The Ultimate Sin: Christianising Slaves in Barbados in the Seventeenth Century

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My article traces the changing attitudes toward slave conversion in seventeenth-century Barbados – from hesitant discomfort in the mid-seventeenth century, to virulent rejection in 1680 – and argues that the attempted rebellion of 1675, which was widely blamed on Quaker proselytising efforts, played a pivotal role in the development of an antagonistic attitude toward missionaries in Barbados. The 1675 attempted rebellion, I suggest, linked slave conversion with slave rebellion in a new and decisive way that had repercussions throughout the British West Indies.

For proselytising Christians in the late seventeenth century, Barbados was not a welcoming place. For those concerned with the souls of African and Creole slaves, it was openly hostile. It had not always been so. Between 1627, when the English settled permanently on the island, and 1680, when the conversion of slaves was denounced as being simultaneously pointless and destructive, much had changed: sugar had replaced tobacco as the island’s primary crop, African slaves had replaced European (primarily Irish) indentured servants as the island’s primary work force, and big planters had come to dominate local politics.¹ These new developments contributed to the creation of an antagonistic relationship between Anglican planters and Christian missionaries as the former, finding themselves increasingly isolated, looked for ways to control their growing number of slaves.

Yet while these broad shifts in economy, population, and politics set the stage for the battle over enslaved African and Creole souls, Barbados could have developed into a different type of slave society. There were other models, including the so-called ‘paternalistic ethos’ that developed in colonies like Virginia and South Carolina that allowed at least ‘modest gains’ for Protestant missionaries.² The slave society in Colonial Mexico described by Herman Bennett offers another potential model in which enslaved Africans were at least theoretically supposed to be converted to...
Christianity – in this case Catholicism – before they arrived in the Americas. Richard Dunn confirms that

the [West Indian] planters’ determination to keep their blacks at arm’s length [was] a striking characteristic of Negro slavery in the sugar islands [and that] [by] refusing to admit slaves into their churches the English planters differed markedly from contemporary French, Spanish and Portuguese slave owners.

How did planters in the West Indies develop such an abhorrence of missionary work, while planters in other colonies were at least marginally accepting? And why? This essay argues that a turning point in the development of anti-missionary sentiment occurred in Barbados between 1675 and 1676, when a group of enslaved Africans organised a plot to overthrow their masters and take over the island of Barbados. The slaves failed, but their actions had consequences. In the hysteria following the attempted rebellion, the island’s militia system was improved and further controls were placed on slaves. This was not all: the leading planters, as well as the small but existing Anglican ministry, found a convenient scapegoat for the revolt in the sizable community of Quakers living on the island. Quakers, the Anglican planters claimed, were at fault for the unruly behaviour of black slaves because they brought them ‘into their Meetings’ and taught them the Gospel. As a result, ‘the safety of this Island [was] hazared’. Within a year of the attempted rebellion, the Barbados Council had passed not only a more rigorous version of the 1661 Act for the ordering and governing of Negroes, but also an Act to prevent the people called Quakers, from bringing Negroes to their meeting.

Quakers had, in fact, been bringing slaves ‘into their Meetings’ and teaching them about Christianity, but it is far from likely that they were encouraging their slaves to rebel. The Quakers were, like most Anglcians on the island, slave owners who had it in their best interest to subdue rebellion. Moreover, Quakers were inflexible pacifists who rejected the use of violence. Anglican planters knew this: the Barbados Council had fined and jailed Quakers for their refusal to support the Barbados militia that patrolled the island.

So why did the Anglican planters blame Quakers for slave rebellion? From one perspective, the 1676 Quaker Negro Act can be understood as just another example of Restoration-era Quaker persecution. In both England and Barbados, Anglicans had become increasingly intolerant of dissenting religious groups and the Quakers had come under fire for their pacifism, their refusal to take oaths, and their anti-authoritarian theology. Yet the 1676 Act did more than just target a convenient and familiar scapegoat. By highlighting the Quaker’s proselytising efforts rather than their refusal to bear arms and join the militia, which had been the focus of attacks in the past, the Council of Barbados linked slave rebellion to religious conversion. In the year following the attempted rebellion, Quakers were persecuted for allowing their slaves to meet for worship. These arrests marked the first time any Protestant group in the British West Indies had been persecuted for missionary activity.

The conceptual connection between proselytising and slave rebellion had major implications for the perception of missionary work in the British West Indies.
As big planters in the British Caribbean grew increasingly anxious about how to control the growing number of black slaves, they took precautions to shield their human property from potentially disruptive social and religious forces. Once missionaries were associated with rebellion, it became increasingly difficult for proselytising Christians to convince fearful slave owners that converted slaves would not, as the Governor of Barbados put it in 1675, ‘rebel and cut their Throats’.

By 1680, the Barbadian planters’ stance on conversion was in marked contrast to the sentiment in England. When William Blathwayt, on behalf of the Lords of Trade and Plantations in London, wrote to the merchants of Barbados to inquire as to ‘the unhappy state of the negroes and other slaves in Barbadoes by their not being admitted to the Christian religion’, the self-titled ‘gentlemen of Barbados’ were able to explain that ‘the conversion of their slaves to Christianity would not only destroy their property but endanger the island, inasmuch as converted negroes grow more perverse and intractable than others’.

‘We could not make a Christian a Slave’: Slavery and Christianity on Barbados before 1675

Barbadian planters had not always been so virulently opposed to slave conversion. Prior to 1675, Barbadian slave owners had been averse to, but not fearful of, slave conversion. Their aversion was based on widespread confusion about the theological and legal status of a ‘Christian slave’ in the Anglophone world and there was a general fear that converted slaves would eventually have to be freed. This confusion was exacerbated by the political situation in England: English colonisation of the West Indies occurred in tandem with the English Civil War and the Interregnum, when the Church of England was in turmoil and unable to proscribe a position on slave conversion.

The state of missionary work on Barbados during this time can be gauged by Richard Ligon’s *True & Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*, a text published in 1657 but based on Ligon’s three-year visit to the island at the end of the 1640s. According to Ligon, black slaves did not ‘know’ religion. Nevertheless, Ligon did perceive slaves as candidates for Christianity. Ligon’s belief that African slaves could become Christians was representative of the period: as Rebecca Goetz has shown, the English in the pre-Restoration era tended to see both Indians and Africans as potential Christians rather than ‘hereditary heathens’.

A second vignette in Ligon’s *True and Exact History*, in which Ligon describes his own attempt to convert a slave, both confirms and complicates this conclusion. Ligon wrote that one particular slave was curious about his compass and wanted to understand how it worked. He entreated Ligon to convert him to Christianity because ‘he thought to be a Christian was to be endued with all those knowledges he wanted’. Soon afterward, Ligon approached the slave’s master and pleaded the slave’s case. In response, Ligon was told that ‘the people of that Iland were governed by the Lawes of England, and by those Lawes, we could not make a Christian a Slave’. Realising that the slave owner had misunderstood his intention, Ligon pointed out that his ‘request was far different from that,’ and that he ‘desired him to make a Slave a
Christian’, not a Christian a slave. The slave owner, at last comprehending the issue at hand, responded that

being once a Christian, he could no more account him a Slave, and so lose the hold
they had of them as Slaves, by making them Christians; and by that means should
open such a gap, as all the Planters in the Island would curse him.\(^{11}\)

The slave owner’s initial confusion about the consequences of slave conversion is representative of a more general confusion about the repercussions of Christianity on slavery in the Protestant Atlantic world. While the Papacy had declared as early as 1493 that Catholics worldwide should ‘instruct the native . . . [and] imbue them
with . . . Christian faith and sound morals,’ the Church of England, which was in
the midst of upheaval itself, had not developed a position on slave conversion and
the question remained unresolved.\(^{12}\) The slave owner’s final response in Ligon’s
*True & Exact History* – that ‘being once a Christian, he could no more account
him a Slave’ – was a nascent fear throughout the British colonies in the early to
mid-seventeenth century. Slave owners did not know whether they would be
forced to free or eventually manumit their slaves if the latter were converted to
Christianity. Some were also concerned that Christianity would give slaves dangerous
ideas about freedom and allow them to become too similar to their Christian
masters.

Confusing the situation is the possibility that at least some of the enslaved Africans
on Barbados already were Christian. As Linda Heywood and John Thornton argue, a
significant number of West Central Africans, particularly in Kongo and Angola, had
converted to Catholicism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Kongo
had been recognised as an episcopal see in 1595, and Catholic symbols and rituals
were prevalent throughout much of the kingdom.\(^{13}\) Thornton and Heywood argue
that many of these converted Christians would have ended up as New World slaves
during a period of unrest and Civil War in West Central Africa during the mid-
seventeenth century. Thornton and Heywood’s argument is bolstered by the recorded
presence of Catholic slaves from Brazil on Barbados and the 1654 arrival of a group of
Catholic slaves travelling with French traders from Surinam.\(^{14}\) Their presence may
have allowed Barbadian planters to see that while the slaves may have been Christian
in name, they were certainly not free.

Still, there are several factors that minimise the relevance of Catholic slaves on Bar-
bados. First of all, not all Catholic slaves were ‘convinced’ Christians. Antoine Biet, a
priest traveling with the Frenchmen from Surinam, commented, ‘if any of them have
any tinge of the Catholic religion, which they received among the Portuguese, they
keep it the best they can, doing their prayers and worshipping God in their hearts’
while, as Jerome Handler has written, ‘[European Catholics] appear to have had a neg-
ligible religious impact on the slave population [on Barbados].’\(^{15}\) Second, many West
Central Africans who were self-defined Catholics mixed African traditions into their
Christian practice, meaning that Protestants would not have accepted (and may not
have recognised) their legitimacy. Finally, Heywood and Thornton conclude that
West Central African Catholics comprised only ‘a small faction . . . of the larger

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settler group’ in Barbados, while much larger groups of West Central African Creoles ended up in Bermuda, New Amsterdam, and other New World settlements.\textsuperscript{16}

It is also important to distinguish Catholic conversion from Protestant conversion. For the Anglican planters of Barbados, a Catholic slave, much like an Irish Catholic indentured servant, would not have been considered a ‘true’ Christian. Only slaves converted to Protestantism would have been deemed legitimate Christians. This meant that even the existence of Catholic slaves would not have been sufficient to convince Barbadian planters to accept Protestant proselytising.

With the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, the Church of England finally clarified its position on slave conversion and made it clear that all slave owners should actively seek to convert their slaves to Christianity. In 1661, the British Parliament instructed Lord Willoughby, the reinstated governor of Barbados, to ‘[win] such as are purchased . . . as slaves to the Christian faith and [make] them capable of being baptised thereinto’. Lord Willoughby complied with this request and in 1663 a bill ‘recommending the christening of Negro children, and the instruction of all adult Negroes, to the several ministers of this place’ was placed before the Council of Barbados.\textsuperscript{17} In keeping with their prior ambivalence, the ruling planter class in Barbados ignored the bill, suggesting that they, like the slave owner in Ligon’s text, were hoping to avoid the issue of slave conversion.

From Ligon’s observations at the end of the 1640s to Restoration in the 1660s, the planter class demonstrated a general aversion to slave conversion. But the confused and partial rejection of slave conversion in the 1640s–1660s lacked the urgency and vehemence it would develop by 1680. The planter’s stance on conversion had been initially predicated on the fear that Christian slaves would have to be freed, but by the time the idea of a ‘Christian slave’ was no longer a paradox, something else had happened in Barbados. A community of Friends, or Quakers, had taken it upon themselves to make their own judgement about the role of Christianity in a slave society.

**Quakers on Barbados, 1655–1674**

In 1655, two Quaker women named Mary Fisher and Ann Austin arrived in Barbados. They quickly ‘convinced’ several white islanders, including a few big planters such as John Rous.\textsuperscript{18} It is unclear how many Quakers arrived from abroad and how much of the booming Quaker community was made up of converted Barbadians, but it is probable that the majority of the Quaker community were recent converts. Nevertheless, the Quakers in Barbados were in constant communication with the global Quaker community and Quaker leaders such as George Fox and William Edmunson visited Barbados and instructed Barbadians on Quaker practice and moral behaviour.

Quakerism was a new phenomenon not only in Barbados, but also in England, where the movement is formally traced to 1647.\textsuperscript{19} Quakers, or ‘Friends’, as they called themselves, resented the Church of England’s hierarchical structure and regarded ‘Spirit’ as universal. They claimed that immediate revelation was possible for every individual, with or without ordination. Quakers were radical not only for their institutionalisation of revelation, but also for their rejection of all forms of violence and swearing. They refused to engage in or support any war and they rejected
monarchical and clerical authority. While they were tolerated under Oliver Cromwell’s regime, they were actively persecuted during the Restoration period when Charles II came to power. The Quaker Act of 1662 fined Quakers heavily for meeting together and refusing to take oaths.\textsuperscript{20}

In Barbados, the first anti-Quaker law was passed in 1660, just as Restoration was beginning in England. Within the space of four sentences, the Barbados Council announced not only that the ‘patents from Oliver or Richard Cromwell [were] declared … to be void’, but also named ‘Reasons … against the being and sect of the Quakers within Barbadoes’ and ‘[imposed] fines … upon all willfully refusing to serve in military affairs’.\textsuperscript{21} As this note confirms, Quaker persecution gained lawful legitimacy once Charles II came to power. This note also demonstrates that the ruling Barbadians were primarily concerned with the Quaker refusal to participate in the militia. They were not interested in Quaker doctrine or Quaker proselytising practices.

Aside from their refusal to bear arms, which was the primary reason for their persecution, Quakers drew scorn on two other counts in the pre-1675 period: their refusal to take oaths (which also excluded them from public office), and their refusal to pay church dues. Joseph Besse, a Quaker hagiographer who recorded his people’s sufferings around the world, documented 237 cases of Quaker persecution in Barbados between 1658 and 1695.\textsuperscript{22} Quakers also interrupted Anglican services and created resentment among the Anglican clergymen living on the island.\textsuperscript{23}

Quakers were either fined or sent to prison for their disobedience. Most of the Quaker ‘sufferers’ were men, although there are some cases of female persecution, such as that of Elizabeth Piersehouse, a widow who was fined 1,500 lbs. of sugar ‘for not sending Men to serve in the Militia’.\textsuperscript{24} Fines were paid in sugar, slaves, or both. Though sugar was the more common fine, Richard Gay was forced to give up ‘one of his best Negro Men and one Horse, appraised at 7,500 lb. of Sugar … for not sending his People to help build Forts, and for what they called Church-dues.’ The fate of the seized slaves is unclear, although the individuals who collected the fines probably kept them. In the Gay case, Besse reports that ‘John Steart and Nathanael Maverich, Commissioners,’ ordered the seizure while ‘Joseph Hobbs, Constable’, made the collection. ‘The whole [fine], Besse continues, was ‘by them kept’.\textsuperscript{25}

Between 1650 and 1674, there were no Quakers persecuted for missionary work. This was partially due to the slow development of a Quaker position on the subject of slaves and slavery. Quakers did not come to Barbados with the intention of ‘convincing’ slaves, but the presence of a large slaveholding Quaker community on Barbados forced Quakers worldwide to deal with the theological implications of slavery. Faced with a sizeable population of Quaker slaveowners, Quaker leaders such as George Fox and William Edmunson began to consider the meaning of slavery within the context of Quakerism. Both were influential in the development of a Quaker position that encouraged conversion, religious education, and continued enslavement.

Fox preached his conversion stance to Barbadians during a visit to the island in 1671 on a trip intended to formalise the global infrastructure of the Religious Society of Friends. On Barbados, where all but four of several hundred Quaker inhabitants
were slave owners and at least six Quakers owned more the 100 slaves, Fox ‘urged Quaker masters to limit their slaves’ terms and to educate them’. The existence of slavery concerned Fox on two counts: first, it made him uncomfortable to imagine himself or other Friends as slaves and he encouraged Friends to treat blacks as they would want to be treated in a ‘slavish Condition’. Moral treatment, according to Fox, included allowing slaves to hold worship meetings and providing them with a Christian education. He argued that Christ ‘dyed for Tawnes and for the Blacks, as well as for you that are called Whites’. Fox’s second worry regarded the Quaker family. Fox saw the family as a sacred institution and feared that the presence of non-Christian ‘strangers’ would weaken Christian practices and make Quaker children lazy, so he encouraged Friends to ‘preach Christ to [their] Ethyopians that are in [their] Families’.

Upon his return to England, Fox published a response to his experience in Barbados, an 80-page diatribe addressed To the ministers, teachers and priests (so-called and so stiling your-selves) in Barbadoes. In addition to berating the non-Quaker spiritual leaders for immoral behaviour and the disorderly nature of non-Quaker English households, Fox attacked the Anglican ministry for refusing to convert slaves and Indians, asking ‘And if you be Ministers of Christ, are you not Teachers of Blacks and Taunies (to wit, Indians) as well as of the Whites? For, is not the Gospel to be preached to all Creatures?’ Fox also mentions that Quakers were being criticised for their proselytising efforts: ‘And why do you find fault with the Quakers (so called) for reaching of their Families, and instructing them (to wit) the Blacks, and Taunies, and Whites?’ From Fox’s text, we learn that the Quaker community was, at least by the beginning of the 1670s, attempting to convert slaves to Christianity and that their efforts were resented by the Anglican ministry.

The Anglican ministry responded to Quaker criticism by appealing to the Barbados Council. Following George Fox’s visit in 1671, six ministers sent a ‘Humble Petition and Address of the Clergy of Barbados’, requesting the suppression of the Quakers who continued to interrupt church services and attack the Church of England for being ‘both in doctrine and discipline false, erroneous and anti-Christian’. The Barbados Council does not mention the ministers’ petition in their minutes and they took no action in response, suggesting that as late as 1672, the Council did not share the Anglican ministers’ concern about Quaker doctrine or Quaker proselytising.

The Barbados Council had other things to worry about. The greatest concern was the threat of a potential slave rebellion, a fear that receives constant attention in the Minutes of the Barbados Council in the mid-seventeenth century.

Omnipresent fear: slave laws and slave rebellion on Barbados before 1675

While the Quakers were preaching conversion and practising disobedience, the Barbados Council was in the process of creating and implementing new Slave Laws and strengthening the militia. The 1661 Act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes, which would later be used as a model for slave laws in Jamaica and
Antigua, was characterised by ‘tyranny and the need for constant vigilance’ and ‘built on mutual fear and suspicion’. In order to implement the 1661 Act, white planters reinforced a militia system that had been in place since the 1630s and 40s. All ‘planters and Christian servants’ were to be ‘provided with arms, mustered and trained with power in case of insurrection’. The presence of Christian servants alongside planters in this 1661 statement is important. Given that Christian servants, specifically Irish indentured servants, had attempted a revolt in 1649, this line suggests that the primary source of fear among planters had shifted from the Irish servants to enslaved Africans. It can also be understood as a strategic device intended to promote division between servants and slaves who had previously joined together in rebellion against their English masters. Either way, it indicates that by 1660, black rebellion had become the focus of the Council’s attention.

It is difficult to judge exactly how large the militia was. While the planters boasted to King Charles II that ‘they [could] arm 10,000 men’ within the span of ‘a few hours’, Hilary Beckles suggests that the militia ‘fluctuated between 6,000 to 7,000 men’ between 1655 and 1680, or ‘just under one-third of the white male population’. The militia was responsible for patrolling the island, searching slave quarters, hunting runaway slaves and building forts, of which there were probably multiple. Unfortunately for historians, the only Surveyor on Barbados was Richard Forde, a convinced Quaker who refused to include the military forts on his 1673/4 map of the island, so there is no way to know exactly how many forts existed in the 1670s.

The militia was of utmost importance to the non-Quaker English population, who had reason to be concerned. Slaves and servants had resisted their English masters’ domination in varying ways throughout the seventeenth century. Before 1650, indentured Irish servants, who represented the majority of the work force at the time, attempted to rebel against their English masters as early as 1634, when a militia of 800 was needed to suppress a conspiracy to ‘kill [the servants’] masters and to make themselves free’. An aborted servant rebellion followed in 1647 while the first collective slave rebellion was recorded in 1649.

In the wake of this string of rebellions, the English extended the role of the militia and tightened control over the enslaved. No slave was allowed to leave his or her plantation without a ticket and the militia stepped up their controls. Perhaps as a result of this increase in vigilance, there were no recorded rebellions or attempted rebellions in the 1650s or 1660s. Hilary Beckles suggests that ‘increased planter repression forced a large number of slave to perceive maroonage as a more attractive option’, and that there was ‘a marked increase in the number of reports referring to the activity of runaway slaves hiding out in the woods and gullies about the island’.

Slaves and servants had been running away from their masters and forming their own communities since at least the 1640s, when Beauchamp Plantaganet reported in 1648 that ‘there are many Rebell Negro slaves in the woods’ and Ligon himself commented that ‘runaway negroes, often shelter themselves ... for a long time ... and steale pigs, platins, [and] potatoes ...’ By 1655, the runaways had caused enough trouble to incite two English planters, John Jones and Richard Goodall, to complain...
to the Council of Barbados that this group of rebels was ‘making a mockery of the law, and attempting to draw other slaves into their design’. By 1657, the militia had begun to pursue the runaway groups of slaves and servants and by 1660, the militia had succeeded in eradicating the rebel communities on their own island.  

Many runaways left Barbados and by 1670, there were hundreds of former slaves living on nearby islands. These ‘maroons’ had been a recognised problem as early as 1652 when Daniel Searle, then-governor, signed an ‘Act against the Stealing away of Negroes from off this island’. Barbadian planters attempted to retrieve their runaway slaves periodically, but when Jonathan Atkins tried to organise a group of English to invade and conquer the maroon communities, not one person volunteered to participate.  

On the eve of the attempted slave rebellion of 1675, then, slave rebellion was common, but there had been no collective rebellion since 1649. Preventing a collective rebellion was, for the English on Barbados, the most important aspect of defence, for while the rebel slaves caused minor problems, often stealing food or goods and sometimes robbing or killing island inhabitants, a collective slave rebellion would mean widespread destruction. It was this situation that the ruling English planters desperately wanted to avoid.

The stakes are raised: the attempted slave rebellion of 1675 and the Quaker Negro Act of 1676  

The planters’ greatest fear was nearly realised in May of 1675, when a group of enslaved male Africans planned to take over the island and crown ‘an ancient Gold-coast Negro’ named Cuffy as the king of the island. The plot, which had been planned for three years and was to occur on 12 June, was for the slaves to kill their English masters and take control of the island. It was to be executed at night, coordinated by ‘trumpets . . . of elephants teeth and gourdes [which were] to be sounded on several hills’. After successfully taking control of the island, Cuffy was to be crowned ‘in a chair of state’. Jerome Handler suggests that Cuffy ‘may have been an obeah man, a prominent figure among Barbados’s plantation slaves’ and that the chair of state ‘was of fundamental significance to the Ashanti and other Akan peoples as a symbol of political authority and group permanence and identity’. The symbolic meaning of the chair of state suggests that the rebellion, which excluded both women and Creoles, was organised by first-generation male slaves who gained inspiration from their experiences prior to European enslavement. The organisation and ideology of the rebellion can also be seen as an indication of the impact of Akan political ideology on the social structure of the Americas. The leaders of the rebellion were members of the ‘Coroman-tee’ nation, a term used to refer to Twi and Akan speakers in the Americas (there was no corresponding African state), and their post-rebellion vision of government was informed by Coromantee political thought. According to John Thornton, this included the belief that social mobility was possible through the acquisition of wealth or through forcibly breaking free from slavery. This change-oriented political philosophy, which would have been particularly strong among African slaves in the
Americas (since they tended to come from commoner, rather than elite, backgrounds), also led to the belief that a group of individuals could choose their own king.\textsuperscript{42}

Two weeks before the rebellion was to take place, the plot was discovered by a house slave named Anna/Fortuna.\textsuperscript{43} Anna was the personal servant in the home of Gyles Hall, one of the first settlers of South Carolina who had been in absentia for much of the 1670s.\textsuperscript{44} One of Hall’s other slaves, a young man of about 18 from the Gold Coast, had been involved in planning the rebellion but would ‘[not] consent to the killing of his master’ and had, as a result, returned home. According to the narratives of the rebellion, Anna/Fortuna overheard this slave ‘discoursing with another Cormantee Negroe working with him . . . He would have no hand in killing the Baccararoes or White Folks’.\textsuperscript{45} Sometime afterward, she informed her superiors.

Word of the impending rebellion spread quickly among the planter class, who acted quickly and violently: 107 slaves were accused of involvement and 42 were found guilty and executed publicly. Five others ‘hanged themselves, because they would not stand trial’.\textsuperscript{46} Anna, meanwhile, was granted her freedom ‘in recompense of her eminent service in discovering the intended rebellion of the negroes’.\textsuperscript{47}

The extreme response of the white planters is representative of their strategy to create division between slaves and servants: they granted generous rewards to obedient slaves while torturing, humiliating, and murdering disobedient ones. Therefore, in the same meeting that Anna was granted her freedom, ‘Paul Gwynn’s negro woman Marrca’ was given 20 s ‘for her diligent attending the Assembly’ and the 1675 Militia act, which tightened surveillance of blacks after the attempted rebellion, acknowledged ‘that many Negroes and Slaves in this Island are worthy of great Trust and Confidence to be reposed in them’.\textsuperscript{48} By granting some slaves special treatment, the Council aimed to partition the slave population.

Within a year, the Council of Barbados had passed a series of laws designed to secure the island against any future insurrections. In April of 1676, they passed a supplement to the 1661 Act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes, which added new features and specified consequences for rebellious behaviour. The daily policing of slaves was increased while slaves’ freedom of movement was limited. The Council aimed to prevent the meetings of slaves in all unsupervised circumstances and they revamped their ‘ticket system’, in which ‘slaves leaving their estates were required to carry a ticket signed by their owners’. Disobedience was treated severely. A first offence carried a punishment of severe whipping, while a fourth offence led to execution.\textsuperscript{49}

The militia reinforcements and the extreme punishments and rewards given to obedient or disobedient slaves were typical of a tyrannical slave regime, but the Council of Barbados also made a third more unexpected move: a month before passing the ‘supplement act to a former act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes’, the Council passed ‘An Act to prevent the People called Quakers, from bringing Negroes to their Meeting.’\textsuperscript{50} This Act asserted that ‘many Negroes have been suffered to remain at the Meeting of Quakers as hearers of their Doctrine, and taught in their Principles, whereby the safety of this Island may be hazared’. If, the act continued, ‘any Negro or Negroes be found with the said People called Quakers, at any time of their
Meeting, and as hearers of their Preaching that such Negroe or Negroes shall be forfeited’. The ‘seizing party’ would receive ‘one-half’ of the slaves seized. The same Act required all teachers on the island to take the Oath of Allegiance and Supremacy before the Justice of the Peace, an initiative intended to bar Quakers from all teaching, since no Quaker would ever consent to taking an oath, let alone an oath of supremacy to a monarch whom they in principle rejected. Within a year, Ralph Fretwell was ‘prosecuted for eighty Negroes being present at a Meeting in his House’ and Richard Sutton was taken to court ‘for thirty Negroes being present at a Meeting’.51

Quakers defended themselves against the Anglican attacks by arguing that conversion taught slaves to be peaceful. When William Edmunson, a visiting preacher in 1675, was attacked by an Anglican minister named Ramsey and subsequently by Governor Atkins for ‘making the Negroes Christians, and [making] them rebel and cut their Throats’, Edmunson replied that

It was a good Work to bring them to the Knowledge of God and Christ Jesus, and to believe in him that died for them, and for all Men, and that would keep them from rebelling or cutting any Man’s Throat.

According to Edmundson’s journal, Governor Atkins was convinced by his argument and the minister Ramsey ‘ask’d them Forgiveness’. Although this seems unlikely, given that Jonathan Atkins would, just months later, pass the Quaker Negro Act, it demonstrates the tactics that Quakers used to defend themselves against attacks: they argued that knowledge of the gospel would prevent rebellious behaviour, not incite it.

Why did the Barbados Council believe that Quaker proselytising was so dangerous? Was the Quaker Negro Act just another way for the non-Quaker English to punish the Quakers for their refusal to defend the colony or were the Quakers actually inciting rebellion? It is worthwhile to consider exactly what the Quakers may have been encouraging their slaves to do. Fox, Edmundson, and other Quaker leaders advised Barbadian Quakers to allow their slaves to meet for worship and to educate them about the gospel. What did they mean when they told them to ‘meet for worship’? Quakers believed that all humans could have a direct, personal relationship with God. As a result, they rejected the idea of having ministers or other ‘mediaries’ between the individual worshipper and the divine. A Quaker meeting for worship, then, was a gathering of believers who spoke when they felt ‘moved by the Spirit’.

Since worship was not concentrated around an organised sermon and was not led by an ordained priest or minister, Quaker meeting could be very unpredictable and the substance of the meeting was dependent on the mood and individual character of the congregation. In a meeting of Quakers and slaves, then, both groups would have had, at least theoretically, equal access to the ‘floor’ and equal access to God.

But did Quakers really invite slaves to their own meetings? The evidence here is mixed. The Quaker Negro Act implicates Quakers for ‘bringing Negroes to their Meeting’, but George Fox’s verbatim advice to Barbadian Quakers was to ‘let [the slaves] have two or three Hours of the Day once in the Week, that Day Friends Meeting is on, or an other Day, to meet together, to wait upon the Lord’.52 In Gospel Family Order he refers to these meetings as the ‘fortnights meeting among
Fox, in other words, did not foresee a common meeting between slaves and Quakers, but rather, two separate ones, each taking place in a different location. This meant, in practice, that Quakers were encouraging slaves to meet together in large groups without any whites present. Put into the context of widespread English fears of unsupervised gatherings of slaves, the Council’s sudden attention to the Quaker’s proselytising efforts is given new meaning. It seems possible that slaves could have been using the Quaker ‘meeting for worship’ for their own purposes.

What could those purposes have been? If Quakers had, as George Fox prescribed, taught their slaves about Quaker doctrine, it is likely that Quaker theology, which focused on a ‘Spirit’ that could commune directly with an individual, could have been easily adapted into the Coromantee belief system, which was centred around a variety of greater and lesser spirits (obosum and sumang) which could be harnessed by individuals for good or evil purposes. If the Quaker Spirit were interpreted as a type of obosum or sumang, Quaker meetings among slaves may have taken a form similar to Coromantee religious ceremonies, led by an obeah man who now dealt in Quaker Spirit, obosum and sumang. Alternatively, slaves may have used unsupervised Quaker meetings for political purposes. They could have discussed options for revolt, escape, or a post-rebellion form of government, as well as other strategies for improving their situation. Meetings may also have performed both religious and political functions.

No matter what slaves were doing in their worship groups, it should come as no surprise that the Barbados Council deemed Quaker-condoned meetings of slaves dangerous, since one of the first steps taken by the Council after the attempted rebellion was to ‘prepare and act to restrain the too frequent wanderings and meetings of Negroes’.

What slaves did in Quaker meetings remains a mystery, but the perception of the non-Quaker English was clear and fixed: Quaker proselytising led to rebellion. It was just a small step to consider the more general category of ‘proselytising’ to be inherently dangerous.

A new category is created: dangerous missionaries

During the English Civil war, when the then-governor Lord Willoughby was forced to surrender to parliamentary troops in Barbados, he drafted the island’s Charter as a treaty between the cavaliers and roundheads. It was accepted immediately. The Charter, using the same rhetoric that would later be invoked by William Penn in his description of the Holy Experiment and in the US Bill of Rights, began by proclaiming ‘liberty of conscience in matters of religion [for] all’.

Although the Charter of Barbados, written just three years before the arrival of the first Quakers, could have signalled an acceptance of ‘nonconformists’ and radical Protestant sects, it proved to be an opportunistic invocation of religious tolerance for the alleviation of a specific situation. When the parliamentary forces of England, led by the Congregationalist Oliver Cromwell, were victorious, a policy of religious tolerance was a strategic method intended to unite a fragile country and Church. The same policy was useful in Barbados, although not for long. Once the Quakers arrived on the
island, the ideal of ‘tolerance’ regarding religion lost its political urgency and other needs took its place.

Until 1675, it was the Quaker refusal to bear arms or support the militia that infuriated the rest of the planters and slave owners on the island; but after the attempted rebellion of 1675, a new idea gained currency: Quakers, and their insistence on converting slaves, were at fault for slave rebellions. Whether this was actually true did not weaken the potency of the idea and by the end of the 1670s, non-Quaker planters in Barbados began to use a new rhetoric. John Colleton, a prominent leader of the Anglican planters, railed not only against Quaker proselytising, but also against the conversion of slaves to any form of Christianity. The influence of Christian thought, he argued, would ‘make them more rebellious than they otherwise would have been’.  

Anglican missionaries, eager to defend their religion against Quaker attacks, strengthened the conflation of Quaker and Anglican conversion by using the same rhetoric as the Quakers to defend Christian proselytising. Morgan Godwyn, an Anglican missionary who visited Virginia and Barbados in the 1670s, published *The Negro’s and Indian’s Advocate* in 1680, in which he argued that blacks and Indians could and should be converted to Christianity. *The Negro’s and Indian’s Advocate* was a direct response not only to the plantation life Godwyn had observed in the Americas, but also to George Fox’s diatribe against the ministers and preachers of Barbados. Morgan joined Fox in his sharp criticism of the clergy in Barbados who refused to baptise slaves or teach them the gospel. Blacks, he wrote, were allowed only in ‘the most distant part of the [Christian] meeting place … the necessity and benefit whereof they were never taught’. Also like Fox, he argued that black slaves had a ‘naturally equal Right with other Men, to the exercise and Privileges of Religion.’ Morgan, like virtually all missionaries of the time, did not suggest an end to slavery but argued that Christian slaves would be more obedient.

Despite his argument that Christian slaves would be obedient and docile, Godwyn failed to convince slave owners that they should convert their slaves and by 1680, the dominant anti-conversion opinion had been firmly established in Barbados. Meanwhile, sentiment in England had been moving in the opposite direction and the Lords of Trade were convinced that the role of religion in the West Indies needed to be improved. Hoping to understand why conversion was rejected in Barbados, the Lords asked the Bishop of London for his advice. The Bishop responded by explaining that the planters feared ‘that conversion of slaves may deprive the owners of their present power and disposal’ but he assured the Lords that this fear was ‘groundless’. The slave owners, in other words, had no reason to fear that ‘being once … Christian, [they] could no more account [their blacks] as Slave[s].’  

The Bishop was 30 years late in his diagnosis; for while white planters during Richard Ligon’s time may have been troubled by the legality or hypocrisy of owning ‘Christian slaves’, Barbadian planters in 1680 had other, more pressing fears: they were convinced that slave conversion would lead directly to rebellion, a conviction that had been moulded by their experience with the 1675 slave revolt and their connection of this event with Quaker proselytising efforts. Therefore, when the ‘gentlemen of Barbados’ responded to a letter from the Lords of Trade and Plantation in October
of 1680, which had asked them to consider ‘means whereby [slaves] might be admitted and encouraged [the Christian religion] without prejudice to the freeholders’, they rejected the idea firmly, stating that ‘the conversion of their slaves to Christianity would not only destroy their property but endanger the island, inasmuch as converted negroes grow more perverse and intractable than others’.  

The island of Barbados provided, in many ways, a model for other islands in the West Indies. Barbados was the first island to convert to sugar production and by the 1670s it was the richest and most profitable colony in British America. The 1661 Act for better ordering and governing of Negroes provided the basis for future Acts in Jamaica in 1664 and Antigua in 1702 and the 1676 Quaker Negro Act was copied two years later in Nevis. However, Barbadian laws and crop choice were not the only sources of influence. The ideas that emerged in Barbados about the role of missionaries, the place of religion, and the domain of the slave’s soul created categories and concepts that changed the way slave conversion and religion were spoken about in the British West Indies.

These ideas helped to define the meaning of Protestant Christianity in the context of slavery. As Christopher Brown has suggested in his recent study of British abolitionism, broad trends in planters’ acceptance or rejection of proselytising attempts left various slave societies either more or less vulnerable to moralistic criticism. Slave societies that allowed missionaries at least limited access to slaves actually aided the longevity of the slave system by partially accommodating religious ideals. By redefining slavery as a Christian institution with a religious cause, slave owners could weaken the development of an abolitionist movement.

West Indian planters may have succeeded in rejecting the missionary movement for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but they paid heavily for their rigidity. Their failure to even pay lip service to the missionary movement enraged abolitionists in Britain who made strong – and successful – arguments against the slave trade on moral and religious grounds. Eventually, those impassioned few led the abolitionist movement in Britain that would put an end to slavery and the slave trade in the British Empire.

Within this larger narrative, the 1675 attempted slave revolt in Barbados played a formative role in shaping the West Indian planters’ stance on slave conversion. The attempted rebellion, organised by a small number of enslaved Africans and betrayed by one woman named Fortuna, gave the Anglican planters in Barbados the opportunity to link Quaker proselytising to insurrection and, with it, slave conversion to rebellion. The planters’ subsequent actions solidified their condemnation of missionary work and led to a radical rejection of Christianising forces in Barbados and the British West Indies.

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Notes

[16] This conclusion is supported by the data on the origins of enslaved Africans who disembarked on Barbados in the seventeenth century. Between 1640 and 1675, only 1,195 of 136,328 slaves who disembarked at Barbados had embarked in West Central Africa. ‘Estimates,’ http://slavevoyages.com/tast/assessment/estimates.faces.  
[29] Campbell.  
[35] Beckles, 34.


[38] Beckles, 36.

[39] According to Anon., *Great Newes from the Barbadoes, or, A True and Faithful Account of the Grand Conspiracy of the Negroes Against the English* . . . Women and creoles were excluded from the plot.

[40] Cited in Jerome Handler, ‘The Barbados Slave Conspiracies of 1675 and 1692’.

[41] Handler, 315.


[43] The house slave is referred to as Anna in one of the narrative sources, but as Fortuna in the *Calendar of State Papers*. Handler writes, ‘as was not uncommon, she easily could have been known by both names’. Jerome Handler, ‘The Barbados Slave Conspiracies of 1675 and 1692’, 313.


[51] Besse, *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers*, vol. II.


[60] Ligon, *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*.


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