Chapter 7

The Overly Candid Missionary Historian: C.G.A. Oldendorp’s Theological Ambivalence over Slavery in the Danish West Indies

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Introduction

Shocked and deeply offended, the pietistic preacher and scholar Christian Oldendorp (1721–1787) wrote an indignant letter of protest to the elders of the Moravian Church on 2 June 1777. He had just received the published volumes of his great history of the Moravians’ mission to the Danish West Indies, only to find that his three thousand-page manuscript had been cut by three quarters and thoroughly rewritten by the editor appointed by his principals, the church elders. Oldendorp felt degraded to ‘an assistant who only provided materials for the editor’ and utterly humiliated by the editor’s foreword, which stated that the author had been unable to condense his vast materials into a publishable book. ‘The History has been taken away from me and my name is included only to disgrace me,’ he wrote.¹

A comparison of Oldendorp’s manuscript with the book published in 1777 by the editor, Johann Jakob Bossart (b. 1721), largely confirms the author’s lamentation that these are in many respects two different works.² One of the most conspicuous differences concerns the conflicting approaches to depicting slavery and the African Caribbean slave population. In spite of its many ambivalences, the original manuscript can be read as a scathing critique of the West Indian slave society and a passionate appeal for the human dignity of its

African and African Caribbean victims. This is remarkable both because Oldendorp deviated far from the official Moravian policy on the matter and because these elements in his text were largely removed or subdued by the editor. Bossart, head of the Moravian Church archives and teacher at its theological seminar in Barby, Saxony, had never visited the Caribbean.\(^3\) Christian Oldendorp, on the other hand, had made extensive first-hand observations for his history during a journey to the Danish sugar islands of St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix in 1767–1768.

Around the time Oldendorp's mission history was published, the Moravian church, a radical pietistic-protestant revivalist movement, was making great efforts to restore its international reputation, which had been severely damaged by a period of ecstatic excesses in the 1740s and a financial crash resulting from overspending in 1753. Starting in the 1760s, the Moravians, also known as the United Brethren or *Herrnhuter Brüdergemeinde*, published a number of works intended to improve their public image and bring out their merits in the missionary field. These works included Oldendorp's history of their mission to the Danish West Indies. Control and oversight was concentrated within the Unity Elder's Conference (UAC), which started exercising a strict supervision of all the Moravian's far-flung international activities. The UAC re-emphasized the Moravian policy of deference towards the power that be and respect for secular authority. In the Caribbean context, this meant accepting slavery and supporting the social status quo of slave society.\(^4\) Eventually, this careful public relations work both towards colonial authorities and the European general public yielded very good returns. The Moravians' apparent success in turning heathens into ‘civilised’ and humble ‘real Christians’ was important for their rehabilitation and rise to a model for the modern missionary movement towards the end of the eighteenth century.\(^5\)

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