

The Bulletin

of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and Religion

Vol. 3 No. 3

November, 1979

"Jesus Christ Has Got Thee at Last"

Afro-American Conversion as a Forgotten Chapter in Eighteenth-Century Southern Intellectual History

by Peter H. Wood

Editor's Note: *An authority on eighteenth-century Southern history, Dr. Peter H. Wood has written extensively on the subject of slavery in South Carolina. His book, Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion, won the Albert J. Beveridge Award of the American Historical Association in 1974. Dr. Wood served as Assistant Director for Humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation from 1971 to 1974, and he is currently Associate Professor of History at Duke University.*

His address, "Jesus Christ Has Got Thee at Last": Afro-American Conversion as a Forgotten Chapter in Eighteenth-Century Southern Intellectual History," was presented to the Center on April 26, 1979. A videotape of the occasion has been made by the Center.

Every student of eighteenth-century American intellectual history recalls the delightful tale of Benjamin Franklin's encounter with the great English evangelist, George Whitefield. With his usual blend of self-mocking and self-serving humor, the Philadelphia sage relates in his *Autobiography* how he was drawn to hear the visiting clergyman, how his powerful skepticism was momentarily undermined, and how he emptied his pockets into the collection plate. Most of these students remember, too, that Whitefield travelled through the South several times during his journeys to the American colonies. But how many are familiar with the personal account of another encounter, which occurred during Whitefield's final visit to the South in 1769? The story is told by John Marrant, a free black man born

in New York in 1755. It provides both a suitable title and a sensible starting point for my remarks.

John Marrant moved south early in life, and, as a boy living in colonial Charleston not long after the Stamp Act controversy, he mastered the art of playing the violin and the French horn well enough to earn money performing for white patrons. One day, at age fourteen, while on his way to an engagement with his horn wrapped around one arm, he passed a meeting house where, in his words, "a crazy man was hallooing." A bystander informed him it was the evangelist Whitefield and dared him to go inside and "Blow the French-horn among them." "I liked the proposal well enough," Marrant recalled,

but expressed my fears of being beaten for disturbing them; but upon

Included in This Issue: J. Anthony Paredes provides a synopsis, "Kinship and Ethnicity among the Eastern Creek Indians." Book reviews by R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. and Robert Hall. Poetry by Van K. Brock. Center Notes.

his promising to stand by and defend me, I agreed. So we went, and with much difficulty got within the doors. I was pushing the people to make room, to get the horn off my shoulder to blow it, just as Mr. Whitefield was naming his text, and looking round, and, as I thought, directly upon me, and pointing with his finger, he uttered these words, "PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD, O ISRAEL." The Lord accompanied the word with such power, that I was struck to the ground, and lay both speechless and senseless near half an hour.

Young Marrant was carried from the hall, delirious and "hallooing." But when the meeting adjourned, "Mr. Whitefield came into the vestry, and being told of my condition he came immediately, and the first word he said to me was, 'JESUS CHRIST HAS GOT THEE AT LAST.'"¹

¹"A Narrative of the Lord's wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black . . ." in Richard VanDerBeets, ed., *Held Captive by Indians: Selected Narratives, 1642-1836* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1973), pp. 182-83.

THE BULLETIN

236 Williams Bldg.
The Florida State University
Tallahassee, Florida 32306

Leo Sandon, Jr. — Editor
Karen L. Bickley — Managing Editor
Linda Schmidt — Associate Editor

Editorial Board —

Jerry M. Chance, Samuel S. Hill, Jr., William R. Jones, Anne E. Rowe, Richard L. Rubenstein, Robert A. Spivey, Charles Wellborn

The *Bulletin* is printed and distributed three times each year. It is published by the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and Religion.

Contents copyright © by the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and Religion.

Following his abrupt conversion, Marrant was ostracized by his family and soon threw himself entirely upon the Lord's mercy, wandering alone in the forest with a copy of Watts's Hymnal under his arm. He spent two years living among the Cherokee Indians, and, when the American Revolution broke out, he was impressed into service for the British Navy. After seven years aboard ship, he was ordained a minister of the gospel in England in 1785. He then returned to Nova Scotia to preach among the Indians, and he died there in 1790 at the age of thirty-five, having written down the eventful story of his brief life. Like Franklin's memoir, Marrant's is in many ways imaginative, self-serving, and unique. But in other ways it is, like Franklin's, emblematic of important shifts in the wider culture. I cite it here because it contains tangible evidence, greatly over-simplified and exaggerated to be sure, of the much more obscure and complicated process which I wish to discuss: the gradual, widespread and controversial conversion of Afro-Americans to Christianity over the course of the eighteenth century.

For a number of reasons, it is hard to imagine blacks in America who were not Christians, just as it is hard to imagine Afro-Americans who spoke no

English, but these were prevalent conditions in the South during the century of large-scale, forced African immigration.² Why has the significant early conversion of forced immigrants from Africa received so little attention? Until recently, historians of black America have been concerned primarily with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where source materials are less limited and where

²For a survey of recent scholarship, see Peter H. Wood, "'I Did the Best I Could for My Day': The Study of Early Black History during the Second Reconstruction, 1960-1976," *William & Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 35 (April, 1978), 185-225.

Protestant Christianity is accepted as a central theme in Afro-American life. At the same time, most intellectual historians of early America — and historians of religion in particular — have remained oriented toward the well-documented "life of the mind" in colonial New England.³

Even when the religious beliefs among eighteenth-century slaves have been examined in the past, the tendency has been to think of their conversion from non-Christians to Christians as something rather simple, rather inevitable, almost uninteresting. Ignorance of African religions and deep-seated confidence in the missionizing power of the gospel traditionally made this shift appear something of a foregone conclusion. Generations of historians accepted the notion that blacks migrating to North America were devoid of prior religious and intellectual commitments. Spreading Christianity among them, according to this analysis, involved the filling of a cultural vacuum. The moral zeal of white missionaries and the spiritual ignorance of black slaves were thought to be the limiting factors. Meaningful black participation in the debate over religion was not documented, or even imagined. Instead the historians, like the white "propagators of the gospel" upon whom they focused, portrayed a confrontation not between ethical equals in a complex and highly charged political and social situation but rather between enlightened adults and receptive, unthinking children.

Ironically, the story did not become any more interesting or engaging when the "civil rights" historians of the last twenty years took over. For while they denied the traditional myth that the American Negro had no cultural past, they embraced the belief

³The most important recent publication in this field is Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978).

that the African heritage had been all but destroyed by the horrors of the transatlantic middle passage and the oppression of the slavery system. The vacuum once attributed to black depravity was now attributed to white brutality. Stanley Elkins compared arriving Africans to concentration camp victims, "traumatized" by their arbitrary treatment within the total institution of slavery, and unable to sustain their psychological and cultural values. The "Elkins Thesis" had obvious appeal for liberal white historians burdened by the social guilts of racism and troubled by the complexities of achieving court-mandated racial equality; Richard Hofstadter, for example, had absorbed this view fully, and he summarized it clearly while working on his final book in the late sixties:

To Africans, *stunned* by the long ordeal of the Middle Passage, the auctions could only have marked a decrescendo in *fright and depression*; . . . as one tries to imagine the mental state of the newly arrived Africans, one must think of people still *sick, depleted, and depressed* by the ordeal of the voyage, *the terror of the unknown*, the sight of deaths and suicides, and *the experience of total helplessness* in the hands of others. *What they had been and known receded rapidly*, and the course of their experience tended to *reduce their African identity to the withered husks of dead memories.*⁴

But just suppose, as many historians now do, that Africans coming to North America were not totally culturally benighted on the one hand or psychologically traumatized on the other. Suppose that for the newcomers and their immediate children during the period of continuous large scale importation from Africa (as for millions of other American newcomers during the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries) the varied belief systems of the Old World remained something more than "the withered husks of dead memories." Then surely there was a profound struggle, stretching out over several generations and passing through a number of roughly definable phases, with regard to Afro-American Christianization. And surely this debate went on not only among white Christians over how to deal with their enslaved workers, but among the enslaved workers themselves as to how and when and whether to deal with the Christian faith to which they were being given limited access.

Such a debate must have been intermittent, gradual, repetitious, covert, stretching beyond the bounds of the plantation South and beyond the limits of the eighteenth century. But if it did occur, then in fact it represents an important missing chapter in American intellectual and religious history. For after all, Africans represented the largest non-English immigrant group to enter North America during the eighteenth century, and their eventual acceptance of Christianity, one might easily argue, has been of far greater lasting importance than the New Light/Old Light controversies inside the eighteenth century Protestant church with which historians have occupied themselves for generations. Suggestive scholarship touching on this long and complicated conversion process has begun to appear, but a great deal more remains to be learned. What I wish to do here is to sketch, in a simplified way, how I think this process must have evolved; to do so, I shall deal with three periods, or generations, of thirty years each, beginning in 1700 and stretching up to the founding of the United States in the late eighteenth century.

The Conversion Process, 1700-1730

The first generation stretches from roughly 1700 to 1730. This was not, of course, the first generation in any

literal sense. Africans had been in the New World since at least the early 1500s and had been residing permanently in English North America since the early 1600s. But their numbers were few — by 1700 well under 30,000 persons, who made up scarcely 10 percent of the population of the English colonies. Most of these early Afro-Americans had been born or "seasoned" in the West Indies, most spoke English, and most had been assimilated somewhat into the crude frontier culture of the seventeenth-century colonies.

All this began to change around the turn of the century, however. England's Royal Africa Company, which had imported 5,000 or 6,000 slaves annually to the New World during the 1680s, had lost its monopoly by 1700, and in the first decade of the new century English free or "separate" traders were carrying 20,000 African workers across the Atlantic every year. What were exploitable bodies for the planters were savable souls for the church, and it is not surprising that, when the Anglican Church established the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts in 1701, a chief aim of this missionary organization in America was to minister to African slaves as well as European colonists and neighboring Indians.

In retrospect, the early efforts of the S.P.G. missionaries and others were not particularly successful. Indeed, this first generation of concerted Christian/non-Christian interaction in the coastal South, where African immigrants were increasingly concentrated, may best be characterized as an *era of pervasive mutual distrust*. A number of logistical considerations worked against the possibility of widespread conversion. The ministers were few, and their training was often poor. The parishes to which they were assigned seemed absurdly large by European standards, and their white parishioners seemed as needing of the gospel as the Indians or Africans. Almost the entire Southern population was isolated on remote farm-sites; communication by land was tedious at

⁴Richard Hofstadter, *America at 1750: A Social Portrait* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1971), p. 90. Italics added.

best; towns were few and small. Moreover, formidable language barriers existed between whites and blacks. In 1727 the Bishop of London observed with dismay, "they are *utter strangers to our language and we to theirs*; and the gift of tongues being now ceased, there is no means left of instructing them in the doctrines of the Christian religion."⁵ In addition, language barriers existed among the blacks themselves, and in the early eighteenth century these barriers actually increased for a time as the number and diversity of new arrivals from Africa grew.

In broader terms, there existed an underlying European reluctance to press for conversion. Slave owners in particular expressed the fear that Africans, by embracing Christianity, might somehow alter their slave status. (Missionaries were forced to remind slaves explicitly before baptism that conversion could not alter their legal condition, and this in turn removed one obvious incentive for professing Christianity.) If anything, white reluctance increased as the proportion of slaves imported directly from Africa began to grow and the perceived cultural breach widened. Referring to these African-born workers — or "outlandish" slaves as they were called — Governor Nichols of Virginia wrote in 1699:

Negroes brought to Virginia from foreign parts are seldom converted to Christianity because of their gross barbarity and rudeness of their manners, the variety and strangeness of their languages, and the weakness and shallowness of their minds.⁶

If Europeans felt ambivalent and distrustful about the idea of proffering Christianity to their workers, the laborers themselves felt more than

⁵Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 121.

⁶Colonial State Papers/America and West Indies (1699), p. 473.

reluctant about the prospects of embracing it. Learning elements of the masters' religion, and in particular learning to read the printed English in which it was transmitted, could have obvious strategic, if not moral, advantages. But the small proportion of slaves who accepted religious instruction often found that they were laughed at and ridiculed by other workers; the incentive for retaining as much as possible of the Old World traditions was strong. "I asked once a pretty ancient and very fine slave whether he cou'd read," wrote the Rev. Francis Le Jau from South Carolina in 1710; "his answer was he wou'd rather choose hereafter to practice the good he could remember."⁷

While conversion to Christian ways proved difficult during this initial era of mutual distrust, so did the preservation of separate religious traditions. Ministers and masters often forbade African forms of dancing, and several colonies passed laws "to suppress tumultuous meetings of slaves on the Sabbath and other holy days." The North Carolina slave code of 1715 imposed a fine of £50 on any master who permitted his slaves "to build . . . any house under pretense of a meeting house upon the account of worship or upon any other pretense whatsoever."⁸ Any kind of gathering place which represented some degree of physical and cultural independence for this growing work force created anxiety among whites. However, the impulse to carve out their own space, to create what Virginia Woolf called "a room of one's own" or what E.P. Thompson has characterized as "an unsteeped place of worship," could never be destroyed. I am reminded of the dialectal reminiscence of a Sea

⁷Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1974), p. 188.

⁸William L. Saunders, ed., *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 10 vols. (Raleigh: P.M. Hale, 1886-1890), II, 214-15.

Islander concerning the nineteenth-century experience of a fellow slave named Okra:

Old man Okra he say want a place like he have in Africa so he built 'im a hut. I 'member it well. It was 'bout twelve by fo'teen feet an' it have dirt floor and he built the side like basket weave with clay plaster on it. It have a flat roof what he make from bush and palmetto and it have one door and no windows. But Massa make 'im pull it down. He say he 'ain' want no African hut on he place.⁹

Throughout the early eighteenth century the debate continued among whites over whether, and how, to extend Christianity among Afro-Americans who seemingly preferred to evolve their own common religious ties. In 1730 the British Crown issued instructions to the royal governor of North Carolina, George Burrington, urging him "to find out the best means to facilitate and encourage the conversion of Negroes and Indians to the Christian religion."¹⁰ And while Europeans were discussing the ways in which Christianity should be offered, non-Europeans were beginning to debate more broadly whether Christianity could and should be adopted.

The Second Period, 1730-1760

The era of intensified discussion, from roughly 1730 to 1760, is described by the great black historian,

⁹John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), p. 136.

¹⁰Jeffrey J. Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina* (Raleigh, 1977), p. 47.

Carter G. Woodson, as "the dawning of the new day." I might call it, less poetically, *the period of initial convergence*, as the divergent worlds of Africans and Europeans begin to come together for a variety of reasons. First of all, the simple expansion of the colonial economies along the Southern coast leads to more dense settlement. Bigger port towns, improved road networks and larger plantation units contribute to the possibility of greater communication. Linguistic changes contribute as well. Not only do Afro-Americans who have spoken English since the seventeenth century teach the language to newcomers, but these diverse foreigners also search out the common elements of their separate African languages. Soon an English dialect has evolved which allows clearer communication not only between whites and blacks, but within the black community itself. As immigrant slaves debate the political and religious merits of Christianity, it is this early form of so-called black English which becomes the most accessible common language of discourse.

The factor which stimulates debate, and which adds urgency to the acquisition of a common language of discussion, is the occurrence among white Christians in these years of the so-called "Great Awakening." Like so much else in early American history, this massive Protestant revitalization movement of the 1730s and '40s has been studied primarily in the North, but it is now clear that in the South the Great Awakening had significant implications for Afro-Americans. As New Light preachers made Christian faith more available to persons with little education, the slaves were confronted for the first time with a Protestantism which stressed emotional preaching over learned discourse, spontaneous response over rote learning. When the patterns of Christian worship altered, numerous blacks not only gained access to, but increasingly related to and identified with, these evangelistic forms and rituals. Part of what made the Great

Awakening attractive for slaves was the fact that, for the first time, they were exposed to the subversive and radical aspects of Christian doctrine. Theological and social debate split the white community during these years, and many English-speaking Africans were now in a position to grasp the implications and note the effects of such debate. Established authority could be challenged through Christian doctrine itself. This was a lesson which attentive black Americans learned quickly, and which subsequent generations of leaders would not soon forget.

It is in this period, therefore, that we begin to see what anthropologists refer to as "syncretism," the overlapping of European and African forms whereby comparable characteristics from separate cultures reinforce one another, becoming more commonly shared and accepted. Emphases on music, on dance, on bodily movement, on call and response with the preacher, on hand clapping, on spirit possession, on river baptism, on elaborate burial rights — all these tendencies so common to later Southern Christianity begin to fall into place by the middle of the eighteenth century.

At the same time, European deities are being associated with the more extensive pantheon of African gods. Satan, for example, begins to converge with such West African trickster-gods as Eshu of the Yoruba and Legba of the Dahomeans, clever devil-figures who could be deceptive, helpful and worldly-wise. (One need only to think of Flip Wilson's satanic sidekick to realize that the devil-as-trickster is still alive and well in the Afro-American community.) This elaborate juxtaposition which gains momentum in the American South during and after the Great Awakening was, of course, already well under way in other parts of the New World. In 1722, for example, a French minister in the West Indies, Jean-Baptiste Labat, observed that, "The Negroes do without a qualm, what the philistines did; they put Dagon with the Ark and secretly preserve all the superstition of their

ancient idolatrous cult alongside the ceremonies of Christianity."¹¹

In each colony, indeed on each separate plantation, the timing, the form and the outcome of this convergence process, this religious syncretization, was different. The final results of this process in a given region were determined by a complicated equation of African origins, the colonial work situation, rates of slave importation, black-white population ratios, language conditions, planter-imposed regulations and a number of less tangible variables, such as the presence and preferences of strong black leaders. Whatever the outcome, there can be little doubt, despite the inevitable lack of extensive documentation, that serious debate over these volatile religions and cultural matters must have taken place from the moment the conversion process began, even if at first it only touched a very small minority of the diverse Afro-American community.

The Third Period, 1760-1790

By the end of the French and Indian War the great mass of enslaved Afro-Americans still remained remote from Christianity. To a great extent this varied and rapidly-growing population had successfully held out against large scale co-option in religious terms by their European controllers. In 1760 an Anglican minister in New Bern, North Carolina, commented, "The greatest part of the Negroes in the whole country may too justly be accounted heathens. 'Tis impossible for ministers in such extensive counties to instruct them in the principles of the Christian religion and

¹¹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 25.

their masters will not take the least pain to do it themselves."¹² A small but important sector of the black population, however, had by now become professing Christians, and their influence would be felt strongly in the continuing underground religious debates of the Revolutionary era. Indeed, I would characterize this third period, from approximately 1760 to 1790, as *the era of black preaching*, for during these years we find undeniable evidence of Afro-Americans preaching the gospel to one another in increasing numbers.

Growing participation by blacks in Christian worship was predictably unsettling to many whites. "New light baptists are very numerous in the southern parts of this parish," an Anglican minister in Brunswick, North Carolina, wrote disapprovingly in 1766. "The most illiterate among them are their Teachers," commented John Barnett; "even Negroes speak in their Meetings."¹³ By the time the Revolutionary War began ten years later, it was increasingly commonplace for newspaper ads concerning runaway slaves to mention not only their looks, clothing, age, height and weight, but their religious disposition as well. A notice in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1777 for William Hunt, a skilled blacksmith and cobbler, stated that, "He pretends also to know something of religious matters, and misses no opportunity of holding forth on that subject." The next year an ad in the same paper for a runaway named Nat observed that he "pretends to be very religious, and is a Baptist teacher."¹⁴

For every John Marrant who accepted Christianity during these years through the proselytizing of a white minister or a converted black,

there were numerous Afro-Americans who continued to argue for the ascendancy of their traditional religion. Summarizing the reports of his Anglican ministers in the South, Bishop Porteus in London noted in 1774 that "The First and principal Difficulty which you alledged against attempting to instruct Adult *Negroes* imported was their strong Attachment to the idolatrous Rites and Practices of their own Country."¹⁵ Yet, as Ira Berlin has pointed out, "By the 1770s, if not earlier, the vast majority of blacks were native Americans with no firsthand knowledge of Africa,"¹⁶ and the generation of Kunta Kinte, entering adulthood in the South during the Revolutionary years, faced increasingly complex religious choices. If Christianity had first been viewed by many as a divisive force further undermining the tenuous solidarity of Afro-American migrants, it now seemed to offer important possibilities for reuniting the black race under exceedingly adverse conditions and perhaps even for nurturing some kind of network for limited social independence and political resistance.

These possibilities were not simply held out by white Christians, though pious planters, established ministers, evangelical preachers and itinerant lay teachers all could and did play a part. Instead, black leaders themselves began to have an ever increasing role as catalysts in the conversion process, and not all of these persons are unknown. David George, for example, was born in Essex County, Virginia, in 1743, and was working in South Carolina for the prominent back-country trader, George Galphin, in the 1770s. At Galphin's Silver Bluff Plantation, George joined with other slaves to form the first black Baptist congregation in North America. At the same time, he took advantage of the

master's children to assist him in learning the ABC's and his recollections offer heartfelt testimony to the joys of adult literacy. "The reading so ran in my mind, that I think I learned it in my sleep," he related, "and I can now read the Bible, so that what I have in my heart, I can see again in the Scriptures."¹⁷

The father of Boston King was another such patriarchal figure who exerted his capacities for leadership within and through, rather than outside and against, the Christian faith. Boston King himself was born in St. George's Parish, South Carolina, around 1760 and eventually returned to Africa as a Methodist missionary; he left a moving description of his father's life. The elder King was born in Africa, captured as a boy and transported to Charleston. He was made a slave on Richard Waring's plantation, and apparently became one of about a hundred slaves in the rich rice-growing parish of St. George's to be baptized before Christianizing slowed in the 1750s due to a poisoning scare. He married a plantation seamstress and was given the prestigious position of "driver." According to his son, this man

lived in fear and love of GOD. He attended to that true Light which lighteth every man. He lost no opportunity of hearing the Gospel, and never omitted praying with his family every night. He likewise read to them, and to as many as were inclined to hear. On the Lord's Day he rose very early, and met his family: After which he worked in the field till about three in the afternoon,

¹² Crow, *Black Experience*, p. 48.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 109.

¹⁶ Ira Berlin, "The Revolution in Black Life," in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1976), p. 362.

¹⁷ Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976), p. 13.

and then went into the woods and
read till sun-set.¹⁸

Having gained the tool of literacy and a command of Christian scripture, men like George and King used their faith as more than a defensive mechanism to protect and sustain their families and immediate kin. By the time of the Revolution, laws were being passed to prohibit blacks from travelling about to preach, on the suspicion — no doubt frequently justified — that they were using their calling to spread strategic information and dangerous doctrines. After the war, debate quickened within the American Protestant churches with respect to the proper place of black ministers and worshippers. Such arguments were by no means confined to the Quakers and Congregationalists of the North, but included Methodists and Baptists in the South as well. Nor were the debates limited to whites; open black involvement in discussing the future direction of Christianity reached an early high water mark in the years prior to 1790.

The Christian religious promise, like much of the egalitarian social, economic and political promise of the revolutionary era, was short-lived, especially for blacks. From the 1790s onward, systematic discrimination within the major denominations increased, and it became clear that black Christians would be obliged to form their own separate churches. This they did, and, as Ira Berlin has noted, "some blacks welcomed the split. It allowed them, for the first time, full control over their own religious life. By the end of the century," Berlin writes, "black communities from Boston to Savannah boasted their own African churches."¹⁹

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, newly-arrived Africans remained far removed from Chris-

tianity; strong inherited beliefs, serious barriers of language and the skepticism of white owners regarding conversion all contributed to this gulf. By mid-century the expansion of the Afro-American population, the increased access to English as a shared means of communication, and the shifts underway within Protestantism itself all served to make Christianity a more accessible and attractive doctrine. Well before the Revolution a small but influential scattering of blacks were established as professing and proselytizing Christians, and by the time the Constitution was approved many blacks and whites could foresee an eventual day of racially integrated Christian worship, even in the South. Such a vision was not to be, and the complicated story of nineteenth- and twentieth-century black Protestantism in the South has its start in the subordination, segregation and outright suppression of Afro-American congregations in the young republic.

Even by 1800, as the slave trade to North America reached its end, the Afro-American community was by no means totally converted to Christianity. Such conversion had been made all but inevitable, however, by the debates of preceding generations. For it was during the course of the eighteenth century that non-Christian and Christian blacks thrashed out the relative merits and demerits of their owners' faith, testing its doctrines, modifying its structures, influencing its forms. The singular styles of Christian worship which persist among blacks and whites in the South down to the present day owe more than we generally recognize to the intense, widespread and protracted debate over conversion which filled Southern slave quarters throughout the eighteenth century. The fact that this elusive debate is hard to document and easy to overlook does not in any way diminish its importance as an early, formative chapter in American intellectual and religious history.

"TUPELO"

I looked around me, Elvis.
People were lingering, nothing
to do, nowhere else to go.
This was your house, and they
were trying to make themselves
at home, waiting for you to come
and say, "Come in and stay,
awhile," as you might have done.

Like it was a mansion.
Everything they wanted.

And all the time I was there
a reporter was asking a couple
who looked like Young Republicans,
"What did he mean to you?"
"Why did you come here?"

"FAN"

I couldn't see.
I dreamed he was playing his guitar.
He was made of iron and welded to the sky
But danced and waved like fire.
The picture blurred and it was part
Of him waving at me, then it was me.
We were one, but he was holding me.
One hand on my throat, squeezed
But not too tight and his fingers were
Separate, moving all over my body.
They were musical notes, but as lightning
When it strikes moves everywhere,
Everywhere they touched sprouted flame.
I was the music. My whole body.
It came out of his mouth and out of me.
Every pore and every hair was singing.

by Van K. Brock

NOTE: Dr. Brock is a Professor of English at The Florida State University. A nationally recognized poet, he is currently working on a series of poems on Elvis Presley.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14

¹⁹ Berlin, *op. cit.*, p. 373.