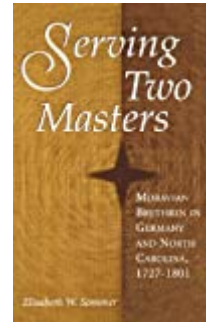


Elisabeth W. Sommer. *Serving Two Masters: Moravian Brethren in Germany and North Carolina, 1727-1801.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000. xvii + 234. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2139-0.



Reviewed by Stephen Longenecker (Department of History, Bridgewater College, Virginia)

Published on H-SHEAR (March, 2001)

A Tale of Two <cite>Gemeine</cite>

A Tale of Two *Gemeine*

“Gordon Wood and Turner, too” might be an appropriate subtitle for Elisabeth Sommer’s creative and well-researched comparison of two American and German Moravian communities. In this valuable addition to our understanding of Moravianism, the American Revolution and the Carolina backwoods become the key variables as American Moravianism evolved into a more rebellious variant of its European parent.

The Moravians, or Unity of the Brethren, were born far from the American wilderness. They originated with a group of Moravian and Bohemian exiles, who traced their heritage to the Hussite movement and who in 1722 settled on the Saxon estate of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf. Under the Count’s guidance, they created a community, Herrnhut, that brought economic, political, and family life in addition to religion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Moravians carried this model across the Atlantic and planted it in the Carolina piedmont backcountry. They called their new community the Wachau, or Wachovia, and Salem became the hub of this settlement with subordinate villages clustered about it.

Moravians built other settlements in Europe and America, but Sommer’s study focuses on Herrnhut and Salem.

First-generation Herrnhut may have been closer to feudal Europe than to Revolutionary America. Zinzendorf and the early Moravians, according to Sommer, “were, in many ways, children more of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than of their own” (p. 89). Like all villages in the early modern era, inhabitants of Moravian communities were interdependent, and the economy was anything but free enterprise. Masters did not compete with each another, and journeymen did not contract independently for employment.

Herrnhut, however, took regulation a step further than secular communities by bringing other aspects of life, especially families, under the authority of the group. The community, not parents, selected the apprenticeship and trade for children. The community government chose marital partners, supervised child-rearing, and even regulated visits between siblings of opposite sex, so eager were Moravians to separate genders.

A rich, complex devotional life influenced by Pietism

and emphasizing emotion and spirituality motivated individuals to contribute to these intricate community relations. By bringing early modern values under the influence of the Spirit, Moravians “baptized the secular village community” (p. 31). Liturgies, communions, holidays, festivals, anniversaries, hymn-sings, and Love Feasts wrapped spirituality around commitment to the community. Although scholars writing about other topics have found that the individualism of Pietism eroded authority and encouraged egalitarianism, Sommer believes that in Moravian communities this faith system promoted structure.

Second-generation Moravians in both Europe and America chafed at this well-ordered system their parents had created, but Sommer argues that rebelliousness in the Wachau took different forms and was stronger. In Germany challenges to authority fell within traditional methods of resistance. Dissenters appealed to proper social roles, or rebellious brethren simply ignored authorities and did things their own way. Moravians in Salem, though, felt the influence of the American Revolution and the American woods. The brothers, at least, voted more frequently in public elections, and elders considered political participation so important that they recommended candidates for office to the Brethren. Leadership noted that young men indulged in rough speech and spent their time hunting and shooting instead of working. Cheap land encouraged farming rather than the trades, which scattered families across the countryside and inspired Brethren to fulfill the popular American role of the independent yeoman, hardly the image of a faithful and obedient member of the community. Others left their assigned trades without permission or for higher wages outside the commune. Salem brethren became increasingly interested in land speculation. Couples courted covertly, and parents argued with the community over decisions about their children. New arrivals to Salem generally noticed a “free manner” (p. 166), but Salem leadership more specifically interpreted the appeals to freedom as distinctly American, convinced that “the wilderness had invaded the refuge” (p. 170). This growing individualism and resistance to authority unraveled the regulation and deference on which Moravian communities were built. Gordon Wood and Frederick Jackson Turner would be pleased.

Minor themes add to Sommer’s persuasiveness. Sommer acknowledges that generational factors explain some of the defiance. First generation Moravians made a decision to join Herrnhut or Salem while second generation Brethren, who were born into it, naturally

questioned what the previous generation had created. Also, Sommer credits the Enlightenment’s influence over young Moravians for some of the changes, but her description of the Enlightenment as a series of debates over reason, human nature, and freedom that “fell outside stately philosophical tomes” (p. xii) is a bottom-up definition consistent with her reliance on Gordon Wood.

Sommer’s most interesting chapter, “Gambling with God,” discusses the erosion of the lot as the Age of Reason increasingly influenced Moravians. Though the first generation Brethren had developed an effective administrative system, they still asked the “true head,” i. e., God, through the lot to make all the important decisions, especially about marriage, readmission after expulsion, and confirmation for office. The most common method was to submit two written statements expressing the divine will: “The Savior approves” whatever was being proposed and the converse, “the Savior does not approve.” A member of the Elders Council then pulled one of these papers from a container. Criticisms of this procedure appeared early. Some questioned whether individuals should be required to obey the lot even if they did not write the questions, and, more specifically, some feared that the lot would send them to the mission field in Ethiopia without their consent. Moreover, leaders could manipulate the lot by rewording and redrawing it until they got the answer they wanted. Second generation Moravians, influenced by the Enlightenment, suggested that God was too rational to use such an irrational system and that the lot was just a matter of luck. They asked why business and home ownership, which had no spiritual element, should be submitted, and they particularly resisted exposing marriage plans to the lot. Increasingly members urged that decisions be left to “brotherly reason.” Finally, in 1801 the Brethren removed the lot in election confirmation but only after receiving affirmation for this from the lot. Sommer explains diminishing support for the lot as evidence of the growing influence of reason and individualism.

Two topics—the Sifting Period and slavery—are conspicuous by their near-absence from the book. The Sifting Period was a time of extreme emotionalism and irrationalism in which Moravians became preoccupied with the physical aspect of Christ’s crucifixion. The thorns, the blood, the nails, the cross all held special meaning and fascination. As Moravians pondered the wounds, they left worldly concerns to Christ. But Sommer ignores most of this, and in one paragraph she rushes over the Sifting Period, explaining it as part of the devotional ritual and emotional faith that baptized the sec-

ular community. Does she mean to be revisionist and claim that previous scholars have incorrectly described or overemphasized the Sifting Period, or does this aspect of Moravianism merely fall outside the parameters of her study? Given the Sifting Period's stress on irrationalism and Sommer's emphasis on reason, more attention to this topic might be helpful.

Sommer similarly has little to say about slavery. Carolina Moravians owned other persons, which Sommer interprets as "another aspect of American opportunity, or, even, of freedom." But she hints of a larger story with the remark that "the Brethren incorporated slaves into their spiritual life on a roughly equal parity as Brothers and Sisters" (p. 123). Did inclusion of Blacks into Moravian spiritual life stem from an alternative view of race? If Moravians drank freely from the Revolution and the Enlightenment, as Sommer argues, did that include the heightened antislavery sentiment that came with these movements? Another recent work, Jon F. Sensbach's *A Separate Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763-1840* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998) finds that Moravians became increasingly fond of the South's institution, a less democratic image of Moravianism somewhat at odds with Sommer. Perhaps Moravians in Salem were Southern as well as American. *Serving Two Masters* leaves us pondering what direction it might have taken had it said more about how these Germans and Pietists, under the influence of the Revolution, treated their human property.

Also curious is Sommer's use of the New England Puritans as a comparative. She cites New England Calvinists, especially their Half-Way covenant, as another group accused of declension but which, she believes, more likely adapted to maintain the next generation. Although Puritans conveniently possess a full shelf of secondary literature, and Sommer's allusion to them contributes to her book with another vision unrav-

eled in the North American woods, the middle colonies offer more immediate comparisons. Contemporary observers in this region noted some of the same democratic trends that Sommer finds among Carolina Moravians. Henry M. Muhlenberg invoked Judges 17:6—"In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes"—to lament the independence of Pennsylvania Lutherans. Quakers and Pennsylvania German Anabaptists were closer to Moravians geographically and chronologically and more similar theologically. Anabaptists, of course, were also Germans. Quakers even suffered declension but restored discipline at approximately the same time that Moravians headed into the woods. Did the Revolution and the back-country impact these middle colony fellowships as it did Moravians? Sommer may have found better comparisons closer to home.

But these questions are small points, and *Serving Two Masters* will interest a variety of scholars. Although the topic is a bit too arcane and maybe too dry for most classrooms, North Carolina-area teachers with students already vaguely familiar with the Moravians, or at least with Salem, might want to incorporate a few examples from the book into lessons on democratization. Moravian scholars will welcome this significant addition to the literature of their denomination, and others will find valuable Sommer's description of declension, outsider-ness, and assimilation. Finally, scholars of the American Revolution and the Early National period will discover one more piece of evidence in an unusual place for the emergence of a distinctive American egalitarian society. Sommer's tale of Count Zinzendorf's losing battle with Frederick Jackson Turner should enjoy a wide readership.

Copyright (c) 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: Stephen Longenecker. Review of Sommer, Elisabeth W., *Serving Two Masters: Moravian Brethren in Germany and North Carolina, 1727-1801*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5002>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.