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The Native Baptist Church

PROFESSOR G. KITSON CLARK'S warning about accepting generalizations without paying much critical attention is well taken, and his comment that "Those generalizations had sometimes actually been inherited from contemporaries in the events themselves, who might have been strong partisans of one side or other in the conflicts of the period"¹ is particularly applicable to the study of the Native Baptist Church of Jamaica.

This essay is an attempt to remove some of the prejudices which seem to have dogged the Native Baptists during the latter part of the eighteenth century and most of the nineteenth century: in the words of King Lear, they have been more sinned against than sinning. Contemporary writers such as the two Presbyterian missionaries, George Blyth² and Hope Masterton Waddell³, are strong in their disapproval of the Native Baptists, and seem to have coloured the thinking of later writers such as Philip Curtin⁴. Both Blyth and Waddell make no effort to hide their contempt, Blyth in his brief outline of the beginnings of Baptist work in Jamaica writes:

Previously to the arrival of any European Baptist missionaries several black persons had found their way to Jamaica from America, and possessing a slight knowledge of religious truth, they began to give such instruction to the slaves as they were capable of imparting. They took the name Baptist, and inculcated the peculiar dogmas of that body, along with a considerable mixture of superstition and truth on other subjects.⁵

While Waddell was even less polite:

Leile founded a large congregation in Kingston and founded that peculiar body known as the Native Baptists. . . His successors, Gibb, Clarke, Moses Baker, and others in various parts of the country, extended his system, and a queer system it was. . .⁶

Before an assessment of their judgement on the beginnings of the Native Baptist Church and its founders is made, two factors need to be considered. It is understandable that both these men, having come from the somewhat puritanical and academic climate of the Church of Scotland, which was not too kindly disposed towards the more charismatic interpretation of the Church, displayed by some of the Dissenting community, and especially so by the Native Baptists, should find the

'afro-christian sects' as Dr. Curtin describes them', disturbing—and example of the suspicion of the charismatic is evident in the reaction of the Church of Scotland to the ministry of Edward Irving in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁸

The second factor lies in the historical relationship between Dissenters and the Presbyterians, which has not always been the most cordial, as witness the period 1640—1648 when there was a Presbyterian Parliament in England. One Baptist historian has said that "Baptists in their struggle for religious liberty, found a foe in Presbyterians who desired 'presbyterial' in place of 'episcopal' uniformity."⁹ There can be no doubt that they had little sympathy with the voluntary or sect-type of Christianity.¹⁰

There was, however, a contemporary witness whose evidence contradicts the statements of Blyth and Waddell, and whose evidence is of importance for the simple reason that he was closer in time to the beginnings of Baptist work in Jamaica, namely, Dr. Thomas Coke, the Methodist pioneer, who wrote in 1808:

"The Baptists have had societies among the negroes of Jamaica for twenty years, and much good has arisen therefrom. Their success in that island, in the conversion of souls, has far exceeded that of the Moravian Brètheran. . . in the course of his three visits to Jamaica, he was so far acquainted with their proceedings that he is confident they have been truly useful to hundreds of negroes."¹¹

Taking into account that Dr. Coke was familiar with the more emotional expressions of religious faith as demonstrated during the days of the Wesley revival in England, his account does not leave the impression that Leile and his followers were either peculiar or heretical.

Baptist work began with the arrival from America of George Leile, an ex-slave. Having served as a minister in America, Leile continued his evangelical work in Jamaica forming a Native Church and building the first Dissenting Church on the island on 1793—helped not a little by contributions from British Baptists.¹²

Leile was not unaware of the enormity of his task, as he intimated in a letter written in May, 1792:

"the chiefest part of our society are poor illiterate slaves, some living on sugar estates, some on mountains, pens and other settlements; they have no learning, no, not to know so much as a letter in the book; but the reading of this covenant, once a month, when all are met together from different parts of the island, keeps them in mind of the commandments of God."¹³

Together with another ex-American slave, Moses Baker—whom Leile had baptized—the Baptist cause began to grow. Both men drew up a Church Covenant; Leile's was brought with him from America as its title indicates, 'The COVENANT of the Anabaptist church, begun in America, December 1777, and in Jamaica, December 1783.'¹⁴ Baker's, an adaptation of Leile's, was published as part of a letter in *The Evangelical Magazine* in 1803¹⁵, and reveals no significant difference to that drawn up by Leile, in spite of Dr. Curtin's statement that Baker "departed from Leile's orthodoxy". Baker's emphasis, he states, was "upon the spirit", but Baker's covenant makes no mention of the spirit save in an orthodox Trinitarian formula; his description of the baptism used by the Native church is also misleading:

'The ceremony of baptism by immersion also took on a new importance and became an elaborate initiation for a new member. It was no longer a symbol, but the extension of Grace itself and thus led to practices that the white missionaries condemned as antinomianism. It led, as well, to the subordination of Christ as the chief religious figure and an emphasis on John the Baptist. This was only natural, since John had been the 'leader' who admitted Christ to baptism, though it was also shocking to the European missionaries.'¹⁶

There is in this judgement a failure to understand the importance of 'believer's baptism', and once again, it is important to point out that in the two Covenants—it is Baker who is being attacked primarily—there is no confusion whatsoever between the baptism of John and Christian baptism, in fact there is no mention of John the Baptist at all. As the references at this point come from Blyth and Waddell, who seems to have been either unaware of the Covenants, or ignored them, we need to bear in mind that both the missionaries, because of their theological background, were antagonistic to 'believer's baptism'; the innuendo concerning antinomianism seems unwarranted, for no evidence is forthcoming that baptism led to this—that it led to a spirit of independence is another question. Presumably those who accepted the 'Westminster Confessions' were just as likely to become heretical, as evidence the eighteenth century, when along with many General Baptists and Independents, many Presbyterians became Unitarian. Dr. Curtin's judgements are strongly reminiscent of Blyth's reference to Baptist doctrine as 'the peculiar dogmas of that body'¹⁷ and Waddell's 'queer system.'¹⁸

The evidence of one of the Moravian missionaries indicates that Baker was the victim of prejudice, for:

'During his thirty years labour in these parts, he has had to endure much persecution. In some instances, his ardent zeal for the cause of Christ may now and

then, as with many, occasioned his running too fast, and brought trouble on himself. The most abominable lies have been propagated concerning him, and still serve to amuse idle people; . . . There are some clever and gifted black preachers in this country. May the Lord make them and us useful in his work. . . .¹⁹

Coultart wrote of Baker in 1882, "Mr. Baker is neither superstitious nor enthusiastic; he is evidently spiritual in all things; has much good sense. . . I saw some instances of his decision and firmness in religious discipline which surprised me."²⁰ There seems nothing that can really place either Leile and Baker in the capacity of irresponsible fanatics.

That there was laxity, no one would deny. Some of the early Baptist missionaries, in particular Le Compere, speak of indolence and laxity, but Compere goes on to say that there is a great need for leadership.²¹ This need was due in part to the Jamaican Plantocracy who legislated in such a way that it was impossible for any Native leadership to function properly. In 1804 the Kingston Authorities refused to grant licences to anyone other than those who could produce a *bona fide* certificate to say they were agents of recognised church bodies; naturally the Native leaders could not hope to qualify. Such action, which was to be repeated at various intervals, caused some anger amongst British Dissenters. Fuller, Hall and Booth made their protest — though Fuller, in a letter to William Carey, suggests that he was disappointed that others, including Sutcliff, did not sign their petition.²² The Dissenting Deputies also made their protest²³ and though the British Government depreciated the Jamaican action, there was little they could do about it.

There can be no doubt that one of the reasons for such persistent and vicious attacks upon the Dissenting communities in Jamaica, and the Baptists in particular, was the fact that the Plantocracy saw the rapid spread of the Native Baptist Church as a danger signal. The Haitian revolt in 1790 had increased the fear that the Jamaican negro slaves would emulate their Haitian counterpart. The real danger, as they saw it, was the emergence of a vociferous and powerful body of lay people within the Native church. Native preachers were having a distinct effect upon the slave population, thus the planters were afraid that this exercise of authority given to the natives by the Baptists, was the first step to anarchism; later before the Commons Committee of Enquiry, John Barry, a Methodist Missionary, gave as his judgement:

'if anything were to attribute to the Baptist Society, as connected with that insurrection, it must have arisen out of permitting black men to exercise a greater degree of influence than we would have done.'²⁴

This fear was strengthened by the Native Baptists' use of a

'ticket' system. It was a simple system, each member was issued with a ticket on which was written his name and the name of his minister. It was a sign of his acceptance by the church, and usually indicated that the person in question had undergone some form of instruction in order to qualify for membership. That such a simple method was capable of being corrupted is undeniable, and not a few were able to 'purchase' their ticket. In the hands of the unscrupulous this system was used not only to make money, but also to exercise authority over the unsuspecting. To the planters it was an iniquitous system which gave the slave a false sense of security, and an exaggerated sense of his own importance; it was a 'passport for heaven.' In the hands of the missionaries, however, it could be used to good effect in the management of increasing congregations. Dr. Curtin overstates his case when he suggests that the ticket was 'the Christian equivalent to the fetishes carried by Negroes in the Gambia of West Africa. . .'²⁵ It seems strange that he does not suggest that, even more powerful than the ticket, and far more liable to be construed as a fetish, were the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both these sacraments are based upon a profound spiritual mystery, not easy to explain, yet dramatic in their presentation of initiation and continual commitment. The act of baptism far more than the holding of a ticket, was liable to create a revolutionary spirit, for it signified that they were new men belonging to a new people, resulting in the demand to be treated as such. Even the planters seem to make no mention about this particular aspect, though it could be argued that they did all they could to ensure that the Negro had little opportunity for either. That the ticket was seen by the planter as a symbol of a freedom movement is undeniable, but to argue that by so using the ticket system, the European Baptists were 'moving towards the Afro-Christian synthesis' seems to be reading too much into what was in fact a simple expedient for the organisation of a fast growing community. This was certainly how the European Baptists understood the method which they inherited from the Native Baptist groups founded by Leile and Baker; they saw nothing superstitious or syncretistic about the practise, men such as Burchell and Coultart were happy to use the system.²⁶ That is emphasised the importance of the lay leader is without question, but then the Baptists relied a great deal on lay leadership as is evidenced by one of Coultart's helpers, Mr. Burton:

'Your missionaries occupy an humble station on the gradual scale of excellent means; and yet the principal part of the good which is done, is accomplished by means that are humbler still. The slaves who have received the truth are, amongst their fellow-slaves, the most effectual preachers of the Gospel. Poor men and

poor women, whom we denominate as 'Leaders' because of their religious employment, are the chief instrument in filling our places of worship, and in bringing sinners unto God. And they *do* bring them in a manner that must give angels very much of the employment of praise.²⁷

Knibb was a little more conservative when it came to the giving out of tickets, for he informed the Select Committee of the Commons that he only distributed the tickets—presumably at Falmouth.²⁸

Nevertheless the stigma of illiteracy, fanaticism and superstition remained, and the Native Baptist Church became a synonym for rebellion; the term was generic, much as the term Anabaptist in the days of the European Reformation in the sixteenth century²⁹ so that it is not surprising that the cause of the 1832 insurrection was said to be the Baptist Church—including both Native Baptists and European Baptists. The very nature of the Baptist concept of the church made it easier for independent groups to be formed, owing no allegiance at all to the B.M.S., and still able to call themselves Baptist; thus the term Baptist covers a wide variety of movements, from the orthodox type of Baptist Church of that period to the semi-political and revolutionary coterie. Blyth and Waddell in particular, in making their generalisations, leave the impression that from the very beginning the Baptists in Jamaica practised some perverted form of Christianity, and that the Negro Baptists naturally perverted the faith, which does not fit the facts. That there was a tendency to emphasise independency was inevitable, but this did not automatically lead to heresy, and during the years of depression, such groups naturally proliferated and amongst them were groups whose standing in the community seem to be high, especially to the discerning. R. R. Madden, a keen Anglican and one of the special magistrates during the Apprenticeship period, wrote in 1834 of a Baptist Church independent of the B.S.M., with nothing but praise:—

"The places of worship are numerous and well attended; there are two Protestant churches, two Catholic churches, and several Baptist and Wesleyan places of worship. But there is one chapel of the former denomination on the Winward Road, the clergyman of which is a Negro, of the name of Kellick—a pious, well-behaved, honest man, who in point of intelligence and the application of Scripture Knowledge to the ordinary duties of his calling, and the business of life, stands a comparison with many more highly-favoured by the advantages of their education and standing in society. . . The building I am sorry to add, is in very bad repair; and, as poor Kellick is looked upon as an

interloper by all parties, he gets no assistance from any."⁵⁰

Madden again speaks in glowing terms about Kellick in the second volume of his work; Underhill informs us that Kellick, who had been baptized by Lelle in 1801, became a minister in 1811; in 1841 the House of Assembly, impressed with the work he was doing, gave him a grant of £200 for repairs and additions to his chapel, while the Corporation of Kingston gave a further £100.⁵¹

During the late fifties and early sixties, the fact that G. W. Gordon, a man of colour, as well as being a man of some social standing, joined the Native Baptist cause, was proof positive that it was a movement designed for anarchism. It is surprising to read an historian such as W. L. Mathieson writing in somewhat sarcastic tones that 'it is impossible to understand how a man of his (Gordon) social and political standing. . . could debase himself to the level of a Native Baptist.'⁵² Mathieson underestimates the importance of the Native Baptist Movement in the political life of the country, and as an important stimulus to Gordon's own sense of social righteousness. The Native Baptists quite naturally were a movement of the poor who most readily lent its support to their cause. It is argued that Gordon was religiously unstable, beginning in the church of his father, the Church of Scotland, moving, it seems, as he rose in social standing on to Anglicanism, and finally into a more congenial atmosphere, congenial, that is, to his own temperament, of the Native Baptist community. It is not surprising that a man of such strong emotional expressions as Gordon should feel more at home amongst the freer atmosphere of the extreme left of Dissent, a community which provided both stimulus and occasion for his own involvement in championing the cause of social justice; it ought perhaps to be stated here that it was Phillippo who encouraged Gordon to join the Native Baptists.⁵⁵

Though Governor Eyre attempted to blame Baptists for the Morant Bay Tragedy of 1865, the Commission set up to enquire into its causes could find no substance in his generalisations: it, however, cannot be gainsaid that some of the leaders in the revolt such as Paul Bogle, were deeply committed to the cause of the Native Baptist Church, and it could be argued with force that they used the Movement for political ends. Be that as it may, one needs to ask the question, "What set alight these terrifying fires of revolt?" and the answer must be "social injustice", which was the case presented by Underhill in his letter to Secretary Cardwell, who refused to accept its indictment. It is little wonder that the Native Baptists provided a home for revolutionaries such as Bogle and Gordon, where else could they find sympathy and encouragement — and what

is more, some effort at action—but not all the churches in membership with the J.B.U., were prepared for action even though they suffered. Accepting the complexity of the situation, and the reluctance on the part of the churches to become as deeply involved as they might, one cannot but feel that the Native Baptist, being the worst hit by the depression, took over the role by the B.M.S., missionaries in the 1832 revolt, and precipitated the Jamaican Assembly into facing up to the situation, aided by Underhill and the letters of the B.M.S. missionaries. Perhaps their greatest crime lay not in the religious sphere, but in the political and moral sphere. It was not because they tended towards the enthusiastic or even to the religiously unorthodox that they were feared, but having nothing to lose and everything to gain, they were prepared to attack the social and political situation and reveal it for what it was—in the words of a modern martyr for a similar cause, Martin Luther King, writing about a modern Negro revolt. “. . . years of humiliation, abuse and deprivation cannot be expected to find voice in a whisper. The storm clouds did not release a ‘gentle rain from heaven’, but a whirlwind, which has not yet spent its force or attained its full momentum.”³⁴

A study of the Native Baptist Movement up until the present day is almost impossible, for unlike the J.B.U., there has been no semblance of organisation, therefore records are few and far between, though no doubt many months and years reading through newspapers and reports kept in the West India Reference Library, Kingston, and the archives at Spanish Town, would yield up some evidence. Nevertheless there is sufficient indication to suggest that the picture hitherto presented of a community from which no good could come, needs to be revised, and that their contribution to the development of Jamaica is not negative, but that there is a considerable amount of constructive work if only one is prepared to accept that they were capable of such work.

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