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Spreading Afro-Protestantism: Afro-Caribbean Christianity and the Growth of Methodism during the Caribbean Great Awakening, 1760-1810

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Spreading Afro-Protestantism

Afro-Caribbean Christianity and the Growth of Methodism during the Caribbean Great Awakening, 1760-1810

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Introduction

In the 1780s, an enslaved man called Black Harry arrived on the Dutch island of St. Eustatius where he became the founder and leader of a vibrant religious community of free and enslaved Afro-Caribbeans. Before Harry arrived, he had been living in slavery in North America where he came into contact with the Methodist religion at a time when old and new Christian denominations were quickly spreading through the continent. After the American Revolution people like Harry were moving between the Caribbean and North American colonies, which incited the spread of evangelical Protestantism through the Greater Caribbean.¹ Within this context, Harry brought Methodism to St. Eustatius and became a charismatic religious leader who inspired the island's free and enslaved Afro-Caribbean population. With his preaching, Harry greatly touched his audience, with whom he shared a common experience of living in slavery. The enslaved men and women listening to, praying with, and singing along with him "were so affected under the word, that many of them fell down as if they were dead, and some of them would remain in a state of stupor for some hours".² Besides faithful followers, his religious activities also gave him a notorious reputation among planters and colonial authorities, who ultimately banned him from the island. Although Harry lived only on St. Eustatius for a couple of years, his preaching did have a long-lasting impact on the local Afro-Caribbean community and its public memory of slavery. Up to the present day, his powerful religious devotion is still remembered on the island.³

While a remarkable man in many ways, Harry's story does not stand on its own. As they shaped their religious lives, Afro-Caribbean people played an instrumental role in the development of Christianity in the Caribbean in the later eighteenth century.⁴ The story of Harry forces us to rethink the history of Christian missions in Caribbean colonial slave societies. This history has generally been told through a focus on white missionaries travelling from Europe to the Caribbean 'to convert the heathen'. However, Christianity was not something that was simply brought to the Caribbean from Europe, spread by white missionaries and adopted by enslaved Africans, but forged from the interactions across ethnicities and cultures – between missionaries, slaves, and colonists. Afro-Caribbean men and women,

¹ The Greater Caribbean is used by historians as well as geographers and biogeographers to emphasize the economic, political, social, and biogeographic integration of the islands of the Caribbean Sea and the neighbouring mainland. The Greater Caribbean region stretches from the Guianas on the northern coast of South America, to the Antilles, the Gulf of Mexico, the Bahamas, and the Atlantic coast of North America.

² Thomas Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. by John A. Vickers (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2005), 83. This image of the powerful effect of Black Harry's preaching upon his audience has also survived in oral history accounts. See: Felicia Jantina Fricke, 'The Lifeways of Enslaved People in Curaçao, St Eustatius, and St Maarten/St Martin: A Thematic Analysis of Archaeological, Osteological, and Oral Historical Data' (PhD dissertation, University of Kent, 2019), 314.

³ Fricke, 'The Lifeways of Enslaved People in Curaçao, St Eustatius, and St Maarten/St Martin: A Thematic Analysis of Archaeological, Osteological, and Oral Historical Data', 314. I am grateful to Felicia Fricke for allowing me to read the original transcripts used in her dissertation.

⁴ This thesis uses 'Afro-Caribbean' and 'African descended' for both black and mixed-race people collectively. It uses 'free people of colour' to refer to freeborn and manumitted people of both black and mixed race descent and uses 'black' and 'mixed-race' to specify individuals of mainly African and combined African and European ancestry respectively.

both free and enslaved, were not only the recipients of the gospel but also the people spreading the Christian message, as fellow believers, preachers, and religious leaders.

The beliefs and practices of Afro-Caribbean Christians, and in particular the role of black preachers and leaders within Protestant mission movements have remained largely invisible in historiography. Some historians have successfully shed light on important Afro-Caribbean Christian preachers and leaders within the history of specific missions in specific colonies, such as the famous Baptist George Liele who became an influential and successful missionary in both South Carolina and Jamaica,⁵ or Rebecca Protten who became a spiritual leader in the Moravian missionary movement on St. Thomas.⁶ At the same time, various scholars have emphasized the influence of African religious and cultural traditions in the development of Afro-Protestantism, particularly in the North American context.⁷ Yet still little is known about the broader role, impact, and networks of Afro-Caribbean men and women in the spread of Christianity. This thesis contributes to the growing field of Afro-Caribbean Christianity by investigating the participation of Afro-Caribbeans in the Methodist movement during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Before I lay out my research questions, I will briefly introduce the history of the early Methodist Caribbean mission and its representation in historiography.

The Methodist Caribbean Mission

In the late eighteenth century, white Protestant missionaries who came to be known as Methodists, visited various British, Dutch, and Danish Antillean islands, where they established religious communities among the white, Afro-Caribbean, and Indigenous populations. Methodism originally started as a revival movement within the Church of England and has its origins in the British and North American evangelical revivals of the 1730s and 1740s known as the Great Awakening.⁸ The movement, which initially sought reform within the Church of England, spread through England, the British Isles, North America, and eventually around the world. Conversion and the experience of conversion played an important role within Methodist Christianity as well as other evangelic movements, which gave a strong impetus to missionary work in the Atlantic. This has led scholars to emphasize the importance of the Great Awakening in the development of Afro-Protestantism, stressing the attraction of the mid- and

⁵ Thomas J. Little, 'George Liele and the Rise of Independent Black Churches in the Lower South and Jamaica', *Slavery & Abolition* 16, no. 2 (1995): 188–204.

⁶ Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁷ The two classical works on Afro-Protestantism are: Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). See also the more recent work of Noel Leo Erskine, *Plantation Church: How African American Religion Was Born in Caribbean Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁸ The term Great Awakening or First Great Awakening is most often used in the North American context. In the United Kingdom the revival movement is mostly referred to as the Evangelical Revival. Grayson M. Ditchfield, *The Evangelical Revival* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

late eighteenth-century evangelical missionary movements – of the Moravians, the Methodists, and the Baptists – in contrast to the institutionally embedded Anglican and Reformed Protestant churches.⁹ Although Katherine Gerbner has nuanced this chronology by emphasizing the significance of Afro-Protestant conversions before the evangelical revivals, however limited in number, there can be no doubt that the Caribbean became an increasingly missionized region as the eighteenth century progressed.¹⁰

The history of the Methodist mission in the Caribbean has traditionally been characterized as the project and undertaking of one man: it was thanks to the inexhaustible efforts, enthusiasm, and determination of Thomas Coke, according to this narrative, that the Methodist mission became a success at the end of the eighteenth century. Coke was a leading figure within the British Methodist Society and became responsible for the transatlantic endeavours of the church in North America and the West Indies in the 1780s. From the perspective of the British Society, the beginning of the Methodist mission lay in the 1780s and 1790s, when Coke made his famous journeys through the Caribbean. He travelled through the Caribbean for the first time in the years 1786 and 1787. Within the next seven years, he would make three more visits to the region, each time reaching out to more and more islands and including them in the Methodist missionary network. Although Methodism had already spread through the region before Coke's journeys, it was not until he arrived in the Antilles that one could speak of an institutionally organised transatlantic effort to spread Methodism in the Caribbean. Stressing the importance of Coke in the spread of Methodism around the world, the Methodist historian John A. Vickers has characterized the early mission as a "one-man band".¹¹ Vickers' work should be read as a defence of Coke, who according to him "has suffered neglect" and who has "been misrepresented" as an ambitious self-seeking person caught up with worldly ambitions.¹² Both Vickers and scholars to which he relates his work, have written the history of the early Methodist mission from the perspective of the British Society and its internal politics.¹³

However, by writing the history of Methodism in the Caribbean from the perspective of the British transatlantic organised efforts, with Coke and his fellow white missionaries playing the leading parts, a crucial part of the story remains in silence. The instrumental role of Afro-Caribbean people, free and enslaved, in the Caribbean Methodist communities, as believers, but more importantly, also as preachers and leaders, deserves greater attention. On various Antillean islands, Afro-Caribbean men and

⁹ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 80.

¹⁰ Katharine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 11.

¹¹ John Vickers, 'One-Man Band: Thomas Coke and the Origins of Methodist Missions', *Methodist History* 34, no. 3 (1996): 135–47; John Vickers, *Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1969).

¹² Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 2; xi.

¹³ Cyril Davey, *The Man Who Wanted the World: The Story of Thomas Coke* (London: Methodist Missionary Society, 1947); G. G. Findlay and W. W. Holdsworth, *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, 5 vols (London: The Epworth Press, 1921–1924); John Wesley Etheridge, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, D.C.L.* (London: John Mason, 1860); Samuel Drew, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D. Including in Detail His Various Travels and Extraordinary Missionary Exertions, in England, Ireland, America, and the West-Indies* (London: Thomas Cordeux, 1817).

women came to play an important role in the founding and growth of Methodist Christianity, before, during, and after white missionaries visited those islands. Afro-Methodism and the role of Afro-Caribbeans within the development and growth of evangelical Protestantism have predominantly been investigated in the North American context.¹⁴ In the Caribbean context, several scholars have begun to revise the traditional narrative of the early mission as the sole undertaking of Coke and his missionaries. Yet their research is still confined to the study of individual colonies, leaving us with an understanding of Afro-Methodist participation and experience that is both fragmented and myopic.¹⁵

Historiography of Protestantism in the Atlantic World

From the seventeenth until the nineteenth centuries, various competing Protestant missionary organisations travelled to and through the Caribbean to spread their religion. The history of these Christian missions has often been studied by examining the role of missionaries in colonial slave societies, asking how they were received and how their missionary efforts influenced and were influenced by the realities of slavery they encountered. In this context, the interactions between missionaries, colonists, and slaves have often been investigated from the perspective of the missionary organisations or the colonial elite, planters, and authorities.

A question that has dominated scholarship on Christian missions in a colonial context more generally is whether or not missionaries were colonizers and whether or not Christian missions were part of the colonial project. In asking this question, scholars have implicitly defined the missionary as a white person coming from the metropole to the colony. At one end of the debate, traditional mission historians have tried to show that missionaries had no complicity in colonialism, stressing the fact that mission societies were often critical of colonialism and colonial policies, and that colonists and missionaries were often in conflict with each other. In the context of the Atlantic world, this has resulted in Protestant missions being examined in relation to antislavery thought, evaluating Christian missions on humanitarian terms. This is also true for the study of Methodism within North American and West Indian colonial slave societies. Methodism has for a long time been characterized as an antislavery movement that contributed to British abolitionism and the emancipation of slaves in the British empire.¹⁶ However, Methodism's relationship with slavery was far more complicated. A group of scholars has argued that although initially firm abolitionists, evangelicals in the Southern North American colonies were forced to accommodate to the institution of slavery in order to spread the Christian gospel.¹⁷ It is

¹⁴ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 132–35. See also: Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, chapter 4 and 5.

¹⁵ Michael Jagessar, 'Early Methodism in the Caribbean: Through the Imaginary Optics of Gilbert's Slave Women—Another Reading', *Black Theology. An International Journal* 5, no. 2 (2007): 153–70; David Bundy, 'The African and Caribbean Origins of Methodism in the Bahamas', *Methodist History* 53, no. 3 (2015): 173–83.

¹⁶ Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

¹⁷ Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760–1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

one of the arguments of this thesis that Methodism's commitment to slavery was more fundamental and that the mission in the Caribbean was based on an acceptance of the everyday reality of slavery as well as a theological commitment to slavery.

At the other end of the debate, critical postcolonial scholars have reacted to traditional mission historians by emphasizing the extent to which missionary practices were characterized by colonial power relations.¹⁸ However, in the last decades, historians have reacted to this strand of scholarship, by stating that African, African-descended, and Indigenous people who converted to Christianity have unjustly been characterised as passive victims whose traditional culture was erased. They argue that conversion in a colonial context did not necessarily imply submission to European rule and should not be treated as a "unidirectional event, but as a problem to be unravelled in all its ambiguity, instability, and local specificity".¹⁹ As a result, scholars have shifted their attention to the experiences and practices of non-European converts in their encounters with Christianity and European missionaries.

For example, Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood have placed people of African descent at the centre of their study of Protestantism in the Americas, reacting to scholarship that has wrongly depicted these historical actors "as reactive rather than as proactive, as shaped by rather than having helped to shape [...] Protestant Christianity".²⁰ In their work, which focuses on the British Americas, they particularly recognize the influence of African beliefs and rituals in shaping what they call "New World religious cultures".²¹ More recently, Edward E. Andrews has particularly foregrounded the role of Afro-American and Native American preachers in Anglo-American Protestantism. He uses the term 'native missionary' to highlight and recognize the instrumental spiritual role of these groups: "These 'native' missionaries were not necessarily native to the land, but rather they generally came from the same population as their potential converts."²² He shows that the existence of native clergy was more widespread than has been acknowledged.

Although Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean engagement with Christianity rather than missionary intentions has gradually moved to the foreground, a detailed and comprehensive understanding of this engagement is still lacking. This thesis underwrites the recent shift in colonial mission history from a focus on the European missionary to the Afro-Caribbean believer, preacher, and religious leader, and contributes to the growing field of Afro-Protestantism by rethinking the history of the Caribbean Great Awakening from the perspective of Afro-Caribbean evangelicals. More specifically, I investigate the history of the early Methodist movement in the Caribbean and ask how

¹⁸ For a discussion of these historiographical developments see: Karen Vallgård, 'Were Christian Missionaries Colonizers? Reorienting the Debate and Exploring New Research Trajectories', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 18, no. 6 (2016): 865–86; Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 3.

¹⁹ Katharine Gerbner, 'Theorizing Conversion: Christianity, Colonization, and Consciousness in the Early Modern Atlantic World', *History Compass* 13, no. 3 (2015): 137.

²⁰ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, xii.

²¹ Frey and Wood, xii.

²² Edward E. Andrews, *Native Apostles: Black and Indian Missionaries in the British Atlantic World* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 2.

Methodist Christianity shaped and was shaped by Afro-Caribbean religious beliefs and practices in the period from 1760 to 1810. The main research question of this thesis is: how did Afro-Caribbean people participate in the early Methodist movement and how did their participation shape Methodist Christianity? To answer this question, Afro-Methodist participation and spiritual leadership are investigated from two complementary angles. On the one hand, this thesis focuses on the different ways in which enslaved and free Afro-Caribbean men and women engaged with Methodist Christianity, practised their religion, took up positions of spiritual leadership, and propagated their own spiritual message. On the other hand, this thesis examines how Afro-Methodist participation and leadership were understood by white clergy. A focus on the ideas about Afro-Methodism allows us to understand how missionary discourse on Christian missions, Methodism, and people of African descent has influenced the history of Afro-Protestantism.

Sources and Methodology

This thesis is primarily based on missionary documents. Missionaries have been recognized to be the most prolific writers in the early modern Atlantic world and their writings include manuscript sources such as mission diaries, letters, and reports, as well as published material, such as accounts, journals, reports, and periodicals. Both types of missionary sources are used in this thesis. Within the Methodist mission, most published material came from the hand of Thomas Coke, who published the journals of his four voyages to the West Indies, annual mission reports, solicitations for funding, and a three-volume book on the history of the West Indies.²³ On the one hand, Coke's accounts of his visits to the Caribbean give insight into the development of the early mission. On the other hand, his writings were often propagandistic in nature as Coke sought to mobilise public support for the missions, and give therefore insight into the British Methodist discourse on Afro-Methodism. In addition to Coke's published writings, this thesis uses letters and correspondence of missionaries stationed in the Caribbean. Most of this material has been preserved in the *Methodist Missionary Society Archives* held at the School of African and Oriental Studies University of London. Although I could not visit this archive, much of the correspondence from the early period is included in John Vickers' source publication of Thomas Coke's correspondence.²⁴ In addition, parts of missionary letters are also included in the published periodicals, reports, and mission overviews.

Most of the (preserved) Methodist sources were written by white missionaries stationed in the Caribbean who corresponded with the mission organisation in Great Britain. However, writings of Afro-

²³ Coke's journals of his voyages to the West Indies and North America have been published in separate instalments in his lifetime. In 1790 and 1793 Coke published collected editions of the journals that had been published so far. In 1816, two years after Coke's death, a further collected edition was published with an introductory bibliography by Joseph Sutcliffe. In this thesis I will mainly reference to the source publication edited by John A. Vickers, who has annotated the published journals from 1816. In some cases, when the edition from 1816 differs from the original publications, the earlier published accounts are referenced. For a complete overview of the publications see the bibliography.

²⁴ Thomas Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. John Vickers (Nashville: Kingwood Books, 2013).

Caribbean evangelicals have been preserved, such as the writings of the free women of colour Anne Hart Gilbert and Elizabeth Hart Gilbert, who were important Afro-Methodist spiritual leaders in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Antigua. These exceptional sources, brought together in a source publication by Moira Ferguson, are part of a small but significant body of sources written by African-descended and Native Christians in the Atlantic.²⁵ Although limited in their scope, the writings of the Hart sisters are an important source for this thesis because they are closer to Afro-Caribbean religious practices than most missionary records. Lastly, missionary documents are cross-referenced with colonial archival material from the Dutch National Archives. These colonial records are used to contextualise the history of Methodism and Afro-Methodist participation in the Caribbean.

Tracing and explaining the religious beliefs, practices, and roles of Afro-Caribbean people is, without doubt, the most challenging objective within the history of Christianity and Christian missions in colonial slave societies. The limited number of sources produced by Afro-Caribbean people themselves, and the silences created within missionary and colonial records, force historians to be critical and creative when investigating the social, cultural, and religious history of this marginalised and oppressed group. In general, historians are confronted with silences and gaps in their source material. After all, an archive cannot store everything and is by definition characterised by its finitude.²⁶ However, historians of slavery have argued that the archives of slavery are distinct in the violence that has made enslaved voices “invisible, mutilated and difficult to reach”.²⁷ Marisa Fuentes has emphasized in her work that many of the thoughts, experiences, and perspectives of enslaved people will remain “unrecoverable silent” and that it is important to recognize the destruction of colonial violence.²⁸

While Fuentes stresses the need for historical awareness of the archival limitations within the history of slavery, historians have also shown that critical methodologies can reveal complex historical realities. This thesis combines both methodological insights. On the one hand, I use missionary records to analyse the missionary discourse about Afro-Caribbeans, their engagement with Methodist Christianity, and their role within the Methodist movement. I reconstruct the representations and silences in the British Methodist narrative about Afro-Protestantism that has continuously influenced the way that this history has been understood and written. Drawing on Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s concept of silence in the production of history, this thesis argues that the instrumental role of Afro-Methodists as

²⁵ Moira Ferguson, ed., *The Hart Sisters: Early African Caribbean Writers, Evangelicals, and Radicals* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993). Other examples are the accounts of the Baptist George Liele, the Baptist David George, and the Anglican Philip Quaque. For other published writings of black people in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Atlantic see: Henry Louis Gates and William L. Andrews, eds., *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772-1815* (Washington: Civitas, 1998).

²⁶ Jacques Derrida has emphasized how the fundamental finitude of archives leads to an “in-finite movement of radical destruction without which no archive desire or fever would happen”: Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 94.

²⁷ Brian Connolly and Marisa J. Fuentes, ‘Introduction: From Archives of Slavery to Liberated Futures?’, *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 6, no. 2 (2016): 105; Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

²⁸ Connolly and Fuentes, ‘Introduction: From Archives of Slavery to Liberated Futures?’, 105.

preachers and religious leaders has been marked not only by gaps in sources and historiography, but more importantly by the epistemological gap created and articulated by the British Methodist Society.²⁹ On the other hand, I use the same missionary records to move beyond this narrative by reading these records from a different perspective and with different questions than the missionaries who created them. By interpreting missionary records from an Afro-Caribbean perspective, and by contextualizing these records with the history of slavery in the Greater Caribbean, literature on African and African-derived religious practices, and source material from colonial archives and Afro-Caribbean evangelicals, this thesis unravels the history of Afro-Caribbean Christianity.

In addition, this thesis takes a regional inter-imperial and inter-island approach, which counteracts the traditional transatlantic mission history – in which European missionaries brought Christianity to the Caribbean – and highlights the role and position of local actors in religious communities. By examining a religious movement that transcended imperial boundaries, we can begin to understand the role of white missionaries, enslaved converts, and Afro-Methodist believers, preachers, and religious leaders in the Caribbean as a whole. Moreover, foregrounding the regional scale of the Methodist Caribbean mission exposes the importance of inter-island religious networks and the role of Afro-Caribbeans within the Methodist movement. Too often, the history of Christian missions in Caribbean colonial societies has been studied in isolation, being fragmented and divided along lines of denomination, empire, and even individual colony.³⁰ Within the historiography of Christian missions in the Caribbean, research has generally focused on two different geographical scales: the local scale of the individual colony and the transatlantic scale of the white missionaries' connections with the Church organisation in North America and Europe. In my study of early Methodism in the Caribbean, I propose a third possible perspective, that of the integrated region. Whereas the regional scale as an analytic framework has been employed within Atlantic history in studies of trade, mobility, and politics, this perspective is lacking in the study of Christian missions.³¹

Structure

The first chapter examines the spread and growth of Caribbean Methodism in the second half of the eighteenth century and places the development of the religious movement within its broader historical context. The spread of Methodist Christianity in the Caribbean was part of a wider movement of evangelical revivals in the region, which was a great impetus for the development of Afro-Protestantism.

²⁹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015). Trouillot's concept of an epistemological silence will be discussed more detailly in chapter 2.

³⁰ The notable exception is the work of Gerbner (2018) which focuses on the Anglicans, Quakers, and Moravians in what she calls the Protestant Atlantic: the British, Dutch, and Danish colonies. Yet whereas her argument is both inter-imperial and inter-denominational, her analysis, evidence, and source material is still very much connected to two specific colonies, namely Barbados and St. Thomas.

³¹ See for example Jeppe Mulich, who writes about the Leewards Islands, which he understands as an inter-imperial microregion. Jeppe Mulich, *In a Sea of Empires: Networks and Crossings in the Revolutionary Caribbean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Taking a regional perspective, examining the Methodist communities in the Caribbean from a single framework, the first chapter investigates the origins of the Methodist mission, how Methodism spread through the Caribbean, and how the different societal groups played a role in the religious movement.

The second chapter focuses on the missionary discourse of Afro-Methodism by investigating how Afro-Methodist participation was understood, perceived, and assessed by the British Methodist Society. This focus on the contemporary understanding and representation of Afro-Methodist spiritual involvement enables a better understanding of the place and role of Afro-Caribbean religious beliefs, practices, and leadership within the Methodist mission. To explore white ideas about Afro-Methodist participation, I analyse several works of Coke written and published from the early 1780s until the end of his life in 1814. It will become clear that in his writings, intended for a British audience ‘at home’, Coke downplayed the independent role of Afro-Methodists. For him, Afro-Methodist leadership was unthinkable and white missionary guidance inevitable.

The third and last chapter investigates in more detail what Afro-Methodist participation looked like by asking when, how, and why Afro-Caribbean people participated in the Methodist movement – as believers, preachers, and religious leaders. Afro-Methodist participation did not only take place within the British-organised missions, under the supervision of white missionary guidance, but also in autonomous religious communities. The third chapter investigates both forms of Afro-Methodist participation by discussing two case studies: the mission society on Antigua, which functioned as the epicentre of the Methodist missionary efforts in the Caribbean, and the autonomous society on St. Eustatius, which operated independently on the fringes of the white missionary organisation.

1. The Spread and Growth of Methodism during the Caribbean Great Awakening

In the last two decades of the eighteenth century, the British Methodist Church sent dozens of missionaries to the West Indies to establish religious communities among the enslaved populations of the British, Dutch, and Danish colonies. The missionaries, who had often worked as itinerants within British or Irish Methodist circuits before taking on their new adventures, started their transatlantic journey with the expectation of conveying and spreading the word of God to new places and peoples. They hoped to convert ‘the heathen’ and saw themselves as the pioneers of the Methodist faith. Arriving in the Caribbean, however, these white men found that, contrary to their expectations, they were not the first to spread Methodism throughout the region. Often, when visiting new Antillean islands to include them in their missionary network, Thomas Coke and the missionaries accompanying him encountered Afro-Caribbeans who were already practising and spreading Methodist Christianity. These Afro-Caribbean men and women united themselves in religious communities to share their spiritual experiences, by praying, singing, and preaching along with other enslaved and free people of colour.

This chapter examines the growth and spread of Methodism in the Caribbean during the second half of the eighteenth century, showing how the religious movement grew among the enslaved and free Afro-Caribbean populations of the colonial societies, both because of and despite the organised missionary efforts of the British Methodist Church. The growth of the Methodist movement was part of a broader religious development in the so-called Protestant empires, where the arrival of the evangelical movements accelerated the spread and development of Afro-Christianity.³² From the 1730s onwards, when the first Moravian missionaries arrived in the Caribbean, tens of thousands of Afro-Caribbeans came to identify themselves as evangelical Christians. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Afro-Caribbean participation within the Moravian, Methodist, and Baptist evangelical movements reached new heights. This period of evangelical revivals, which can be called the Caribbean Great Awakening, was characterised by a stark increase in interest in Christianity and membership numbers among the Afro-Caribbean population. Although influenced by the well-studied Great Awakenings in Europe and North America, the upsurge of religious enthusiasm in the Caribbean should be studied in its own right as a chronologically and spatially distinct but interconnected religious movement.³³

³² I use the term Protestant empires to refer to the British, Dutch, and Danish empires, which all had a Protestant public church: the Anglican and Lutheran Church were the state churches of the British and the Danish empires respectively, and the Dutch Reformed Church was the public and privileged church in the Dutch empire. This does not mean, however, that these empires were entirely Protestant, as Catholicism and Judaism also existed in these empires. For work on the role of Catholicism and Afro-Catholicism in British and Dutch colonial contexts see: Mary Cornelius, ‘Becoming Catholic: Religion and Society in Colonial Grenada, 1763-1838’ (PhD dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2020); Linda M. Rupert, ‘Seeking the Water of Baptism: Fugitive Slaves and Imperial Jurisdiction in the Early Modern Caribbean’, in *Legal Pluralism and Empires. 1500-1850*, ed. by Richard J. Ross and Lauren Benton (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 199–231; Linda Rupert, *Creolization and Contraband: Curaçao in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2012), 133–55.

³³ Historians have increasingly recognized that the Great Awakening is difficult to demarcate as a distinct historical event, as it consisted of several spatially and chronologically inconsistent awakenings. See for example the work of John W. Catron, who also writes about the existence of a distinct Caribbean Great Awakening: John

This chapter argues that the Caribbean Great Awakening was at least partly driven by the Afro-Caribbean spread of Methodism. To understand the emergence, spread, and growth of Afro-Caribbean Methodism – and Evangelicalism in general – historians need to move beyond the investigation of mission histories only. This requires a shift in focus from the organised trans-Atlantic efforts of mission churches to the religious communities and networks that were taking shape in the Greater Caribbean. While the white missionaries sent across the Atlantic by the British Methodist Society were setting up missions and missionary networks throughout the Antilles, Afro-Methodists were spreading their religion within, alongside, and outside these structures. Moving through the Greater Caribbean region, Afro-Methodists brought their religion to new places and new peoples, establishing new Christian communities and creating religious networks. Together with Afro-Protestants who identified as Moravian and Baptist, they became the key actors in a series of religious revivals taking place during the late eighteenth century.

Christianity in the Atlantic World

When in the late eighteenth century the first Methodist missionaries were sent from Britain to the Caribbean to spread the word of God, Christian missionaries had been travelling to the Americas for over two centuries. In the Iberian empires, and later the French empire, religion was closely connected to the colonisation of the Americas and the enslavement of Africans. Under Spanish, Portuguese, and French colonial rule, all slaves were to be converted, baptised, and catechised. As such, the close relationship between Christianisation and colonisation was embedded in the legal frameworks of the Catholic empires. As slave owners were commanded to provide their slaves with the proper Christian instruction, Africans and Afro-Caribbeans were expected to conform to Christianity. Some Catholic slave owners were reluctant to provide their slaves with religious services, prompting Catholic priests to complain about the lack of religiosity among the enslaved population. In general, however, Christianity played an important role within Catholic slave societies.³⁴

Whereas within the Catholic empires worldly expansion went hand-in-hand with the expansion of Christianity, at least formally, the situation was different within the Protestant empires. Within the British, Dutch, and Danish empires, baptism and slavery were not legally connected and the institutionally embedded public Protestant churches did not make a systematically sustained effort to convert the enslaved population. Instead, during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, enslaved religion and religiosity were largely left untouched, leaving more room for African religious beliefs and

W. Catron, *Embracing Protestantism: Black Identities in the Atlantic World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016), 75–76.

³⁴ Rolena Adorno, 'The Polemics of Possession Spain on America, Circa 1550', in *Empires of God: Religious Encounters in the Early Modern Atlantic*, ed. Linda Gregerson and Susan Juster (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 2010); Alan Watson, *Slave Law in the Americas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

practices within the enslaved communities. Moreover, even if enslaved and free people of African descent themselves desired to become members of the Anglican, Dutch Reformed, or Lutheran Church, they were only sporadically admitted to the colonial Protestant communities. With this “pattern of sporadic proselytization”, the British, Dutch, and Danish empires broke with the Iberian habit of converting, baptising, and catechising slaves and hereby including people of African descent within the Christian community. Evan Haefeli argues that Dutch Brazil was the first colony where this new “habit of keeping enslaved Africans at arms length from Christianity” was developed, soon followed by other Dutch and English colonies such as Rhode Island and Maryland.³⁵

Although there have always been individual slave owners and planters who promoted Christianity among their slaves, scholars have pointed out that the opposition to slave conversion and Christian missions “was one of the defining features of Protestant slave societies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries”.³⁶ Katharine Gerbner explains this anti-conversion sentiment within the Protestant empires by showing that Protestant colonists defined Christianity as an exclusive ethnic and social category. For planters, Christianity came to play a central role in defining slavery and servitude. They used Christianity as an ethnic indicator by juxtaposing Christians with enslaved Africans. This ideology, what Gerbner has called ‘Protestant Supremacy’, excluded enslaved people from the Christian community and regarded slave conversion as a threat to the social order of slave societies.³⁷ In the eighteenth century, this gradually changed, as the increasing number of missionaries travelling to the Caribbean articulated and promoted a vision of Christianity “that reconciled Protestantism with bondage”, making not religion but race the defining feature of slavery.³⁸ Although anti-missionary opposition persisted into the nineteenth century, in general, missionaries and their missionary endeavours came to play an increasingly dominant role in Protestant slave societies from the mid-eighteenth century onwards.

The most important change in the development of Afro-Protestantism in the Caribbean was the emergence and spread of the evangelical movements in Europe, North America, and the Caribbean itself. From the 1730s onwards, tens of thousands of enslaved and free Afro-Caribbeans came to identify themselves as evangelical Christians belonging to Moravian, Methodist, and Baptist communities. The first evangelical movement that spread through the Caribbean was Moravian Christianity, a Protestant revival movement that was founded by the Saxon nobleman Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in 1727 and that had its origin in Lutheran Pietism. The Moravians are known for their extensive missionary work in the Caribbean, which started in 1732 with a mission on the Danish West Indian island of St. Thomas. In subsequent decades, they expanded their mission in other Danish, Dutch, and British

³⁵ Evan Haefeli, ‘Breaking the Christian Atlantic: The Legacy of Dutch Tolerance in Brazil’, in *The Legacy of Dutch Brazil*, ed. Michiel van Groesen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 138, 125.

³⁶ Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 2.

³⁷ Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 2, 42, 47; Katharine Gerbner, ‘Protestant Supremacy: The Story of a Neologism’, *Church History* 88, no. 3 (2019): 773–80.

³⁸ Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 3–4.

colonies, where significant numbers of Afro-Caribbeans became interested in, attracted to, and involved in this new Christian community.³⁹ From the 1760s, Methodist and Baptist Christianity also gradually spread through the Caribbean. Both evangelical movements had already experienced spectacular growth in North America in the previous decades. Influenced by the missionary success of the Moravians, whose missionary practices they adopted, Methodist and Baptist Christians spread their religions in the colonial societies of the Caribbean.⁴⁰

The arrival of evangelical Protestantism greatly influenced the development of Afro-Christianity in the Protestant empires. In the middle and later decades of the eighteenth century, Christianity grew rapidly among Afro-Caribbean people in the British, Dutch, and Danish colonies. Historians have often explained this growth by emphasizing the theological and ideological differences between the Anglican Church and the evangelical movements, stating that the latter were more open to and appealing to people of African descent. The Christian worldview of the Moravians, Methodists, and Baptists, they write, “carried an implicit promise of a new social order” as they spread the message that before God, everyone was equal.⁴¹ Although scholars have demonstrated that this idea of universal spiritual egalitarianism went hand-in-hand with a commitment to the system of slavery and the underlying idea of racial submission, this spiritual message was still new compared to the more exclusive understanding of Christianity expressed and practised by the Anglican, Dutch Reformed, and Lutheran churches.⁴² In addition, historians have emphasized the importance of emotionalism and emotional religious experiences within evangelical movements. Personal spiritual conviction and salvation were considered more important than rituals and tradition, and the conversion experience played a central role within the evangelical doctrine. This importance of emotionality was one of the characteristics that made evangelical Protestantism attractive to people of African descent because it resembled African religious beliefs and practices.⁴³

When evangelical Christians – both white and black – arrived in the Caribbean with the intention to convert the enslaved populations of the colonial societies they visited, many Afro-Caribbeans were already familiar with Christianity, either because they had come into contact with the Christian faith or because one of their friends or family members had. Maybe they had arrived in one of the Protestant colonies after being enslaved by Portuguese, Spanish or French slave traders; perhaps they had even lived in one of the Catholic empires where they were expected to conform to Catholicism; perhaps they had experience with one of the sporadic early Protestant missionary endeavours; or they had already

³⁹ Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival*, 47–59.

⁴⁰ For the influence of Moravian missionary practices on the Methodist and Baptist missionary movements see: Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 83; Hempton, *Methodism*, 132.

⁴¹ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 83.

⁴² See for example the work of Sensbach and Hüsgen, who have both emphasized the Moravian acceptance of and participation in the system of slavery: Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival*; Jan Hüsgen, *Mission und Sklaverei: die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine und die Sklavenemanzipation in Britisch- und Dänisch-Westindien* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016).

⁴³ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 80; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. Regarding Methodism specifically: Hempton, *Methodism*, 132.

been part of a Christian community in the Congolese hinterland or the West African littoral.⁴⁴ In short, when Methodists, as well as Moravians and Baptists, arrived in the Caribbean, Christianity was by no means new. Building upon these earlier Christian movements, the white and black evangelicals moving through and living in the Caribbean attracted many Afro-Caribbeans to their communities. Bringing Afro-Protestantism to new heights in the second half of the eighteenth century, they incited a Caribbean Great Awakening.

The British Methodist Mission

From the perspective of the British Methodist Society, the origins of the Caribbean mission lie in the year 1786, when Coke entered Caribbean waters for the first time and visited various Antillean islands. That same year, Coke published his *Address to the Pious and Benevolent*, in which he laid out his plans for overseas missions and tried to recruit subscribers for the financial support of the missionaries he was planning to send to Scotland, the isles of Jersey and Guernsey, the Canadian provinces of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Quebec, and the West Indies.⁴⁵ Coke had already tried to initiate the Methodist missions three years earlier but was unsuccessful at the time, as his *Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathens* fell on deaf ears.⁴⁶ In 1786, Coke was more successful and his proposals were formally accepted at the British Conference, where it was decided that the first three missionaries were to be sent out to Nova Scotia and Antigua.⁴⁷ At the end of that year, John Clarke, William Hammet, and William Warrener arrived together with Coke on the island of Antigua. Although they initially headed for North America, from where only Warrener was supposed to sail to the West Indies, a hurricane forced the captain of their ship to change course. For Coke, this was not a coincidence but “the powerful hand of God” who brought them to the West Indies, encouraging him to make the Caribbean mission an important focal point of his ambitions.⁴⁸

In the next decades, the Caribbean mission would remain the most important foreign endeavour of the British Methodist Society. Although some missionaries would be sent out to the Canadian provinces of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Quebec, the religious work in these regions was largely under the supervision of the North American Methodist Episcopal Church, which was responsible for all missions in the North American continent. In later years, during the mid-to-late nineteenth century,

⁴⁴ John K. Thornton has showed in his work that many enslaved men and women were already familiar with Christianity before they left Africa: John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁵ Thomas Coke, *An Address to the Pious and Benevolent, Proposing an Annual Subscription for the Support of Missionaries in the Highlands and Adjacent Islands of Scotland, the Isles of Jersey, Guernsey, and Newfoundland, the West Indies, and the Provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec* (London: n.p., 1786).

⁴⁶ Thomas Coke, *Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathens* (n.p., 1783).

⁴⁷ Conferences are the primary regional decision-making bodies within the Methodist Church organisation and take place annually.

⁴⁸ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 69.

Methodist missions were also established in many other parts of the world, both by the British and North American mission organisations. As a result, Methodism “had established a foothold in most countries of the world” by the 1880s.⁴⁹ The ambitions for this worldwide missionary expansion were already visible in the early plans of Coke, who wanted to expand the British Methodist missions to Africa and Asia. Yet in the last decades of the eighteenth and the first decade of the nineteenth centuries, Coke was fully occupied with the Caribbean mission alone. Within the British Methodist Society, he was responsible for funding the mission as well as the recruitment and supervision of the missionaries sent across the Atlantic.⁵⁰

Once in the Antilles, Coke was struck by “the wonderful openings we have in these parts” and continued his first journey through the Caribbean by visiting five more Antillean islands before heading for his originally planned destination, North America.⁵¹ Within the next seven years, between 1786 and 1793, he made three more visits to the region, each time reaching out to more and more islands, including them in the Methodist missionary network. Besides Antigua, he visited the British islands Dominica, St. Vincent, Barbados, Grenada, St. Kitts, Nevis, Tortola and Jamaica, the Dutch islands St. Eustatius and Saba, and the Danish island St. Croix. During his journeys, Coke preached to Methodist congregations and potential converts and made contact with believers as well as elite and middle-class members of colonial society who would approve, support, and aid his mission plans. Coke’s main concern was to ensure colonial support for the Methodist mission, both from local authorities and planters of the different islands. By trying to get in contact with the colonial elite and convincing them of the benefits of the Methodist mission, Coke hoped to gain access to the enslaved populations of the colonies. In this way, he helped to create the most favourable situation for the missionaries who would stay behind on the different islands.

Sometimes, when arriving on the Antillean islands, Coke and his companions already knew people living there, either through previously established connections or because people had moved from a colony in the Caribbean where they had already engaged with Methodism. Most of the time, however, the missionaries came into contact with people they did not know. Yet even in these cases, Coke and his companions would not arrive empty-handed. Using their network from Britain, they armed themselves with recommendation letters, often written for specific planters whom they had heard would be positive concerning their mission ambitions. In some cases, “warm letters of recommendation” were not even necessary, for example when the missionaries met a planter on Dominica who had been a member of the Methodist Society in Dublin, or when they encountered a merchant on Barbados who had heard Coke preach in Baltimore and Maryland.⁵² Coke and Benjamin Pearce, the missionary

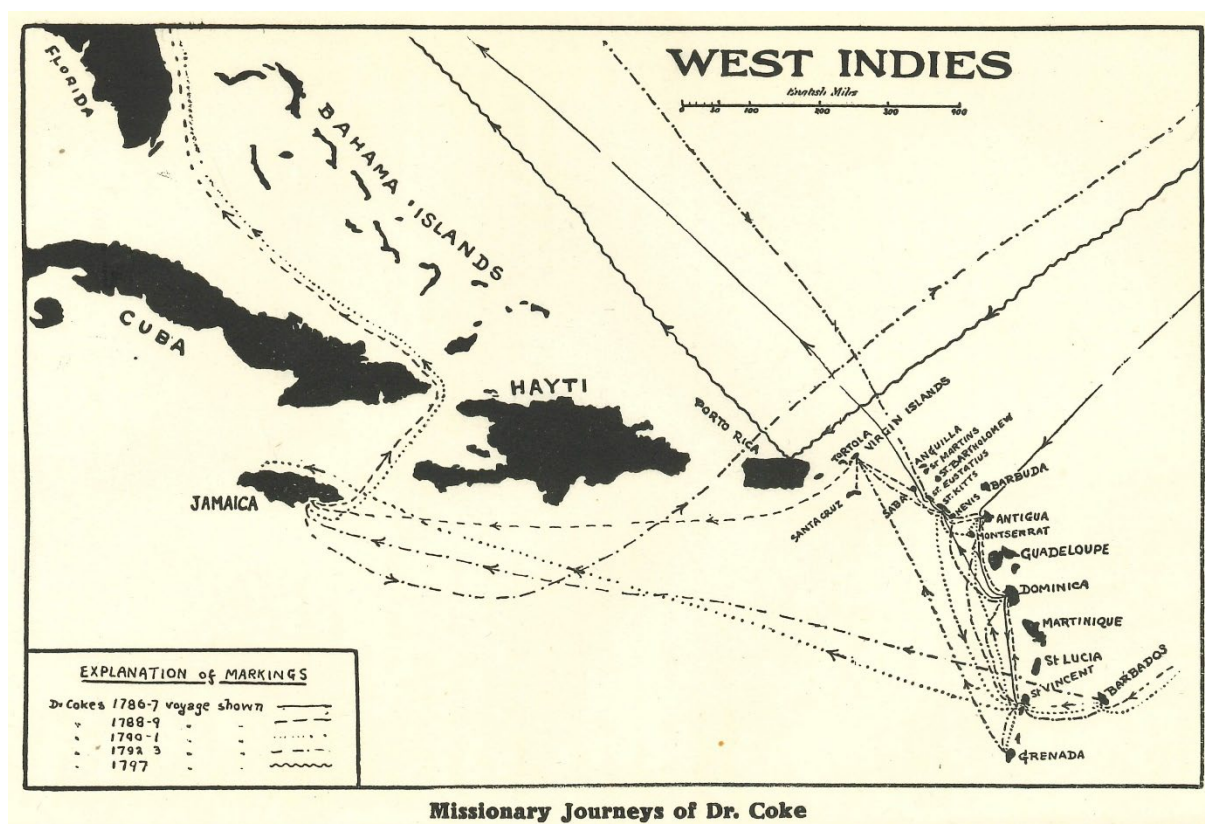
⁴⁹ Hempton, *Methodism*, 151.

⁵⁰ For more on the responsibilities of Coke within the British Methodist Church see: Vickers, ‘One-Man Band: Thomas Coke and the Origins of Methodist Missions’.

⁵¹ Thomas Coke, *An Extract of the Rev. Dr. Coke’s Journal, from Gravesend to Antigua, in a Letter to the Rev. J. Wesley* (London: J. Paramore, 1787), 12.

⁵² Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 80, 94.

accompanying him at that moment, came into contact with this Barbadian merchant because a group of soldiers had told them that said merchant had provided the soldiers with a room for prayer. He also proved to be a helping hand for the missionaries: "His house, his heart, his all seemed to be at our service," Coke wrote in his journal.⁵³ The merchant, a man called Mr Button, became an important contact for the missionaries and introduced Coke and his companions to several planters on the island.⁵⁴ This was not an isolated case: many times the travelling missionaries were tipped off by islanders who mentioned planters, merchants, or other members of the colonial elite who they thought would be willing to help the missionaries' cause. In such instances, colonial elites proactively used their networks for the benefit of the newly arrived missionaries.



Map of the Antilles showing the four voyages of Thomas Coke through the Caribbean. The map also shows Coke's brief visit to Puerto Rico on his way to North America in 1797. Source: Findlay, G. G., and W. W. Holdsworth, *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, 5 vols (London: The Epworth Press, 1921), vol 2, 27.

Colonial support from both local authorities and planters was instrumental to the way that the Methodist missionaries operated in the Antilles. First of all, the missionaries relied upon the patronage of prominent colonists for their position within colonial societies. Good contacts with influential planters and administrators who approved or even actively supported their cause strengthened the position of the missionaries on the ground. Such political support proved especially helpful when the Methodists

⁵³ Coke, 94.

⁵⁴ Coke, 96, 189.

encountered opposition and distrust from colonial society. This was the case in Tortola, the largest and most populous island of the British Virgin Islands, where the Methodist missionaries had to endure “warm persecution” until Mrs Lilly publicly expressed her support for the mission, after which the situation improved. Mrs Lilly, a woman of influence on the islands of St. Croix and Tortola, was herself a Quaker but supported the missionary work of the Methodists.⁵⁵ On other islands, similar situations occurred where supporters and patrons of the Methodists actively opposed the persecution and distrust that the missionaries were at times confronted with.⁵⁶

Moreover, colonists provided the missionaries not only with political but also financial support. Although the missionaries received financial support from donors ‘at home’, they were still partly dependent upon the assistance of local planters and merchants who supported their cause. These local benefactors sustained the missionaries by offering them a place to sleep when they were travelling through the different islands and by helping them to find and finance permanent residence. In a letter from 15 June 1787, only several months after the first British-organised mission stations were established in the West Indies, the missionary William Hammet wrote to Coke that he had received a pressing invitation from a planter from Montserrat who “longs for one of our missionaries to go to that island”. The planter had visited Hammet on the island of St. Kitts and made it clear that he was eager to support the Methodists financially: the missionary who would be sent to Montserrat “might freely make use of his house as his home” and would receive “ten to twelve Johanneses out of his own purse as a part of his salary”.⁵⁷ By offering to support the missionaries financially, the planter hoped to attract them to his estate.

Lastly, good relationships with planters offered missionaries access to their enslaved workforce. Coke and his companions were repeatedly invited to preach on the estates of the planters they visited. These invitations gave them the possibility to have congregations of hundreds of enslaved people and to make themselves heard among large numbers of enslaved men and women during their short stays on the islands. In addition, those same planters often guaranteed missionaries future access to their estates and slaves, promising that their houses “should always be open” to the missionaries and that their slaves would be “at [their] command at all proper hours”.⁵⁸ Sometimes planters went so far as to build a chapel and accommodation for the missionaries on their estate, integrating the Methodist mission on their plantation. This happened for example on Nevis, where the white missionaries stationed on the island were “instructing and exhorting the numerous bodies of negroes on the several estates” owned by Walter Nesbitt, whose cousin later became a missionary.⁵⁹ Nesbitt greatly encouraged the missionary work of

⁵⁵ Coke, 140.

⁵⁶ See for example the situations on Barbados in 1790 (Coke, 133), on Jamaica in 1791 (Coke, 146–47), and St. Vincent in 1793 (Coke, 189).

⁵⁷ William Hammet, *William Hammet to Thomas Coke, June 15, 1787*. Letter. Published in: Thomas Coke, *An Address to the Generous Contributors for the Support of the Missions, Carried on by the Methodist Society, in the West Indies, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland* (London: n.p., 1787), 4–6.

⁵⁸ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 95.

⁵⁹ Coke, 139.

the Methodists and built a chapel on one of his estates so that the enslaved men and women living on his plantations were “constantly instructed”.⁶⁰ The Methodists often organised their missions around the estates of patron planters such as Nesbitt.⁶¹

As Coke travelled through the Antilles, the Methodists soon established a foothold on almost all the islands they visited in the early years of the mission.⁶² Although not all colonists were favourable to the mission, on each island there would be at least several planters or colonial administrators who actively encouraged and supported the missionaries’ work. Emphasizing the success of the mission, Coke frequently expressed his satisfaction with the many doors that seemed open to him and his missionaries. At the end of his second journey, he wrote that “We have now through the blessing of God on our endeavours, a prospect of much good in ten of the islands, which unitedly contain about two hundred and sixty thousand inhabitants, near four-fifths of whom are covered with heathenish darkness.”⁶³ In his journals, Coke engaged in a long-standing colonial discourse that views the Caribbean as a beautiful place that has a lot to offer Europeans – in this case, many new converts. He believed that these new converts could be gathered through the doors opened by planters and slave owners. Similarly, the importance of colonial support for the Methodist mission has led one historian to conclude that “Methodism could not circulate to plantations without patronage”.⁶⁴ However, it would be misleading to equate the growth of Methodism in the Caribbean to the growth of the Methodist mission and the increasing support of planter patrons. Although white men such as Nesbitt and Coke are most visible within the sources and historiography produced, they were not the most important historical actors in the spread of Afro-Methodism.

Afro-Caribbeans and the Spread of Afro-Methodism

Just as people of African descent made up the majority of the population in the Caribbean in general, they were also by far the largest group of Methodist church members. This situation differed from that in North America, where white people made up a far larger proportion of both society in general and the Methodist community in particular. The majority of enslaved and free people of colour in the Caribbean societies is evident from the membership numbers reported by Coke, in which “whites” are often registered separately from “blacks” and “coloured people”. Throughout the Caribbean, white believers always made up less than ten per cent of the total number of Methodist church members, and on some islands, there was not even a single white churchgoer (see table 1).

⁶⁰ Coke, 186.

⁶¹ This is also the image portrayed by Mary Cornelius when she writes about the Methodist mission on Grenada in her dissertation: Cornelius, ‘Becoming Catholic: Religion and Society in Colonial Grenada, 1763-1838’, 103–13.

⁶² A notable exception was the Dutch island of St. Eustatius, which is discussed in chapter 3.

⁶³ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 115.

⁶⁴ Cornelius, ‘Becoming Catholic: Religion and Society in Colonial Grenada, 1763-1838’, 113.

The only exception to this clear black majority was the British island of Barbados. Here the Methodist community was very small, consisting of only 6 white people in 1788 and 34 white people and 17 people of colour in 1793.⁶⁵ Initially, Coke and other missionaries had good contacts with a couple of white colonial elites. They were not successful in reaching and converting the enslaved population, however.⁶⁶ Because the Afro-Caribbeans of Barbados were, in the words of Coke, “much less prepared for the reception of genuine religion than of any other Islands in the West-Indies”, the missionaries focused instead on the poor whites inhabiting the island.⁶⁷ It is difficult to say why Methodism was not popular among the Afro-Caribbean population of Barbados, despite the continuous presence of missionaries on the island. One possible explanation could be that Methodism was less attractive to Afro-Caribbean people because of the white majority within the Methodist community. Some historians have argued that the marginal role of missionary organisations within colonial societies made them more attractive for enslaved people as it enabled them to creolise Christianity with African religious traditions.⁶⁸ Another possible explanation could be that Barbados had a long history of excluding Afro-Caribbeans from the Christian community. The Church of England had already been well established on the island since the seventeenth century and was strongly influenced and ruled by the planter elite, who excluded enslaved people from the Christian community.⁶⁹ Moreover, in the late seventeenth century, laws were promulgated that prohibited planters to have their slaves in Christian worship.⁷⁰

Whereas the number of white church members decreased after 1788, the number of Afro-Caribbean church members strongly increased (see table 1). In 1804, the spectacular rise in Afro-Caribbean church members resulted in a total of more than fourteen thousand members. It is important to note that the group of people interested in, attracted to, and participating in the Caribbean Methodist communities was even larger. When giving an overview of the mission in a letter to the directors of the London Missionary Society in 1798, Coke wrote that “There are about forty thousand, or from that number to fifty thousand who regularly attend the ministry of our Preachers in those islands. Out of these, near ten thousand are members of our Society, and, we have reason to believe under the influence of grace.”⁷¹ Although it is not inconceivable that Coke exaggerated these numbers, as he was trying to convince the directors of the London Missionary Society that another Protestant West Indian mission

⁶⁵ Coke, 116, 187.

⁶⁶ Later, in the nineteenth century, the relations between the Methodist missionaries and the colonial elite of the island became increasingly hostile. These tensions, which were closely connected to the changing political and ideological developments of that time, came to a head in 1824, when angry citizens burnt down the Methodist chapel on the island. For an analysis of similar tensions and anti-missionary sentiments the work of Emilia Viotti da Costa about Demerara: Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁶⁷ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 190.

⁶⁸ See for example Mary Cornelius’ discussion of Catholicism in Grenada: Cornelius, ‘Becoming Catholic: Religion and Society in Colonial Grenada, 1763-1838’, 113–20.

⁶⁹ Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 31–48.

⁷⁰ Noel Titus, *The Development of Methodism in Barbados, 1823-1883* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), 18.

⁷¹ Thomas Coke, *Thomas Coke to the Directors of the London Missionary Society, February 26, 1798*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 229–32. Original in the London Missionary Society Archives. Copy in the Methodist Missionary Society Archives, London.

was not necessary, it is clear that Methodist Christianity was spreading quickly through the Caribbean in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Moreover, besides the numbers mentioned by Coke, there were also Afro-Methodists and Afro-Methodist communities who were independently practising and spreading Methodism.

Table 1: Members of the Methodist Societies in the Caribbean

	<i>People of colour</i>	<i>Whites</i>	<i>Total</i>
1788	3,803	384	4,177
1793	6,345	136	6,571
1804	14,158	238	14,386

Source: Thomas Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. by John A. Vickers (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2005), 116, 187.

Table 2: Members of the Methodist Societies in the Caribbean by Colony

<i>Colony</i>	<i>1788</i>	<i>1793</i>	<i>1798</i>	<i>1804</i>
Antigua	2,800	2,410	2,600	3,538
Barbados	6	51	60	24
Dominica	24	20	80	1,003
Grenada	-	30	150	103
Jamaica	-	240	700 – 900	625
Montserrat	-	12	20	-
Nevis	-	394	500	1,414
New Providence	-	-	-	160
St. Barts	-	-	-	120
St. Eustatius*	258	-	-	-
St. Kitts	700	1,554	1,600	3,017
St. Vincent	389	454	1,000 – 1,100	2,169
Tortola	-	1406	3,000	2,108
Total:	4,177	6,571	9,710 – 10,110	14,386

* After 1788, St. Eustatius was no longer included in the membership numbers recorded by the British Methodist Society. This changed in the 1810s when the first British missionary was stationed on the island and the Dutch island became integrated within the British-organised mission organisation. Although membership numbers were not recorded in the intervening period, this does not mean that there were no Methodists on the island.

Source: the numbers for the years 1788 and 1793 are mentioned by Thomas Coke in his journals: Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 116, 187. The numbers for the year 1798 are mentioned by Coke in a letter to the London Missionary Society: Thomas Coke, *Thomas Coke to the Directors of the London Missionary Society, February 26, 1798*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 229–32. Original in the London Missionary Society Archives. Copy in the Methodist Missionary Society Archives, London.

The rapid growth of Afro-Caribbean churchgoers and church members cannot be explained by the efforts of white Methodist missionaries alone. With ten to a little more than twenty at a time, the missionaries were few, sometimes not even enough for stationing one missionary on each of the islands. Even when a missionary was stationed on an island, they were not always capable of committing themselves to their missionary work due to the severe health issues that they frequently encountered. Throughout the history of the Methodist mission, as well as mission history in general, white missionaries travelling to the West Indies regularly suffered from epidemic diseases such as yellow fever and malaria. More than once did a missionary die only shortly after he had arrived in the West Indies. This fragility was recognized by Coke and the missionaries under his supervision, who, in response, recruited Afro-Caribbean assistants and class leaders among their most pious followers. This practice of giving some Afro-Methodists positions of spiritual authority within the local mission churches is an important characteristic of evangelical missions. The Methodists, as well as the Baptists, copied this practice from the Moravians, who had already worked with this system of so-called ‘Black helpers’ from the 1730s.⁷² By establishing class meetings, small groups of ten to thirty-five church members who collectively prayed, read the scriptures, shared their spiritual experiences, and listened to exhortations under the guidance of a fellow parishioner as class leader, hundreds, sometimes thousands of church members could be reached. The Afro-Methodist class leaders were instrumental in the spread of Methodism through the Caribbean.⁷³

When trying to understand the spread and growth of Methodism it is essential to think about this in terms of movement. Thanks to the influential work of Julius S. Scott we know that the Caribbean was a region which depended upon the movement of ships, commodities, people, and information, especially during the revolutionary period in the late eighteenth century. Scott has shown that the inter-island networks of commerce and trade were intertwined with communication networks and the exchange of news and information in the Greater Caribbean.⁷⁴ Ships and seamen moved between islands and with the commodities they legally and illegally transported they also brought news and information from island to island. Commercial networks thus resulted in cultural connections. Although Scott uses these insights to write about the spread of political news and rumours through the Greater Caribbean, focusing on the Haitian Revolution, a similar dynamic can be identified when examining the spread of

⁷² Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival*, 94–96.

⁷³ For a more extensive discussion of how and why Afro-Caribbean assistants and class leaders participated within the Methodist mission see chapter 3.

⁷⁴ Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Verso Books, 2018).

religion. As people moved between the different Antillean islands and from the Caribbean Sea to the Greater Caribbean region, they took their religious beliefs and practices with them, bringing Methodism as well as other Christian movements to new places and peoples.

Just as Scott has emphasized the instrumental role of Afro-Caribbeans and Afro-Americans in the Greater Caribbean communication networks, they were also instrumental in the spread of Afro-Protestantism. As they travelled and migrated through the Greater Caribbean, they established new religious communities in different colonial societies and created evangelical networks both overlapping with and independent from the white evangelical networks. Coke and his missionaries travelled to and through the Caribbean with the expectation of spreading the gospel to new places and new peoples, yet when they arrived at the Antillean islands for the first time, they often encountered Afro-Caribbeans who were already practising and spreading Methodist Christianity. This happened for example when Coke, John Baxter, and William Hammet arrived on St. Eustatius in 1787, where, upon arrival, they were greeted by two black men who were part of the vibrant Afro-Methodist community led by Black Harry. The two men had already received word from nearby St. Christopher that Coke intended to visit the island, one of the many moments when news travelled faster than the missionaries themselves.⁷⁵ The Afro-Methodist community on St. Eustatius was by no means an exception: during his journeys, Coke encountered Afro-Methodist communities or individuals on the islands of Dominica, St. Vincent, Grenada, Barbados, and Jamaica, before his white missionaries established religious communities on those islands.

Many of these Afro-Methodists had migrated from other Antillean islands where they had come into contact with Methodist Christianity and where they had been members of the Methodist communities. Some Afro-Caribbeans moved as sailors or soldiers, some free people of colour moved to reunite with family or to seek new economic opportunities, and some enslaved people escaped. For some Afro-Caribbeans, spiritual considerations might have even been a motivation for migration. For example, for Jemmy, an enslaved man from Jamaica who had “associated at times [...] with some of those description of people called Methodists” and who had tried to “get on board some vessel, and thereby effect his escape from the island”.⁷⁶ Most Afro-Caribbeans who migrated within the Caribbean, however, were forcibly relocated. In the Americas, African captives were sold and bought by slave owners and slave traders between various colonies.⁷⁷ The intercolonial slave trade relocated enslaved people from one colony to the other, thereby creating enslaved movement across the Greater Caribbean. In addition, enslaved people could also be forcibly removed from one estate or island to the other while remaining the property of the same owner. In the Antilles, it was not uncommon for planters to operate

⁷⁵ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 82.

⁷⁶ The escape attempt of Jemmy is briefly mentioned by Julius S. Scott, who points towards the existence of spiritually motivated runaway cases: Scott, *The Common Wind*, 73. Scott quotes a runaway advertisement from the *Royal Gazette* from 13 April 1793.

⁷⁷ Gregory E. O'Malley, *Final Passages: The Intercolonial Slave Trade of British America, 1619-1807* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

on multiple islands, sometimes even within different empires, with the result that some enslavers owned various estates on different islands. Such slave owners would at times decide to relocate some of their enslaved workers to a plantation on another island.⁷⁸ These different forms of forced migration removed enslaved people from their familiar living environments and their social networks, while at the same time creating new communities and inter-island networks.

Many of the Afro-Methodists that Coke encountered during his journeys came from the British island Antigua, where a Methodist community had already been in place for over two decades before the transatlantic missionary efforts of the British Society took off. The origin of this community has been attributed to the planter Nathaniel Gilbert, who, under the influence of the founder and leader of the Methodist Church John Wesley, converted to Methodism on a trip to Britain in 1758. Once back in the West Indies, Gilbert held Methodist services on his estate and promoted the Christian faith among his own slaves as well as other enslaved people who attended his services. In the 1760s, 1770s, and early 1780s, enslaved and free Afro-Caribbeans increasingly joined the emerging Methodist community on the island. Historians have rightly pointed out that the success of this religious community was mainly due to the instrumental role of Afro-Caribbean religious leaders, whereas Gilbert's role within the emerging Afro-Methodist community has been overestimated. Particularly important were Mary Alley, a mixed-race woman, and Sophia Campbel, a black woman, who continued to hold the Afro-Methodist community together after Gilbert's death in 1774.⁷⁹ The emergence of the Methodist community on Antigua occurred at the same time as the rise of a Moravian community on the island. Together these two vibrant evangelical communities made Antigua a "center of Afro-Caribbean Protestantism" in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁸⁰

Antigua did not only come to play an important role in the emergence and spread of Afro-Caribbean evangelical Protestantism because of its large Methodist and Moravian communities but also because the men and women who were a part of these communities spread their religion through the rest of the Caribbean as they, often forcibly, moved to different islands.⁸¹ Already at the beginning of his first journeys through the Caribbean, when he did not yet know how far Methodism had infiltrated the region, Coke encountered enslaved and free Afro-Methodists on the islands of St. Vincent, Dominica,

⁷⁸ An example is the British slave owner Elizabeth Threlfall who relocated various of her slaves from her plantation on the British island of Tortola to her plantation on the Danish island of St. John. Various of the enslaved people who were relocated ran away from the plantation on St. John back to their former plantation on Tortola. The case is discussed by: Kathrine Faust Larsen, 'Inter-kolonial flugt: slavejortes netværk, viden og agens. En mikrohistorisk undersøgelse af maritim marronage i Dansk Vestindien, 1825-1848' (MA thesis, Copenhagen University, 2021), 41–45.

⁷⁹ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 104–5; Jagessar, 'Early Methodism in the Caribbean: Through the Imaginary Optics of Gilbert's Slave Women—Another Reading'.

⁸⁰ Catron, *Embracing Protestantism*, 56. See chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of the Methodist movement on Antigua.

⁸¹ Catron shows that Antigua was the British Caribbean island with most Afro-Protestants during the eighteenth century. Both the Methodists and the Moravians were very successful on this island. At the turn of the nineteenth century, "the roughly 14,500 Afro-Moravians and Afro-Methodists [...] accounted for almost 40 percent of Antigua's entire population": Catron, *Embracing Protestantism*, 56.

and Grenada. Visiting the island of St. Vincent, he learned that “six of our pious Antigua negroes” were now living on a plantation on St. Vincent, where they had introduced the Methodist religion.⁸² On Dominica, he met a free woman of colour “of some property” called Mrs Webley, who had also spread her faith to a new island. Webley had been a member of the Methodist community on Antigua and played an influential role in the Methodist community that gradually developed on Dominica.⁸³ She was not the only Methodist from Antigua: in the late 1780s and 1790s, there existed an autonomous Afro-Methodist community on Dominica with several black people who had been members of the Afro-Methodist communities on Antigua and St. Kitts.⁸⁴ Visiting the island of Grenada, Coke also encountered an autonomous Afro-Methodist community. After moving from Antigua to Grenada, the free man of colour Sam Painter had founded a society of “about twenty seeking souls” under his spiritual leadership.⁸⁵ This religious movement of Afro-Methodists was fundamental to the emergence and spread of Methodism in the Caribbean.

It is no coincidence that Coke encountered these Antiguan Afro-Methodists on the islands of St. Vincent, Dominica, and Grenada. Together with Tobago, these three former French and neutral islands had recently become British possessions after the nation’s victory over the French in the Seven Years’ War. British planters moved to these so-called Ceded Islands where they expanded the plantation of sugarcane. The cultivation of this labour-intensive cash crop created an enormous labour demand on these islands. As a consequence, many enslaved people living on Britain’s old sugar islands such as Antigua and Jamaica were forcibly moved to these new possessions.⁸⁶

The same happened at the turn of the nineteenth century when Trinidad and Demerara became British crown colonies. The establishment of British rule in these large former Spanish and Dutch colonies led to an influx of settlers and their slaves from British Antillean islands. According to Coke, who recognized the religious opportunities that lay ahead in these new British territories, several hundreds of the enslaved people who were forcibly relocated to Trinidad and Demerara had been “members of our Society in other Islands, and are now as sheep without a shepherd”.⁸⁷ Missionaries stationed on the British Virgin Islands mention for example that many of their members “were obliged to leave the Island, and take up their abode in Demerara”.⁸⁸ After Coke urged the British Methodist Missionary Committee to act upon this opportunity of expanding the mission to Trinidad and Demerara,

⁸² Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 80.

⁸³ Coke, 78.

⁸⁴ Coke, 108.

⁸⁵ Coke, 135.

⁸⁶ Heather Freund Carter, ‘A Negotiated Possession: Law, Race, and Subjecthood in the Ceded Islands, 1763-1797’ (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois, 2021), 38–39.

⁸⁷ Thomas Coke, *Thomas Coke to Joseph Entwisle and the Missionary Committee, September 18, 1804*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 368–72. Original in the Methodist Missionary Society Archives.

⁸⁸ Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of Each Island. With an Account of the Missions Instituted in Those Islands, from the Commencement of Their Civilization. But More Especially of the Missions Which Have Been Established in That Archipelago* (Liverpool, London, 1808-1811), vol III, 125.

it took another five years before the first missionary was sent to these new British territories in 1809. By that time, the number of Afro-Methodists who had migrated to Trinidad had already increased to “no fewer than a thousand slaves [...] and perhaps not less than 500 to Demerara”.⁸⁹ While a missionary presence was still absent in these early years, Methodism did spread to these colonies through the forced movement of Afro-Methodists. Likely, many of these enslaved men and women formed new religious communities with fellow Afro-Methodists – in the same way that people like Webley, Painter, and other Afro-Antiguans had done several decades earlier. During these disruptive events, in which enslaved people were violently removed from their homes, friends, and family, their common faith could have offered them a sense of belonging.

Political events such as the Seven Years’ War and the French Revolution greatly influenced the migration patterns of the different groups inhabiting the Greater Caribbean region. As people moved to different places religious movements also spread. The main political event to shape the religious landscape of the Caribbean in the second half of the eighteenth century was the American Revolution. Historians have shown that the British defeat in the American War of Independence resulted in a significant movement of Afro-Americans to the Caribbean in the 1780s, as many of the black and white loyalists who survived the war fled to British territories in the West Indies, Canada, or Britain. During the war, emancipation was used by the British as a war measure that would provide them with black troops, offering freedom to all Afro-Americans who were willing to take up arms. Although some of these black loyalists migrated themselves, being able to claim their freedom, there were also a lot of Afro-Americans who were re-enslaved by white loyalists and transported to the West Indies.⁹⁰ This movement of Afro-Americans to the Caribbean was “a tremendous catalyst for the growth of black Atlantic religion” as many of the black Loyalists who left North America were evangelical Christians.⁹¹ Although it is difficult to establish exactly how many Afro-American evangelicals moved to the Caribbean in the years after the American War for Independence, it is clear from Coke’s journals that this was a significant group, given the various North American Afro-Methodists he and his missionaries encountered on their journeys. For example on St. Eustatius, where the North American Black Harry established an Afro-Methodist community, and on the islands of Barbados and Jamaica, where Coke encountered several enslaved people who had been baptized in North American Methodist Societies.⁹² Together with many other Afro-Methodists and Afro-Baptists, these Christians were part of a broader

⁸⁹ Thomas Coke, *Thomas Coke to the Missionary Committee, October 2, 1809*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 585–588. Original in the Methodist Missionary Society Archives.

⁹⁰ Sean Gallagher, ‘Black Refugees and the Legal Fiction of Military Manumission in the American Revolution’, *Slavery & Abolition* 43, no. 1 (2022): 145; Ray Raphael, *A People’s History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (New York: The New Press, 2016); Robert G Parkinson, *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 264–323; Sylvia R Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*, 1993, 172–205.

⁹¹ Catron, *Embracing Protestantism*, 195.

⁹² Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 83, 94, 143.

movement in which Afro-Protestantism was spread through the Greater Caribbean after the American Revolution.⁹³

Although Christianity was by no means new to the region, during the late eighteenth century, the arrival of evangelical movements such as Methodism changed the religious landscape of the Greater Caribbean. By the end of the century, the sporadic proselytization taking place in the seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Protestant empires had made way for a Caribbean revival of Afro-Protestantism in which thousands of Afro-Caribbeans converted to Methodism and participated in the spread of their religion. This chapter has shown that an explanation of this remarkable spread and growth of Afro-Methodism requires a redirection of our focus from the well-studied British-organised trans-Atlantic missionary efforts to the religious movement of Afro-Caribbeans in the Caribbean. Taking an inter-imperial regional perspective in examining the spread of Methodism has foregrounded the importance of inter-island religious networks and the role of Afro-Caribbean believers and preachers. They participated in the Methodist missions, established independent Afro-Methodist communities among fellow enslaved and free people of colour, and spread their religion to new places and peoples as they moved through the Greater Caribbean. By participating in the religious movement, Afro-Methodists were instrumental actors in spreading Methodism through the Caribbean. In what follows, this thesis focuses on the question of what this participation looked like and how Afro-Methodists practised their religion within, along, and outside the white missionary organisation structures. Before examining the diverse religious practices of Afro-Methodists on the ground, the next chapter first analyses how Afro-Methodism and its spread through the Caribbean were understood in the writings of Coke.

⁹³ According to Catron there were thousands of black loyalists who left North America in the 1780s: Catron, *Embracing Protestantism*, 200.

2. Representations and Silences of Afro-Methodism in Missionary Writing

While missionary organisations sent missionaries to foreign territories to spread their religion, they were also engaged in efforts from home. By producing and publishing writings about their missions, they created a narrative about their contribution to the spread of Christianity around the world. This chapter investigates the narrative about the spread of Afro-Methodism as articulated in the published writings of Thomas Coke. How did Coke understand the role of Afro-Caribbean people in the spread and growth of Methodism through the Caribbean and how did he understand their participation in the Methodist mission? This thesis shows that Afro-Methodists were key actors in the expansion of Methodism in the Caribbean Great Awakening, yet their instrumental role has remained invisible in history. From the moment the British Methodist Society established missionary activities in the West Indies, they were also actively involved in the production of its history, creating a narrative about European missionary successes in the West Indies and silencing Afro-Methodist autonomy.

Drawing on Michel-Rolph Trouillot's conceptualisation of the production of history – as a complex process in which sources, archives, and narratives are produced and silenced – the multi-layered invisibility of Afro-Methodist participation is examined. Whereas most historians have started thinking about history and historical representation from what they know, Trouillot instead focuses on the unknown aspects of the production of history. Starting from the belief that a fundamental characteristic of power is its invisibility, he looks at the silences that enter history at various moments.⁹⁴ In each of these moments, active choices are made about what is preserved, assembled, represented, and what is not – about what is mentioned and what is silenced. Giving meaning to the past is thus inherently connected to creating silences. Fundamental to Trouillot's understanding of history is that this relationship between the past and the representation of the past is itself historicized: the relationship between 'what has happened' and 'what is said to have happened' is constantly being defined and redefined, and has its meaning for specific people at a specific time and place. By understanding how the history of Methodism in the Caribbean gained meaning for Coke and his audience, it is possible to uncover the silences that they created and tell a different story about Afro-Methodism in the Caribbean.

The Aims and Intended Audiences of Thomas Coke's Writings

Missionaries have been amply recognized as prolific writers who contributed to the cultural project of European colonialism.⁹⁵ They wrote diaries, letters, and reports that circulated locally as well as across oceans, where they were received by the missionaries' supervisors. In addition, mission organisations

⁹⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

⁹⁵ Anna Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Katharine Gerbner and Karin Vélez, 'Introduction: Missionary Encounters in the Atlantic World', *Journal of Early Modern History* 21, no. 1-2 (2017): 1. Under the heading of new imperial history there has been a growing scholarly interest in the cultural project of colonialism in general. For an example of a work in this field that focus extensively on missionary discourse see: Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).

were also actively involved in publishing works for broader audiences. Fragments of diaries, letters, and reports were often reworked for publication in the periodicals that missionary organisations published for their audiences ‘at home’.⁹⁶ Furthermore, they produced writings written for direct publication, such as journals, histories, annual reports of the missions, and solicitations for funding. With these published missionary texts, which were often the result of “a well-oiled and efficient production machine run by missionary societies and their supportive evangelical publishers”, mission organisations sought to mobilise public support for their missions in faraway colonial territories.⁹⁷ More specifically, writing for European and North American audiences, they aimed to build a community of citizens supportive of their missionary interests, recruit new missionaries, and ensure funding by attracting and retaining financial support from individuals, institutions, and governments.

In trying to fulfil these aims, the writings produced by missionary organisations were often “propagandist in nature”.⁹⁸ While ensuring public support for their missions in colonial territories, mission organisations not only legitimized their endeavours but also European imperialism more generally. In her work, Anna Johnston shows that missionary texts were instrumental in creating imperial knowledge about the colonial world, constructing cultural narratives in which Christian missions *and* European colonialism were depicted as a moral duty.⁹⁹ Missionary writing, she analyses, was characterised by a set of generic regulations such as an emphasis on positive mission achievements, a representation of missionaries as almost exclusively heroic, and a depiction of native resistance as moral decay and intellectual depravity.¹⁰⁰ In many missionary writings, including those of Coke, these were dominant themes that structured the narratives of the missionary projects that were being promoted.

During the first decades of Methodist missionary activities in foreign territories, when the West Indies were considered to be the most important mission field, almost all missionary writings produced and published by the British Methodist Society came from the hand of Coke. As discussed in the first chapter, Coke had used the printing press from the very first moment he was convinced of the need for a British-organised Methodist mission in the Caribbean. In 1783 and 1786, he published two accounts in which he laid out his plans for overseas missions and called for funding to finance his plans.¹⁰¹ He was well aware of the benefits of public outreach in Britain, through which he tried to build a community of citizens – both Methodists and other sympathizers – who would fund his ambitious mission plans. In subsequent years, many more publications followed, including Coke’s journals of his voyages to North

⁹⁶ The British Methodists published a monthly magazine between 1778 and 1969. The magazine, first known under the name of *The Arminian Magazine*, was founded by John Wesley. The magazine was retitled *The Methodist Magazine* in 1798 and *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* and in 1822. Missionary work was an important topic in these magazines.

⁹⁷ Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860*, 6.

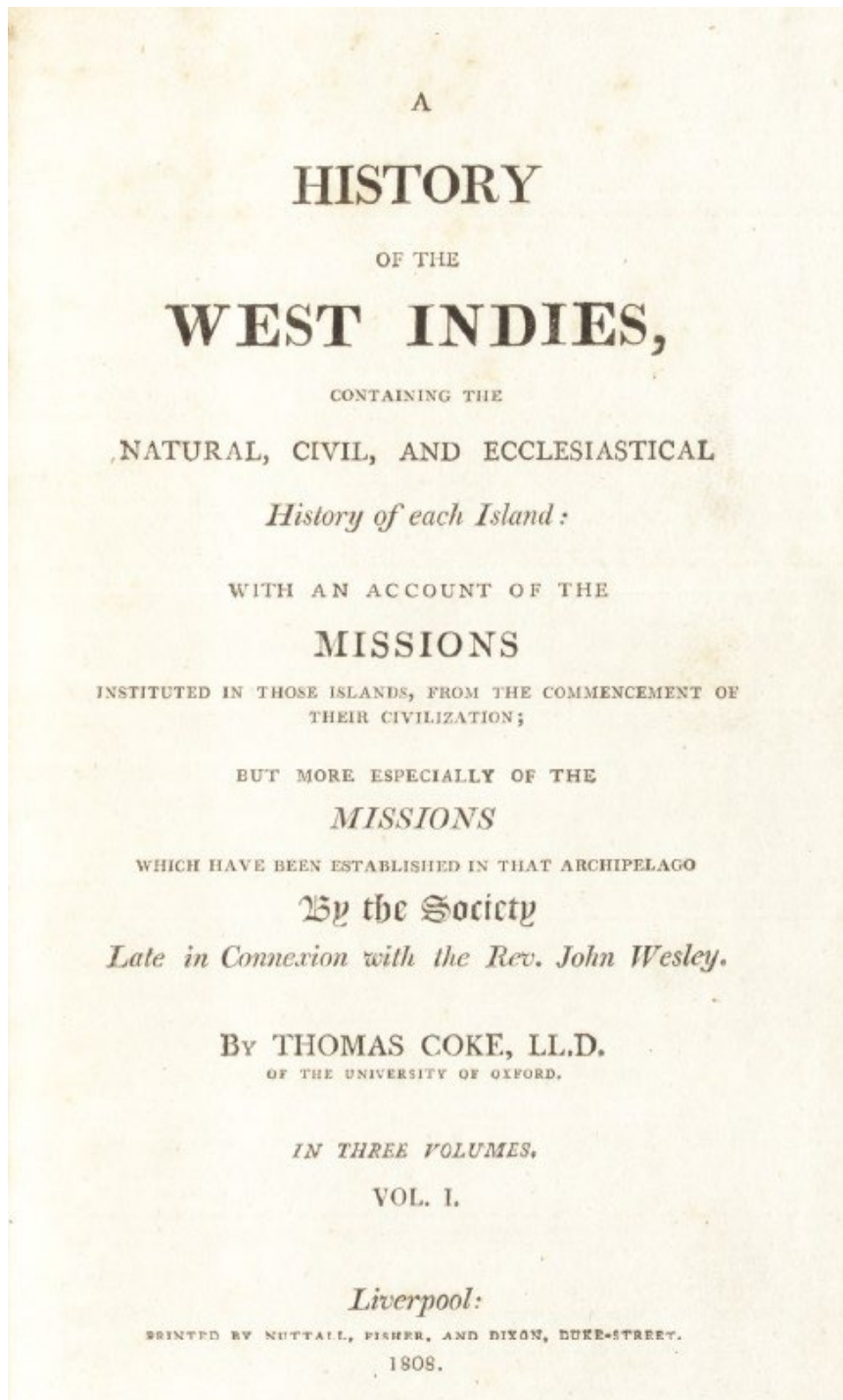
⁹⁸ Johnston, 6.

⁹⁹ Johnston, 2–4; More recently the same point is made by Karen Vallgård: Vallgård, ‘Were Christian Missionaries Colonizers?’, 872–76.

¹⁰⁰ Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860*, 7.

¹⁰¹ Coke, *Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathens*; Coke, *An Address to the Pious and Benevolent*.

America and the West Indies, annual reports on the progress of the missions written and composed by Coke and commissioned by the Missionary Committee, and the three-volume *History of the West Indies*, Coke's most ambitious work which was published near the end of his life.¹⁰²



Book cover of Thomas Coke's three-volume *History of the West Indies*.

¹⁰² Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of Each Island. With an Account of the Missions Instituted in Those Islands, from the Commencement of Their Civilization. But More Especially of the Missions Which Have Been Established in That Archipelago*, vols 1–3 (Liverpool, London, 1808–1811).

The aims of Coke's writings were closely connected to his role within the British Methodist Society. During his lifetime, he was responsible for raising funds for the missions as well as recruiting and supervising the missionaries sent to the different mission stations. His instrumental role within the British Methodist organisation of the missions was partly born out of necessity as Coke's ambitions were initially met with little institutional support. Only in 1804, when the missions had been underway for eighteen years and when the Methodist societies in the West Indies had over fourteen thousand members, a British Missionary Committee was founded.¹⁰³ While the committee helped Coke with the organisation of the missions and the contact with the missionaries working in the field, the establishment of the committee did not solve the precarious financial situation of the missions during this early period. This only happened in 1818, four years after Coke's death, when the financial support and responsibility of the foreign missions were structurally embedded within the British Methodist Society with the foundation of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society.¹⁰⁴ In the meantime, it was mainly due to the efforts of Coke, who was constantly trying to secure future funding, that the missions were financed. This even led him to invest a lot of his own money in the missions to fill the gaps in the balances.¹⁰⁵

One of the most important instruments that Coke used in his efforts to raise funding for the missions was the printing press. Although public collections were occasionally being held in all the Methodist congregations throughout Britain, the proceeds from these collections were not sufficient to finance the missions. Neither could they count on a regular income from the mission stations themselves, without pew rents or property to act as collateral. We have seen that the missionaries were partly supported by local benefactors. However, this financial support was in no way sufficient to cover all the expenses for travelling, living, housing, and mortgages on the West Indian chapels. As a consequence, the funding of the missions was primarily dependent on the proceedings from private subscriptions.¹⁰⁶ Because these donations were mainly collected by Coke, the funding of the missions was highly dependent on his network. Coke addressed his network with various publications. His initial pleas for funding from 1783 and 1786 were soon followed by publications in the years 1787, 1789, 1790, 1794, 1798, and 1804.¹⁰⁷ From the year 1805 onwards, reports on the progress of the missions were published

¹⁰³ For an overview of the missions in 1804, including membership numbers see: Thomas Coke, *An Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Methodist Missions* (London, 1804), 30–31.

¹⁰⁴ Vickers, 'One-Man Band: Thomas Coke and the Origins of Methodist Missions', 145–47.

¹⁰⁵ The personal investment of Coke can be clearly seen in the financial overview of the mission from 1794, in which the receipts and disbursements over the years 1787 till 1794 are shown. Within these six years, Coke donated a total of 2,167 pounds to the mission in the West Indies. A very large amount, given the total of 5,965 pounds that was raised with the subscriptions in these six years (excluding the donations of Coke): Thomas Coke, *A Statement of the Receipts and Disbursements for the Support to the Missions Established by the Methodist Society, for the Instruction and Conversion of the Negroes in the West-Indies, Addressed to the Subscribers* (London: n.p., 1794).

¹⁰⁶ Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 272; Hempton, *Methodism*, 116.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Coke, *An Address to the Generous Contributors for the Support of the Missions, Carried on by the Methodist Society, in the West Indies, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland* (London: n.p., 1787); Thomas Coke, *To the Benevolent Subscribers for the Support of the Missions Carried on by Voluntary Contributions in the British Islands, in the West Indies, for the Benefit of the Negroes and Caribbs* (London: n.p., 1789); Thomas Coke, *An Address to the Subscribers for the Support of the Missions Carried on by Voluntary Contributions for the Benefit*

annually and came under the responsibility of the newly formed Missionary Committee. Even thereafter, Coke continued to play an important role in the production and publication of these reports.

In these reports, which were explicitly addressed to the “generous contributors” or “benevolent subscribers”, Coke gave an overview of the progress of the Methodist missions. The aims of these reports were twofold: first, they gave an overview of the missionary successes that had been achieved so far, justifying the expenses of the missionaries. By reading these reports, the subscribers of the missions needed to believe that their money was well spent. Second, these accounts always emphasized the potential successes that could be achieved in the near future, thereby stressing the urgency of more funding to achieve these prospects. According to Coke, the West Indian mission had the greatest potential for the future and therefore needed the most funding. With optimism, he wrote that the Antillean islands contain

not less than half a million of negroes, who seem to be all ready to receive the gospel. There the fields are ripe indeed: but for some years the expence will be very great [...] O help us, my brethren, I beseech you by the love of God [sic].¹⁰⁸

With these words, Coke tried to convince his audience of the great possibilities that awaited the Methodist missionaries, while calling on their financial support to achieve this.

The financial supporters of the missionary endeavours were also the audience Coke had in mind when writing his *History of the West Indies*. In this three-volume book, Coke gives an overview of the “natural, civil, and ecclesiastical history” of the West Indies by complementing the history of the Methodist mission in this region with an account of the geography, flora, fauna, and colonial history of each island. Coke explicitly dedicates his work to the subscribers of the missions, “as a tribute of acknowledgement for that benevolence which has marked your conduct towards the interest of Jesus Christ”.¹⁰⁹ Coke addressed the subscribers as the “parents” of missionary successes that had been achieved in the West Indies and hoped to strengthen their bonds with the missions. He was convinced that the publication of his work would be an effective strategy to attract the funding that he needed. As early as 1799, nine years before the publication of the first volume, he confidently wrote: “I know that such a work, if executed in a masterly manner, would meet with the public approbation; & would greatly contribute towards the increase of subscriptions for the support of the Missions.”¹¹⁰

of the Negroes in the British Islands, in the West Indies (London: n.p., 1790); Thomas Coke, *A Statement of the Receipts and Disbursements for the Support to the Missions Established by the Methodist Society, for the Instruction and Conversion of the Negroes in the West-Indies, Addressed to the Subscribers* (London: n.p., 1794); Thomas Coke, *An Account of the Missions Established by the Society Late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley, for the Conversion of the Negroes in the West Indies* (Bristol: n.p., 1798); Thomas Coke, *An Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Methodist Missions* (London: n.p., 1804).

¹⁰⁸ Coke, *An Address to the Generous Contributors for the Support of the Missions*, 6–7.

¹⁰⁹ Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 1, iii.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Coke, *Thomas Coke to Mr. Jones, December 6, 1799*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 272–73. Original in the Lamplough Collection, Methodist Archives Centre, John Rylands University Library, Manchester.

Due to the way that the Methodist missions were financed, the clear link between Coke's fundraising activities and his writing had an impact on the content of his published work. To convince his audience to (continue to) support the Methodist mission work, Coke needed to show the benefits of the Methodist missions, the successes of the missionary endeavours, and the instrumental role of the white missionaries in this success. In this context, two themes will be analysed in more depth: first, the institution of slavery and Methodism's relationship with slavery and its abolition, and second, the autonomy of Afro-Caribbean people in the spread and development of Afro-Protestantism. Together this gives us an insight into how Coke understood the role of Afro-Methodists – both in the worldly and religious realms.

Methodism and Slavery

In general, the scholarly discussion of Methodism's relationship with slavery has for a long time been dominated by scholars who have characterized Methodism as an antislavery movement. This traditional strand of scholarship, which also exists in the historiography of other Protestant mission movements, has emphasized the contributions of Methodism to the British abolitionist movement and the emancipation of slaves in the Caribbean and North America.¹¹¹ Although some influential Methodists are indeed known for their early opposition to slavery and the slave trade, such as the founder of Methodism John Wesley, Methodism's relationship with slavery was far more complicated than these scholars suggest. As Methodism spread through the Caribbean and North American slave societies, Methodists were not only confronted with slavery as a theological problem but also with slavery as a reality to which they had to relate themselves.

A decisive moment in the development of this complex relationship was the spread of Methodism in the southern colonies of North America. In 1780, the Methodist Society of North America had distanced itself from the institute of slavery by passing a regulation which condemned slavery "as contrary to the laws of God, man and nature, hurtful to society, and contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion".¹¹² Immediately after the regulation was passed, some attempts were made to exclude slave owners from membership. However, the implementation of the principle in practice proved to be more difficult. As Methodism spread rapidly into Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia after the end of the American War of Independence it became untenable to continue to renounce slavery. In these southern colonies, public testimonies against slavery were met with fierce opposition from both the general public and the Society's own members. As a result, the Society went back on her words and "thought it prudent to suspend the minute concerning slavery for one year, on account of the great

¹¹¹ Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*. For a discussion of the tendency of traditional mission historians to read a humanitarian impulse into other Protestant mission movements see: Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 3–4.

¹¹² Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 94.

opposition that has been given it, especially in the new circuits, our work being in too infantile a state to push things to extremity".¹¹³

A similar shift occurred in Coke's relationship to slavery, as he travelled through the North American colonies during the same period. Arriving in Baltimore at the end of 1784, where the Methodist Society's annual conference was held, Coke took a strong stand against slavery and incited the Society to threaten slave-holding members with excommunication.¹¹⁴ Earlier that year, Coke had been appointed by Wesley as superintendent of the work in the newly independent United States, and this was his first visit across the Atlantic. However, as he travelled south over the following months, through Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, he too became less vocal in his rejection of slavery. After being confronted with violent opposition in reaction to his public testimony against slavery, Coke adapted to his environment:

I bore a public testimony against slavery, and have found out a method of delivering it without much offence, or at least without causing a tumult: and that is, by first addressing the negroes in a very pathetic manner on the duty of servants to masters; and then the whites will receive quietly what I have to say to them.¹¹⁵

This statement shows that Coke became less and less strong-minded in his opposition to the institution of slavery and his determination to change the societal status quo. When visiting the southern colonies two years later, Coke admitted that it was "ill-judged of me to deliver [my sentiments] from the pulpit".¹¹⁶ Gradually, his encounters with the realities of slavery in the southern and the West Indian colonies attenuated his initial opposition to slavery.

A telling example of this shift in Coke's thinking and writing is the way that he reacted to the treatment of slaves by their owners. In 1785, when visiting the state of Virginia, Coke stayed with a man named Dillard whom he described as "a most hospitable man" who is "as kind to his negroes as if they were white servants". Although Coke was happy to see Dillard's slaves being treated well, he was still critical of their enslavement, writing that "he could not beat into the head of that poor man the evil of keeping them in slavery".¹¹⁷ Little had remained of this critical attitude when Coke travelled through the West Indies eight years later. In 1793, Coke praised the Grenadian planters for accepting a law that gave so-called "Guardians" the right to "oversee and protect the Negroes from injurious treatment". According to Coke, this legislation which increased the colonial regulation over how planters treated their slaves, was a "demonstrative proof of their wisdom and humanity".¹¹⁸ After travelling, preaching, and operating within colonial slave societies for almost a decade, Coke accommodated himself to the

¹¹³ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 65.

¹¹⁴ Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 95.

¹¹⁵ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 57.

¹¹⁶ Coke, 87.

¹¹⁷ Coke, 59.

¹¹⁸ Coke, 183.

system of bondage upon which these societies were founded. Instead of criticizing or questioning the practice of enslaving fellow human beings, he praised what he considered to be a more humane treatment of enslaved people.

Several scholars have interpreted this shift in Methodism's relationship to slavery as an unwanted form of accommodation, reluctantly accepted by abolitionists such as Coke, to achieve the greater good of spreading the Christian gospel.¹¹⁹ However, Coke's acceptance of the institution of slavery as part of human life was more fundamental than an unhappy compromise he reluctantly agreed to at the expense of his truly "passionate advocacy of emancipation".¹²⁰ In the Caribbean, he even participated in the system of slavery himself, by buying several slaves with the funds raised for the mission among the indigenous Caribs/Kalinago on St. Vincent.¹²¹ Coke had bought these slaves to cultivate the small cotton and coffee plantations which he had received from the colonial authorities of St. Vincent. After being criticized for his actions by William Hammet, one of the missionaries who accompanied Coke on his first journey through the Caribbean, Coke defended himself by stating that the slaves "would certainly be treated *by us* in the tenderest manner". Still, he admitted a few sentences later that "no exempt case could justify the proceedings".¹²² However, it would not be the last time that Methodist missionaries were actively involved in slave ownership. In 1807, in the same year that the slave trade was outlawed by the British Parliament, the Missionary Committee issued a new regulation prohibiting any involvement in slavery, including marrying anyone who owned slaves. Several missionaries were outraged by this new regulation, as they had acquired slaves through their marriage with white and free women of colour.¹²³ In 1811, five missionaries were accused of owning slaves.¹²⁴

As Coke and the missionaries under his supervision accommodated to and even participated in the everyday reality of slavery in the Caribbean, Coke's theological ideas about slavery as a religious

¹¹⁹ Hempton, *Methodism*, 83; Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800*, 127; Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 148–49; Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 97–98.

¹²⁰ Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 97.

¹²¹ The terminology for the Caribs has been a subject of debate. The naming 'Carib' is a colonial term used by colonists and has been criticized. Therefore, the names of Kalinago rather than 'Carib' and Garifuna rather than 'Black Carib' are preferred by some recent scholarship and indigenous peoples.

¹²² Thomas Coke, *An Address to the Preachers Lately in Connexion with the Rev. J. Wesley, Containing Structures on a Pamphlet Published by Mr. W. Hammet* (London, 1793), 17–19. Coke reacted with this publication to: William Hammet, *An Impartial Statement of the Known Inconsistencies of the Rev. Dr. Coke, in His Official Station, as Superintendent of the Methodist Missionaries in the West Indies: With a Brief Description of One of the Tours through the United States* (Charleston: W. P. Young, 1792). For more on the conflict between Thomas Coke and William Hammet see: Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 173–74; Catron, 'Evangelical Networks in the Greater Caribbean and the Origins of the Black Church', 90.

¹²³ For angry letters of slaveholding clergy see: Natasha Lightfoot, 'The Hart Sisters of Antigua: Evangelical Activism and "Respectable" Public Politics in the Era of Black Atlantic Slavery', in *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, ed. Mia Bay (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 55. Lightfoot references a letter from Edward Turner to Thomas Coke and the Missionary Committee from the 21st of May 1808 and the minutes from the Methodist Antigua District Meeting from the 10th of May 1808. Both documents can be found in: Yale Divinity School Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society West Indies General Correspondence, fiche 13.

¹²⁴ Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 579, footnote 14.

problem also shifted.¹²⁵ Whereas he initially endorsed the view that slavery was contrary to the laws of God, condemning slavery as a sin of the British nation, Coke later described the enslavement of Africans as one of “those strange and mysterious events which take place through the permission of God”.¹²⁶ Instead of publicly condemning slavery as contrary to his beliefs, Coke used his published writings to explain why God could allow such evil to exist. Coke’s answer to this religious problem was that God moves in a mysterious way and that “we are unable to trace it”.¹²⁷ By characterizing slavery as incomprehensible to humans, he tactfully placed the issue outside the realm of human morals, allowing both opponents and proponents of abolition to support his missionary endeavours.

Coke’s message to British citizens was that they can only accept the mysteries of God. The same was true for the enslaved population of the Caribbean. According to Coke, Methodism could and should teach enslaved people to resign themselves to their fate to live in slavery and “to trust God where they cannot trace him, [...] to walk by faith and not by sight”.¹²⁸ In his view, it was the responsibility of the missionaries to focus not on the temporal condition of the Afro-Caribbean population – the fact that they were living in slavery – but on the spiritual liberty that these potential converts could achieve by converting to Methodism. For Coke, the greatest progress that could be made by Methodism was the liberation of Afro-Caribbean men and women from their inner slavery, that is their ignorance of God and lack of faith. In the introduction to his *History of the West Indies*, Coke writes that thanks to the Methodist mission enslaved Afro-Caribbeans had found peace, freedom, and joy as they converted to Christianity and that “thousands are now to be found in this happy state” in which “they can boast of liberty, while they feel the galling chain”.¹²⁹ In this way, by directing the focus toward spiritual freedom, Coke proclaimed a theological commitment to slavery. His encounters with North American and Caribbean slave societies, which became the stages of his missionary ambitions, transformed his thinking about slavery. Enslaved Afro-Caribbeans were, in his view, still victims in need of rescue by white missionaries as benefactors, yet their spiritual salvation was their true liberation: “If they have Religious Liberty, their Temporal Slavery will be comparatively but a small thing.”¹³⁰

The Unthinkability of Afro-Methodist Religious Autonomy

For Coke, the spread of Methodism in the Caribbean slave societies was an intervention in the spiritual and not in the secular realm. By converting Afro-Caribbeans to Christianity he hoped to change their state of mind and their behaviour, but not their position within society. As such, within Coke’s

¹²⁵ For a similar discussion of the transformation in thinking about slavery by the Moravians see: Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 138–63.

¹²⁶ Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 1, 38.

¹²⁷ Coke, vol 1, 41.

¹²⁸ Coke, vol 1, 36.

¹²⁹ Coke, vol 1, 35.

¹³⁰ Thomas Coke, *Thomas Coke to Ezekiel Cooper, April 23, 1795*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 198–201. Original at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois.

worldview, the role of Afro-Caribbean people was one of bondage and submission. How, then, did he understand their spiritual role within the religious movement of Methodism?

In the preface of his *History of West Indies*, Coke writes that the glory of the unprecedented growth of Methodism in the West Indies “belongs to God alone” and that the success of the mission is primarily and ultimately God’s doing.¹³¹ The white missionaries sent to the Caribbean are represented as the instruments selected by God through which “he accomplishes his divine purposes”.¹³² In this way, the importance and instrumental role of the British-organised mission is highlighted. In his work, Coke tried to convince his audience that it was their moral duty to support the West Indian mission, as the missionaries were doing God’s work. Coke and other influential figures within the British Methodist Society gave their missionaries all the credit for the spread of ‘their religion’ in the Caribbean. Although Coke himself had only worked on the different Antillean islands for a short period, making short visits to the different islands of sometimes only a couple of days, he described his own contributions to the success of the missions as pioneering and fundamental:

My visiting every Island myself, in order to see with my own eyes how every thing had been conducted, was highly expedient: and, indeed, in every instance, except that of Antigua, the Lord was pleased to use me as the first instrument of opening the work in the Islands. I was indeed only as the Pioneer: my Brethren were both the Waterers and the Planters, and God has been pleased to give an abundant increase.¹³³

With God as the guardian who gave the British Methodist Society a divine commission, himself as the founding father, and his missionaries as those who continued his work, Coke told a story in which white missionaries are the key actors in the spread of Methodism. The Afro-Caribbean men and women who played instrumental roles in the development of Afro-Protestantism, both inside and outside the British-organised mission structures, are not recognized as actors within this history. They are portrayed as passive recipients of the gospel rather than agents who actively shaped their own religious identity and that of others.

This denial of Afro-Methodist agency was not merely a strategy for Coke to highlight his own contributions and to stress the need for white missionary presence in the Caribbean, but, more fundamentally, an inevitable consequence of his deeply held beliefs about God, human nature, and the impossibility of Afro-Caribbean autonomy. The reality of Afro-Methodist autonomy – of Afro-Caribbean religious leaders and preachers who independently spread Methodism through the Caribbean and who were successful in doing so – did not coincide with Coke’s worldview in which he and the white missionaries under his supervision were the instruments selected by God who needed to rescue

¹³¹ Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 1, 11.

¹³² Coke, vol 1, 181.

¹³³ Coke, *A Statement of the Receipts and Disbursements for the Support to the Missions Established by the Methodist Society*, 33–34.

Africans and Afro-Caribbeans from their ‘heathenish darkness’. Afro-Methodist religious autonomy was, as Trouillot has so influentially explained in his discussion of the Haitian Revolution, unthinkable: it is that “which one cannot conceive within the range of possible alternatives, that which perverts all answers because it defies the terms under which the questions were phrased”.¹³⁴ An unthinkable event is epistemologically unthinkable because it fundamentally disrupts the very framework of thought in which such an event could be discussed. Trouillot shows that in the context of the eighteenth-century Caribbean, where the widely held belief existed that “enslaved Africans and their descendants could not envision freedom, [...] let alone formulate strategies for gaining and securing such freedom,” the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable even as it happened.¹³⁵ In the same way, the silence of the instrumental role of Afro-Methodists in the spread of their religion was not an ideological but an epistemological silence.

So what were the characteristics of Coke’s beliefs that made Afro-Methodist religious autonomy unthinkable? At the end of the eighteenth century, race had become increasingly important as a category of difference in European thinking.¹³⁶ In his published writings, Coke extensively elaborated on the differences between the ‘civilized European’ and the ‘benighted savage’, thereby giving a stereotypical description of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans as intellectually inferior (“they were incapable of analyzing their thoughts”), emotional, impulsive (“their passions were enthroned; and, reigning with absolute dominion, would submit to no control”), undisciplined, lawless, and immoral.¹³⁷ With this racist description of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans, Coke denied the possibility of the equality of humankind. Scholars have demonstrated that many eighteenth-century European thinkers had conflicting ideas about equality and race. There has been particular scholarly attention for the paradoxical relationship between Enlightenment thought, the egalitarian languages of common humanity, and the hierarchical language of racial classifications.¹³⁸ Devin Vartija writes that many Enlightenment philosophers were concerned with the physical diversity of humanity as an intellectual problem. One of their answers was a “racial classification as part of a natural history of the human species” – which was coloured by Eurocentrism.¹³⁹

For evangelists such as Coke, however, racial difference was a theological problem that challenged the belief in the unity of the human race that is so fundamental to Christian theology. They believed that all human beings were descended from Adam and Eve and belonged to the same human

¹³⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 82.

¹³⁵ Trouillot, 73.

¹³⁶ On the ‘grammar of difference’ see Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper. They write that the categories of difference, used to draw a stark dichotomy of colonizer and colonized, were never stable and needed constant defining and maintaining: Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, ‘Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda’, in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1–56.

¹³⁷ Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 1, 29–30.

¹³⁸ Devin Vartija, ‘Revisiting Enlightenment Racial Classification: Time and the Question of Human Diversity’, *Intellectual History Review* 31, no. 4 (2021): 603–25; Devin Vartija, *The Color of Equality: Race and Common Humanity in Enlightenment Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

¹³⁹ Vartija, ‘Revisiting Enlightenment Racial Classification’, 2.

family. The subversion of Christian monogenism would undermine “the very essence of the Christian story”, including the Christian doctrine of fall and redemption which is based on the transmission of the original sin from Adam.¹⁴⁰ As a consequence, it was important for Christian theology to focus on the racial similarities of humans rather than their racial differences. The differences that existed between different peoples that Europeans increasingly encountered from the sixteenth century onwards, were explained as differences that did arise from the particularities of life and the “conduct of men” rather than “any deviation in the conduct of God”.¹⁴¹ However, despite Coke’s defence of monogenism, he did articulate a view of human nature which was based on natural order and hierarchy. To define the task that he envisioned for himself, and for which he sought to mobilise public support, Coke extensively used racial stereotypes to describe the ‘barbarisms’ of Afro-Caribbeans who needed to be converted to Christianity. In doing so, he and other missionaries were creating fixed “representations of African difference and inferiority and disseminating them more widely than ever before”.¹⁴² As such, Coke claimed universalism while practising the making of racial hierarchies.

In addition to viewing people of African descent as intellectually and morally inferior, Coke also saw them as spiritually inferior and unable to know the truths of Christianity by themselves. “Of the truths of the gospel,” he wrote, “they had never heard; and on its excellencies or defects, they were incompetent to decide.”¹⁴³ Even when Afro-Caribbeans would join the mission, become a member of its religious community, and take up an active spiritual role as a class member or a class leader, Coke believed they ultimately had a limited understanding of the theological foundations of Christianity. Coke feared that without the proper white missionary guidance, Afro-Methodists would drift away from pure faith: “We are much in want of leaders. It is dangerous to let too many meet with one; for, being ignorant of the word of God, they run into many superstitions.”¹⁴⁴ The idea that Afro-Caribbeans would independently come into contact with “the truths of the gospel”, made Christianity their own, and became autonomous religious leaders who established new Afro-Methodist communities was absolutely unthinkable for Coke. Within his worldview, the white missionaries sent to the West Indies were the indispensable bridge between Methodism and the Afro-Caribbean population.

For Coke and his European audience, Afro-Methodist autonomy was unthinkable even as it happened. Thus when Coke encountered thriving Afro-Methodist communities that were rapidly attracting new members without being guided by one of his white missionaries, he formulated interpretations of the spread of Afro-Methodism “that force reality within the scope of [his] beliefs, [...] to repress the unthinkable and to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse”, to use Trouillot’s

¹⁴⁰ Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 25.

¹⁴¹ Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 1, 37.

¹⁴² Catherine Hall, ‘Making Colonial Subjects: Education in the Age of Empire’, *History of Education* 37, no. 6 (November 2008): 778.

¹⁴³ Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 1, 30.

¹⁴⁴ Coke, vol 2, 431.

words.¹⁴⁵ Time and again the success of the spread and growth of Methodism in the Caribbean was solely attributed to the handful of missionaries stationed on the Antillean islands. The result was a heroic, sometimes even mythical depiction of the few white missionaries who were working in the Caribbean.

A good example of Coke forcing the unthinkable within the scope of his beliefs is his discussion of the religious situation on Dominica, where he encountered an Afro-Methodist community with several people who had been members of the Methodist Societies on Antigua and St. Kitts. In 1788, when this religious community was already in place, the first white missionary was sent to the island. William McCornock, an Irish preacher who was new to the work in the West Indies, was stationed on the island. However, his presence there did not last long. Within six months McCornock died after catching “a severe bilious fever”, after which no missionary was sent by the British Methodist Society for more than five years.¹⁴⁶ In the meantime, the Methodist community on Dominica continued to grow, something that was noticed by Coke when he visited the island in 1793. In describing the flourishing state of this community Coke continued to refer to the Afro-Methodist men and women as “the flock of my dear deceased friend William McCornock” which he saw as “the fruits of that holy man’s labours”. In no way was he able or willing to recognize the agency of these enslaved and free Afro-Caribbean Methodists and their missionary work. Instead, he lamented, that they “have been left as sheep without a shepherd. The fields are ripe for harvest, but, alas! alas! there are none to reap it.”¹⁴⁷

For Coke and the British Methodist Society, Christianity was brought to the Caribbean and spread amongst the Afro-Caribbean population by missionaries. And missionaries were, in their worldview, white preachers sent and supervised by the British Methodist Society. When complaining about the shortage of missionaries for the missions, Coke urged everyone in the British circuits “to do every thing in their power” to recruit new missionaries so “that we may have labourers enough for these great, and on the whole, very successful undertakings”. For Coke, it was evident that these highly needed new missionaries “cannot be raised in the Islands” themselves.¹⁴⁸ On the few occasions that local preachers were raised in the Caribbean, they were always white. The unthinkable of Afro-Methodist autonomy was deeply connected to the portrayal of missionaries as successful, heroic, and most importantly, white. For Coke, white missionary guidance was inevitably connected to the emergence, spread, and growth of Methodism in the Caribbean.

The representations and silences created in the published writings of Coke, as well as in other missionary texts, have had a lasting impact on the dominant view of missionaries as white Europeans travelling to

¹⁴⁵ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 72.

¹⁴⁶ John Crump, ‘An Account of the Death of Mr. William M’Cornock: In a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Wesley’, *The Arminian Magazine, For the Year 1790. Consisting Chiefly of Extracts and Original Treatises on Universal Redemption*, volume XIII (1790): 15.

¹⁴⁷ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 180.

¹⁴⁸ Thomas Coke, *An Account of the Progress of the Methodist Missions in the West-Indies, and the British Dominions in America, in Ireland, and in the North-Wales. With a Statement of the Receipts and Disbursements* (London, 1805), 7.

foreign territories to convert the colonized peoples. By portraying Africans and Afro-Caribbeans as 'savage heathens' who cannot know the truths of Christianity by themselves, Coke defined the task ahead of him and his missionaries while showing this audience its necessity and urgency. This task was to rescue Afro-Caribbeans from their so-called spiritual darkness or inner slavery. By focusing in his writings on the religious freedom that white missionaries, as God's chosen instruments, could bring to the Caribbean, Coke moved away from interfering with the colonial realities of the slave societies in which he and his missionaries operated. In the same way that colonists were constantly defining the otherness of colonised peoples, trying to create a dichotomy of coloniser and colonised, Coke marked the differences between the missionaries of the British Methodist Society and their potential converts. By creating fixed representations of Afro-Caribbeans as racially different and inferior – intellectually, morally, and spiritually – their instrumental role in the spread of Christianity around the world as pioneers of the Christian faith became an impossibility in British Methodist thinking. Instead, Coke created a narrative in which Afro-Caribbeans needed white missionary guidance.

3. The Diversity of Afro-Methodist Participation

Despite the overwhelming emphasis on white missionaries and their efforts in both missionary writing and historiography, Afro-Methodist class leaders, exhorters, and preachers outnumbered the white clergy stationed in the Caribbean. This chapter examines and highlights their participation in the religious movement, explaining at what moments and in what roles they practised their religion, why they became attracted to the Methodist movement, and how they in turn shaped Methodist Christianity. There was not one way in which Afro-Caribbean people – who came from different backgrounds, had different previous experiences with Christianity, belonged to different ethnic and cultural groups, and had different social standings within colonial society – reacted to and participated in the Methodist movement. This recognition of diversity in religious experiences, motives, and practices is important. Scholars of the Caribbean and the African diaspora have emphasized that Afro-Caribbean culture was extraordinarily varied and complex and the same is true for Afro-Caribbean spirituality.¹⁴⁹

This diversity is also visible in the different ways that Afro-Caribbean men and women participated within the Methodist movement, by uniting themselves in religious communities both within and outside the mission organisation set up and supervised by the British Society. Whereas Afro-Caribbean reaction to and participation in Protestant missions has been the subject of scholarly debate, historians have failed to recognize the existence of Afro-Protestantism outside mission organisations, in autonomous Protestant communities without white missionary guidance. Hence, this chapter examines Afro-Methodist participation and spiritual authority in both contexts, showing how Afro-Caribbean people exercised spiritual authority in mission societies as well as autonomous societies. It does so by discussing two case studies: the mission community on the British island of Antigua and the autonomous community on the Dutch island of St. Eustatius. While remarkable in their own ways, both islands are representative of other mission societies and autonomous societies respectively. Together they give us a more complete view of the different ways in which Afro-Caribbeans became involved in the Methodist movement.

Discussing the diversity of Afro-Methodist participation opens up not only the question of how Afro-Caribbeans became involved in the Methodist movement but also why. The fact that Afro-Caribbeans not only engaged with Methodist Christianity within the context of a mission but also by organising themselves in autonomous religious communities poses new challenges to historians' explanations of Afro-Protestantism. Within the field of Christian missions in the Atlantic world, scholars have often tried to explain why people of African descent and Native Americans have converted to Christianity. At the same time, the term 'conversion' has been criticized for simplifying a complex process because "it falsely implies that 'converts' abandoned one belief system for another".¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ The diversity of African and Afro-Caribbean culture in relation to religion is discussed by John W. Catron: Catron, *Embracing Protestantism*, 6–7, 78.

¹⁵⁰ Gerbner, 'Theorizing Conversion: Christianity, Colonization, and Consciousness in the Early Modern Atlantic World', 135.

Katharine Gerbner has argued that instead, conversion “was a process of transformation that occurred on multiple planes” and had spiritual, social, cultural, and political implications.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, by using the term ‘conversion’ historians would reiterate a white missionary mindset, reflecting missionary intentions rather than the experiences of non-Europeans. This chapter argues that a more fruitful way of thinking and writing about Afro-Caribbean engagement with Christianity would be to speak of their participation within Christian movements, asking how and why they participated in the Methodist movement. A focus on Afro-Methodist participation enables historians to move away from a white missionary perspective, acknowledge Afro-Caribbean religious agency, and capture the diversity and complexity of Afro-Protestantism. Through the case studies of Antigua and St. Eustatius, this chapter reflects on the diverse motives for joining the Methodist movement, enabling a more profound understanding of Afro-Protestantism and the growth of this movement.

Antigua: Afro-Methodist Spirituality within a Methodist Mission

During the period that evangelical Christianity spread through the Caribbean, Antigua was one of Great Britain’s most important colonies in the region. The island had already been colonised by English settlers in the early seventeenth century and rapidly developed as a profitable sugar colony. Antigua was the most important and most populous colony of the British Leeward Islands and formed the administrative centre of the British possessions in that region. In addition to being a centre of royal and colonial power, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards Antigua also became a “center of Afro-Caribbean Protestantism” as both Moravian and Methodist Christianity attracted many Afro-Caribbeans.¹⁵² For the British-organised Methodist mission, Antigua became an important stronghold and administrative centre of the Caribbean mission. Every year, the missionaries stationed in the different Caribbean colonies came together in Antigua to hold their conference, which was their regional decision-making body. For the missionaries working in the Caribbean, Antigua was considered to be their home base. In contrast to many other mission stations, the island was almost always populated by one or more missionaries who stood in close contact with the Missionary Committee in Great Britain.

Before the mission took off and Antigua became a strong mission centre, Methodism was already introduced to the island’s population by the planter Nathaniel Gilbert in 1760. During these early years, from 1760 to 1787, a mission infrastructure was lacking and Afro-Caribbean religious leaders such as Mary Alley and Sophia Campbel were very important and operated largely autonomously.¹⁵³ In the years after Gilbert’s death, and probably also during his life, these two women held the community together by leading prayer meetings and scripture readings. Even when the shipwright John Baxter arrived in Antigua in 1778, who has been celebrated for his work as a lay preacher in the years before

¹⁵¹ Gerbner, ‘Theorizing Conversion’, 134.

¹⁵² Catron, *Embracing Protestantism*, 56.

¹⁵³ Jagessar, ‘Early Methodism in the Caribbean: Through the Imaginary Optics of Gilbert’s Slave Women—Another Reading’.

Thomas Coke's arrival, Afro-Caribbean men and women enjoyed considerable religious autonomy. In these early years, Baxter, who became one of the superintendent missionaries within the British mission after Coke's arrival, could not devote all his time and energy to the preaching of the gospel, as he was primarily employed as a shipwright in the dockyards of the Royal Navy. In a letter to John Wesley, founder and spiritual leader of the Methodist Church, Baxter lamented that although he "continue[s] to travel into the country; [he finds] it hard to flesh and blood to work all day, and then ride ten miles at night, to preach".¹⁵⁴ Baxter tried to reach out to as many potential converts as possible by travelling to different plantations where he met with enslaved people, yet his scope was limited by lack of time and energy. Meanwhile, free Afro-Antiguans claimed leadership roles while they – figuratively and literally – built a religious community. In 1783, Alley, Campbel, and a group of other black and mixed-race women joined their efforts to build a chapel in the port city of St. John's: they collected money to buy lumber and a piece of land, and helped "with their own hands to clear the Land of the rubbish that lay about it, & to bring ready-dressed victuals for the men that were employed in building the House of God".¹⁵⁵ As founders of the first Methodist chapel in the Caribbean, these women had built a preaching house where they practised their religion from the pulpit.

This situation changed in the late 1780s when Coke arrived on Antigua together with three fellow missionaries and initiated what would become a well-organised mission on the island with a relatively strong missionary presence. Whereas on most islands the Methodists had trouble finding and maintaining at least one missionary, due to the few missionaries available and the frequent cases of disease and death, Antigua was always stationed by at least two missionaries who could devote all their time and energy to the mission. From the late 1790s, when Antigua was still one of the major mission stations, now together with St. Kitts, St. Vincent, and Tortola, this number even increased to three.¹⁵⁶ In addition, due to Antigua's central place within the Caribbean mission, other missionaries frequently visited the island for a week or two.¹⁵⁷ This central role in the Caribbean mission makes Antigua a unique mission station. At the same time, the organisation of the mission and the missionary work in Antigua became exemplary for other islands with large mission communities.

¹⁵⁴ John Baxter, *John Baxter to John Wesley, June 10, 1782*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 2, 431–32.

¹⁵⁵ This description is given by Anne Hart Gilbert, a mixed-race women of modest property, in a letter to the missionary Richard Pattison who had requested her to write a history of Methodism on the island: Anne Hart Gilbert, *Anne Hart Gilbert to Richard Pattison, June 1, 1804*. Letter. Published in: Moira Ferguson, ed., *The Hart Sisters: Early African Caribbean Writers, Evangelicals, and Radicals* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 64–65. The financial contribution of the Afro-Caribbean Methodists to the construction of the chapel is also mentioned in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 2, 438.

¹⁵⁶ For overviews from the years 1788, 1793, and 1798 see respectively: Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 115–16; 187; Thomas Coke, *Thomas Coke to The West Indian missionaries, August, 1798*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 240–43. Original in the Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library, Manchester.

¹⁵⁷ Hart Gilbert, *Anne Hart Gilbert to Richard Pattison, June 1, 1804*. Published in: Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 67.



Map of Antigua. Bryan Edwards, *Map of the island Antigua for the History of the West Indies*, 1794, engraved map, 180 x 230 mm., John Carter Brown Library.

The missionaries operated by travelling to various estates across the island that were owned by planters who embraced and supported their mission. On these plantations, there were groups of converts and other enslaved people interested in the Methodist religion who would meet on weekday evenings to listen to the preaching of visiting missionaries and participate in communal prayer. These gatherings were also joined by people from other estates, some of whom travelled “three or four miles after the labors of the days, that they may be present at eight o’clock at night to hear the word”.¹⁵⁸ On Sundays, enslaved Afro-Methodists, if permitted by their owners, took part in the sermon at St. John’s Chapel. These sermons were often so well attended that there was not enough room for everyone and people had to stand outside. Many of the attendants travelled great distances of sometimes “seven or ten miles” from their estate to visit the chapel, which took several hours of walking.¹⁵⁹ On Antigua, enslaved people could travel relatively easily to these and other religious gatherings, without fear of punishment, because the restrictions on slaves’ freedom of movement were not being strictly enforced on the island since the

¹⁵⁸ Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 2, 429–30.

¹⁵⁹ Coke, vol 2, 430.

early 1760s.¹⁶⁰ Most enslaved people were allowed to go to the Sunday markets, where they sold the surplus from their provision grounds. This practice gave enslaved people relative freedom of movement on Sundays, allowing them to attend the general services at the chapel, but it also caused friction with the missionaries who did not want their congregants to work on the Lord's day. The services at the chapel were also attended by free Afro-Antiguans, many of whom lived and worked in the port city of St. John's, Antigua's commercial and administrative centre.

Methodism was largely an oral movement in which the spread of the Methodist message "was inexorably bound up with the medium of oral culture" and where public preaching, speaking, praying, and singing shaped the religious experience.¹⁶¹ The act of singing was particularly important in the transmission of the Methodist message and formed a fundamental part of almost all Methodist religious meetings, which began and ended with a hymn. Singing was a powerful religious practice as it had the potential to transmit complex theological ideas in accessible language, was easily memorized, contributed to a communal sense of belonging and collective devotion, and could reach the emotions of believers through rhyme, rhythm, and melody.¹⁶² Moreover, singing and music could function as a cultural bridge between European missionaries and Afro-Caribbeans as they formed a common cultural reference point for both groups.¹⁶³ Through singing, religious gatherings became a truly communal practice, in which Afro-Methodists "sung, prayed, and praised God together".¹⁶⁴

At the same time, literacy was also important in evangelical missions. For their congregants to be able to read the word of God, missionaries gave them instruction in reading and writing. On some islands, such as Antigua, missionaries also organised special meetings for the instruction of children.¹⁶⁵ Afro-Caribbeans were often very interested in learning to read and write. This enthusiasm led some missionaries to complain that enslaved people were only interested in reading and writing, and not in Christianity.¹⁶⁶ The Methodist missionaries who travelled from Europe to the Caribbean often brought with them books, hymn books, prayer books, and other religious texts. They brought those books for themselves and other missionaries to use in their mission work, but more importantly, also to sell and

¹⁶⁰ Catron, *Embracing Protestantism*, 68.

¹⁶¹ Hempton, *Methodism*, 56.

¹⁶² Hempton, 71–73.

¹⁶³ For work on the role of hymns and hymn singing in Moravian missions see: Walter W. Woodward, "Incline Your Second Ear This Way": Song as a Cultural Mediator in Moravian Mission Towns', in *Ethnographies and Exchanges: Native Americans, Moravians, and Catholics in Early North America*, ed. A. G. Roeber (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2008), 125–42; Rachel M. Wheeler and Sarah Eyerly, 'Songs of the Spirit: Hymnody in the Moravian Mohican Missions', *Journal of Moravian History* 17, no. 1 (2017): 1–26; Rachel M. Wheeler and Sarah Eyerly, 'Singing Box 331: Re-Sounding Eighteenth-Century Mohican Hymns from the Moravian Archives', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (2019): 649–96; Sarah Justina Eyerly, *Moravian Soundscapes: A Sonic History of the Moravian Mission in Early Pennsylvania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

¹⁶⁴ Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 3, 147.

¹⁶⁵ Hart Gilbert, *Anne Hart Gilbert to Richard Pattison, June 1, 1804*. Published in: Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 69.

¹⁶⁶ Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 183. For a discussion of literacy within the Moravian mission in the Danish West Indies see Gerbner.

give away in their mission stations. For example, in 1788, an expense was made for “300 Hymn-Books and other Books and Tracts for the service of the Missions”.¹⁶⁷ Interestingly, Coke mentions in one of his mission reports that some of these books were sold to white people, “but most of them to the free coloured people, and to the domestic slaves, many of whom can read, and have frequently a little money to spare for the purchase of useful books”.¹⁶⁸ For many Afro-Caribbeans, missionaries opened doors to the written word.

In addition to the weekly public sermons and prayer meetings that took place on the plantations and in the chapel, enslaved and free Afro-Methodists also participated in other religious gatherings of which the most fundamental was the class meeting. During these meetings, small groups of ten to thirty-five church members practised their religion together by collectively praying, reading the scriptures, sharing religious experiences, and listening to exhortations under the guidance of a fellow parishioner as the class leader. Class meetings were important gatherings within the mission and have been characterised as “the most important building blocks of the movement”.¹⁶⁹ In contrast to the public sermons and prayer meetings, in which large groups of members and other people interested in Methodism gathered to listen to a preacher, these small intimate meetings enabled all members to take a more active role in collectively practising their religion. In their class meetings, which took place every week, each member had the opportunity to speak up and give an account of their personal spiritual progress, including their failures, temptations, or inner battles. This focus on personal spiritual experiences was closely intertwined with the Methodist doctrine of sanctification, which stresses “the need for human beings to take control of their spiritual destinies, not as passive respondents to the iron will of God, but as active agents in working our own salvation”.¹⁷⁰

This decentral organisation of Methodist communities in small classes offered Afro-Caribbeans the opportunity to exercise religious authority within the mission. Although free and enslaved Afro-Caribbeans were never considered to be able to provide the same spiritual guidance as white missionaries, they did have important and instrumental roles within the mission field as class leaders, exhorters, and religious leaders who provided spiritual care to their fellow members. In fact, the Methodist mission greatly depended on the work of these so-called black assistants. Even on an island such as Antigua, with a relatively strong missionary presence, there were only a few missionaries who had to divide their time and energy among thousands of members. The practice of allowing Afro-Caribbeans positions of authority within the local mission churches was thus born out of necessity, as it was the only way in which the Methodist, as well as Moravian and Baptist missionaries, were able to reach out to the hundreds or thousands of members in their communities. At the same time, it has been

¹⁶⁷ Coke, *A Statement of the Receipts and Disbursements for the Support to the Missions Established by the Methodist Society*, 31. Many similar expenses appear in the financial overview of the mission: 27–28, 29, 54, 55, 76.

¹⁶⁸ Coke, 16.

¹⁶⁹ Hempton, *Methodism*, 78.

¹⁷⁰ Hempton, 58.

pointed out that the existence of black assistants was “one of the key reasons for the evangelicals’ success among the people of African descent”.¹⁷¹ For Afro-Caribbean men and women, the opportunity to exercise religious authority as a class leader was significant and was not possible within the institutionally embedded Anglican, Dutch Reformed, and Lutheran churches. The significance of the spiritual authority of class leaders is shown by the fact that many planters viewed the Methodist “class meetings in a suspicious light” because of the lack of ecclesiastical oversight during these private religious meetings.¹⁷²

Both free and enslaved Afro-Caribbeans took up these positions of class leadership within the Methodist societies. For enslaved people, leadership roles within evangelical communities offered them a measure of power in their daily lives, as they became responsible for the spiritual care of fellow Afro-Protestants and acquired a position of religious leadership that was recognized by their owners. However, enslaved people were also limited in their ability to reach large audiences. Class meetings were held during the evenings due to the nature of the plantation routine. One of the enslaved men who became a class leader within the Antiguan mission was John Cory, a mixed-race enslaved man who worked as a tailor.¹⁷³ Cory joined the Methodists in 1779 when the community was led by Alley and Campbel. Inspired by their spiritual leadership, Cory became a class leader himself three years later, a responsibility he zealously embraced, according to the missionary Baxter. At the end of the day, when he had finished his business, “it was his usual practice either to meet a class, or to exhort his fellow-slaves”.¹⁷⁴ Class leaders such as Cory often had multiple classes under their care which convened weekly. Cory continued to serve the Methodist community until he died in 1794. During his lifetime, he had seen the community grow and experienced the transition of Antiguan Methodism from a religious community led by white lay preachers and Afro-Caribbean members to a British-organised mission centre.

It is likely that, like Cory, many of the Afro-Methodists who were class leaders within the Antiguan mission were early members of the movement. At the same time, the introduction of the British-organised mission on Antigua in 1787 did result in a new rise of members, including a new generation of spiritual leaders. One of them was Christopher Nibbs, an enslaved mixed-race man who converted to Methodist Christianity in 1788.¹⁷⁵ Nibbs was soon recognized as a devout member of the community who became an example for many and a spiritual leader for fellow slaves on his estate, “bringing many to the good ways of God”. Only one year after his conversion, he became “an active and good class-leader; and without all doubt a blessing to many souls”.¹⁷⁶ Enslaved class leaders such

¹⁷¹ Catron, *Embracing Protestantism*, 82.

¹⁷² Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 3, 26.

¹⁷³ John Baxter, *John Baxter to Thomas Coke, May 24, 1794*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 2, 445–46.

¹⁷⁴ Baxter, *John Baxter to Thomas Coke, May 24, 1794*. Published in: Coke, vol 2, 445.

¹⁷⁵ Coke, vol 2, 446.

¹⁷⁶ Coke, vol 2, 446.

as Cory and Nibbs were important communal leaders who provided spiritual care and guidance in everyday life. Baxter wrote to the Missionary Committee that, much to his regret, he and the other missionaries stationed on Antigua were not able to visit “all our people when sick, because they are at a considerable distance from us”.¹⁷⁷ It was during those moments of difficulty, when enslaved people were suffering from sickness, famine, cruel punishments, or other hardships, that religion and spiritual guidance could provide comfort. Besides their spiritual leadership, enslaved class leaders also came to play a role as community leaders, as Afro-Caribbeans sometimes turned towards their spiritual leaders for the resolution of their disputes.¹⁷⁸

The majority of the class leaders, exhorters, and spiritual leaders were free Afro-Caribbeans. The number of free people of colour in Antigua had increased in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from a mere 18 in 1707 (on a population of 12,892 slaves), to 1,230 in 1787 (36,000 slaves), and to 3,895 in 1821 (31,064 slaves).¹⁷⁹ In contrast to enslaved people, they often had more time and freedom to work for the Methodist cause, which made them in the words of Baxter, “more extensively useful”.¹⁸⁰ In Antigua, free Afro-Caribbean women were particularly attracted to the opportunities of spiritual and communal authority that Methodism offered its Afro-Caribbean members. They made up the majority of the class leaders on the island. In general, Methodism is known for the high numbers of women that were drawn to its religious communities: class membership surveys consistently show that women made up the majority of members in both England and North America.¹⁸¹ Historians of Methodism in North America have explained this majority, as well as the active and instrumental roles of female members as prayers, exhorters, and preachers, by pointing toward the lack of ordained clergy and the importance of communal class meetings that characterized the Methodist movement.¹⁸² These characteristics made Methodism more attractive and open to marginalised groups such as women and people of African descent. Although gender is not recorded in the membership numbers of the Caribbean, the active participation of women was regularly observed by missionaries working in the region. When writing about the state of the mission on Antigua, Baxter wrote to Missionary Committee there were “many

¹⁷⁷ John Baxter, *John Baxter to the Missionary Committee, June 12, 1804*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 2, 454–56.

¹⁷⁸ Catron, *Embracing Protestantism*, 73; Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 3, 143.

¹⁷⁹ David Barry Gaspar, “‘To Be Free Is Very Sweet’: The Manumission of Female Slaves in Antigua, 1817–26”, in *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 62; David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 162.

¹⁸⁰ Baxter, *John Baxter to the Missionary Committee, June 12, 1804*. Published in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 2, 454–56.

¹⁸¹ Hempton, *Methodism*, 137.

¹⁸² Hempton, 137–39. For an overview of the contribution of women to Methodism in North America see: Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism, 1760-1939* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

young women in our societies”, but that free men of colour “have no relish for religion” and that there were very few free men of colour who joined the community.¹⁸³



View of the Methodist chapel in Charlestown on the island of Nevis. The engraving shows different social groups in front of the chapel. In the front, there is a group of five well-off women of colour accompanied by three black (possibly enslaved) women sitting on stones. Printed in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 3. Held by the John Carter Brown Library.

The free Afro-Caribbean women who took up instrumental leadership roles within the Antiguan community were recognized to be excellent exhorters who possessed “good gifts in prayer”.¹⁸⁴ This was also observed by the white missionary Thomas Richardson, who, on his way to Dominica, made a short visit to Antigua in 1803, where he was struck by the “eloquence and unction” of the female class leaders and preachers who he met during his stay.¹⁸⁵ Richardson attended one of the weekly public meetings of a group of free Afro-Caribbean women in St. John’s and proclaimed that “their abilities far exceed those of most women I have heard either speak or pray in England”.¹⁸⁶ Not only was he astonished by the

¹⁸³ Baxter, *John Baxter to the Missionary Committee, June 12, 1804*. Published in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 2, 454–56.

¹⁸⁴ Coke, vol 2, 455.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Richardson, *Thomas Richardson to Thomas Coke, February 1, 1803*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 2, 361.

¹⁸⁶ Richardson, *Thomas Richardson to Thomas Coke, February 1, 1803*. Published in: Coke, vol 2, 361.

preaching abilities of these female class leaders, but he was also deeply impressed by the reaction of their congregation and the account their class members gave of their spiritual progress. In short, Richardson had witnessed the performance of spiritual authority and leadership by a group of free Afro-Caribbean women who had an influential and instrumental role in the mission.

Two influential Afro-Caribbean women within the Antiguan Society were the sisters Anne Hart Gilbert (1768–1834) and Elizabeth Hart Thwaites (1771–1833), both mixed-race women of significant social standing who were important spiritual leaders and educators.¹⁸⁷ The Hart sisters were born into freedom, unlike the majority of the free Afro-Caribbeans who were manumitted during their lifetimes, and belonged to Antigua's elite community of free people of colour. Whereas most free women of colour were impoverished labourers who worked as housemaids, washerwomen, seamstresses, or hucksters, Anne and Elizabeth Hart were of modest property, had enjoyed education, and were both married to white Methodist laymen.¹⁸⁸ In 1798, Anne married John Gilbert, a clerk for the Royal Navy at Antigua's English Harbour, and in 1805, Elizabeth married Charles Thwaites, a teacher and catechist in Anglican and Methodist schools. While their marriage to white men gave them more social status and legitimacy as mixed-race women, they were also vulnerable to the taboo of interracial marriages of the time. Especially Anne's marriage to John Gilbert, who belonged to a prominent sugar planting family, was controversial and was met with contempt from other whites.¹⁸⁹ The Hart sisters became involved in the Methodist Society during their late teens. Already several years after they joined the religious community, both sisters became class leaders of hundreds of Afro-Caribbeans. Other activities soon followed as they increasingly committed themselves to their evangelical work. In addition to the spiritual guidance of their classes, Anne and Elizabeth Hart founded a Sunday school for free and enslaved children and a society for the moral education of enslaved women.¹⁹⁰

The Hart sisters, as well as other elite free women of colour, used their charitable work and their position within the Methodist Church to strengthen their social status, by setting themselves apart from the Afro-Antiguans to whom they devoted their charity. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christian mission organisations became increasingly involved in an effort not only to convert people's beliefs, but also to transform Afro-Caribbean modes of daily life by focusing on labour discipline, family life, and sexuality.¹⁹¹ For example, Katherine Paugh shows in her work that in Barbados, Methodist

¹⁸⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the Hart sisters and their writings see: Ferguson ed., *The Hart Sisters*; John Saillant, 'Antiguan Methodism and Antislavery Activity: Anne and Elizabeth Hart in the Eighteenth-Century Black Atlantic', *Church History* 69, no. 1 (March 2000): 86–115; Natasha Lightfoot, 'The Hart Sisters of Antigua: Evangelical Activism and "Respectable" Public Politics in the Era of Black Atlantic Slavery', in *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, ed. Mia Bay (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

¹⁸⁸ Gaspar, "'To Be Free Is Very Sweet': The Manumission of Female Slaves in Antigua, 1817–26", 70.

¹⁸⁹ Lightfoot, 'The Hart Sisters of Antigua: Evangelical Activism and "Respectable" Public Politics in the Era of Black Atlantic Slavery', 55.

¹⁹⁰ Saillant, 'Antiguan Methodism and Antislavery Activity', 89.

¹⁹¹ See for example the work of Karen Fog Olwig for such focus on Christian morality and a respectable life within the Methodist mission on the island of Nevis: Karen Fog Olwig, 'The Struggle for Respectability:

missionaries “played a pivotal role in attempting to remold the sexuality and kinship practices of Afro-Caribbeans in hopes of facilitating childbearing”.¹⁹² They did so by condemning practices of polygamy, adultery, and concubinage while promoting a so-called respectable Christian life. Elite Afro-Caribbean women embraced this focus on Christian morality and respectability by devoting themselves to the moral condition of the enslaved population and by enforcing this morality on their class members. In doing so, they tactfully distinguished themselves from the enslaved majority of congregants as respectable Christian leaders.

This self-representation as a respectable mixed-race woman is particularly evident in the writings of Anne and Elizabeth Hart.¹⁹³ In their writings, which offer a rare insight into elite Afro-Caribbean evangelicalism, they give an account of the state of the Methodist mission on Antigua and their role within the movement. They stress their own importance as spiritual leaders and reformers who can truly bring “the work in Antigua [to] a more flourishing & advanced State” by prohibiting all diabolical practices and excluding all “Drunkards, Swearers, Adulterers & Adulteresses, Sabbath breakers & Dancers”.¹⁹⁴ In a letter to the missionary Richard Pattison, Anne highlights the importance of discipline among the congregants and the enslaved population in general. According to Anne and her sister, Christian education is needed to root out the sins of the enslaved population. In their writings as well as their charity work, the Hart sisters particularly focus on the sins of sexuality that cause women “to fall into disgrace and contempt”.¹⁹⁵ Demonstrating the success of their educational work, Anne declared that she “see[s] with heart-felt joy that prostitution is now esteemed abominable & disgraceful by the greater part of the Colour’d Women in St Johns where the great bulk of them reside”.¹⁹⁶ By positioning themselves as the educators and spiritual leaders who helped enslaved women live a respectable Christian life, Anne and Elizabeth Hart strengthened their own respectability and reputation while reinforcing colonial hierarchies of gender, race, and class.¹⁹⁷

The spiritual and educational work of the Hart sisters coincided with a period of so-called religious disciplining within the Antiguan Society. Whereas in the beginning, the missionaries were primarily focused on converting new people to Christianity and attracting new members to their church, this gradually changed as they became more concerned with the religious and moral discipline of their congregants. They were particularly concerned about the African and African-derived religious,

Methodism and Afro-Caribbean Culture of 19th Century Nevis’, *New West Indian Guide* 64, no. 3 & 4 (1990): 93–114.

¹⁹² Katherine Paugh, *The Politics of Reproduction: Race, Medicine, and Fertility in the Age of Abolition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 202.

¹⁹³ Their writings are published and discussed in the following work: Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*; Saillant, ‘Antiguan Methodism and Antislavery Activity’; Lightfoot, ‘The Hart Sisters of Antigua: Evangelical Activism and “Respectable” Public Politics in the Era of Black Atlantic Slavery’.

¹⁹⁴ Hart Gilbert, *Anne Hart Gilbert to Richard Pattison, June 1, 1804*. Published in: Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 71–72.

¹⁹⁵ Hart Thwaites, *Elizabeth Hart Thwaites to Richard Pattison, May 5, 1804*. Published in: Ferguson, 96.

¹⁹⁶ Hart Gilbert, *Anne Hart Gilbert to Richard Pattison, June 1, 1804*. Published in: Ferguson, 73.

¹⁹⁷ Lightfoot, ‘The Hart Sisters of Antigua: Evangelical Activism and “Respectable” Public Politics in the Era of Black Atlantic Slavery’, 67.

cultural, and social practices that went against white Christian morality and respectability. Much to their dismay, missionaries frequently observed that many of their converts were unwilling to cast off their former beliefs or practices. In the 1790s and the 1800s, these concerns coalesced into efforts of disciplining during which so-called ‘unworthy members’ were excluded from the Society. In 1804, Baxter reflected on the moral state of the Antiguan mission and observed that the membership numbers had been decreasing in the past years because they had been “obliged to exclude many, who ran well for many years” for committing sins such as polygamy, fornication, idolatry, witchcraft, and dancing.¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, “notwithstanding [the] many evils which remain”, Baxter was also optimistic about the state of the mission, due to the “wonderful change for the better” that resulted from the recent exercise of strict discipline. Interestingly, Baxter specifically highlights the role of a group of free Afro-Caribbean women, who according to him, have an important role in the disciplining of the Society:

We have, at present, many young women in our societies, who are an ornament to their profession, and who in their behaviour manifest great purity of manners. And many of the aged prove that they have held fast the beginning of their confidence firmly to the end. I believe we shall now have a shifting time, as we are determined to pay a strict regard to discipline.¹⁹⁹

It is likely that many of these women took up important spiritual roles within the Methodist mission as class leaders. Like the Hart sisters, these Afro-Caribbean women were able to claim positions of leadership and respectability within society at large, by embracing Christian discipline and promoting Christian morality among the enslaved population.

In general, Methodists, like other Protestants, paid close attention to the seriousness of their converts’ faith before accepting them as full members of their church. To be eligible as a member, converts had to demonstrate an “earnest desire to be saved from [one’s] sins” and the willingness to abide by church discipline.²⁰⁰ The requirements of Methodist membership were strictly encoded within the church law books and missionaries were instructed by the Missionary Committee to pay close attention to “the life and conversation of private members,” and to show a “full determination to hold no communion with those who walk disorderly”.²⁰¹ Yet the mission reality in the Caribbean proved to be more diffuse. Many Afro-Methodists remained faithful to former religious, cultural, and social practices while at the same time identifying as Christians. For those people, African or African-derived religions were not necessarily contradictory to evangelical Christianity. Letters and reports by

¹⁹⁸ Baxter, *John Baxter to the Missionary Committee, June 12, 1804*. Published in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 2, 454.

¹⁹⁹ Baxter, *John Baxter to the Missionary Committee, June 12, 1804*. Published in: Coke, vol 2, 454.

²⁰⁰ David W. Scott, *Mission as Globalization: Methodists in Southeast Asia at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 65.

²⁰¹ Missionary Committee, *Missionary Committee to the West Indian Missionaries, February 10, 1804*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 2, 454.

missionaries show that it was difficult to preach against the “sins” of non-Christian spiritualities, rituals, and kinship patterns, when “you know that almost every individual is guilty of them”.²⁰²

Despite the disciplining efforts within the Antiguan Society, which were embraced by the Hart sisters and other elite Afro-Caribbean women, many Afro-Antiguan converts continued to hold on to African and African-derived religious beliefs and practices. This was, for example, noted by Anne Hart in her writings: “I am sorry to say that too much of this diabolical work still exists in the Westindies and am of opinion that our preachers in general not being aware of it, pass too lightly over the sin of witchcraft.”²⁰³ In her plea against non-Christian “superstitions”, Anne describes several obeah rituals in detail: at funerals, obeah believers held lengthy processions in which “the Life & Death of the deceased” were remembered and portrayed in song accompanied by the rhythm of a calabash; at Christmas, obeah believers held “crowded” feasts in honour of their deceased loved ones “upon the graves of their departed friends”; and in everyday life enslaved people consulted obeah priests’ help in their daily labours.²⁰⁴ In contrast to Anne, her sister, and other elite free women of colour who embraced the idea of Christian respectability, there was a significant group of Afro-Antiguan Methodists who aligned these and other African beliefs and practices with a Christian identity.

St. Eustatius: An Autonomous Afro-Methodist Community

As the in-depth study of Antigua shows, many enslaved and free Afro-Caribbean men and women engaged with Methodist Christianity by participating in the mission and by practising their religion within the mission community. This was, however, not the only way in which Afro-Caribbean men and women engaged with Methodism and contributed to the spread and growth of the movement: on various Caribbean islands, Methodist Christianity spread among Afro-Caribbean people outside the mission organisation as free and enslaved people of colour united themselves in autonomous communities. On some islands, small autonomous communities existed alongside the mission communities, in the remote areas that missionaries never visited. This was the case, for example, in the Antiguan town of English Harbour in the south of the island, where Anne Hart encountered to her “great but pleasant surprise [...] a small society of black & coloured people, consisting of 28 Members & all but a few in earnest for Salvation”.²⁰⁵ On other islands, Afro-Methodist communities were already in place before a white European missionary visited these islands. This thesis shows that throughout the region, groups of free and enslaved Afro-Caribbeans practised evangelical Christianity independently of the European

²⁰² Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 103. Viotti da Costa quotes the missionary John Wray who was stationed by the London Missionary Society on Demerara.

²⁰³ Hart Gilbert, *Anne Hart Gilbert to Richard Pattison, June 1, 1804*. Published in: Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 60.

²⁰⁴ Hart Gilbert, *Anne Hart Gilbert to Richard Pattison, June 1, 1804*. Published in: Ferguson, 59–60.

²⁰⁵ Gilbert, *Anne Hart Gilbert to Richard Pattison, June 1, 1804*. Letter. Published in: Ferguson, *The Hart Sisters*, 72.

missions. St. Eustatius was one of those places where Afro-Methodist men and women organised themselves in an autonomous religious community.²⁰⁶



Map of St. Eustatius. William Faden, *The island of St. Eustatius corruptly St. Eustatia*, 1795, engraved map, 460 x 540 mm., Boston Public Library.

In contrast to many of the bigger islands in the Caribbean, St. Eustatius was not a typical plantation colony with a high cash crop production. Although the small Dutch island did expand sugarcane cultivation to its geographical limits, during the eighteenth century, St. Eustatius was mostly known for its important role as a regional trade centre, attracting many foreign merchants and inter-island commercial traffic to its port. Especially the trade with the North American colonies, which reached its zenith during the American Revolution, caused great economic growth at the end of the eighteenth century.²⁰⁷ During the same period, the island also experienced significant demographic

²⁰⁶ Other examples are Dominica, Grenada, New Providence, and Montserrat. For a discussion of the role of these autonomous Afro-Methodist communities in the spread of Methodism through the Caribbean see chapter 1.

²⁰⁷ Most historical work on St. Eustatius has focused on the commercial role of the island: Han Jordaan and Victor Wilson, 'The Eighteenth-Century Danish, Dutch and Swedish Free Ports in the Northeastern Caribbean: Continuity and Change', in *Dutch Atlantic Connections, 1680-1800: Linking Empires, Bridging Borders*, eds.

growth, as the total population grew from 785 in 1700, to 2,515 in 1747, to 3,205 in 1779, and to an all-time high of 8,123 in 1789. Throughout this period, enslaved people made up 60 to 75 per cent of the population, followed by whites and free people of colour. The latter group was relatively small. In 1789, only 8 per cent of the residents of St. Eustatius were free people of colour, 29 per cent were whites, and 63 per cent were enslaved.²⁰⁸

One of the enslaved men and women who was transported to St. Eustatius during the period of economic growth in the 1780s was Black Harry. He had been a member of the Methodist Church in North America and firmly held on to his Christian faith when he migrated, probably by force, to the Caribbean. Although it is not clear when exactly Harry arrived in St. Eustatius, he was likely part of the migration movement that followed the British defeat in the American War of Independence in 1783. In St. Eustatius, Harry soon attracted other enslaved and free Afro-Caribbean people to his religion and became the founder and leader of a vibrant Afro-Methodist community. He was not the only black Methodist who migrated from North America to the Dutch island during that period and it is likely that several of his early followers had already come into contact with Methodism before they arrived in St. Eustatius. In addition, Harry and the Afro-Caribbean spiritual leaders under his supervision did also attract new people to their community as they introduced Methodism to the island.

When Harry, and possibly other Afro-Americans, brought Methodism to St. Eustatius, the religious landscape of the island was dominated by the Dutch Reformed Church, which functioned as the public church in all Dutch colonies.²⁰⁹ During the seventeenth century, the colonial elite of the island considered religious homogeneity of great importance for the stability of society, which led them to exclude other churches from the public sphere. Yet, as the presence of foreign European merchants on the island became stronger colonial elites gradually “permitted the construction of several non-Reformed churches”.²¹⁰ In the eighteenth century, the settlement of Jewish, British, German, and French merchants led to the construction of Jewish, Anglican, Lutheran, and Catholic houses of worship in the town of Oranjestad.²¹¹ However, none of these religious groups systematically directed their efforts toward the conversion of the enslaved population of the island. It was only in the nineteenth century that both the Catholic and Methodist churches established a mission among the Afro-Caribbean population. Thus when, in the 1780s, Afro-Caribbean people for the first time organised themselves in a Christian community, the preaching and communal praying of these Afro-Methodists attracted a substantial group

Gert Oostindie and Jessica V. Roitman (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 273–308; Victor Enthoven, “‘That Abominable Nest of Pirates’: St. Eustatius and North America, 1680-1780”, *Early American Studies* 10, no. 2 (2012): 239–301.

²⁰⁸ Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, *Realm between Empires: The Second Dutch Atlantic, 1680-1815* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2018), 168.

²⁰⁹ For the role of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Dutch Atlantic see: Danny L. Noorlander, *Heaven’s Wrath: The Protestant Reformation and the Dutch West India Company in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019).

²¹⁰ Derek R. Miller and R. Grant Gilmore, ‘Negotiating Tensions: The Religious Landscape of St. Eustatius, 1636–1795’, *Journal of Social Archaeology* 16, no. 1 (2016): 69.

²¹¹ Miller and Gilmore, 70–72.

of followers. They were the first on the island to direct their Christianizing efforts to fellow enslaved and free Afro-Caribbeans.

Although it is more difficult to obtain information about the daily practices and development of autonomous Afro-Methodist communities like that of St. Eustatius than of institutionally embedded mission communities like that of Antigua, it is possible to reconstruct parts of this history through the written traces of white missionaries and colonial authorities. In January 1787, Thomas Coke, John Baxter, and William Hammet were the first Methodist missionaries to visit St. Eustatius. To their great surprise, the three men were greeted by two black men who were members of the St. Eustatius' Methodist community. Interestingly, whereas Coke and his companions were not aware of the existence of these Afro-Methodists, the community itself was well aware of the wider Methodist movement and white missionary presence in the region. The two Afro-Methodists who approached Coke, Baxter, and Hammet had already received word from nearby St. Christopher that the missionaries intended to visit the island. Upon their arrival, the two men brought them to a "house belonging to a family of free Blacks" who were members of the Society.²¹² This shows that Afro-Caribbeans had access to inter-island information networks and that they utilized these networks not only to communicate ideas, news, and rumours about slave uprisings, liberation, and revolution, as Julius S. Scott has shown, but also about religion and religiosity.²¹³

The Afro-Methodist community encountered by the white missionaries had sprung from Harry's charismatic spiritual leadership. With his energetic preaching, he greatly touched his audience and converted fellow enslaved and free Afro-Caribbeans to Christianity. Although it is not clear whether Harry worked on one of the island's plantations or in the port of Oranjestad, he was able to reach out to people interested in his religious message. As a field worker on a plantation, he would have stood in close contact with a group of fellow enslaved workers. As a skilled enslaved worker in the port city, he would have had relatively more freedom of movement to spread his religion. Harry was not the only spiritual leader of the Afro-Methodist Society that Coke and his companions encountered. The community regularly gathered in class meetings, which were led by class leaders.²¹⁴ While Coke clearly describes the existence of a strong vibrant Methodist community, he was not able to acknowledge the spiritual authority of the St. Eustatius' Society and calls its existence a mystery: "About half a dozen little classes meet in corners: and, yet, there is no single Minister of any kind in the Island! What a mystery!"²¹⁵

Despite Coke's numerous efforts to incorporate the autonomous religious community into the British-organised mission network, he did not succeed in establishing a mission on St. Eustatius. Although there were a few colonists who supported his cause, Coke was primarily confronted with anti-

²¹² Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 82.

²¹³ Scott, *The Common Wind*.

²¹⁴ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 84.

²¹⁵ Coke, 178.

missionary sentiments from the colonial elite. After meeting with Coke and his companions, the Governor and Council of the island decided that the missionaries were not allowed to preach in public. Before they would be accepted in the colony, the missionaries would first need to “demonstrate their usefulness with thorough evidence” through their work in St. Kitts.²¹⁶ However, when Coke again visited St. Eustatius two years later, in January 1789, the position of the colonial authorities had not changed. This time, Coke decided to stay on the island for a month to devote himself to the preaching of the island’s congregation. This did not go unnoticed and Coke and his missionaries were soon summoned before the government with the demand that they would not preach “publicly or privately, by day or by night, [...] either to whites or blacks” under the penalty of prosecution and banishment from the island.²¹⁷ In the years that followed, similar confrontations took place during Coke’s third and fourth visits and no white missionary was stationed on the island.²¹⁸

These difficulties did not stop Coke’s determination to establish white missionary control over St. Eustatius’ Society. After the Governor had prohibited Coke and his missionaries to preach, Coke decided that the island’s congregation should be supervised by the missionary stationed on the neighbouring island of St. Kitts. However, this plan too proved to be unsuccessful. Already half a year later, William Hammet, who was at that point stationed on St. Kitts, wrote that they “must inevitably give up St. Eustatius” because of the demanding and time-consuming work in St. Kitts.²¹⁹ In 1794, Coke made another failed attempt to incorporate St. Eustatius into the British mission organisation. He travelled to the Dutch Republic to request the States-General’s permission for the establishment of Methodist missions in the Dutch West Indies. Coke accompanied his request with letters of recommendation from the British politician Henry Dundas and the Methodist Societies in Great Britain and Ireland, emphasizing that the Methodist missionaries were “virtuous, pious and useful men” who were loyal and obedient to the law and who laboured “to make the Negroes faithful and obedient servants to their masters”.²²⁰ In his request, Coke underlined the favourable effects of slave conversion for slave owners, arguing that Christian slaves would be more obedient, work harder, and therefore be more valuable than non-Christian slaves. With these statements, and by explicitly distancing the Methodist Church from the abolitionist movements in the British empire, Coke made sure to acknowledge, and

²¹⁶ National Archives, The Hague (NL-HaNA), 1.05.13.01, Inventaris van de archieven van St. Eustatius, St. Maarten en Saba, inv. no. 2, folio 137, 2 February 1787, minutes of the Governor and Council meeting. My translation: “bij dugtige bewijzen derzelves nuttigheid aan te toonen”. For Coke’s description of his meeting with the Governor and Council see: Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 83–84.

²¹⁷ Coke, 111.

²¹⁸ The anti-missionary opposition on St. Eustatius is also discussed in: Marie Keulen, ‘Missionary Networks, Black Preachers, and the Spread of Methodism in the Antilles’, *In The Same Sea: Working Papers* (blog), 19 January 2022, <<https://inthesamesea.ku.dk/blog/working-paper-3/>>.

²¹⁹ William Hammet, *William Hammet to Thomas Coke, June 15, 1787*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *An Address to the Generous Contributors for the Support of the Missions, Carried on by the Methodist Society, in the West Indies, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland*, 4–5.

²²⁰ NL-HaNA, 1.05.01.02, Inventaris van het archief van de Tweede West-Indische Compagnie, inv. no. 1333, Rekest van Thomas Coke, methodist, aan de Staten-Generaal, met afschriften van geleidebrieven van de Engelse ambassadeur Dundas en raadspensionaris Van der Spiegel, en een getuigschrift van methodisten uit Amsterdam.

even reinforce the underlying conditions of the institution of slavery. However, Coke's appeal to the highest political body of the Dutch Republic was not effective and had no consequences for the situation on St. Eustatius.

Meanwhile, the autonomous Afro-Methodist community continued to play an important role in the lives of a small but significant part of the enslaved and free Afro-Caribbean population of St. Eustatius. In contrast to the mission societies, there is no extensive data on membership numbers for St. Eustatius, which makes it more difficult to answer questions relating to the composition and growth of the religious community. In his account of his second visit to the island in 1788, Coke writes that the numbers continue to grow: "our numbers amount to two hundred and fifty-eight; and of those, we have reason to believe, that one hundred and thirty-nine have tasted that the Lord is gracious".²²¹ This is the only time that Coke included the membership numbers from St. Eustatius in his mission overview.²²² Interestingly, not all members of the St. Eustatius' Society were of African descent, as Coke writes that eight of the 258 members are white. One of those white members, a man named Ryley, was one of the spiritual leaders of the community. In a conversation with Coke, Ryley describes how he was "awakened" by Harry's preaching and how Harry converted him to Methodism, acknowledging his spiritual authority.²²³ Most members, class leaders, exhorters, and spiritual leaders, however, were enslaved and free people of colour. Ryley noted that "upwards of two hundred met regularly in Class under their respective Leaders, – that the Lord has raised eight exhorters among them" and that "the brethren and sisters that were free negroes" played an instrumental role within the Society.²²⁴

The main difference between autonomous communities and mission communities was public visibility and acceptance within colonial society. Although the particular situation differed from colony to colony, in general, Methodism was relatively well received and accepted in colonies with a white missionary presence. On some islands, missionaries did at times deal with periods of planter aggression or colonial persecution.²²⁵ Yet even in those cases, these anti-missionary sentiments were a reaction to a situation in which the Methodist mission was already a visible component of the colonial religious landscape. In St. Eustatius, on the other hand, Methodism was not publicly practised in a church, a chapel, or on an estate with the permission of both planters and authorities. Instead, Methodism would have been practised behind closed doors or outside in an inconspicuous place. Although the congregants did not have a public house of worship, they did have meeting places where they could come together for preaching, singing, praying, class meetings, and other religious gatherings. Such as, for example, the home of one of the congregants where Coke, Baxter, and Hammet were received. Sometimes, they went

²²¹ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 110.

²²² Coke, 116.

²²³ Coke, 138.

²²⁴ Coke, 138.

²²⁵ For example on the islands of St. Vincent and Jamaica: Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 179–81; Coke, *An Account of the Progress of the Methodist Missions in the West-Indies*, 5.

“some distance into the country,” to “have an opportunity of meeting together in quietness”.²²⁶ This secrecy did not apply only to Methodism but also to other religions practised by Afro-Caribbeans such as obeah. Perhaps the Afro-Caribbean men and women participating within the Methodist community used the same infrastructures by which they had practised, or continued to practice, African and African-derived religions on their plantations and in town.

On St. Eustatius, the autonomous Afro-Methodist community was confronted with a negative, suspicious, and even hostile colonial attitude. The growing Methodist movement among the Afro-Caribbean population aroused feelings of discomfort and uneasiness among the island elites. Throughout the Caribbean, planters and colonial authorities opposed the gathering of groups of enslaved and free people of colour for fear that they were plotting an uprising. At the end of the eighteenth century, these fears reached new heights with the outbreak of the successful slave revolt-turned-revolution in Saint-Domingue in 1791, which prompted colonial authorities in the Atlantic world to make new efforts to control the enslaved and free people of colour living in and visiting their colonies. In various colonies, these feelings of insecurity led some colonists to suspect, oppose, and even attack Afro-Caribbean religious gatherings and missionary work among enslaved people.²²⁷ On St. Eustatius, the colonial administration tried to prevent enslaved and free people of colour from meeting outside colonial sight and control by prohibiting

[...] all gatherings and meetings of the coloureds, free and enslaved, by night or by day, in the village or in the country, dances or otherwise. Furthermore, all whites are warned not to rent out or lend any houses or grounds for that purpose, on a penalty of fifty pesos from eight, and the coloureds and slaves are to be punished in the fortress [...].²²⁸

Interestingly, the ordinance suggests that some Afro-Caribbean people had been able to rent a house to come together for communal gatherings. Although the authorities of St. Eustatius tried to prevent this, the repetitions of the ordinance show that this was difficult.

In addition to this general ban on Afro-Caribbean gatherings, the colonial administration explicitly prohibited religious meetings. In the late 1780s, the Governor and the Council promulgated

²²⁶ John Harper, *John Harper to Thomas Coke, April, 1794*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 3, 62.

²²⁷ At various times and places, missionaries have even been accused of inciting slave rebellion. For example, in 1816, Methodist missionaries were connected to the slave revolt on Barbados. For several months the missionaries were said to be responsible for the rebellion, until it was proven that there had been no missionaries in Barbados for more than seventeen months. Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 134. Other examples are the Demerara slave revolt of in 1823 and the Jamaican slave revolt of 1831-1832, also known as the Baptist War: Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*; Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*.

²²⁸ NL-HaNA, 1.05.13.01, inv. no. 25, folio 94, 17 December 1794, register of publications. My translation: “verbiedende meede de zamenrotting en bijeenkomsten des nagts of des daags van de couleuringen vrijen of slaven in het dorp ofte in het land op danspartijen als anderzints. Verders werden alle blanken gewaarschuwd geene huizen of hunne perken daar toe te verhuuren en ofte leenen, op poena van vijftig pesos van achten en de couleurlingen en slaven gestraft te worden in het fort”.

an ordinance in which public and private preaching and praying by white people, free people of colour, and enslaved people were prohibited. Although none of these groups was allowed to preach, their punishment for violation of the ordinance was different. While a white person who was found “praying with his brethren” would be fined for the first two offences, flogged for the third, and banned for the fourth, a free or enslaved person of colour would be flogged and banned from the island immediately.²²⁹ When Coke learned of this “rather most infamous edict”, he interpreted the ordinance as “persecution against *religion itself*” – as an attack against all forms of Christian prayer.²³⁰ It seems more likely, however, that the ordinance specifically targeted Methodism, leaving the accepted Dutch Reformed Church, Anglican Church, and Lutheran Church unaffected.

Several Afro-Methodists were persecuted for their religious activities. The most well-known example was Black Harry. Besides faithful followers, his religious activities gave him a notorious reputation among planters and colonial authorities. His preaching was said to have a powerful effect on his audience, which was a thorn in the side of slave owners and colonial authorities. Sometimes, the men and women listening to him “were so affected under the word, that many of them fell down as if they were dead, and some of them would remain in a state of stupor for some hours. One night sixteen of them fell down in this manner.”²³¹ Similar descriptions of exuberant religious experiences of enslaved people do also occur in other evangelical missionary writings and are often interpreted by owners and authorities as disruptive behaviour. After the Governor got wind of Harry’s religious gatherings, he summoned him and “forbad him to preach any more under severe penalties [sic]”.²³² Nevertheless, Harry continued his religious practices, which ultimately led the colonial administration to ban him from the island. When Coke made his second visit to the island in 1789, he found that Harry had been convicted to be “publicly whipped, imprisoned and banished” from the island.²³³

Although there is no other known case in which an enslaved or free person of colour was banished from St. Eustatius for his or her religious activities, Coke’s journals do mention several other instances of persecution. In January 1793, Coke observed that “the flames of persecution were kindled afresh” and that several enslaved Methodists had been publicly whipped and imprisoned.²³⁴ Coke describes the public persecution of two women, who were sentenced to corporal punishment for attending a Methodist prayer meeting. He portrays the women’s behaviour as an act of heroic martyrdom:

Whilst they remained under the severe lashes of the common executioner, [...] they triumphed in persecution [...] in a manner which astonished the numerous spectators. They assured the multitude, in

²²⁹ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 110.

²³⁰ Coke, 110.

²³¹ Coke, 83.

²³² Coke, 83.

²³³ Coke, 110.

²³⁴ Coke, 178.

their negro dialect, that they prized the torments which they then endured above all the gold and silver in the world.²³⁵

According to Coke's account, the St. Eustatius authorities used the persecution of Afro-Methodists like these two women to set a public example.

This colonial attack on the autonomous Afro-Methodist community continued during the first decade of the nineteenth century. In 1804, the local administration issued another ordinance prohibiting anybody except those with special permission to preach or to be involved in any religious teachings whatsoever. The reason behind the promulgation of this ordinance was

[...] that here, by day as well as by night, various assemblies and meetings of both free people of color and slaves are held, in which both free people of color and slaves preach or are in other ways involved in religious practices [...].²³⁶

This statement shows that not only the authorities persisted in their attempts to ban Methodism from the island, but that the free and enslaved congregants of the Afro-Methodist community also persisted in the practice of their religion. Four and a half years later, in 1808, this situation had not changed as the Governor and his Council thought it necessary to repeat the same ordinance.²³⁷ Afro-Caribbeans continued to gather in religious meetings, looking for opportunities to collectively sing, pray, and talk about their faith, and the spiritual leaders of the community continued to preach.

The underground operation of the St. Eustatius' Society was exemplary for autonomous Afro-Methodist communities and how they practised their religion. As the society attracted more followers, religious gatherings were organised by Afro-Caribbeans without the presence and consent of planters, authorities, or white missionaries. The increasing colonial discontent of these underground religious gatherings demonstrates the growing success of the religious movement. At the same time, the situation on St. Eustatius was remarkable due to the long-lasting absence of a stationed British missionary on the island. Whereas most autonomous Afro-Methodist communities were accompanied by a white missionary after several years, the community on St. Eustatius operated independently for at least twenty-five years.

Interestingly, whereas the British Missionary Committee was unable to include St. Eustatius in the Caribbean mission through the installation of white missionaries on the island, the St. Eustatius' Society did seek contact with the wider Methodist movement. There are several indications that groups of free Afro-Caribbean men and women regularly visited the Methodist Society on St. Kitts. In 1794,

²³⁵ Coke, 178–79.

²³⁶ NL-HaNA, 1.05.13.01, inv. no. 72, folio 107, 14 April 1804, minutes of the meetings of the Governor (Commander) and the Council of Police.

²³⁷ NL-HaNA, 1.05.13.01, inv. no. 82, p. 140–41, 15 December 1808, register of publications, proclamations and notifications.

the white missionary John Harper, who was at that point stationed on St. Kitts, reported in one of his letters that there were “twelve of fourteen” St. Eustatius’ Afro-Methodists “now here, to spend Easter with us”. This visit from their neighbouring fellow Christians was not a one-time event, as Harper noted that “they visit us in this island [...] as often as their circumstances” admit.²³⁸ Four years earlier, in 1790, a group of free Afro-Methodists from St. Eustatius had also visited the congregation in St. Kitts, to attend the religious meeting on Christmas day.²³⁹ These cases suggest that the St. Eustatius Society felt spiritually connected with the wider Methodist movement in the region. They actively tried to be part of this broader movement by visiting neighbouring Societies. In this way, they operated autonomously but were not isolated.

In the 1810s, changes in the governance of St. Eustatius led to the acceptance of missionaries on the island and the incorporation of the religious community in the British-organised Caribbean mission. When in 1810, the island came under British rule, Coke and the Missionary Committee seized this opportunity to petition the newly installed Government for permission to establish a mission.²⁴⁰ In March 1811, this permission was granted “from a wish to encourage every good intention to diffuse throughout all classes of the community a knowledge of the Christian Religion” and the first British missionary was stationed on the island.²⁴¹ As on other islands, the missionaries on St. Eustatius still encountered resistance or even aggression from planters who did not agree with their presence on the island. For example, a year after the first missionary Coupland Dixon had arrived on the island, the fiscal of St. Eustatius found a death threat opposite to his gate, warning him to be “on [his] guard, for if [he] continue[s] to protect the Methodist parson in his violence to the inhabitants, the consequences may be very fatal to [his] own person”.²⁴² However, despite these occasional outbursts of resistance, Methodism became and remained an accepted mission church on St. Eustatius after 1811. The arrival of white missionaries and the acceptance of Methodism within the public religious landscape did change the way in which Methodism was practised on the island. The missionaries who were now accepted on the island had to adhere to a “strict observance” of a set of rules that regulated the hours on which they were allowed to preach, the types of meetings that they were allowed to hold, the conditions under which they were allowed to admit enslaved and free people of colour to their meetings, the condition under which they were allowed to administer the eucharist, the financial support that they were allowed to accept

²³⁸ Harper, *John Harper to Thomas Coke, April, 1794*. Published in: Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, vol 3, 62.

²³⁹ Coke, *The Journals of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 138.

²⁴⁰ Thomas Coke, *Thomas Coke to Robert Johnson, 30 April, 1810*. Letter. Published in: Coke, *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, 611–13. Original in the Methodist Missionary Society Archives in London.

²⁴¹ NL-HaNA, 1.05.13.01, inv. no. 72, folio 451–53, 28 March 1811, minutes of the meetings of the Governor (Commander) and the Council of Police.

²⁴² NL-HaNA, 1.05.13.01, inv. no. 82, p. 212, 16 January 1812, register of publications, proclamations and notifications.

from their congregants, and the message that they were allowed to preach – all with the permission of the slave owners.²⁴³

Throughout the Caribbean, Afro-Caribbean men and women participated in Methodist mission communities and autonomous communities like those of Antigua and St. Eustatius. The case studies of Antigua and St. Eustatius show that both enslaved and free Afro-Methodists exercised religious authority and propagated their own spiritual message under various degrees of ecclesiastical oversight. There is not one general reason why Afro-Caribbean people participated in the Methodist movement. They became spiritually involved in different contexts and for various, sometimes multiple reasons. One reason was that enslaved and free Afro-Caribbeans gained social benefits by joining Christian communities. This happened in different ways. For instance, participation in evangelical missions gave both free and enslaved Afro-Caribbeans access to instruction in reading and writing. Furthermore, for enslaved people, their presence at mission meetings could give them privileges if their owners endorsed and supported missionary work on their estates. In this way, they could, in some cases, strengthen their social position on the plantation. The same was true for free people of colour, some of whom used their position within the Methodist movement to establish good social standing within colonial society. Particularly, elite free women of colour used their evangelical charity work among enslaved congregants to strengthen their reputation as respectable Christians and their position within colonial society.

However, explaining Afro-Methodist participation solely in instrumentalist or pragmatic terms is too simplistic. The autonomous Afro-Methodist communities like that of St. Eustatius force us to rethink our interpretations because the social benefits offered to Afro-Caribbeans in mission communities do not apply to autonomous communities. In fact, on St. Eustatius, active involvement in the Methodist Society could put the congregants in serious trouble, given the persecution that raged on the island. The autonomous St. Eustatius' Society stresses what is also applicable to all other forms of Afro-Methodism in the Caribbean: that spiritual explanations are instrumental in understanding Afro-Methodist participation. For people of colour who were constantly confronted with the hardships and destruction of slavery, natural disasters, and war, evangelical Christianity functioned as a source of spiritual comfort in situations of distress. Methodism was not the only religion that could provide spiritual fulfilment, and Afro-Caribbeans also reached out to other religious leaders, rituals, and beliefs. Many members continued to hold on to African and African-derived religions alongside their engagement with Methodist Christianity. Yet, the histories of Antigua and St. Eustatius show that significant numbers of Afro-Caribbeans found a new source of spiritual power in evangelical Christianity.

²⁴³ NL-HaNA, 1.05.13.01, inv. no. 72, folio 451–53, 28 March 1811, minutes of the meetings of the Governor (Commander) and the Council of Police.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the role of enslaved and free Afro-Caribbean men and women in the history of Christianity. During the second half of the eighteenth century, the arrival of Methodism and other evangelical movements changed the religious landscape of the Greater Caribbean. Thousands of Afro-Caribbeans engaged with Methodist Christianity and participated in its religious movement. Traditionally, the history of Methodism in the Caribbean has been written from the perspective of the British Methodist Society and its internal politics. However, the spread and growth of Methodism cannot be explained by a mere investigation of its mission history. Rather than a transatlantic intervention borne by white missionaries, the Caribbean Great Awakening was driven by the participation and engagement of Afro-Caribbeans with evangelical Christianity. While the beliefs, practices, and different spiritual roles of Afro-Methodists have largely remained invisible within historiography, this thesis has told the history of the spread of Methodism through the Caribbean from their perspective.

To rethink the history of Methodism in the Caribbean, it is important to analyse and understand the production of its history. The traditional narrative of white European missionaries spreading Christianity into the ‘rest of the world’ by travelling ‘as pioneers’ to what they considered an unfamiliar world has been shaped by white missionary discourse. European missionary organisations such as the British Methodist Society used the printing press to narrate their missionary success. As the person responsible for the organisation and supervision of the mission, Thomas Coke used his published writings to mobilise public support, ensure funding, and recruit new missionaries. In his writings, Coke told a history of Caribbean Methodism in which white missionaries played the leading parts and in which Afro-Methodists were not the propagators but the recipients of the gospel. In doing so, he highlighted his own role and that of the white missionaries under his supervision while silencing Afro-Methodist autonomy.

For Coke, and the British Methodist Society at large, Afro-Methodist autonomy was an epistemological impossibility that fundamentally disrupted their widely held beliefs about Christianity, human nature, and racial hierarchies. In his writings, Coke portrayed Africans and Afro-Caribbeans as intellectually, morally, and spiritually inferior people who could not know the truths of Christianity by themselves and who had a limited understanding of theology. He created fixed representations of African difference and inferiority to define and demarcate the task he envisioned for the mission, and for which he sought to mobilise public support: to rescue Afro-Caribbeans from their so-called spiritual darkness or inner slavery. As such, the instrumental role of Afro-Methodists in the spread of Christianity was an impossibility in British Methodist thinking, even as white missionaries including Coke encountered Afro-Caribbeans who were independently practising and spreading Methodism.

Reading missionary documents from an Afro-Caribbean perspective, this thesis has shown that Afro-Methodist evangelicals played an instrumental role in the emergence, spread, and growth of Methodism in the Caribbean. Contrary to the expectations of the British Methodist Society, the white

missionaries sent to the Caribbean were not the first to spread Methodism through the region. As they arrived in the West Indies, they regularly encountered Afro-Caribbeans who were already practising and spreading Methodist Christianity. This has not been recognized within historiography, yet it fundamentally changes our understanding of the Caribbean evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century. In the past decades, historians have already demonstrated that people of African descent were not passive recipients of the gospel, but that they often proactively engaged with Christianity and took up positions of authority within mission movements. This thesis shows that their role in the spread of Afro-Protestantism was even more important and far-reaching than has been thought so far, because they were independently practising, propagating, and spreading Christianity before and alongside British missionary activities.

A regional perspective on the origin, spread, and growth of Methodism shows that Afro-Caribbean migration was essential to the spread of religion and religiosity. As enslaved and free people of African descent moved through the Greater Caribbean region, they brought their religion to new places and new peoples, establishing new Christian communities and creating religious networks. Enslaved Afro-Caribbeans and Afro-Americans were often forcibly relocated within the Greater Caribbean as they were sold in the intercolonial slave trade or moved to a different estate from the same owner. This enslaved movement was greatly influenced by political events such as the Seven Years' War, the American Revolution, and the French Revolutionary Wars. While these disruptive events violently relocated enslaved people to new colonies, removing them from their homes, friends, and family, they simultaneously created new religious communities and networks.

Afro-Caribbeans participated in the Methodist movement in various contexts, for diverse reasons, and under various degrees of white ecclesiastical oversight. In mission societies, the decentral organisation and the importance of class meetings and class leaders offered both enslaved and free Afro-Caribbeans the opportunity to take up leadership positions and exercise spiritual authority. Because the white missionaries stationed in the Caribbean were few and often suffered from epidemic diseases, the mission greatly depended on the work of Afro-Caribbean class leaders. Coke and the missionaries under his supervision have been characterised as important catalysts for the evangelical movement in the Caribbean, as they travelled through the region and established important contacts with planters and local authorities who provided them with political and financial support. Yet when the missionaries left one estate or town for the next one, Afro-Caribbeans built the Afro-Methodist communities.

Whereas the importance of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American people within evangelical mission communities has increasingly been observed within the historiography of Afro-Protestantism, historians have not recognized that Afro-Caribbeans could also engage with Christianity outside the supervision and guidance of white clergy. This thesis has shown that significant groups of Afro-Caribbean people organised themselves in autonomous Methodist communities which operated independently from the mission organisation. On St. Eustatius, Black Harry and other Afro-Caribbean evangelicals led a vibrant autonomous religious community for at least twenty-five years. While Coke

called its existence a mystery, this thesis demonstrated how they were able to hold religious gatherings while standing in open conflict with the colonial authorities of the island.

The different contexts in which Afro-Caribbeans engaged with Methodism offered different opportunities for different groups. On St. Eustatius, as well as in other autonomous communities, congregants risked persecution and punishments from authorities and enslavers when they participated in religious gatherings. This was different in mission communities like that of Antigua, where participation in the mission could offer Afro-Caribbeans social benefits, privileges, and a good reputation within colonial society. Especially elite free women of colour, such as Anne and Elizabeth Hart, used their charity work and position as class leaders to strengthen their social position as respectable Christians. In doing so, however, they embraced the efforts of missionaries and colonists to transform enslaved Afro-Caribbean modes of daily life. They condemned African and African-derived religious, cultural, and social practices while promoting a so-called Christian morality. As a result, the majority of Afro-Methodists who aligned their Christian identity with African beliefs and practices came under increasing pressure. Part of the same religious movement, Afro-Methodists like Black Harry, Mary Alley, Sophia Campbel, John Corry, Christopher Nibbs, Anne Hart Gilbert, and Elizabeth Hart Thwaites embraced different spiritual messages for different reasons, yet they had one thing in common: they engaged with – and spread – Methodist Christianity to shape their lives and futures, and those of others.

The present study demonstrates that it is possible to move beyond the unthinkability of Afro-Caribbean spiritual authority and autonomy articulated in missionary writing. To further reconstruct the complexities of religious life in the Caribbean, historians should read missionary documents against the lines of empires, individual colonies, and denominations. Shifting our perspective from the transatlantic movement of white missionaries to the regional movement and networks of Afro-Caribbeans allows us to bring Afro-Caribbean spirituality into view. This helps us to explain the spread and growth of Afro-Protestantism in the second half of the eighteenth century. The instrumental role of Afro-Methodists in the Caribbean Great Awakening – within, alongside, and outside mission communities – complicates our narrative of Christian missions and urges historians to rethink the history of Christianity in colonial slave societies.

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