Kristen Block

Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean: Religion, Colonial Competition, and the Politics of Profit. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012. xiii + 309 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

In recent years, there have been several calls from Atlanticists—including Eliga H. Gould, David Armitage, Alison Games, and others—to make Atlantic history broader and more transnational in scope, especially in the Caribbean. Kristen Block's rich and sophisticated new book answers this challenge. Hers is a "serial microhistory" of poor whites and slaves brought into a "single frame" in an "integrated approach that moves across empires" (p. 3). Using this transnational lens to study the long seventeenth century, she argues for a closer examination of the voiceless and shows that religion was the primary "force for social inclusion and exclusion" in the Caribbean (p. 2).

Block's main argument is twofold. First, she asserts that religion—rather than nationality—was the primary means by which enslaved people and poor whites asserted their political and social identities in the early modern Caribbean. Second, she argues for a shift from religion to race as the determining factor in the development of social and political identities by the end of the seventeenth century. Undergirding this shift was a change in economic systems, from bureaucracies and monopolies to imperial competition and profit-seeking. Block, who is fluent in Spanish and has plumbed the depths of archives in Colombia, Barbados, Britain, Spain, and the United States, does an exemplary job of proving her first point—that religion allowed marginalized peoples of the Caribbean to both mitigate and define their sociopolitical status. Her second point, however, is much more original and interesting, if less well-developed.

In Part I, Block considers the 1639 case of Isabel Criolla, a slave in Cartagena who ran away from her abusive mistress, seeking protection from the Spanish governor. In this attempt to limit abuse through an appeal to shared Christian values, Isabel used religion as leverage, maintaining that a return to her abusive owner would jeopardize, or possibly condemn, her soul. Although the Catholic governor heeded her warning, her abusive mistress appealed the judgment in the Superior Court of New Granada and successfully overturned the lower court's ruling. Isabel may have met with initial success in her plight to mitigate the physical and sexual abuse she endured, but the "imbedded loyalties of local politics and power" eventually trumped even the shared Catholic mores of elites and converted slaves (p. 50).

Part II examines the 1651 Inquisition case of Nicholas Burundel, a "reputed Englishman and alleged heretic" who was accused of espousing his anti-Cath-

lic sentiments to local residents. Block investigates the way Burundel, who was actually a French Calvinist, embraced the performative aspects of Catholicism in order to maintain his innocence. A distinctive feature of “post-confessional culture” in the Caribbean was that “heartfelt conversion” was utilized to “express allegiance” (p. 68). Whether facing the Lord Inquisitor in Cartagena or serving as the servant of the Spanish governor of Jamaica, Burundel used religious performance to define himself as a Spanish Christian and eschew his perceived heretical Englishness.

Part III investigates the story of Henry Whistler, an English sailor who arrived in Hispaniola in 1654 as part of a company of soldiers dispatched to fulfill Cromwell’s “Western Design” in the New World. Using Whistler’s experience as a lens, Block contends that “analyzing the influence of gender and race on the religious politics” of Cromwell’s political economy in the Caribbean emphasizes Englishmen’s new sense of Protestant sociopolitical cohesion and authority, an identity that was forged in opposition to “ungodly” black slaves and officers loyal to Cromwell’s Puritanism (p. 112). Her point that a unique “free-born Englishmen” identity was defined against “white slavery,” African pagans, and a rejection of Cromwellian political economy, is easily the most original of the book.

Part IV follows two enslaved household servants, Yaff and Nell, who labored in the service of their Quaker owner, Lewis Morris, in Barbados. The slaves’ participation in worship meetings and Quaker instruction served as a negotiating tool that mitigated their condition as human chattel. Or so they believed. Instead, as Block shows, the realities of profit-seeking planters who sought to maximize production and the nearly constant threat of slave rebellion trumped Quakers’ commitment to kinship and universal love. While Quakers have usually been pinned as antislavery crusaders, Block emphasizes that the story of Yaff, Nell, and Lewis is a “more accurate story of exclusion and distrust between Quakers and their human chattel in this early period” (pp. 196–197).

Block should be lauded for her methodology; her emphasis on the “entangled histories” of the early modern Caribbean and on piecing together the lives of marginalized folk goes against the grain and reflects her creativity and moral obligation to her sources. However, her fierce commitment to the “stories” of the voiceless at times undercuts the power of her project. Although she states that religion, rather than nationality, is a more useful category of analysis, her argument about race trumping religion as a key determinant in identity begs to be read through the lens of “nation,” since “race” and “nation” became interchangeable terms by the 1700s. And Block could have developed and sharpened her analyses in many areas. For instance, the irony of religion being “one of the most powerful tools to control the enslaved” while also providing “slaves

with the best opportunities to evade that control” would have been a wonderful frame for many of the sections (p. 62). Similarly, her argument about the emergence of “free-born Englishmen” in Part III is fresh and provocative, but underdeveloped and mostly confined to a single section. Lastly, her claim that the hypocrisies and inequalities of religion allowed ordinary folk to negotiate that religion seems like an imposition of modern-day values on the past. Rather than characterizing early modern religion as hypocritical, Block might better have viewed it as inchoate; it was precisely this incipient state that allowed for marginalized peoples to negotiate it and claim it as their own.

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