Dissertation Abstract:

“The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Creation of Race in the Atlantic World”

This dissertation examines the eighteenth-century activities of the Anglican missionaries of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) in the Atlantic world and the responses and resistance of Africans and African-Americans, Native Americans, and European colonists to these efforts. The eighteenth century was a pivotal period in the development of ideas about human difference. Proto-scientific theories, religious beliefs, the growth of slavery, and increasing contact among the different peoples of the Atlantic world led to the combination and recombination of ideas about the origins of people and their relationships to each other. Out of this jumble would come hardening concepts about the division of humanity, a historical process usefully conceptualized as the “creation of race.” This study uncovers the ways the missionary encounter between the SPG and Native American and African-American peoples affected the creation of race in the Atlantic world.

In two opening chapters, I examine how Anglican views about theology and social structures established the parameters of the SPG’s activities around the Atlantic world. As the missionary wing of England’s established Church, the SPG’s membership included many influential religious and political leaders who played large roles in the intellectual and cultural life of eighteenth-century Britain. In the first chapter, I examine how the leadership and membership of the SPG participated in and were influenced by wider developments in Protestant theology that led to the first concerted Anglican efforts to convert non-European peoples to Christianity. Supporters of the SPG were drawn from across the range of eighteenth-century Anglican theological and political thinking. In the decades immediately following the founding of the Society, there was within the Church of England a broad consensus that it was right and
important to convert the Atlantic world’s Native American and African-American populations. Drawing on my analysis of the membership of the SPG, theological writings, and sermon material, I argue this consensus included both those who favored political liberalism and rationalistic theological positions and those who favored political conservatism and Scriptural literalism. Whether based on concepts of “natural religion” or concepts of Biblically-inspired “ethnic theology,” the SPG became formally committed to the Christianization of all peoples in the Atlantic world. In chapter two of this work, I explore the reverberative decision made by the SPG and the Anglican leadership that slavery and Christianity were entirely compatible, and indeed could be mutually beneficial. This position was not inevitable, and I show that there were important voices within Anglicanism and the SPG that questioned it, but it increasingly became the dominant one. While the Church of England was not alone in this position – it was for example also the position of the Roman Catholic Church – the implications for America, Britain, and the Caribbean were profound. Because it believed that church and state should support each other in a project of reformation, the SPG became an advocate for laws that tightened colonial slave codes and removed legal ambiguities that it saw as potential barriers to slave conversion. This project yoked Anglicanism to the burgeoning institution of Atlantic slavery and shaped the SPG’s interactions with all non-European peoples.

In the heart of my dissertation, I explore how these Anglican assessments of who should be converted and of the relationship between Christianity and slavery interacted with the beliefs and values of Native Americans and African-Americans around the Atlantic world. In chapter three, I examine the SPG’s century-long effort to convert the Iroquois peoples of north-eastern America to episcopal protestantism. This encounter was shaped not only by the desires of the SPG to counteract the efforts of French Catholic missionaries and to secure the Iroquois as British allies in their continuing wars with France, but by the political and cultural autonomy of
the Iroquois, particularly the Mohawk people. Mohawk communities alternately rejected, modified, and adopted Anglicanism as a marker of their own particular religious and social identity. Ultimately, while most Iroquois ignored Anglicanism in favor of their traditional religious practices or Roman Catholicism, a segment of the Mohawk people came to use Anglicanism to meet their own spiritual and political needs. This adoption of Anglicanism was not purely a local matter, but affected how Americans came to conceptualize Native Americans more widely by providing an image of an Indian people who were militarily strong, “loyal” to Britain, and good Protestants. In the torturous history of the development of race, not every encounter between the European settlers and Native Americans would produce these responses, but the complex implications of the Society’s encounter with the Iroquois are notable in comparison with the SPG’s interaction with the Atlantic world’s black population.

In chapters four and five of my dissertation, I turn to the SPG’s involvement with African-Americans at the most defining site of Anglican missionary effort in the Atlantic world. Through the bequest of a prominent Barbados planter, the Society became the owner and operator of Codrington, one of the largest sugar plantations in the Caribbean. In chapter four, I examine the population of the SPG’s Barbados estate to contextualize the encounter between British missionaries and the hundreds of SPG-owned African and Afro-Caribbean slaves who lived and worked on the Society’s plantation in the eighteenth century. These people, drawn mainly from the Gold and Slave Coasts of Africa, proved consistently resistant to the SPG’s version of Christianity, even at those times when the Society attempted to mobilize the full horrors of plantation discipline as coercive tools for their conversion. Using information such as slave naming practices, I argue that African-inspired cultural values were a continuous and dominant presence on Codrington throughout the eighteenth century. In chapter five of this work, I use this detailed knowledge of Codrington’s population to analyze how the encounter
between British missionary and West African slave played out in key areas including disputes over the plantation’s work regime, debates over slave literacy and education, and matters of religious practice including ritual rites such as baptism and burial. In the eighteenth-century, despite their continuing commitment to the conversion of their own slaves, the SPG was not able to effect a religious transformation on Barbados. In a period when a majority of Codrington’s population remained African-born, Anglicanism remained unappealing to most people on the estate because of its incompatibility with their own religious needs, because of their continued reliance on African religious practices, and because of the SPG’s tight connection to slave mastership. The Codrington experience too had ramifications beyond Barbados. I argue that in a misinterpretation that played out slowly over the course of the century, many in the ranks of the SPG took the rejection of Anglicanism by Codrington’s slaves largely as a sign that Africans were in particular ways unfit to become Christians.

In chapter six of this work I widen perspective to reveal further dimensions of this encounter between the SPG and non-European peoples in other locations around the Atlantic world. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the SPG was a force for reform in the Atlantic world, but by the second half of the century, the SPG had begun to doubt the wisdom of its conversion efforts among non-European peoples and had become completely enmeshed in the institution of Atlantic slavery. This change is captured in the histories of SPG efforts in South Carolina and the west African coast. Early in the century, the SPG missionary Francis Le Jau and others sought the conversion of both Native Americans and African Americans in the colony of South Carolina. Native Americans’ religious resistance to SPG missionary work and armed resistance to the encroachment of European settlers on their lands and livelihoods led Le Jau to conclude that southern Native Americans were beyond the reach of Christianity. When Carolina’s slave population proved likewise resistant to Le Jau’s efforts to spread Christian
values, he came to argue for a tightening of masters’ control over their slaves’ sexual lives and leisure time as an instrument for the refashioning of morality and religious practice in the colony. Like Codrington’s people, Carolina’s black population largely rejected Anglicanism. When some slaves began to make Protestant Christianity their own, they did so primarily within the traditions of non-Anglican dissent. This trend in the SPG’s interactions with the Atlantic world’s African peoples is brought forward to the late eighteenth century by a review of the Society’s missionary effort to west Africa. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the SPG sent two missionaries to Cape Coast Castle, a British trading post in modern Ghana. In a culmination of the SPG’s support for slavery, these ministers – including Philip Quaque, the first African-born person to be ordained in the Church of England – held dual appointments as missionaries to African peoples and as ministers to the slave traders and soldiers of the Royal African Company. Dispatched when some in the SPG believed that an African would best be able to convert other Africans to Anglicanism, Quaque spent nearly forty years as a missionary on the African coast. For over two decades he worked largely in isolation, unsuccessfully attempting to negotiate for himself a sustainable role between free Africans and slave traders at Cape Coast. Ultimately, Quaque converted few to Anglicanism and I argue that an SPG leadership that had come to believe that the conversion of African peoples by anyone was a practical impossibility effectively abandoned him.

I conclude by drawing together my analyses of these various encounters and refocusing on cultural and intellectual change. The creation of concepts of race was not a single event, but a multi-strand process that developed over the course of the eighteenth century. Around the Atlantic world, this process was determined both by intellectual trends and by responses to the experience of colonialism. In the case of settler and British perceptions of Native Americans, the SPG’s relationship with the Mohawks provided an important and largely positive note in a
complex cultural debate about the place of Native Americans in emerging conceptions of racial hierarchy. In the case of African peoples, I argue that in an important misinterpretation of how events in America had developed over the course of the century, many within the SPG saw the refusal of its Codrington slaves and others to adopt Anglicanism not as evidence of the Society’s failings, but as a mark of the fundamental and inherent inferiority of Africans. The SPG’s experience suggests that an important strain in the eighteenth-century development of ideologies of human difference – the hardening of hostility to some non-European peoples based on perceptions of their rejection of Christianity – has been missed by most historians. Christianity played an important role not only in shaping the initial encounter between European and non-European peoples, but had continuing importance as a contributor to the development of race as a potent ideology in the late eighteenth century. In an era when most Euro-Americans and Britons continued to filter their perceptions of the world through religious lenses, the acceptance or rejection of Christianity was not interpreted as just a matter of personal choice, but was wrongly identified as an important indicator of fundamental difference.