SCHOLAR’S CORNER

I hear you are working on the diocese’s report to General Convention about the history of our own diocese’s involvement with slavery and racial discrimination. Can you share anything with us from your research so far?

Yes, I can give you my overall observations on the history of the Episcopal Church and race.

In a sentence (and this may be hard to hear): as a denomination we have little to be proud of in relation to issues of race, since until the 1960s, most white Episcopalians either approved of slavery and/or discrimination (that is, they were racist or prejudiced) or just didn't concern themselves much about the welfare and rights of African-Americans (that is, they were apathetic).

Jamestown, the first English government-supported (and therefore Church of England-supported) settlement in North America, had the first African slaves owned by Englishmen in America From that day forward to the end of the Civil War, the Episcopal Church in the South was entirely supportive of slavery, with clergy who were slave owners. As the Church of the landed gentry of the South, the Episcopal Church was very much a part of the Southern social and economic system. The Southern ruling class provided most of the Church’s income (and all her clergy) in places like Virginia, so the Episcopal Church in the South had absolutely no inclination to criticize the institution of slavery (though it preached that slave owners should not be unnecessarily cruel.). Episcopal clergy, especially in the South, legitimized slavery by providing biblical and theological arguments supporting it

By the way, the most (in)famous defense of slavery by an Episcopalian came from John Henry Hopkins, Bishop of Vermont, who wrote *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham to the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1864) and several other pieces defending slavery.

Before the Civil War, Episcopalians in the North, like Northerners in general, were opposed to abolitionism, seeing abolitionists as fanatics who could cause a Civil War with the South over slavery with their insistence on the immediate freeing of Africans (what was called “immediatism”). The option most appealing to Northern whites was “colonization” (sending Africans back to Africa), since few whites beyond the white abolitionists could envision blacks and whites ever living side-by-side as social equals in America.

The Episcopal Church, like most other denominations, avoided discussing the issue of slavery for fear of rancorous debates and, if a position was ever taken against slavery, losing Southern whites to a break-away Southern denomination. After all, though the details are complicated, that is basically what happened with the Methodists, the Baptists, and the Presbyterians: when their national churches passed resolutions condemning slavery as immoral, their Southern members withdrew, resulting in three new Southern denominations. “The Methodist Episcopal Church, South” broke away from the Methodist Episcopal Church (1844-45). In 1845 the Southern Baptist Convention separated from Northern (American) Baptists over Southern missionaries owning slaves. Presbyterians argued over slavery for decades, but eventually the Southern and conservative “Presbyterian Church in the United States” was formed in 1866. (They finally reunited with the Northern Presbyterians in 1983.)

Seeing the strife and eventually schism in these churches, the Episcopal, Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches determinedly pursued neutrality on the issue of slavery. Before and after the Civil War, the prevailing attitude was that one should not “mix” religion and politics. The Church’s authority was in the spiritual realm, and it should not take sides on political or economic matters. This meant that the Church by and large did not criticize the economic and political status quo (whether slavery before the Civil War or discrimination and segregation afterwards) or take up the cause of “have-nots” like the poor and African-Americans. When white Christians did try to help African-Americans, that help was usually (though perhaps unconsciously) tainted by a paternalism that felt sorry for African-Americans but did not see them really as equals.

Finally, at the end of the 1950s, white Episcopalians began to talk about issues of race and after a few years started to take positions against segregation and for civil rights. Sadly, many people left the Episcopal Church at that time, saying it had become “liberal.” After a series of “exoduses” of Episcopalians who described themselves as “conservative,” the smaller Episcopal Church of today generally tries to be responsive and sensitive to issues of race, but it is proving difficult to root out the ingrained, often unconscious, belief in white superiority. The legacy of 400 years of African slavery in America is still with us.

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