

## Chapter 7

### Jamaican Slaves and Christianity

Jamaica was occupied by Juan de Esquivel from Santo Domingo in 1509, and when the first Spanish settlers arrived they began an immediate campaign to convert the native Arawak population to Catholic Christianity. At first they constructed simple churches of wood and straw, which were gradually replaced by much larger and more solid structures of stone. One such church was built at St Ann's Bay, then known as Sevilla Neuva; in addition, religious houses were founded.

The Spanish masters always felt that it was incumbent upon them to instruct their slaves in the Catholic faith; in fact, it was an essential feature of the Spanish Slave Code. But the Amerindian Arawaks were not particularly impressed by the new religion preached to them, since they associated it very closely with the heavy work which they were forced to do for their Spanish conquerors. Moreover, as we have seen, the Arawaks were unable physically to survive the harsh treatment that they received at the hands of the conquistadores, and within a little over a century their population had declined from something in the region of 60,000 to 74.

As the Amerindian population declined so the Spanish settlers became increasingly dependent upon the use of negro slaves who had been steadily imported from Africa since the beginning of the Spanish occupation. But the colony remained poverty-stricken and open to the attacks made repeatedly upon it by privateers and the ever-increasing number of runaway slaves, who frequently ganged up to pillage homes and sack churches. The colonists also suffered considerable damage and loss from hurricanes. In 1655 the islands became a British colony, and in consequence the established Roman Catholic faith and the Spanish way of life were quickly superseded by Protestantism and the current British life-style.

Soon after Charles II (1660-85) came to the British throne he received reports from the Jamaican colony concerning the general lack of religious organization, and the open immorality and uncivilized behaviour of a fair proportion of the British colonists in the island. In consequence he issued instructions that, in addition to rule by martial law, the Church of England was to become established in Jamaica in order, in his own words, 'to discourage vice and debauchery'.

As an increasing number of settlers arrived, and the population of negro slaves increased, the whole question of the morality of the slaves and of slavery itself began to be mooted. For their part, the English planters made it clear that, whatever the Anglican clergy might teach and preach, they did not want the slaves to get any ideas above their station, which was essentially one of total subservience. Nor, moreover, did they want the slave labourers to be worried too much about such sophisticated matters as sexual morality. The planters and their white managers, overseers and attorneys lived lives in which gambling, immorality and heavy drinking seem to have been the main forms of leisure activity. Female slaves were regarded for the most part as chattels to be used by their masters in any way they saw fit, or as the passion took them. In the meantime, the Anglican clergy generally took the path of discretion and exhorted the slaves to please their masters by working hard, and to accept with resignation their earthly lot which, whether predestined by God or not, had somehow devolved upon them.

It has been pointed out that the deliberate exclusion of the Caribbean slaves from the Christian community, to which their masters belonged, created differences of kind between the two groups. This resulted in the exploitation of slaves as real property from which their owners could extract the maximum social economic satisfaction. Unlike the Muslim Hausa, who converted their slaves to Islam, the English colonists in the Caribbean denied their slaves Christianity and treated them as being outside the pale of any Christian or human rights. As a result the response of the slaves themselves was negative, and rebellious crimes became common. In the Jamaican slave-society only the whites were considered to belong to the nation of the mother country, and the social distance between masters and slaves was very carefully maintained. They belonged to two different worlds in which their social institutions (whether of marriage, religion, education, kinship or family) were very differently conceived.

In the eighteenth century the number of Anglican clergy was very small, and there is little doubt that for the most part they accepted that the maintenance of this social distance was a good thing. Some undoubtedly felt that they might be able to do more for their coloured parishioners by not openly opposing and angering the planters and their overseers. Others somewhat naively suggested that if the slaves were converted to Christianity they would become

increasingly tractable, so that money spent on the expansion of the Anglican Church would be worthwhile. Edward Long, however, writing in 1774, did not mince his words when he suggested that there were some clerics who were more qualified to retail salt fish, or even to act as boatswains for privateers than to perform the functions of Christian priests.

By about 1820 at least a million slaves had been imported into Jamaica from the West coast of Africa, and out of a population at that date of something like 380,000 it was estimated that at least 310,000, or about 81 per cent, were slaves. And yet, in the *Jamaican Almanac* for 1812, only twenty clergymen of the Church of England were listed; and it became very clear that if the Anglican Church were to become in any sense a force in Jamaican society, or were to give even the most elementary instruction to its flock, whether white or black, the number of resident priests had to be considerably increased. But, in fact, during the next ten years only another dozen clerics were appointed, and it was only in 1825 that a bishop, who was to be responsible for the selection, character and supervision of the clergy, was appointed.

Whilst the Anglican Church did little or nothing to alleviate the plight of the slaves, there were other sects and denominations of Christianity gradually arriving and developing their missions in the Caribbean. The Quakers, for example, had been in Barbados since 1671, and George Fox urged all members of the Society of Friends to treat slaves in a humane manner and to set them free after a certain period of time. In 1754 the Moravians were somewhat surprisingly invited by two wealthy plantation-owners to send missionaries to their estates, and they were the first Christian denomination in Jamaica to attempt in any realistic way the task of teaching Christianity, and its meaning to slaves. It seems fairly clear that, despite their humanity and good intentions, these plantation-owners did not fully understand the real situation vis-a-vis the planters and the slaves, as they were themselves living in England, employing estate managers to run their plantations for them. Planters on the spot were certainly not in favour of anything that gave the negro a sense of his own worth, whether in the eyes of God or of man. Christianity, which might have led to monogamous marriage, was discouraged amongst the slaves. Despite the fact that in 1793 the Consolidated Slave Act had laid down that slaves were to be instructed in religion and baptism by their owners, the law was not widely

observed.

After the Moravians, missionaries of other denominations, including Wesleyan Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists, quickly followed. The Wesleyan Missionary Society was founded in Jamaica in 1789, and its members were amongst some of the most enthusiastic in their desire to convert the Negro slaves, and also to improve their physical condition and material environment; and they quickly succeeded in arousing the anger and opposition of the planters.

In 1782 there arrived on the Jamaican scene two American negro slaves, George Lisle and Moses Baker, who initiated the Native Baptist Movement. The Baptist denomination has always been the breeding-ground of vastly different and varying levels of thought, belief and faith, and it has embraced all types of disciple – from the scholar, the intellectual and the keen biblical critic to the fundamentalist and literalist, the evangelist and the authoritarian. The two American slaves were simple and uneducated negroes who easily mingled Christian elements of their faith with the superstition and more pagan ideas and ritual of primitive cultures. Before long an invitation was extended by the Government to the Baptist Missionary Society in England to send some of their missionaries to Jamaica. Not unnaturally many slaves were becoming confused concerning the essential message of Christianity, and these missionaries were invited to go in order to establish precisely what the Baptist message was, and to assist in the development of the Baptist mission. The Baptist Missionary Society complied, and the Jamaican Baptist Mission was established in 1814. In 1824 the Presbyterian Church of Jamaica was founded, and the Congregationalists followed soon after.

Despite the sometimes confusing desire to convert to a particular sect or denomination, it should be noted that the nonconformist groups in Jamaica, in general, worked together to protect slaves from excessive cruelty and to improve their condition by providing them with instruction on the sanctity of human life and personality, the importance of self-respect and the development of a sense of individual responsibility. It did not take long for many of the planters to see in all this 'Christianization' a threat to end slavery and, at the same time, their own economic interests – if not their personal safety. The hostility which the planters very clearly expressed soon turned to open threats, and when the threats were ignored there followed deliberate and unveiled persecution. Some groups of proselytizers decided to act with

discretion and to compromise; others, however, including the Baptists, stood firm and began to organize a plan for the abolition of slavery and all its attendant evils.

Warning notes were sounded from time to time in the West Indies, and Mrs Carmichael, who spent the years 1821-25 in St Vincent and Trinidad, made it abundantly clear that many mistakes were being made both by the established Church and by nonconformist missionaries. She felt that the Church of England was doing nothing towards the regular religious instruction of slaves, but that in attempting to rectify the situation the zeal of the dissenters had 'far exceeded their prudence'. She attacked, in particular, the Methodists who, according to her, insisted far more upon the sins of 'vain amusements and dress' than upon lying, theft, fighting, cruelty and slander. She went on to present a picture of most missionaries as being both uncultured and uneducated, and consequently unable to enter into some of the refinements of the 'civilized' society of the planters or to raise the social levels of the slaves. She herself saw little wrong with the dances of the negroes which were, in her view, always conducted with great ceremony and propriety. She added that:

Judging by the conduct of those Negroes who were the most regular attendants at the Methodist chapel, I am unwillingly driven to the belief that the Methodist missions have done little for the cause of true religion, and have rather helped to foster dangerous delusion. The Methodists I fear have done harm; for they have diffused a general feeling among the Negro population that abstaining from dancing, from drinking (a vice, by the way, which Negroes are rarely prone to) and a certain phraseology, which is mere form on their part, is Christianity.

This reaction may have been bias on Mrs Carmichael's part but, in consequence, she set about giving her slaves what she considered to be correct and adequate religious and moral instruction.

If the Methodists taught a somewhat strict code of dress, speech and social behaviour in St Vincent, the Baptists in Jamaica were inculcating a belief in liberty. The Baptists developed a Church membership which was supported by what was known as a 'Baptist ticket'. These 'tickets' were in fact printed cards issued each month to every member of the Baptist congregations by which offerings and weekly attendance were recorded. In addition, they served as passes to church meetings which were regarded as private, and at which on occasion plans for emancipation might be

discussed. In fact, the liberty which the Baptists and the Moravians in particular preached was blamed for the slave revolts which broke out in December 1831, and which led to a full-scale Slave Rebellion in 1832, frequently referred to as the 'Baptist War'.

Certainly these two sects were violently attacked by the Established Anglican Church for their responsibility for the affair, and some of their members were very badly treated. A union, called the Colonial Church Union, was founded ostensibly to protect the rights of the Anglican Church, but actually was a somewhat thinly disguised subterfuge designed to destroy the nonconformist missionary effort, to persecute nonconformist supporters and to protect the interests of slave-owners. There followed a vigorous destruction of Baptist, Moravian and Wesleyan chapels, mission-huts and property generally. All this – including the hounding, persecution and beating of the missionaries themselves – was carried out largely by the planters' tough employees. Leaders of the Moravian and Baptist missionary societies, such as H.G. Pfeiffer, William Knibb and Thomas Burchell were arrested and charged with inciting the slave revolt. There can be little doubt that these, and many other nonconformist leaders, had encouraged slaves to put forward demands for improved conditions and ultimate emancipation.

The hundreds of 'Baptist tickets' discovered on the estates where rebels were found were certainly not all planted, but although they were a fair indication of the Baptist support for the ultimate emancipation they hardly constituted proof of any conspiracy or incitement to rebellion by any leaders named. Eventually the missionaries were acquitted and released, and the Government, realizing that both the newly formed Colonial Church Union and the sentiments which inspired it were running counter to the tide of events, wisely disbanded the Union by Royal Proclamation.

After the full emancipation of the slaves in Jamaica on 1 August, 1834, many of the Christian churches, in a much more united effort than they had previously achieved, assisted the released slaves to make the difficult transition from servitude to freedom. The missionaries in particular saw it as a part of their duty to help the new citizens of the colony to purchase plots of land, as well as small dwellings, to enable them to settle down as full members of their society. Throughout the period of transition the Established Church still tended to remain somewhat aloof, in part because it chiefly represented the interests of the planters, who had

everything to lose from the increasing self-sufficiency of a liberated slave population, but also because the representatives of the Anglican Church in Jamaica found it very difficult to collaborate with missionaries and denominations which, not so very long before, they had violently persecuted and sought to destroy; or to treat as equals coloured peoples whom they had persistently exhorted to obey their masters and to be content with their condition.

After emancipation and the end of the unsuccessful apprenticeship scheme in 1838 increasing dissatisfaction was expressed with the way in which former slaves and people of the lower classes were being treated. In 1865, Dr Underhill, a Baptist minister, wrote a letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in which he described in some detail the living and working conditions in Jamaica which he had observed while living in the island. He complained in particular about the treatment which the lower classes received at the hands of planters and employers generally, and he urged certain reforms. His complaints and assertions were denied by nearly all the *custodes* and the Anglican clergy in Jamaica, but a copy of the letter found its way into the Jamaican newspapers.

In consequence of this, meetings were held in many different towns. Some of the meetings were presided over by George William Gordon, a member of the House of Assembly, supported by a political and religious agitator called Paul Bogle who certainly went much further than Gordon ever intended to go. The Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 resulted, and – although Gordon was almost certainly innocent – the two men were hanged. The Governor, Mr Edward John Eyre, was subsequently recalled and dismissed from the Imperial Service. The existing Government of Jamaica was forced to resign, the constitution was surrendered, and a Crown Colony government was established. The new Governor, Sir John Peter Grant, disestablished the Church of England, making the Anglican Church just another Christian denomination.

On emancipation there were considerable differences in the religious systems of masters and slaves as a result of the reluctance of slave masters to allow their slaves to be instructed in the Christian faith. In addition, since marriage was established as a religious sacrament, any refusal to allow slaves to become involved in the Christian religion also involved a virtual prohibition of marriages between them. This resulted in a familial disorganization of the slave population; and any existing slave family units were dissolved

through the transfer and sale of individual members.

It is not surprising that the refusal to recognise slaves, even after their emancipation, as being worthy of participating fully in Christianity – and all that this implied socially – at the same level as whites resulted in the persistence and development of a variety of African cults, which exist even today. It resulted also in attitudes to concubinage and promiscuity which are more often condemned than understood by societies where the Christian ideal of marriage is established. These were attitudes and behavioural forms into which slaves were forced by their masters' own patterns of behaviour, and in which they were deliberately encouraged. Moreover, any innocent tyro reading, or being introduced to, the Old Testament for the first time might possibly be forgiven for believing that the Lord Jehovah himself had sanctioned such activity. Concubines and limited promiscuity were certainly not exactly novel among the ancient Israelites!