Katharine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 280 pp. (Cloth US\$ 39.95)

The subjects of Protestantism and racial slavery account for a great many of the books written about early British America and the Atlantic World, yet surprisingly few historians have attempted to assess the relationship between the two. Katharine Gerbner's well-researched *Christian Slavery* is a significant first step, shedding light on the way religion shaped both the practice of slavery and ideas about race in England's, and then Britain's, New World colonies. Gerbner asserts that from the 1650s onward the Protestant Anglican Church "was exclusive, the domain of slave owners and government officials" (p. 1). While true, one wonders about the fact that tens of thousands of mid-seventeenth-century white Britons killed one another in part because of disagreements over Christian religion and the state. For Englishmen in Barbados, Jamaica, and beyond to unite under Anglican Protestantism's exclusion of enslaved Africans and indigenous Americans is quite remarkable, perhaps attesting to the ways in which racial slavery changed everything.

Enslaved people in Spanish, Portuguese, and French Catholic colonies were regularly baptized and brought into the Catholic faith, yet Protestants from the British Isles resisted the Christianization of bonds people. As Gerbner demonstrates, generations of white planters and slave owners claimed an exclusive Christian identity for themselves while denying enslaved people access to God's saving grace. What she terms "anti-conversion sentiment" was rooted in "an exclusive ideal of religion based on ethnicity—a construct that I call 'Protestant Supremacy'" (p. 2). Gerbner suggests that in the seventeenth century and much of the eighteenth there was a clash between this Protestant Supremacy, which excluded the enslaved, and Christian Slavery, which sought to include them. Only in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did these two evolve into the proslavery and abolitionist movements respectively. *Christian Slavery* is a welcome corrective to earlier work or unexamined assumptions about the significance of Christian abolitionism early in the history of British slaveholding.

Gerbner acknowledges and builds upon the work of historians who have emphasized the persistence of African forms and beliefs in the development of black Protestantism in the British Atlantic. Yet at the same time she argues that free and enslaved Africans played a significant role in "transforming the culture of African Protestantism for both blacks and whites" (p. 10). Of particular note is her assertion that historians have exaggerated the emotive appeal of Protestant evangelism from the Great Awakening onward, and that well before these

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transformative revivals masters sought to deny the enslaved access to Christian knowledge and literacy which—with its real and symbolic links to mastery and power—proved appealing to many bonds people. That said, it is remarkably difficult to assess what Protestantism may have meant to enslaved people in mid-seventeenth-century Barbados or Virginia, and it can be no surprise that this book engages more successfully with the better documented stories of white beliefs and practices. Yet Gerbner does well in assessing what little concrete evidence survives, and her reading of this material and its potential significance is persuasive.

Ranging from West Africa to the Caribbean and North America, and from Anglicans to Quakers and Mennonites, this is an impressive book which succeeds in doing justice to the role of northern Europeans and their articulation of Protestantism in the developing slave societies of the British Americas, while uncovering the attempts of the enslaved to harness this religion and its trapping for themselves. Gerbner sheds light on the ever-deepening tension between Protestant supremacy and Christian slavery, a tension that required Whites to “reconsider the relationship between freedom and Protestantism” (p. 193). A series of questions demanded answers, and these answers threatened fundamental change: could enslaved people become Christian? Should Christians be enslaved? And could free black and indigenous Christians become full members of both church and state? As Gerbner demonstrates, race and ideas of whiteness became ever more important in the ways that slave owners responded to these questions, fashioning an ideology that was vulnerable to the abolitionists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. More than anything else this book demonstrates that Protestantism was of fundamental significance to the evolution of the idea and practice, first of slavery and then of race in the British Americas.

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