CHAPTER 16

German Pietism and the Origin of the Black Church in America

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Introduction

One of the most important stories in the history of Western civilization is the conversion of over a million enslaved Africans in North America to Protestant Christianity. Historians Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood call this “the single most significant event in African American history” because their new faith “provided Afro-Atlantic peoples with an ideology of resistance and the means to absorb the cultural norms that turned Africans into African Americans.”¹ The term “Black Church” refers to a variety of evangelical denominations (mainly Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal) that share the heritage of slavery and resistance. The Black Church remains one of the central pillars of African American culture, as evidenced by the prominent role African American clergy, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jessie Jackson, have played in world politics and social justice advocacy. Black theology of liberation continues to inform and inspire those confronting systems of injustice in many countries.²

Studies of the Black Church and its role in American culture abound, but largely overlooked until recently has been the critical role played by eighteenth-century German Pietism in the creation of the Black Church. This is in part due to the fact that prior to the Civil Rights movement after World War II, white academics largely ignored the Black Church entirely. African American denominations scarcely appeared in the older, standard studies of religion in America. For instance, in The American Church History Series, a monumental study of American religion edited by Philip Schaff in the 1890s, there are no entries for the many African American denominations. The introduction does address the fact that more than a third of African Americans were Christians in the 1890 United States census, but says almost nothing about their churches.

² James Cone, God of the Oppressed (Maryknoll, NY, rev. 1997) remains a classic introduction to Black theology of liberation.
The author of volume one simply asserted with characteristic paternalism that “the negro is not only Christian, he is an evangelical Christian. He is a devout Baptist and an enthusiastic Methodist. He loves these denominations, and seems to find in them an atmosphere more congenial to his sunny disposition.”\(^3\) As to the conversion of enslaved Africans, the author notes without irony that it “was fortunate for him that, while he was the slave of the white master, that master was a Christian and instructed him in the Christian faith.”\(^4\)

Eighty years later, Sidney Ahlstrom acknowledged that the situation had improved slightly thanks to the Civil Rights Movement, and that the meager attention he gave to the Black Church in his massive history of American religion “can be regarded as no more than preliminary.”\(^5\) It was generally recognized by scholars of religion in the twentieth century that African American Protestant churches had a distinctive character, especially in terms of worship, but little attention was given to the uniqueness of the Black Church except for W.E.B. Du Bois’s classic text *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903.\(^6\) Du Bois focused on ways in which the experience of slavery and segregation had shaped African American culture and spirituality rather. The book contains many accounts of African American religious experience, but it has little to say about the formative period of the eighteenth century. Carter G. Woodson’s 1921 work *History of the Negro Church in America* was the standard text on the history of African American churches for half a century, but it did not explore the creation of African American Protestantism prior to the Methodists.\(^7\) Likewise E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Church in America* implies that the Black Church began during the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century since he gives little attention to the eighteenth century.\(^8\)

One reason for the lack attention given to role of Pietism in the creation of the Black Church is that American historians have focused on the United States with little attention to the larger colonial world. Often overlooked in studies of American religion is that there was a great deal of contact between the British colonies in the Caribbean and the new American states, particularly South