

Rebecca Anne Goetz. *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 240 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4214-1981-7.

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As her book's subtitle makes clear, historian Rebecca Anne Goetz seeks to understand how "Anglo-Christians used Christianity to create an idea of race." In particular, she examines how the belief that Africans and Indians were "incapable of true Christian conversion" developed over the course of the seventeenth century. Rooted in the emerging idea of "hereditary heathenism," this assertion allowed for Anglo-Virginians to "marginalize and control" what they believed were their irredeemable neighbors. It also led them to invent "an entirely new concept—what it meant to be 'white'" (p. 2).

When they settled at Jamestown in 1607, most English people believed that Christianity was meant to be spread and that the true Christian's covenant with God could, and surely should be universally obtained. The English also believed that it was their responsibility to lead the world to the true Christian church. Confronting the efforts of Spain to spread Catholicism throughout the New World, the English saw Virginia, and the conversion of its native population, as a bulwark against false Christianity and Spain's territorial ambitions. Virginia's Indian population, the English supposed, while certainly primitive and backwards in faith, could be redeemed.

At Jamestown, English colonists embarked on an effort to form an Anglo-Christian common-

wealth, one "in which the Indians would be unequal but willing participants" (p. 35). Indians' conversion to Christianity entailed a broader adoption of English culture and government. It would also better ensure the economic success of the new colony; the Indians being Christian allies rather than "heathen hostiles" (p. 36). Building this commonwealth proved harder than the English had expected. It turned out that the Powhatan Indians were not awed by Christian practice and did not wish to be "junior partners" in the enterprise, and that the English, beset by an alarming death rate, starvation, and internal turmoil, were themselves prone to "heathenish" behavior (including cannibalism). The colony's new charter of 1609 strengthened the authoritative hand of the struggling colonial regime, implementing stiff punishments for various transgressions while regulating colonist-Indian interactions. The goal, however, remained Indian conversion to Christianity and English ways. The kidnapping, marriage to John Rolfe, and conversion of Metoaka (Pocahontas) instigated further efforts to build a peaceable commonwealth. So too did the establishment of a school for Indian children, though, like other efforts at their conversion, the Powhatans proved largely reluctant to handing their children to the English. By the early 1620s, Goetz notes, "few, if any, [Indians had] repeated Metoaka's conver-

sion" (p. 57), and visions of an Anglo-Indian Christian commonwealth dissipated with the Powhatan 1622 attack on Jamestown. The Indians' heathen ways, which the English had once considered evidence of their potential for conversion to Christianity, now appeared as a hereditary barrier to evangelization. Thus took root the idea that Christianity, like heathenism, was hereditary, giving English colonists "an opening to deny Christianity and its associated privileges to Africans and Indians" (p. 64).

A key site in which this idea manifested was English efforts at regulating sexual and marital activity. Punishing fornication of any kind during the first decades of settlement had been confusing, with punishments varying from whippings and public penance to fines. Anglo-Indian and Anglo-African fornication—the mixing of Christian and heathen bodies—worried colonial leaders. Goetz uses the well-known 1662 law, which tied a child's status of free or bond with the "condition of the mother," to demonstrate how by that time Virginia planters perceived religious differences between black and white. As the law also prescribed punishment when a "Christian" fornicated with a "negro," Goetz contends that the lawmakers supposed that "English people were Christian; people of African descent were not" (p. 79). A 1691 law went further, levying a fine on any woman having a bastard child of an African or an Indian. If she could not pay the fine, then she would be sold as an indentured servant. To bolster conventional English gender norms and ideas about legitimacy, colonists also "forbade access to Christian marriage for people they defined as heathen" (p. 62). After 1691, whites who married across the religious-color line could be banished from the colony. The assembly strengthened the 1691 act's provisions early in the eighteenth century.

The English seized on Christian baptism as a tool of conquest and another site through which to differentiate peoples. While Goetz is careful to note that rumblings over baptism—the responsibilities of the baptized, adult versus infant baptism, etc.—

had percolated through Western Christianity from about the time that Martin Luther took up hammer and nail, she also illuminates how Indians and Africans comprehended baptism, using it as a way "to build their own communities and gain a place in English society" (p. 98). Early on, indentured and enslaved Indians who converted—though few in number—may have found some rights within the English community, as did their African counterparts. Virginia's innovative 1667 statute, moreover, which denied that a Christian baptism altered one's condition of freedom or bondage, signaled that Africans were indeed converting to Christianity. Though conversion raised concerns over a convert's status, Goetz claims that few baptisms prior to 1667 resulted in freedom directly. Instead, those Africans who had obtained freedom through baptism had often navigated layers of agreements, with planters, planter's heirs, and if necessary, local courts. More importantly, perhaps, is Goetz's contention that the 1667 law proved a crucial step in colonists' construction of "a creole idea of race and Christianity," which rejected the convertibility of all humankind and embraced instead a limited, hereditary conception of salvation (p. 110).

Virginia's leaders believed that the colony's stability depended upon well-governed Christian English households. With Indian threats still lingering on an insecure frontier, dependence on slave labor growing, and Quakers and Catholics seemingly intent on upending the social order, the colonial assembly—with a nod to Robert Filmer's elucidations on governance—attempted to legislate conformity to the patriarchal household. Lawmakers passed a slew of acts during the 1660s and 1670s meant to shore up household authority and combat both religious and racial outsiders. While white servants gained protections from excessive abuse, those the English deemed hereditary heathens lost any rights which their Christian beliefs may have hitherto provided. Moreover, the assembly forbade blacks and Indians from owning Christian servants, and described religious dissent-

ers as enemies of well-governed households and thus to the colony's peace. England's 1689 Act of Toleration provided some legal rights for dissenting groups and solidified England's national identity as white, Protestant Christian. Virginia did not fully acknowledge that law until 1699, yet there, Goetz contends, the growth in religious toleration sprang in part from the process of delineating between white and black, Christian and heathen. This culminated with the 1705 Act Concerning Servants and Slaves, "the first time that Christians were legally and explicitly defined by a physical distinction—skin color—and granted certain privileges based upon color and religious identity" (p. 137). The connection Goetz makes between religious toleration and racialized religion is tenuous at best. Decades later, Virginians still railed against religious outsiders. In 1724, for instance, the Anglican minister Hugh Jones insisted nonconforming preachers be, at the very least silenced, and even better, banished from the colony. Too much toleration, he warned, would make it difficult to eradicate "any heterodox, libertine, or fanatical Persons."^[1]

While throughout the book Goetz charts the construction of "neat legal boxes" which categorized individuals by race, she also notes that prescription did not always reflect practice, and individuals from the mother country and every level of colonial society resisted lawmakers' circumscriptions. Well after Virginia planters associated whiteness with Christianity, Anglican missionaries from across the Atlantic still pressed their colonial brethren to convert Indians and Africans. Moreover, the association between Christian conversion and freedom persevered in the minds of enslaved Virginians. Even as Anglican ministers and missionaries back in England slowly got on board—agreeing that emancipation need not follow conversion, but that the latter was necessary—slaves continued to argue for the link between freedom and conversion. Their actions, in bringing suits to court, writing letters to imperial officials, and "as a last resort, in rebellions," Goetz con-

cludes, highlights their "older, radical view of Christian conversion" and how they "fundamentally challenged hereditary heathenism." Finally succumbing to missionaries' pleas during the course of the eighteenth century, Virginia planters constructed "reluctant room" for enslaved Christians, space that later gave birth to proslavery Christian thought (pp. 166-67).

This is a story of transformation. In the century after Jamestown's establishment in 1607, Virginia's planter class had reimagined Christianity as "a religion almost exclusively for white people" (p. 169). They restricted Africans' and Indians' access to Christian ritual, regulated sex across the color line, and redefined the rights of the baptized. The rhetoric and ideals of the Revolution, and the subsequent growth of the abolition movement, may have raised questions about slavery in a supposed land of liberty, but many Virginians and other slaveholders stuck to polygenetic and biblical justifications of bondage that stressed the "unbridgeable divide between Christian and heathen at the root of race and slavery" (p. 171).

The Baptism of Early Virginia is based on a deep reading of qualitative sources, especially court records. It demonstrates Christianity's role in shaping inequality in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake, providing a more nuanced portrait of the development of slavery there and throughout the British Atlantic world. While illuminating the ways in which historical actors shaped secular categories through religious discourse, it also challenges modern readers to interrogate how religion and race are often still lumped together. The book's conciseness makes it ideal for undergraduate and graduate seminars, and will be of interest to historians of race, religion, law, and early American society in general.

Note

[1]. Quote in Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26.

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