theories and methodologies

Soul Matters

JOANNA BROOKS

IS THERE A NEW "RELIGIOUS TURN" IN EARLY AMERICAN STUDIES? OR DO DECLENSIONS AND REVIVALS IN SCHOLARLY ATTENTION TO RELIgious matters suggest something about how religion and spirituality are lived? Witness an episode from the life of Olaudah Equiano, as recorded in his *Interesting Narrative* (1789), one of the new classics of early American literary study. It is October 1773, and the twenty-eight-year-old Equiano finds himself once again home in London. London, of course, is home in name only. Where is home for Equiano, really? Is it Igbo West Africa, the Carolinas, Philadelphia, London, or the black Atlantic itself? Did Equiano himself even know?

What he does know is that it is fall and the weather is turning, that at twenty-eight years old he has no secure employment and no family, and that he is miserable. By his canny efforts, his savvy exploitation of entrepreneurial niches in an exploitation-powered Atlantic economy, he is free. Free, that is, to worry about his day-to-day survival. Free to live among strangers who constantly endeavor to cheat him. But also free to pursue his "chief comforts" in life: "the musical French-horn" and the "dressing of hair" (179). Perhaps, Equiano wonders through the winter months, he might find a place where he could pursue another kind of freedom by "work[ing] out my own salvation, and in so doing, procure a title to heaven" (178).

The idea that human beings might work out their own salvation is, of course, heretical to Christianity, which holds that salvation is won for humankind by Christ. It is also antithetical to the quality of life on the black Atlantic, as Equiano is once again reminded, when in spring 1774 he witnesses his friend John Annis, a free black cook, kidnapped from his shipboard employ and forced back into slavery. To rescue his friend, Equiano undertakes extraordinary legal efforts and costs, but these avail him nothing—even his lawyer cheats and abandons him. Annis is transported to Saint Kitts, where he is staked to the ground, loaded with irons, and tortured until he dies. Once again Equiano is left to face his own powerlessness against death and exploitation. "I became a burden to myself," he writes,

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"and viewed all things around me as emptiness and vanity, which could give no satisfaction to a troubled conscience" (181).

His thin-walled London lodging house, with its noise, its turbulence, and its pestilence, is a poor place to grapple with such matters as these, so Equiano spends his days walking the streets of London. One day he finds himself at the house of "an old seafaring man, who experienced much of the love of God shed abroad in his heart." The man invites Equiano into his home, asks him to sit, perhaps offers him something warm to drink. "As I desired to love the Lord, his conversation rejoiced me greatly," Equiano writes, "and indeed I had never heard before the love of Christ to believers set forth in such a manner, and in so clear a point of view." What is it Equiano feels? Solidarity? Familiarity? Understanding? The conversation is interrupted when a visiting evangelical minister drops in and invites Equiano to a "love-feast" at his church that evening. The invitation, Equiano writes, "cheered my then heavy and drooping spirit more than any thing I had met with for many months. . . . I wished much for the company of these friendly men" (183).

Naively, Equiano assumed the "love-feast" to be an actual banquet. But what he encountered that night at the clergyman's chapel was an assembly of clergy members and believers, regular men and women, extemporaneously sharing their experiences and manifesting to Equiano's eyes a remarkable sense of certainty—the feeling he may have hungered for most. "I was entirely overcome," Equiano writes, "and wished to live and die thus." Four hours passed in the sharing of experiences. Then the assembled men and women passed "some neat baskets full of buns" around and "sipped water out of different mugs," and "each person communicated with his neighbor." There was for a moment no shipboard rank, no imminent threat of capture, no lodging-house chaos—just the simplicity of bread and water, the intimacy of experience, plain faces in candlelight. "The first soul-feast I ever was present at," Equiano notes (184).

As soon as the next day broke, Equiano left his lodging house to seek the assurance of the soul-feast company. He found the old sailor at home with his wife, both of them busy with their silk-weaving piecework. Once again Equiano was welcomed in to sit and talk about "soul matters." "They seemed mutually happy," Equiano writes. "Their discourse was amazingly delightful, edifying, and pleasant" (185). With their guidance Equiano began to take his religious course of study more seriously. Still, the clergymen at his local Methodist chapel judged him insufficiently prepared for communion. And then there was, as always, the problem of making a living. In fall 1774 Equiano prepared to hire himself out for a voyage to Spain, a prospect so dire it made him consider taking his own life. But armed with a Bible and religious tracts from an evangelical Christian associate, Equiano went to sea, and it was at sea, on 6 October 1774—the date is noted in *The Interesting Narrative*—that Equiano had a vision that confirmed his Christian conversion. But there was no one on board with whom he felt he could share his experience. "I much longed to be with some to whom I could tell of the wonders of God's love towards me, and join in prayer to him whom my soul loved and thirsted after. I had uncommon commotions within, such as few can tell aught about. Now the Bible was my only companion" (191). On his return to London, he discovered the company he sought at New Way Chapel in Westminster, where he was admitted to communion after examination.

Contemporary reviewers confessed they found these scenes from *The Interesting Narrative* tedious. In May 1789 Mary Wollstonecraft wrote in the *Analytical Review*, "The long account of his religious sentiments and conversion to Methodism is rather tiresome" (qtd. in Carretta 332). In fact expressions of religious sentiment appear only episodically

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in the first part of *The Interesting Narrative*, and the acute phase of Equiano's conversion takes up less than one chapter of twelve. Still, with its frank confession of powerlessness, loneliness, and hunger for nourishment in soul matters, Equiano's conversion narrative challenges the reader. Instead of offering simple entertainment or an even narrative of progress, it demands a willingness to enter intimate conversation about soul matters, to stand as it were in a candlelit circle, buns and mugs of water in hand—like Equiano, whose hunger for this kind of consoling experience drove his conversion, which makes sense given the role existential insecurity played in shaping *The Interesting Narrative*.

We see Equiano seeking such consolation as a teenager in the early 1760s when he meets on the ship *Aetna* a forty-year-old messmate named Daniel Queen. "This man soon became very much attached to me," Equiano explains, "and took very great pains to instruct me in many things. He taught me to shave and dress hair a little, and also to read in the Bible, explaining many passages to me, which I did not comprehend"—including descriptions of laws and ceremonies that remind Equiano of his African home. Queen "was like a father to me," Equiano writes, "and some even used to call me after his name; they also styled me the black Christian. Indeed I almost loved him with the affection of a son" (92). It is in the context of religious instruction that he finds a sympathetic father figure, even in the predatory world at sea.

Equiano attempts to adopt this fatherly role himself in November 1775, when he meets four indigenous Central American men returning home after a year's stay in England. One of the four—the eighteen-year-old son of a tribal leader—has been baptized and renamed George but never truly instructed in the tenets of Christianity. Equiano teaches him the alphabet and the rudiments of Christian doctrine, from which efforts grows an intimacy between the younger man and the older. Equiano writes, "When I used to go to bed at different hours of the night, if he was in his bed, he would get up on purpose to go to prayer with me, without any other clothes than his shirt; and before he would eat any of his meals amongst the gentlemen in the cabin, he would first come to me to pray, as he called it. I was well pleased at this, and took great delight in him" (203). But the relationship between Equiano and George draws ridicule from other sailors, which causes George to pull back and prefer time alone. He would not "be with me even at prayers," notes Equiano of the loss (204). George and his three traveling companions disembark in January 1776, carrying cases of liquor back to their Central American towns.

Similarly earnest but abortive is Equiano's 1779 effort to obtain the blessing of the bishop of London to serve as a missionary to Africa. Confessing himself "heartily disgusted with the seafaring life," Equiano accepts a position as a household servant to Matthias Macnamara, who notes Equiano's religiosity—especially in his practice of asking other servants to "join me in family prayer," which was met with "mockery" (220). Macnamara encourages Equiano to consider missionary service and in March 1779 assists him in assembling a dossier of application and recommendation letters for the bishop. The bishop, Equiano writes, "received me with much condescension and politeness" but "declined to ordain me" (223). After this disappointment, there is a gap of five years in the narrative, and the chapter concludes as does the book itself when Equiano finds a place in the anti-slave-trade fight in the 1780s.

That *The Interesting Narrative* does not end on a religious note is significant: religious conversion does not free Equiano from the ongoing existential crises endemic to black Atlantic life. In this *The Interesting Narrative* breaks from the conventions of eighteenth-century spiritual life writing. For those who mastered the genre and its forms, narratives

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of conversion move the self beyond the randomness of daily life into a different way of being in relationship and time. Hazards, dramas, and private agonies give way at last to religious community and assurance. Lives are regularized by the rhythms of preaching, missionary work, and religious observance, since many (if not most) authors of eighteenth-century spiritual autobiographies are preachers or exhorters who used the texts as an element of their ministries.

But not Olaudah Equiano. Just as his peripatetic, self-making narrative tries on and works through many eighteenth-century aspirational discourses, his spiritual narrative is discontinous and incomplete. Intimacy is continually sought, temporarily experienced, but persistently ephemeral. So too are his religious affiliations: Equiano is, after all, an African who traces his roots to the Jews and a baptized Anglican who finds his most profound spiritual experiences in Methodism and yet continues to the end of his life to call himself a "church man" rather than a dissenter. He does not during his fallow years in the early 1780s personally seek out Selina, the countess of Huntingdon, a celebrity of dissenting Christianity. As England's then most prominent patron of black authors (including Phillis Wheatley and James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw), the countess would likely have offered Equiano a place in her network of sponsored preachers, as she did for the black preachers David Margate and John Marrant. (He did, however, obtain her support as a subscriber.)

Equiano writes the experience of religion as worldly, discontinuous, and intimate. His narrative queries the very possibility of human relationship in a modern world where some people are marked for perpetual exploitation. And it puts this question not just before but to its readers, as it draws them into intimate matters of the soul. In the literary theorist Fred Moten's perceptive reading of Equiano's religiosity, the staging ground of knowledge and "salvation" is a sounding out not of individual subjectivity but of the "ensemblic mediation of improvisations" (282). For Moten the word *ensemble* is key, locating the pursuit of freedom in the intimate interstices of worldly relationship and marking its improvisatory impermanence as well. Religious narratives like Equiano's aim to draw readers into that ensemble, testing out experience the way one might at a soul feast and expecting readers to join in the breaking of bread and the passing round of mugs of water.

It can be uncomfortable for readers to bear such an expectation. One has to be open to that kind of intimacy, the way one must be open to inviting a stranger walking down the street to sit down for a cup of tea. Wollstonecraft was not the last reader to resist *The Interesting Narrative*'s intimate presumptions. Out of the hundreds of scholarly essays published on Olaudah Equiano, about one dozen have substantially engaged the role of religion in his writing, and two of the most significant of these dozen essays—by Adam Potkay and Srinivas Aravamudan—are locked in argument over whether the other is doing religion right. A soul feast it has not been.

Perhaps the quality of engagement with religion in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* reflects either a lingering uncertainty about the kinds of questions literary scholars can and should ask or a resistance to the prospect of asking such intimate questions. Perhaps that resistance stems from the resemblance between scholarship and religion: both, after all, are translational enterprises. As Talal Asad, an acute student of the relation between religion and the secular, has argued, religion has been one of the "weak" languages translated through ethnography into the "stronger" language of secularism. Similarly, to believers and practitioners religion is the strong language into which one translates the randomness of everyday life.

I am hopeful that recent scholarship interrogating the concept of the secular and

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especially the grand modern presumption of teleological secularization will furnish renewed terms for a closer conversation between scholarship and religion. Literary scholars like Tracy Fessenden, Vincent Pecora, and Gauri Viswanathan have reminded us that the secular is not, after all, constituted in the emptying out of religious thought or sentiment. Instead, according to Fessenden, Pecora, and Viswanathan, the secular is robustly uneven and internally contradictory, a conveyance for heterodoxy or a residual of locally elite forms of religiosity. *Secular*, it turns out, may just be another way of saying "complicated."

The complicated—worldly, discontinuous, yet intimate—religious life of Olaudah Equiano may provide some cues for a new round of conversation about religion in American literature. Remembering the worldliness of religion is especially important. This, after all, is what pioneering Americanists like Perry Miller and his protégés did so well: trace through the New England Puritans specific genealogies of American religious thought—these genealogies marking the way theology conditions the distribution of social and institutional power. Miller set a salutary example in his precision and his rigor, the detailed piecing together of names, dates, places, and theological technicalities to demonstrate that the ephemerality of religion's aspirations should not be dissociated from its worldly mechanics. There is more of this sort of work to be done, tracing lines of descent and influence in non-elite and non-Puritan communities.

It may also be helpful to season genealogical research of this kind with the awareness that religiosity can entail profound discontinuities of experience and affiliation, as Equiano's life demonstrates. I have argued elsewhere that literary texts can be examined as archives of dissenting, unorthodox, or heterodox theologies—archives that bear telling relation to the dominant institutionalized theologies of their times ("From Edwards to Baldwin"). But we cannot discern these dissenting, unorthodox, or heterodox theologies if we continue to reverence the secularist article of faith that holds that knowledge and culture must evolve evenly from orthodoxy into atheism. Equiano's personal history of temporary affiliations and interstitial ensembles proves instructive here: the church-house architecture of reassurance notwithstanding, religious traditions are profoundly fragmented in their histories, individual and institutional.

Finally, work remains in asking deeper methodological questions about our own resistance to the intimate conversations that discussion of religion can entail. We would not, after all, be reticent to examine the other great "comforts" in Equiano's life: hairdressing, the French horn. We are sometimes more guarded about engaging the comforts of religiosity. What intimate demands do accounts of religious conversion make on their readers? Why does the project of modern literary criticism from the late eighteenth century onward make us professionally resistant to acceding to these intimacies? What conditions do we put in place for engaging the spiritual in conversation? Is professional literary criticism, or the classroom, a variety of soul feast? Is the ensemble, improvisational quality of understanding that Equiano finds at the soul feast inimical to modern scholarly conceptions of knowledge and value? If so, what is the politics of this opposition?

For this is what *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* teaches us about our own scholarly engagement with religion—that religion returns and returns, not as something essential, monolithic, and abstract but as something worldly, discontinuous, and intimate. And always achingly incomplete.

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