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In the 1740s, a group of Moravians built their main settlement, Bethlehem, on Pennsylvania’s Lehigh River. The Moravian Church or *Brüdergemeine* had emerged two decades earlier, when Bohemian and Moravian Protestants settled in Herrnhut, Saxony, under the leadership of Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, developing into a dynamic community that attracted people from throughout Europe. A 1727 revival convinced the Herrnhuters that God had renewed the church of the Bohemian Brethren (*Unitas Fratrum*) in their midst. Within a few years, Moravians had founded communities and mission stations all over the world. Moravians came to Pennsylvania to spread Christianity to the native populations and to minister to the European settlers, who they believed lacked appropriate pastoral care. Itinerant ministers sent from Bethlehem preached and administered the sacraments to Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed settlers. The Moravians had not been persecuted in Europe, but in North America, they became the object of violent attack. While the topic of Fogleman’s book—interactions between Moravians and local settlers and religious leaders—has not been sufficiently studied in the past, his explanation of the reasons for this violence is not fully convincing. I agree with him that the Philadelphian ideals of the Moravians were misleading to many and constituted a justification for the transatlantic campaign against the Moravians. Readers like me, however, will take exception to the author’s interpretation of Moravian ideas on gender.

Most studies on the Moravians in North America focus either on their work among Native Americans or on the internal life of their communities. Fogleman is mainly interested in the opposition Moravians encountered from other colonists, which in some instances led to physical violence. The author identifies the main opponents of the Moravians as the Halle Pietists, the Amsterdam classis of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands (which had the oversight over the Dutch and German Reformed immigrants in the colonies), and the Lutheran Church in Sweden. To his credit, Fogleman has utilized the extensive anti-Moravian literature in English, German, and Dutch; these sources have been mostly ignored by scholars in the past.

Fogleman sees the main sources of violence against Moravians as lying in their “violations of orthodox gender order” (p. 9) and their ecumenical beliefs. The significance of the first of these themes is developed in the first half of the book. Moravians supposedly violated the existing gender order by allowing women to preach and through their belief “in a largely female Christian deity” (p. 103). While it is true to note that Zinzendorf attributed female qualities to the Holy Spirit, whom he characterized as a mother, Fogleman goes a few steps further to claim that not only did Moravians “disempower” God the Father, by referring to Christ as the Creator, they also believed that Jesus was female. Although the author has used the provocative title of this book twice in the past,[1] this book does not satisfactorily prove his claim and indeed is surprisingly brief on this topic. While he claims that "many of their protocols, poems, hymns, and much of their iconography suggested female qualities of Christ,” the book does not provide any documentation in support of this claim (p. 77). The author does quote a hymn that speaks of Jesus leading “with motherly love” (p. 78) and argues that Moravians referred to the wound in Jesus’ side as a “womb” from which the Holy Spirit and believers were born, but these mentions are insufficient to prove the larger thesis. Even when Moravians did re-
fer to the Holy Spirit as Mother, it is unclear that they believed “in a largely female Christian deity” (p. 103). At most, these references suggest that Moravians sometimes attributed female qualities to Jesus. Fogleman, however, does not make any distinction between “female qualities of Jesus” and “the female Jesus” (p. 83). Nor is it clear what he means when he claims that “the gender of Jesus … has not been constant historically” (p. 83).

Moravian piety drew upon many different sources including Lutheranism, German Pietism, medieval mysticism, and the traditions of the ancient Unitas Fratrum. Central to it was a personal surrender to Christ due to the emotional impact of his suffering and death on the cross. Within this complex of ideas, it was neither unusual to attribute female qualities to God (as in Isaiah 66:13) nor was it unheard of in Lutheran hymnody (as in Paul Gerhardt’s Nun lasst uns gehen und treten [1653]). It would have been helpful had Fogleman explained why Moravians stressed feminine aspects in their theology, why they had different views on gender, and why they allowed women to preach. Zinzendorf, at any rate, did not teach that the Holy Spirit was born from Jesus’ side. Moreover, it is incorrect to claim that eighteenth-century Moravians believed in a “female Jesus.” Mid-eighteenth-century Moravians did refer to Jesus as their “Man” or the “Husband” of their souls. Both women and men expressed their longing for Christ in the sensuous language of bridal mysticism, in which Christ was the bridegroom and the believer was the bride. Accordingly, Zinzendorf taught that all souls (animae) are female and that every human would eventually return to his or her female state. Fogleman does mention this claim on page 79, but he does not give it much attention. It may be feminization, but not a feminization of the divine, as Fogleman repeatedly claims; instead, it is a feminization of the believer. A final problematic moment in Fogleman’s argumentation about gender is his claim that local settlers reacted strongly against Moravian female preachers when, as he himself notes, in British North America during the Great Awakening “female preaching became the most prominent in the Protestant Atlantic world during the eighteenth century” (p. 46).

Fogleman does realize that alleged violations of gender order are not alone sufficient as an explanation for opposition to the Moravians. He offers a better explanation in what he identifies as “the ecumenical challenge” in chapter 4. Zinzendorf and other leading Moravians were influenced by the ideas of the Philadelphian movement. Ever since his encounter with Philadelphia ideas in the early 1720s, Zinzendorf sought to bring together the true children of God, and much of his life’s work must be examined in light of these ecumenical ideals. Zinzendorf conceived of the Brüdergemeine during its formative years as a community of members of different denominations, including the ancient Unitas Fratrum, Reformed, and Lutherans. The Brüdergemeine was not meant to be a new church, but rather a realization of Christ’s true church on earth, assembled from the “children of God” of various churches. To the Moravians, the American colonies promised a fertile testing ground for these ideas. Although Zinzendorf’s 1742 Pennsylvania Synods with representatives from different religious groups failed, Moravians still sent itinerant preachers to Lutheran and Reformed communities in the American colonies. Moravians were deeply worried about the lack of ministers and ecclesiastical organization in the colonies and hoped to provide pastoral care as a service to the settlers. From the perspective of the Moravians’ Philadelphian ideals, a contradiction did not exist in sending out itinerant preachers as “Lutherans” or “Reformed,” even when they were members of the Moravian congregation, too.

The established churches, however, saw Moravian activity quite differently; they feared serious encroachment on their religious territory. Fogleman demonstrates the numerical strength of Moravian preachers in comparison to other religious groups. Itinerant preaching—Moravians called it “diaspora work”—was one of Bethlehem’s main missions. Moravians offered free preaching, infant baptisms, medical assistance, education, and at times, financial aid for raising church buildings. Some—including Fogleman—thought that Moravians tried “to win over Lutheran, Reformed, and other settlers” (p. 125); in fact, Moravians were very reluctant to receive people into their community, but considered itinerant preaching a religious service to others and a mission from God. The Moravian connections of some “Lutheran” or “Reformed” itinerant preachers made them suspect to representatives of those churches. This suspicion led to the coordination of a solid campaign against the Moravians by religious leaders in Europe.

In some cases, confrontations led to violence. Although Fogleman implies that the number of cases of violent incidents against Moravians was quite high—he refers to an “extraordinary level of popular religious violence” (p. 4), or “widespread religious violence” (p. 185)—he does not substantiate his claim. The number of actually violent confrontations presented by the author is limited to only a few. Furthermore, these incidents seem to have occurred relatively early in the 1740s, be-
fore Moravians developed some of their more unusual practices and beliefs and, most significantly, before anti-Moravian writers were able to write about them.

A problematic aspect of the book is its suggestive language. Like its title, the terminology of the book does not attempt to take the neutral tone usually preferred by historians. Fogleman uses terms such as “dangerous” (p. 64), “enemy” (p. 65), “Moravian expansion” (p. 66), “Moravian victory” (p. 218), “Moravian assault” (p. 217), “onslaught” (p. 111), “flagrant transgressions of gender and confessional order” (p. 133), “sexual orgies” (p. 90), or “Catholic-like perversities” (p. 90), apparently without irony. At some crucial points footnotes are missing: for example, as proof of the assertion that in the early modern era “many” believed that giving life was “a male function” (p. 77). Readers whose interest is aroused by this statement will not find any references.

In the end, although Fogleman claims to present an image of the Moravians as found in anti-Moravian writings, the resulting reduction of Moravian theology to “views on the Trinity and ... radical practices regarding gender” (p. 86) is not very helpful in enhancing our understanding of this group. Indeed, those texts show more nuance of description than Fogleman’s repetitive assertions about Moravian feminization of the deity and challenges to the existing denominational order. While Fogleman considers the Moravians “radicals,” he does not seem to follow the usual use of this term in relation to radical Pietism, but instead defines the Moravians as “radicals” in contrast with other colonists, who are portrayed as having “held orthodox Protestant beliefs.” Moravians were radicals because they “deviated” from “traditional, core beliefs in fundamental, controversial ways” (p. 2). Unfortunately, he does not explain what these orthodox, traditional beliefs were.

The author himself admits that his “view that confessional and especially gender issues motivated colonists of the ‘lower sort’ to attack Moravians and their supporters cannot be proven with hard data” (p.10), but asserts nonetheless that “this seems to have been the case” (p. 215). A lack of sources to prove this supposition generates the comment that “[p]erhaps some people did not want to publish unpleasantries regarding gender, marriage and sex practices in the local newspaper,” and the conclusion that the role of gender issues “must be inferred” (p. 211). Fogleman’s picture of the Moravians is a caricature that does not help us understand the conflicts they were engaged in. Nor does it give us a better understanding of religious life in the American colonies.

Note


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