The White Methodist Image of the American Negro Emigrant to Liberia, West Africa, 1833-1848

by D. Bruce Franklin

During the first half of the nineteenth century, notions of Negro inferiority prevailed in the white American consciousness. This common perception of a universal racial shortcoming must be viewed from two different perspectives. The first, a "racist" perspective, was rooted in pseudo-scientific theories which demonstrated the innate and permanent inferiority of non-whites. It suggested that little, if anything, could be done to change the limited capacities of Negroes. Though the germs of such racist thinking can be traced back to eighteenth-century biological theories, still its consequences for racial ideas were somewhat limited to a small circle of natural philosophers. A more widely held early nineteenth-century view of Negro inferiority often carried with it the idea that Negro character could be remade, that the causes of the Negro's depravity and degradation could be ameliorated. Certain American Protestants held this second view, a "pre-racist" perspective. Their ideas about religion and society and their experiences in West Africa during the middle decades of the nineteenth century reflected the public debate over Negro character.¹

American Negroes had emigrated in small numbers to Liberia, West Africa since 1820 under a philanthropic scheme promoted by the American Colonization Society, a pan-Protestant organization founded four years earlier.² In ten years, certainly by 1832, the colonization program had gained the support of an influential group of Methodists from the Upper

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South, Border, Mid-Atlantic and, to some extent, New England states. Methodists of colonizationist persuasion saw resettlement as an ideal solution to "the Negro problem." By the middle decades of the century irreconcilable differences had emerged between northern abolitionists and southern proslavery factions within the Methodist ecclesiastical polity. Colonizationists believed that the removal of Negroes from America would open the door to a new era of national unity by eliminating what appeared to them the cause of these factional disputes. As pious Christians, colonizationists did not intend to abandon the American Negro; rather, the Negro would be offered the benefits of the civilizing mission in Africa, and an opportunity for personal salvation, social equality, and person dignity. Furthermore, white oppression in the slave states and anti-Negro violence that continually erupted in the free states caused much anxiety for colonizationists who believed the Negro would never be accepted by white Americans. Colonizationist thinking manifested a blend of pietism and secularism that, in the narrow range of their vision, sought to eradicate all alien influences which they believed stood in the way of white Protestant America.

Eventually, with the urging and financial support of the colonizationist faction, the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church opened the Methodists' first foreign mission in Liberia to buttress the already trouble-plagued settlement of Negro American colonists.

The experience of Melville B. Cox, the first white Methodist missionary to Liberia, discloses the way in which aspects of pietism and secularism resonated in conservative nineteenth-century thinking. Over the course of two decades, however, the mission faced a number of challenges. Cox and his colleagues struggled to adapt to the local cultural and religious landscape, and they found themselves grappling with issues of evangelization and racial equality. The mission eventually closed in 1860, but its legacy continued to influence the development of Liberia and its relationship with the United States.

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century evangelical thought and influenced white perceptions of Negroes. Comparing the economic and social progress of American civilization to what appeared as the backwardness, poverty and social stagnation of Negro life in Africa, Cox demonstrated his affinity to the type of ethnocentric thinking associated with established Methodist orthodoxy. By presuming that social, economic and technological progress would follow evangelical activity in a primitive society, he reflected the link between religion and a social philosophy that stemmed from colonizationist and missionary racial thought. This pattern of thought reinforced the pre-racist image of Negro inferiority.

Prior to embarking on his mission in 1832, Cox manifested profound piety as he contemplated the potential success of his forthcoming endeavors. Evincing an attitude of inspirational hope, Cox expressed a zeal that was the hallmark of the conservative element in the national Protestant churches during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.\(^6\) For example, envisioning the outcome of this forthcoming crusade, Cox foresaw a continent “studded with Christian stations” from north to south, and from east to west. He asserted that they would “ultimately meet at some common centre,” in Liberia. At this crossroads Christians would together “sing the triumphant song, that ‘Africa is evangelized to God.’” It would be difficult to find a more eloquent statement of pietistic ambition. Cox believed that the Protestant crusade would transform American society, rescuing it from the “cursed bonds” of slavery in the way that it would redeem Africa from “heathenish darkness.” This statement expressed the colonizationists’ resolution to remake Negro character in Africa, while simultaneously saving America from the disaster that lay ahead if the Negro remained in the new world. Cox insisted, “Degraded and oppressed as they [Africans] are, they are human beings and have souls.”\(^7\) Implied in this paternalistic, condescending attitude was what Cox and the colonizationists viewed as the superiority of white Christian civilization to the “pagan” society of Africa. Ingrained in the fabric of this paternalism was belief in Negro inferiority; it

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permeated the imagination of the colonization movement's supporters.

Cox felt that the mission to Liberia was a Christian responsibility and duty. He depicted the impending enterprise as a struggle with Satan, declaring that the devil "must be dethroned" from his reign over millions of degraded Africans. Visualizing his evangelical efforts to Christianize the African Negro, he described himself as "the messenger of heaven to those outcasts of the world." Tribal society, he wrote, was "elevated but little above brutes... enveloped in a darkness... and sunken in a depravity that knows no bounds." He felt that Africans, with a few exceptions along the coast, were "all gone out of the way" because they did not know about Christianity.

Cox's reading of African history led him to conclude that "Satan hath literally taken his seat among them, and I doubt not that he will hold it with the grasp of death."8

Part of the cultural heritage to which Cox and the colonizationists fell heir was their belief that the social, political and economic systems of white Christian civilization were superior to the customs and habits of African society. Cox's initial contact with Africa, during a two-month journey down the West African coast in January and February 1833, seemed to reaffirm this conviction. The poverty, famine and disease at Port Praya in the Cape Verde Islands shocked and appalled Cox.9 His contact with the activities of British Wesleyan missions in Bathurst, Gambia, together with observations made during a three-hundred-mile trip up the Gambia River, did little to allay the apprehension that had already settled in his mind. In the interior, for example, he noticed that the native dwellings were "much inferior" to those he had seen in Bathurst. Presumably as a result of white missionary influences, the Bathurst houses were "simple but quite comfortable."

When Cox observed labor conditions in Africa, he noticed the continent's dependence on manual labor, the lack of labor-saving machines, the abundant number of horses and bullocks that were not put to work, and the cheapness of native labor. These factors sharpened the differences between Africa and America in his mind. He was alarmed at the spectacle of the "pleasure-loving" African whose "only object seems to be

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He wrote that the African woman was inferior, "as in all barbarous countries." This attitude of prudish disapproval further exposed his belief in the depravity of the Negro.  

Cox did, however, have two encouraging experiences. Three hundred miles up the Gambia River, he observed fifty boys and twenty girls in a school run by a native convert who had been educated by white missionaries in Bathurst. Cox regarded this school as proof that blacks were not intellectually inferior to whites. Cox believed that if Africans were properly influenced and appropriately guided, they were capable of change and could adapt to the norms and mores of civilized conduct. This belief was reinforced when Cox met a native woman in Sierra Leone. A member of a distinguished tribal chief's family, she had visited England and Ireland and had been educated in America. After dining in her home, Cox reported that she could "entertain with as much gentility and intelligence as ladies of the first rank in general." The fact that she and her husband were Methodists no doubt enhanced Cox's tribute to her capabilities.  

Yet in recording these incidents, Cox again revealed his belief that Christianity set the tone and established the behavioral patterns for civilized life. His notes also made clear that the Negro could achieve religious salvation and social betterment only by elevation through a program of spiritual and secular education to the superior position already attained and held by white Protestant Christians. Cox's observations in Freetown, Sierra Leone, the principal town and port of another British West African colony, reinforce this interpretation. Sierra Leone offered an earlier and parallel experience in the colonization of Africa by North American Negroes. Cox's first impression was that Freetown was "neither wholly civilized nor entirely barbarous." After a closer inspection of the town, however, he was sufficiently alarmed to write that "it must be a long while before European manners and customs will be wholly adopted by the natives." To Cox, apparently, only the adoption and emulation of white mores could save the native from depravity and degradation.

10. Ibid., pp. 157-159 and p. 185.  
11. Ibid., p. 152.  
13. Ibid., pp. 166-170.
His concern for the moral conditions in Africa became manifest in conjunction with an observation Cox made during a local Methodist worship service in Sierra Leone. The church, comprised of blacks, had seceded from Wesleyan Methodism in 1823. Thus, Cox discovered that “improperly ordained” preachers were administering the sacraments. Such circumstances, he probably reasoned, definitely hindered the Protestant crusade.

Cox’s experience along the West African coast early in 1833 seemed to confirm his preconceived idea of a continent in the firm grip of Satanic darkness. His observations accentuated the differences in his mind between Christian and “pagan” society. In secular terms, he expressed this difference as a wide chasm between the technological achievements of “civilized” and “tribal” society. In religious matters, he noted deviations from Christian norms of social behavior and ecclesiastical orthodoxy. Whether articulated in religious or secular terms, Cox tended to associate these differences with a racial dichotomy between white and Negro. It is not difficult to imagine the way in which Cox linked Christianity and western technological superiority to white civilization, and Satanic darkness and the “backwardness” of African society to black civilization. This loose, and yet close, association between religion, society, and race would, of course, reinforce a white missionary’s predisposition to assume the inferiority of the Negro.

Melville Cox finally arrived in Monrovia, Liberia, on March 10, 1833 firmly convinced of the evangelical value of his mission, but chastened by his observations in Africa during the journey down the West African coast. Although Cox was inspired by his realization that only twelve years earlier paganism and Islam had reigned supreme in Liberia, the physical conditions of Monrovia, which were “more humble” than those in Bathurst or Freetown, intensified his awareness of the difference between America and Liberia. Dismal poverty and crude living conditions in the colony confirmed his notions about the superiority of white Protestant civilization.

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Monrovia probably represented only a tenuous foothold for Christian civilization on what Cox might well have thought was the precipice of satanic barbarism. 17

His observations must also have crystallized some of his ideas concerning the future of the mission. Cox, who did not trust the American Negro settlers (known as Americo-Liberians), felt that the success of the mission would depend upon the leadership of white missionaries, who were endowed with the moral fibre and "civilized" values of Christianity. While planning a missionary station in the interior, Cox revealed his doubts about the fortitude of Americo-Liberians when he commented that the Negro colonists would succumb like children to the temptations of the tribal environment. He also thought that they lacked sufficient maturity to withstand the hardships of the frontier. Furthermore, Moslem Africans inhabited the Liberian interior; Cox thought that these people possessed "more intellect than perhaps can be found in the same number of souls in all uncivilized Africa." The American Negro colonist would, therefore, need close supervision, outnumbered as they were by "pagan" Africans, unable to match the more sophisticated Moslems. Cox reasoned that his mission had little hope of triumph under the conditions he perceived in Liberia unless the strategy, logistics, and conduct of the mission were entrusted to the care of white guardians. 18

Within a week of his arrival, Cox had organized a Methodist congregation in Monrovia among the Americo-Liberian settlers, revealing himself as a model of orthodoxy in ecclesiastical affairs. He ensured his own position as superintendent of the mission by convening an official conference of the Negro preachers. Seemingly, they accepted him in this capacity and recognized his right to control the policy and activities of the church.

The next stage in establishing white control over the mission was the agreement of the Negro American preachers to subordinate their activities to supervision and control by the


Methodist Episcopal Church in America. This occurred at a camp meeting in early April which was attended by all the black Methodist preachers in the colony. Their capitulation to Cox’s demands was achieved “with great difficulty” Cox wrote his brother. Americo-Liberian preachers, alarmed at the prospect of being subjected to the white racial attitudes they had emigrated to avoid, evinced “many prejudices” against American white Methodist control of their affairs. Only after “several Meetings, earnest prayer, and the exercise of great discretion” did the “coloured preachers” agree to this affiliation with the American church. 

Ironically the racial prejudice that the Americo-Liberians had faced in America had followed them to Africa; it was ratified in a covenant sanctioning white Methodist supervision. In the name of orthodoxy Cox unwittingly brought with him the long-established racial prejudices embedded in the Methodist consciousness which influenced his thoughts and actions.

And so the pattern of race relations in Liberia replicated conditions that both whites and blacks knew so well in America. Cox had successfully persuaded the Negro emigrants to yield their sovereignty in ecclesiastical affairs to the Methodist Church in America. This acceptance of white control stemmed from two factors. First, the Negro Americans had already been influenced in America by the Protestant ethnocentrism which would be the dominant theme of any missionary activity in Liberia. Secondly, their economic need for the material goods of western Protestant civilization ruled out adoption of traditional African modes of living which they, like their white brethren, perceived as degraded and backward. Consequently, shared perceptions of Liberian reality led to unconditional surrender on


20. Barclay states, “There is no record of the Missionary Society having given instructions to its missionaries to transfer...the exact pattern of church organization at home. It was assumed by all, without question, that this would be done.” See Barclay, Widen7ing Horizons, 1845-1895, Vol. III of Methodist Missions, pp. 158-60. This is certainly true for Cox. See “Letter of Commission,” from Bishops Roberts and Hedding to Melville B. Cox, June 22, 1832, in Cox, Remains, p. 219. A few Negro clergymen, however, did not sign the covenant. They formed an independent body called the African Methodist Episcopal Church. See Liberia Annual Conference, Minutes of Annual Conference, 1833-1853, World Methodist Council, Commission on Archives and History, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina (Handwritten), Minutes for 1836; and “Monrovia Revival,” in Africa’s Luminary (Monrovia, Liberia: Methodist Episcopal Mission Press, June 5, 1840), p. 22.
all fronts. Americo-Liberians let white Methodists on the Board of Managers of the Missionary Society in New York, who selected the superintendent for their mission, supervise their affairs. Their right to administer the sacraments was curtailed until white bishops in America ordained them properly. Their mission-house and property were paid for by funds raised in America and were deeded to the individual trustees of the New York Young Men's Missionary Society, the auxiliary missionary society which had sponsored Cox. Finally — perhaps most slighting of all — they were not consulted on plans for further missionary activity in Liberia. White control of the evangelical crusade in Liberia stemmed from the benevolent paternalism that had inspired the colonization program.21

Melville Cox died in Liberia in July 1833, but not before he set the scene for white control of all missionary activities. His replacements, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel O. Wright, Mr. and Mrs. Rufus Spaulding, and Miss Sophronia Farrington, who came to Liberia late in 1833, continued the early policies. The Wrights died in Liberia early in 1834, and the other three, debilitated by illness, returned to the United States that year. Late in 1834 John Seys became Superintendent of the Mission and served in that capacity until 1841.

Seys was not the only white Methodist attached to the Liberian mission. Miss Ann Wilkins arrived in 1836 with the superintendent's wife and children. In 1837 she founded the Millsburgh Female Academy, located across the river from White Plains. In addition, Dr. S. M. E. Goheen, a physician, Mr. Jabez Burton, a graduate of Allegheny College, Pennsylvania, who was appointed principal of Monrovia Academy, and a Mr. Jayne, a printer by trade who began publishing a bi-weekly Methodist newspaper in 1839 called Africa's Luminary, arrived by 1840. White control of the mission did not entail numerical superiority and therefore immediate strength. By 1841 the Liberia Mission Conference embraced 350 miles of West African coastline. It extended less than twenty-five miles inland, following the estuaries of the major rivers which flowed into the Atlantic Ocean. The mission consisted of a central station in

Monrovia, two frontier mission stations among the native Africans, and about ten or twelve smaller Americo-Liberian settlements along the coast and inland on the major rivers. The two mission stations in the tribal interior, Heddington and Robertsville, founded early in 1839, were located about two miles from the Americo-Liberian settlements at White Plains, which was about fifteen miles up the St. Paul’s River from Monrovia. George S. Brown and Dr. William Taylor, two recent black emigrants to Liberia, took charge of these stations. The superintendent in Monrovia, John Seys, visited them four or five times a year. From these pockets of civilization, the black surrogates established circuits to preach among the neighboring tribes. The smaller Americo-Liberian settlements on the frontier had 150 to 400 inhabitants, of whom about 20 percent were Methodists. After arriving in Monrovia, immigrants were transferred to these agricultural villages, where they cleared land, planted crops, and improved their particular surroundings. Each village contained a building which was used as both a church and a day school. No more than fifteen or twenty black preachers and teachers, supported by the Missionary Society, served the mission. By 1845, approximately five thousand emigrants were living in Liberia. About a thousand of these colonists were members of the Methodist Church. In all that time there were never more than eighty to a hundred native converts to Methodism.\footnote{22}

The mission station in Monrovia functioned as the evangelical nerve-center for Methodist activities. John Seys served in the role of \textit{paterfamilias} to the Americo-Liberian surrogates. The mission-house in Monrovia, where the superintendent lived, served as headquarters for the Methodists — an extension of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. There was also a combined print-shop and store-house in

Monrovia. On a third lot stood a school-house, named Monrovia Academy, which offered primary and collegiate courses of instruction.

A parallel can be drawn between the mission-station and the traditional New England town. Spiritual activities included daily worship services, annual revival meetings and love feasts, a Sunday school for children and adults, and marriage ceremonies. This round of events represented the spiritual haven which the missionaries had envisioned as the nucleus of the African crusade. Apart from these features, however, the Missionary Society built an academy, published a newspaper, organized public lectures on current events and literature, conducted scientific experiments to foster local fruit production, and founded Temperance and Anti-Tobacco Societies. Monrovia was the center of the colony's political, economic and social life. Methodist propagandists in America published glowing accounts of these secular activities. They believed that their missionary enterprise was well on the way to success.23

At this point, difficulty materialized. The neatly arranged buildings and western architecture reflected a white Protestant consciousness. The mission station was outwardly respectable, religiously orthodox, and socially functional. It appeared able to solve all the problems of social reform that surrounded it, but it symbolized the mentality that had built it. The mission served as a statement of Western Christian civilization's superiority to the barbarous and degraded society of Black Africa. Its mood was one of silent paternalism and benevolence; the consciousness that inspired it was one of bland disregard for the deep-rooted traditions and social identity of the native population. Its most insidious aspect was its implicit racial posture. Its very nature and its very presence on the African continent highlighted, subtly but potently, the image of Negro inferiority associated with the ethos of Protestant civilization. Although the Monrovia mission station — and all it represented — seemed to function with the efficiency expected of the white Methodist civilizing mission, the situation was fraught with underlying tensions and conflict.24

Consider an incident which involved Seys and Francis Burns, one of the Negro preachers who emigrated from New York and accompanied the superintendent on his journey to Liberia in 1834. In 1840, Burns published a letter in the local Liberian newspaper which criticized the Methodist mission and its administration. Seys promptly suspended Burns for insubordination. It took several weeks of earnest negotiation between the other Americo-Liberian preachers and Seys before arrangements could be worked out for Burns to retract his criticism.\textsuperscript{25} Such personal criticisms were curtailed by Seys, and other white superintendents, throughout the 1840's. Thus, Negro American preachers had little chance to voice their opinions about their own destiny.\textsuperscript{26}

Seys felt that certain customs among the Negro communicants reflected "a great evil." He deplored the singing of "banjo songs" or "corn songs" brought from the southern plantations. These, he maintained, were "a series of unsanctioned songs, the tunes and words of which are so little calculated to promote a spirit of piety." These songs were being introduced into the worship services and had to be stopped. Seys was also concerned about exhibitionism during worship when congregations shouted "Hallelujah!" and "Amen!" during the preaching.\textsuperscript{27}

Equally serious were the conflicts which erupted between native converts at Heddington and Robertsville and their traditional tribal enemies. Late in 1839, for example, a native leader, Goterah, led a band of about three hundred tribesmen in an attack on the new Christian villages. Several Americo-Liberian settlements were constantly threatened by tribes along the coastline, and upstream on the major rivers. In all of these incidents, Americo-Liberian surrogate preachers and their converts defended their mission stations until the arrival of the colonial militia. The significance of these periodic tribal wars is that the "civilized" black colonists and their few Christian converts were not only defending their lives, but also defending...
the new social order.28 In the midst of this unending tension between the Methodist mission establishment and their black surrogates and hostile African tribes, doubt persisted about the Negro's character and capabilities. By earlier subjugating the black church to the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Cox demonstrated his doubts about the ability of the Negro to lead the civilizing mission. John Seys continued to express these same doubts. Throughout his tenure in Liberia Seys faced enormous difficulties, and, as he saw it, the conduct of the black preachers and congregation did not help the situation. He pointed out that with few exceptions, "our excellent general rules are violated" by the surrogate preachers, and that among the church membership the violations occurred "with impunity."29 He urged that black missionaries adhere to the discipline of the church. He stressed the need for a standard of conduct which would become, Seys asserted, "the mould into which the habits, the customs and morals of the people are all cast."30 On several occasions, Seys's disapproval of surrogate conduct resulted in probation and even suspension from preaching and membership in the Liberian Methodist Church.

With these circumstances in mind, then, consider Seys's assessment of the "civilized" attributes of the black emigrant settlers. Of the four hundred American Negroes who came to Liberia during the five-year period ending in 1841, at least one hundred and fifty died. About three hundred and fifty manumitted slaves arrived with no trade or skills. The American Colonization Society supported the settlers for the first six months, considered sufficient assistance to insure self-support thereafter. Emigrants inevitably became destitute, since Liberia did not have an economic base sufficient to insure material prosperity.

28. Editorial, *Africa's Luminary*, March 20, 1840, pp. 2-3. Seys published four letters from the America-Liberian preachers on the scene in this issue of the newspaper. For reports of other "native wars" which involved attacks on the Negro American settlers, see the following issues of *Africa's Luminary*: May 3, 1839, p. 15; June 7, 1839, p. 23; June 21, 1839, p. 27; July 19, 1839, p. 35; October 4, 1839 (entire issue); December 6, 1839, pp. 70-71; December 20, 1839, p. 75.

29. Liberia Annual Conference, Minutes for 1835 and 1837.

30. "Seys' Address to Liberia Annual Conference," in *Africa's Luminary*, February 5, 1841, p. 85. Other persisting criticisms of black surrogate behavior are found in *Africa's Luminary*, October 15, 1839, p. 59 and December 17, 1841, p. 74, as well as Liberia Annual Conference, Minutes for 1842, 1843, 1844, and 1847.
Cox had noted identical conditions in 1833, and no change occurred thereafter. According to Seys, only a dozen or so emigrants had any trade or skill. Colonization did not attract skilled and educated Negroes. If this course of events continued, he concluded that it would spell disaster for the mission enterprise and Liberia as a whole. In a letter to the American Colonization Society, he urged them to send men "of intelligence and personal property" and with "industrious and temperate habits." Liberia was not the place, he stated, where "hordes of unfortunate, ignorant people" could be transformed into a society with "abilities and attainments necessary to constitute and sustain a republican or any other form of government." 31

This posture of Seys suggests an important contradiction in the colonization and missionary mentality. On one hand, colonizationists professed to remake depraved Negro character by resettling them in what purported to be a promised land in Africa, an ideal environment fostered by the educative nature of Christian evangelism. On the other hand, Seys's plea for a more educated and cultivated emigrant suggests that the Methodist missionary required that Negroes be remade before they left America.

This contradiction becomes evident when we examine Seys's response to criticisms from anti-colonization and anti-missionary factions within the domestic Methodist polity. Vigorous attacks from the abolitionists in America engendered the necessity to defend the Liberian enterprise. Claiming to be disturbed by misrepresentations of colonization, John Seys voiced the strongest defense. False information and misjudgments were "more rife," in respect to Liberia, "than any other place on the globe," he stated. He hailed the colonization scheme as a "most efficient auxiliary to the missionary society." To answer the charge that the colonizationists believed that only white men could civilize the tribal native, Seys retorted that this assertion was a "mistaken" and "ridiculous" notion. In replying to abolitionist criticism, he did not question the ability of the American Negro to lead the mission. Seys also implied that responsibility for the mission would inevitably and justifiably fall to the Americo-Liberian preachers. When he heard that some Negro colonists had given up and returned to the United States, and that a group had proposed a scheme to resettle the

Liberian colonists in America, Seys responded that no "sober-minded man" would be "induced to forego the social, civil, and religious blessings" of Liberia.32

Much of the colonizationists' defense of their enterprise centered on the promotion of what the Missionary Society believed to be "benevolent institutions." Seys in particular argued for the establishment of American civil institutions. When Bishop Waugh, President of the Missionary Society, made plain his concern that "there be no deterioration from the purity and power" of American Methodism, he cautioned Seys to "bring up the people to our system, but do not change it to accommodate the people."33

Two related elements are significant in this concept of colonization and the mission. First, the missionary activities were bound up in an ethnocentrism in which secular American institutions were considered the criteria for the remaking of Liberian society. Second, to impose American institutions on an alien culture without taking into consideration the actual conditions or the indigenous culture evidences the paternalism and condescension which, in all faith, was the prevailing attitude by the white Methodist evangelicals toward social reform and spiritual rebirth.

During the 1840's the mission faced a dilemma which reflected the extent of the white Methodists' ambivalent attitude toward the Negro. After Seys left the mission in 1841 white supervision became sporadic in spite of the Missionary Society's recruitment of new white superintendents. At least six white Methodists either died in Liberia or returned in ill health to America between 1842 and 1847. Since Cox's arrival in 1833, six of the thirteen male white missionaries had died, and seven had returned to the United States for health-related reasons. Except for Mrs. Wilkins, women fared no better. This experience gave rise to a long debate in missionary circles about the suitability of sending white missionaries and teachers to a

32. Several articles and letters were reprinted or published by Seys in his capacity as editor of the mission's newspaper. See Africa's Luminary: November 15, 1839, p. 67; January 3, 1839, p. 9; September 20, 1839, p. 51; February 7, 1840, p. 87; May 3, 1839, p. 15; March 15, 1839, p. 3; December 17, 1841, p. 73; June 7, 1839, n.p.; and August 7, 1840, p. 39.
33. Africa's Luminary, February 5, 1841, p. 87; June 6, 1840, p. 23; August 16, 1839, p. 43; and September 4, 1840, p. 46. Letter from Bishop Waugh to John Seys, February 5, 1840, in Africa's Luminary, March 20, 1840, p. 2.
climate where illness and death were almost a certainty.34

Methodists remained optimistic that relying on their white brethren and the Negro American surrogates and native converts, the mission would extend its work. "This mission must, and doubtless soon will, be strengthened," stated the Annual Report for the Missionary Society in 1844, but the Missionary Society failed to recruit adequate replacements, and as a result black surrogates gradually took over positions formerly held by white Methodists.35

This shift was consistent with the colonizationists' rationale that the mission be in the hands of "civilized" Americo-Liberian colonists. Associated with this shift were clear signs of retrenchment. The two native Christian villages at Heddington and Robertsville failed to prosper. George S. Brown, the surrogate preacher-in-charge at Heddington, was suspected of mishandling funds raised in America and left the mission, and Dr. William Taylor died at Robertsville. Many native converts returned to their tribal villages.36 In 1843, an Americo-Liberian preacher, Beverly R. Wilson, made a major journey into the interior beyond the frontier settlements, and, in 1844, Seys returned briefly to follow up Wilson's efforts. These endeavors did not lead to the success enjoyed in 1839 at the native Christian villages of Heddington and Robertsville. Both men renewed old acquaintances, but failed to establish mission stations in the interior. The Missionary Society simply did not have the human and financial resources to risk in the interior. Native animosities, tribal wars, and the generally unsettled conditions beyond the frontier of the "civilized" Americo-Liberian set-

34. Further to the issue of Negro and white leadership capabilities centering on the health of whites and the doubts about Negro character, see "A Plea for West Africa," Missionary Advocate, October, 1847, p. 50; Francis Burns, "Who Will Come to Our Help?" Missionary Advocate, October, 1849, p. 53; "Can White Missionaries Labor in Africa?" Missionary Advocate, October, 1849, p. 55; Editorial, Missionary Advocate, July, 1850, p. 29; "A Coloured Ministry for the Coloured People," Missionary Advocate, December, 1851, p. 66.


tlements would, they no doubt thought, lead to the fiasco experi­enced several years earlier, when the new Christian villages had come under attack. In New York, at Missionary Society headquarters late in 1844, Seys advised the Board of Managers that "it would be inexpedient at present to entrust the superintendency...to a coloured man." Four years later, however, three Americo-Liberian surrogates who had been ordained as preachers in America were appointed in charge of the mission.

The following year, in 1849, the Corresponding Secretary of the Missionary Society in New York explained that, at a time when the Society could find "no one among our white brethren" to supervise the work, the bishop in charge of the missions "determined upon a change in policy," which he indicated was a "temporary arrangement." He reported the appointment of the Americo-Liberians as "an experiment." The Methodists' doubts about their black surrogates persisted; the report expressed "strong hope" that this measure of expediency would demonstrate "the prudence and prosperity" of the Negro surrogates and provide them with an opportunity to "show themselves competent to the task of managing, successfully, the spiritual and financial interests" of the mission. If the Missionary Society and the church authorities in America were satisfied, they would recognize this achievement as "a gratifying consummation of hopes long entertained, and devoutly cherished." The Society was "convinced that increased and stronger efforts" were required to "bear upon the natives proper." They would judge the success of their Negro surrogates in this manner as they waited, "with much anxiety," for information from the mission.

The white Methodists' withdrawal from the leadership of

37. Monthly Missionary Notice, issues for November, 1843; July, 1844; August, 1844; and September, 1844.
38. Missionary Society, Africa Committee, Minutes of meeting for December 3, 1844.
40. Thirtieth Annual Report (1849), pp. 15-19. See also letters, Durbin to Burns, June 17, 1850; Durbin to Rev. Bishop Waugh, August 19, 1852; Durbin to Scott, July 11, 1856; Durbin to Rev. Prof. True (at Wesleyan University), November 22, 1855; Scott to Liberia Mission Annual Conference, December 6, 1864; and Durbin to Scott, December 12, 1864. Missionary Society of Methodist Episcopal Church, Letters from Board of Missions, Africa, July 10, 1849 — November 14, 1866, Central Records Division, United Methodist Church, New York. (Handwritten).
the mission no doubt exacerbated their long-standing ambivalence about Negro character. At mid-century, almost two decades after Cox's arrival in Liberia, there was little evidence either of material prosperity or large-scale native conversions. White missionaries, predisposed to view Negro life and society as inferior, no doubt associated the mission's demise with the lack of piety, the moral infidelity, and inferior racial attributes of their black surrogates. As one member of the Missionary Society expressed these conservative evangelicals' faith at the time, the gospel "will regenerate humanity in all respects" on the condition "it be properly preached." 41 In any appraisal of the mission, it is essential to take into consideration this aspect of the conservative evangelical consciousness.

When white Methodist evangelicals ventured forth to proselytize the world, they thought it was not only possible and desirable but even their moral duty to convert the world through the redemptive power of Protestant evangelism. Yet they, like Cox and Seys, took with them a complex amalgam of perceptions, shaped by a set of ethnocentric assumptions about religion and society. Methodist apologists for colonization defended the mission with a self-image of their own piety and morality. Referring to the inability of white missionaries to survive in Africa, one member of the Missionary Society said Liberia presented "unprecedented openings." He reminded devout Methodists that God placed "solemn obligations" upon the Methodist Church "to increase her efforts to evangelize the world." To him, this was a sign that was "impossible to mistake." 42 Another Methodist declared that the mission to Africa constituted the kind of active Christian responsibility that would lead to the "conversion of the world, and nothing less." 43 Methodist evangelicals, at this time, were concerned

41. See report of a speech by Rev. George A. Coffey, in which the following two principles for missionary work are promulgated: "First, That the gospel, if received into the heart and life, will regenerate humanity in all respects; it will regenerate individuals, and then Society; it blesses now and for ever. Secondly, That the gospel will be received, if it be properly preached." (Emphasis in original) "Anniversary Meeting," Twenty-ninth Annual Report (1848), n.p. See also "Christianity and Civilization," London Juvenile Offering, reprinted in Missionary Advocate, September, 1846, p. 47.

42. Address of Rev. Schuyler Seager, reported in "Anniversary Meetings," Twenty-eighth Annual Report (1847), n.p.

about the state of Christianity. They had reckoned that "more than three-fifths of the race of man are idolators," and that heathenism had been increasing for centuries. They believed that the numerical gap between Christians and the unconverted was widening. This concept of the world situation required a vigorous, world-wide missionary program to insure that the Protestant crusade fulfilled its destiny.

Their zeal can partly be explained by their understanding of religion and society. They were convinced, as one Methodist said, that the mission to Liberia represented "the championship of philanthropic minds sanctified by the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ." Considering themselves a moving force in the world-wide crusade to further the progress of Christian civilization, a central purpose of their evangelical motivation was to transform the world into a civilization as they knew it. The significance of this impulse must be considered in appraising their mission to Liberia.

Doubts about Negro character and destiny seemed to dissipate with this forced retreat of expressions of pious optimism about the civilizing mission. Hoping to rekindle the flickering flame of their evangelical zeal, they reiterated their faith in the moral righteousness of their cause, claiming that their missionary endeavors were included in God's divine plan to convert the world to Christianity, and, therefore, to a progressive civilization.

Their belief, however, in the superiority of Christianity and western civilization could not overcome the economic, social, and psychological conditions they found in Liberia. An undercurrent of dissension between the white evangelicals and their Americo-Liberian surrogates suffused the mission. The sponsors lacked the financial, technical, and human resources necessary to transform Liberia into what Methodists considered to be a progressive Christian society. Some native Africans were actively hostile, and others were but partially accepting of what must have appeared to them to be the encroachment of an alien way of life upon their societies. When defending their mission, the Methodists ignored the real difficulties they encountered in "civilizing" Liberia. However, they could not deny the enormous

difficulty of maintaining white evangelicals in the field.\textsuperscript{46}

The whites' withdrawal from the leadership of the mission in part reflected the inability of white evangelicals to survive in Liberia. It was also motivated by their desire to maintain a pious image of themselves by handing over the mission to the Americo-Liberians who, as "civilized" Negroes, would carry on the evangelical crusade in Africa. This step was taken in spite of the white missionaries' doubts about the Negro's character and ability.

In the hands of black surrogates, the Methodist mission produced less than adequate results. This outcome did not lead the conservative evangelicals to call into question their belief in the efficacy of benevolent Christian institutions. They retreated from Liberia without changing their basic assumptions about religion, society, and the Negro. In the eyes of paternalistic and benevolent white Protestant guardians, the black surrogates no doubt came to be considered sinners in the conservative Methodists' evangelical effort to liberate Africa from Satan's hegemony.

\textsuperscript{46} In the 1850's, the Missionary Society attempted a concerted effort to send white teachers to Liberia to work under Americo-Liberian leadership. But by 1857, the last white teacher had returned to America. The next appearance by a white Methodist would not be until 1879. See Barclay, \textit{Methodist Missions}, III, pp. 869-903.