shows that the positive attitude toward female leadership among Moravians was rather short-lived and only found support as long as the Moravian leader Zinzendorf was alive. Marianne S. Wokeck describes the role of pastors’ wives and the adjustment of their traditional German roles to colonial circumstances. Anna Smith turns her attention to the connections between Cherokee and Moravian women in nineteenth-century Moravian missions. Her evidence suggests that

there was much more interaction than hitherto thought, although the common ground was around specific gender roles rather than religion. Ellen Klinkers's essay focuses on the problem of the conversion of slaves in nineteenth-century Suriname and shows the ambiguous attitude of Moravians toward slavery, depending on their relationship to authorities and planters. Jon Sensbach addresses similar questions in pointing to the ambivalence of Moravians toward modernity. The success of the Moravian Church among slaves in the Caribbean partly resulted in his view from its ability to provide a spiritual meaning to enslavement and subjugation.

A. Gregg Roeber's concluding essay is more of a comment on Sensbach and others while at the same time summarizing and/or raising important questions concerning the whole volume. He sees as one of the outcomes a "general insistence on tracing the gradual decay of the universal confidence in the Gospel and the decline of the Moravians into more conventional nineteenth-century provincial Protestants" (p. 241). And indeed, after reading the essays of the volume, it seems like the Moravians do not fit into a master plan leading to modernity, and they might not even have had any such plan, a fact that some of the contributors might perhaps find disappointing. Apparently, the Moravians were not the forerunners of antislavery movements or women's liberation. They were not against slavery per se, but against what they considered its abuses. Female offices in church seem, in the long run, to have been the exception rather than the rule. Moravian piety could be combined with, but also challenged or contradicted by, economic success and market flexibility. And even their theological ideas in the eighteenth century do not seem too consistent at times.

This intriguing collection successfully deconstructs myths of the Moravians and their putative ties to modernity. Nevertheless, implicit in many essays is the idea that the Moravian as well as the German contribution to

the Atlantic system can be measured with the values of today. What this rather teleological perspective sometimes too willingly puts aside are the specific eighteenth-century characteristics and the contemporary context in which the Moravians lived. Their "Pietism" as well as their "ecumenism" seem to be taken for granted by the contributors, instead of being more critically assessed. One might like to know more, for example, about the Moravians' relationship toward other confessional groups, such as the Halle Pietists, who strongly competed with the Moravians in an emerging Atlantic world. In addition, Roeber's comment raises the important question of whether and, if so, more precisely how other confessional groups, such as the Halle Pietists (or perhaps, one might add, even Roman Catholics), provided a good deal of the ideas and infrastructure on which the Moravians built. To build on Roeber's query, a comparative view of these groups might reveal that the Atlantic system, and even a "German Atlantic," is much more fragmented than hitherto thought, at least in a religious sense.

After reading the essays it is difficult to say whether there were more similarities or differences between eighteenth-century European Herrnhuters and American Moravians. At any rate, these possible connections (or disjunctures) need to be assessed further, perhaps combining research from both sides of the Atlantic more than before. The crucial questions of how "German" the American Moravians were; how long and why they preserved parts of their "Germanness"; and which political, social, devotional or theological models they introduced into Atlantic societies (and how these models might have changed over time) are still not sufficiently answered. That said, the present volume, with some highly original research, well written and widely focused, adds an important intercultural perspective to the Atlantic evangelicalism of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and is a very good starting point for further such investigations.

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