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From Protestant Supremacy to Christian Supremacy

Rebecca Anne Goetz

Over the last generation, historians have begun to explain Christianity's impact on developing ideas of race and slavery in the early modern Atlantic. Jon Sensbach's *A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763–1840* showed how Moravians struggled with both race and slavery, ultimately concluding that Moravians adopted the racist attitudes of their non-Pietist North Carolina neighbors. Travis Glasson's *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World* showed how the Anglican church accustomed itself to slavery in New York and the Caribbean. Richard Bailey's *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* unraveled changing puritan ideas about race and belonging in New England. My own book, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race*, argued that Protestant ideas about heathenism and conversion were instrumental to how English Virginians thought about the bodies and souls of enslaved Africans and Native people, and to how they developed a nascent idea of race in seventeenth-century Virginia. Heather Kopelson's *Faithful Bodies: Performing Religion and Race in the Puritan Atlantic* traced puritan ideas about race, the soul, and the body in New England and Bermuda. From a different angle, Christopher Cameron's *To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement* outlined the influence of puritan theologies on black abolitionism.[16] Engaging all this scholarly ferment is Katharine Gerbner's new book, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World*. Gerbner's work both synthesizes and transforms this extended scholarly conversation with a broad and inclusive look at Protestants—broadly defined as Anglicans, Moravians, Quakers, Huguenots, and others—and race in the seventeenth and eighteenth

[16]Jon Sensbach, *A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Travis Glasson, *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Richard Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Rebecca Anne Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Heather Miyano Kopelson, *Faithful Bodies: Performing Religion and Race in the Puritan Atlantic* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); and Christopher Cameron, *To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2014).

Rebecca Anne Goetz is Associate Professor of History at New York University.

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centuries over a geography stretching from New York to the Caribbean. The book is synthetic in that it builds on the regional and confessionally specific work of earlier scholars, but innovative in its argument that Protestants from a variety of European backgrounds and sometimes conflicting theologies all wrestled with questions of Christian conversion of enslaved peoples—could it be done? Should it be done? And, of overarching concern: how could Protestant Christians in good conscience hold fellow African and Native Christians as slaves?

In answering these questions, Gerbner proposes two new concepts, named with delightfully catchy phrases. The first is "Christian Slavery," which, as Gerbner notes, was a "polysemic concept" encompassing the myriad ways in which Protestant slaveholders and missionaries attempted to justify first not converting enslaved people at all and, after they reconciled themselves to proselytizing enslaved people, how to justify holding enslaved Christians in bondage. Protestants' conclusion, Gerbner argues, allowed them to suggest that "race, rather than religion, was the defining feature of bondage."[17] In other words, it was Protestant missionaries' very commitment to converting enslaved people that allowed them to more clearly articulate racial difference. To describe the effects of debates about Christian Slavery, Gerbner situates her argument within what she terms "Protestant Supremacy." In articulating their own commitment to Christianity and to slavery, white Protestant slaveholders "conceived of their Protestant identities as fundamental to their status as masters."[18] They also came to see themselves as "white"—a racial category that was inextricably linked to their status as planters, as holders of wealth in the form of enslaved people. Gerbner argues boldly and convincingly for considering the links between the Protestant Supremacy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the modern problem of White Supremacy. The intellectual and theological contortions of Anglicans in Barbados and Moravians in the Danish West Indies cast significant shadows in the present moment as we continue to wrestle with the implications of the religious and racial exclusivity seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Protestants pioneered. As Gerbner concludes: "The irony is dark and yet unambiguous: the most self-sacrificing, faithful, and zealous missionaries in the Atlantic world formulated and theorized a powerful and lasting religious ideology for a brutal system of plantation labor."[19] I would add that that ideology remained "powerful and lasting" in the Jim Crow South, in the Caribbean (where today the argument for reparations is rooted in this history), and in the

[17]Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 3
[18]Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 2.
[19]Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 196.

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present United States, where issues of race, White Supremacy, and the state are daily in the news. Gerbner has given us an engaging *longue-durée* analysis of how the most harmful tendencies in our contemporary public life originated.

Gerbner's book is an excellent capstone for the multiple lines of inquiry on the topic of religion and race in the Protestant Atlantic, but where should scholars go from here? How should we make connections among Gerbner's work, other scholarship on the Protestant Atlantic, and the wider Atlantic world? Gerbner touches on the Spanish antecedents for controversies about conversion and slavery (the precedent of the Siete Partidas, for example). How might historians consider the intellectual and theological disputes of the Spanish/Catholic Atlantic alongside those in the Protestant Atlantic? Latin Americanists have written extensively about race and the ways in which Roman Catholicism can be implicated in ideas about racial difference and about slavery. Work by María Elena Martínez, Ann Twinam, and Joanne Rappaport, among many others, make deeply important points about how race and religion operated in Spanish American societies. How do we braid the threads of these Atlantics together? We often consider what happened in Spanish colonies in the Caribbean littoral as precursors to what happened in Anglophone and Dutch colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, yet Spanish societies developed alongside Protestant ones and also have critical seventeenth- and eighteenth-century histories. How would the religious and racial histories of largely Protestant colonies look when read alongside the histories of largely Catholic colonial spaces?

We have some models for how this kind of scholarship might look: Kristen Block's *Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean: Religion, Colonial Competition, and the Politics of Profit* toggles between the Spanish and English Atlantics and Jenny Shaw's *Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans, and the Construction of Difference* shows how Irish Catholics and English Protestants lived cheek-by-jowl in seventeenth-century Barbados.[20] Protestants, as Gerbner points out, were quite aware of Catholic evangelization efforts and often saw themselves in moral competition with their Catholic counterparts. Governor Christopher Codrington's efforts on the Anglo-French island of Saint Kitts seemed particularly Catholic, as Gerbner argues when she points out the English of Saint Christopher's close relationship with the Catholic French with whom they shared the island.[21] Gerbner's book does suggest the kind of work that might be done putting Protestant and Catholic practices, beliefs, and evangelical rivalries into conversation with one another.

[20]Block, *Ordinary Lives in the Early Caribbean*; and Jenny Shaw, *Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans, and the Construction of Difference* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).

[21]Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 100, 103–104.

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Enslaved people engaged Catholicism and various kinds of Protestantisms around the Atlantic. In 1570, an enslaved Native man named Francisco interviewed as part of a judicial investigation in the pearl colony of Cabo de la Vela insisted on reciting Catholic catechism to the visiting judge (even though the judge's set questions did not cover the religious beliefs of interviewees).[22] Francisco might have emphasized the cruel treatment the Spanish meted out to enslaved Native divers, as many of his counterparts did, but instead he chose to demonstrate his Catholicism for the judge. Why? And what connections might we make between Francisco's use of Christianity and those of the Afro-Caribbean enslaved people whom Gerbner describes expressing their desire to learn to read as they greeted Friedrich Martin on Saint Thomas in the 1730s?[23] Perhaps Francisco thought the Spanish judge might free him if he appropriately demonstrated his faith? Perhaps the enslaved people of Saint Thomas also thought that reading and studying Christianity might help them earn their freedom? Gerbner points to the ways in which enslaved people used Christianity as resistance, though her focus is not on subaltern Christianities. One way to connect historiographies of religion and race might be to focus on enslaved people in both Catholic and Protestant spaces who saw baptism as a means to gain some advantages and possible access to freedom in otherwise all-encompassing slave systems.

We need not make these connections merely in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The intertwined relationship between religion and race continues into the modern era. How do we connect our knowledge of the early modern period to the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries? Work by Judith Weisenfeld, Edward Blum, Jemar Tisby, and Paul Harvey (to name just a few) all suggest the modes in which early modern attitudes were extended into and were transformed by later centuries. This suggests the possibility of a broader inquiry—instead of "Protestant Supremacy," we might perhaps think about a generally shared attitude of "Christian Supremacy" that includes not just the Atlantic world but also the Indian Ocean and Pacific worlds. Gerbner is absolutely right to connect her Protestant Supremacy with White Supremacy, but the historical origins of White Supremacy are even broader than her present work argues. There are wide-ranging implications for how scholars understand the links among Christianity (in its Protestant and Catholic iterations), colonialism, and slavery both historically and in the present. Gerbner's *Christian Slavery* points us in the right direction.

[22]Eduardo Barrera Monroy, "Los Esclavos de las Perlas: Voces y Rostros en la Granjería de Perlas de Cabo de la Vela (1540–1570)," *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico* 19, no. 61 (2002): 24.
[23]Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 168.

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