CHAPTER TEN

PINK, WHITE, AND BLUE:
FUNCTION AND MEANING OF THE COLORED
CHOIR RIBBONS WITH THE MORAVIANS

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One of the most striking and noticeable phenomena of Moravian culture in the mid-eighteenth century were the colored ribbons the women wore to tie their caps. Many visitors to a Moravian community noted the colored ribbons and even modern day tourists in Moravian towns such as Herrnhut in Germany, Fulneck in England, or Bethlehem in Pennsylvania are fascinated when this practice is explained to them by their tour guides.

It is all the more surprising that we know so little about the ribbons. We know which colors corresponded to each group, but not much is known about the origins of the choir ribbons or about their exact function. Why did Moravians use these ribbons and what do they say about the community in which they were used? In the 1740s, ribbons were worn not only by the women but also by the men; only later did the ribbons exclusively become part of women’s culture.

Ever since Colleen McDannell’s study, *Material Christianity*, attention has been given to material aspects of the culture of religious groups.¹ This aspect of Moravian material culture has only been superficially studied so far. Although the choir ribbons did not go unnoticed in studies of Moravian dress, authors did not go far beyond listing the meaning of the different colors. Otto Uttendörfer, Moravian pastor and administrator during the first half of the twentieth century, had an immense and detailed knowledge of the Herrnhut archives. In his wide-ranging economic history of Herrnhut, he discussed the introduction of the colors for the individual choir ribbons and the changes they

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underwent over time.\textsuperscript{2} Gisela Mettele, in her excellent study of Moravian dress, examines the sociological role of fashion in the creation of a common group identity and in its role in separation from other groups.\textsuperscript{3} Mettele mentions the choir ribbons and explains the symbolic meaning of the various colors but does not deal with the sociological function of the ribbons.\textsuperscript{4} Craig Atwood discusses the ribbons in the Moravian congregation of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and draws attention to the “ribbon-giving ceremonies.”\textsuperscript{5}

In 1722, the first community of the Moravians (also known as the Unity of the Brethren) originated in Herrnhut, Saxony. Under the leadership of Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), a religious movement developed that combined elements from Lutheranism, Pietism, the Bohemian Brethren, and Mysticism. From the late 1730s on, new communities in other parts of Europe and America were formed, all modeled on the same principles. Each eighteenth-century Moravian congregation was divided into groups according to age, gender, and marital status. Each member of the congregation belonged to one of these so-called choirs (German: \textit{Chor}). A choir had its own pastoral leaders. Some choirs, such as the single sisters, the single brothers, and the widows lived together in choir houses.\textsuperscript{6} The choir system proved to be a successful form of pastoral care of individuals, especially in the larger congregations. It was within these choirs that the ribbons played such an important role.

One way for religious individuals or groups to express their attitude towards the world was through their dress. By wearing different clothing, the devout demonstrate that he or she is different and not part of the world. Religious dress is an excellent way to make visible one’s separation from the wider culture. Furthermore, dress is a possible means to express the values of the group, in most cases simplicity and obedience. Religious dress can also express the opposite: ostentatious vestments made of fine


\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., pp. 309–311.

\textsuperscript{5} Craig D. Atwood, \textit{Community of the Cross: Moravian Piety in Colonial Bethlehem} (University Park, 2004), p. 190.

\textsuperscript{6} On the choir system, see Atwood, \textit{Community of the Cross} (see above, n. 5), pp. 173–178.