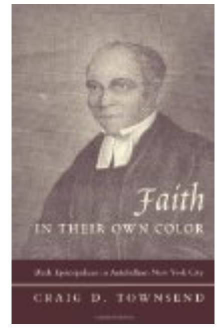
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Craig D. Townsend. *Faith in Their Own Color: Black Episcopalians in Antebellum New York City.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. Ix + 241 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-13468-2.



Reviewed by Kenneth Scherzer

Published on H-Urban (May, 2006)

James McCune Smith--physician, antislavery newspaper editor, and key intellectual leader of antebellum New York City's black community--warned against separatism in the pursuit of racial equality. "A movement based upon the complexion of the skin," he concluded, "will end in riveting still more firmly the chains which bind us" (p. 78). This tension over whether to withdraw or remain engaged lies at the heart of Craig D. Townsend's new history of St. Philip's Church (to which Smith belonged), and its role in shaping the religious life of African-American Episcopalians. To be sure, during the twilight era of slavery in New York, many black churchgoers followed the path first blazed by Richard Allen in Philadelphia, and formed autonomous congregations like African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Others doggedly refused to leave white-led denominations and sought autonomy from within. Founded as an outreach mission of the establishment Trinity Church in 1809, St. Philip's was led by the dutiful-but-diffident black priest, Peter Williams, Jr. (1786-1840). Under his guidance, it became the second largest black congregation in the city and survived attacks by anti-abolition mobs in 1834, and even more tellingly, a series of slights by bishops and the Diocese. By the time the church finally was admitted to the Episcopal Convention in 1853, Williams was long dead. Services were now conducted by a succession of white clergymen; the congregation would not be led by another black priest until after the Civil War.

Anglican missionary outreach towards African-American New Yorkers began in the early eighteenth century through the work of Elias Neau, which was funded by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Without mentioning the fierce opposition unleashed by Neau and George Whitefield, the famed Methodist evangelist (critics blamed their missionary activities for helping to encourage the Slave Conspiracy of 1741), Townsend argues that early missionaries set the pattern for decades to come. Conversion could come only with the understanding that baptism conferred neither social and civic status, nor any expectation of freedom to slaves. Even with the end of slavery, the Episcopal Diocese used this divorce between the temporal and the spiritual to justify segregation and second-class status for African-American worshipers and their clergymen.

Nevertheless, the hierarchical nature of Episcopalianism and the desire to regulate liturgy in the name of uniformity created tensions, especially when black church members requested a church of their own and equal treatment with white parishes. Episcopal leaders were willing to provide financial support to help African Americans organize separate worship and the Episcopal Bishop John Henry Hobart helped fund the construction of St. Philip's Church, and aided in its rebuilding after a disastrous fire. But support in organizing a separate congregation came with strings attached. The new African-American congregation would be treated as little more than an outreach mission with no rights to join the Episcopal Convention. Qualified black priests faced nearly insurmountable barriers to ordination. Williams' advancement from lay reader to deacon and, finally, to ordained priest, was painfully slow due to the Hobart's paternalism.

Though shy and cautious, the newly consecrated leader of St. Philip's tried to balance loyalty to his bishop's High Church traditions with his growing involvement in the early abolition movement and opposition to the American Colonization Society. The result was nearly disastrous. Although Townsend does not discuss any collaboration between Williams and other African-American clergymen, such as Presbyterian ministers Rev. Samuel Cornish and Rev. Theodore Wright, an anti-abolition mob made St. Philip's Church one of its main targets during the riots of 1834. Perhaps more damaging was the response of the new Episcopal bishop, Benjamin Treadwell Onderdonk. He demanded that Williams immediate resign from the American Anti-Slavery Society and renounce all activism not related directly to his church duties. Townsend is at his most passionate in defending Williams' quiet acquiescence to this directive. He sees loyalty as the only alternative to dreaded schism and supports Williams' High Church style of worship and priestly obedience. Citing the bitter split of both Methodists and Baptists, Townsend argues: "Better unity through apathy than that. Episcopalianism therefore avoided the issue of slavery" and, by extension, any discussion of race (p. 59). Williams sought to preserve faith and loyalty to his denomination, thus reflecting the bind that W. E. B. Du Bois labeled "double consciousness," (although Williams' stress on gradual advancement through education and economic opportunity presaged Booker T. Washington's program for advancement). By contrast, Townsend is critical of impatient activists like white Episcopal abolitionist John Jay, grandson of the Supreme Court Chief Justice and son of prominent abolitionist William Jay. Jay II comes off as vain, arrogant extremist whose bluster did little for the cause of racial equality.

The fate of St. Philip's Church after the death of Williams is the focus of the second half of the book. Townsend shows how Onderdonk's racism kept several qualified African Americans out of the priesthood and made Williams' shoes so difficult to fill. Alexander Crummell was too controversial. Even gifted lay leader Smith retreated into private faith. Nevertheless, African-American members remained loyal to church authority. When Jay began what would become an annual crusade to gain membership for St. Philip's Church in the Episcopal Convention in 1843, vestrymen distanced themselves from the outspoken abolitionist. They feared that Jay's personal vendetta against conservative church leaders and strong antislavery agenda would turn Convention members against membership.

Parishioners of St. Philip's even expressed continued support for Bishop Onderdonk after he was placed on indefinite suspension after being charged with sexual harassment. Indeed, Jay's high profile effort on behalf of St. Philip's did backfire. A subcommittee rejected any association with African Americans, a group it considered to be "socially degraded, and are not regarded as proper associates for the class that attend our Convention" (p. 131). Fortunately, this report was not the last word, but the debate over whether to admit St. Philip's dragged on for years. Townsend covers this agonizing process at length, as Jay sought repeatedly to win support for a universal doctrine of racial equality within the church, always without success. Finally, quiet diplomacy and networking triumphed over public posturing. William Morris, the well-connected white rector of Trinity School, who moonlighted as priest at St. Philip's, was able to bypass Jay and win membership for the church by a comfortable margin.

This gracefully written study owes much to the tradition of parish histories going back to the nineteenth century. It is decidedly an institutional history which relies heavily upon vestry minutes, convention journals, and correspondence with Episcopal officials. As befits a religious organization that was far more centralized and structured than other Protestant denominations, church politics become an important measure of shifting strategies of black Episcopalians struggling for acceptance once the facade of institutional racism began to crack. Townsend's close knowledge of theology, the internal workings of the church, and the key doctrinal divides enliven this book. He is particularly good at dissecting the battles between High Church traditionalists and Low Church reformers influenced by the pietistic revivals of the Second Great Awakening, as well as the Oxford Movement Tractarians, who sought to reinforce dogma and ritual but, instead, raised fears of a backslide to Roman Catholicism. However, those looking for a deeper analysis of how St. Philip's related to other African-American community institutions or how religious practice shaped the lives of the average black Episcopalian might be disappointed. Townsend's examination of community institutions outside the church is cursory. The lack of data on pew ownership and membership limits his findings to a small subgroup of members. And the open nature of Episcopal communion compared with other Protestant denominations, such as Shiloh Presbyterian Church, denies Townsend a wealth of possible information on tests for probationers, ecclesiastical trials, and expulsions for misconduct to be found in records of these churches. Still, Townsend does not neglect the social background St. Philip's members.

The ultimate question remains why some African Americans were attracted to Episcopalianism over denominations like the Methodists or the Baptists, even if it meant acquiescence to white control. For Townsend, an Episcopal priest himself, the answer is more theological than social. He notes that most prominent black antislavery leaders belonged to white-led denominations and discounts Booker T. Washington's assertion that evangelical churches were the natural home for African Americans. To be sure, middle-class aspirations did play a role. Townsend refers to "bourgeois elitism" in the rejection of "egregiously lower-class behaviors and attitudes among black New Yorkers" (pp. 85-86). His contention that religious choice was not self-interested does not always jibe with evidence of upwardly mobile economic aspirations that may have made membership in the New York City's wealthiest denomination attractive. Indeed, his quantitative analysis of the economic background of St. Philip's leaders underscores their elite status within the black community, although the spotty nature of the data and lack of information on other African-American churches undercut his assertion that "the people of St. Philip's, as a whole, cannot be seen as significantly different in economic status from their fellow black New Yorkers" (pp. 160-161). Still, Townsend's main conclusion is that black Episcopalians subsumed race to faith and bucked the growing tide of evangelical Protestantism in favor of formal liturgies; High Church trumped Low. Unfortunately, such a theological explanation, like the reason for Peter Williams' rejection of his father's Methodism, is difficult to prove historically. Many antebellum denominations, black and white, competed for members, attracted parishioners from outside their immediate neighborhood, and saw their membership rolls (and finances) fluctuate as popular ministers came and went.

The strength of this book is also the cause of some weaknesses, albeit minor. If his insider's view yields a richness of understanding of theology and how diocesan governance operated, the narrow focus of the work prevents Townsend from directly comparing the appeal of Episcopalianism to black worshipers with that of other Protestant denominations.

This focus also comes at the expense of an understanding of the historical context of the changing status of African Americans under worsening racism in the 1820s. Nor did church leaders operate in a vacuum. Splits in Whig politics were clearly on the minds of some leaders, for William Jay argued that the debate over admitting St. Philip's to the Convention was one of "conscience vs. cotton" (p. 180). Townsend's effort to explain decisions and understand the motivations of those making them sometimes comes off as defensive. His conclusion, which casts the 1853 vote on St. Philip's as a precursor of the Episcopal General Conference's rejection of the Sewanee Conference resolution of 1883, which called for total segregation and disenfranchisement of African-American churches, may be a stretch. Nevertheless, this study successfully moves the spotlight away from more-studied evangelical denominations. By showing the intersection between race, church politics, and theology, Townsend had made and important contribution to our understanding of a neglected chapter of New York City religious history.

Note

[1]. Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 2005), pp. 183-188.

Citation: Kenneth Scherzer. Review of Townsend, Craig D. *Faith in Their Own Color: Black Episcopalians in Antebellum New York City.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. May, 2006.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11794