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Enlightened Dissent: A Treatment of Eighteenth-Century Baptists and Moravians

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TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF...

ENLIGHTENED DISSENT:
A TREATMENT OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
BAPTISTS AND MORAVIANS

Taylor F. DiRoberto

Mentor: Mark Valeri

During the eighteenth century, Protestant Christians adopted many diverse theological, sociological, and political forms in the British colonies of North America. The era between the famed religious revivalism of the First Great Awakening and the political upheaval of the American Revolution saw an unprecedented culture of religious pluralism rise and flourish along the Atlantic seaboard. Amidst this culture of increasing religious pluralism, certain ecclesiastic groups maintained exclusive political rights and privileges as the established religion of a geographic region, such as the Congregationalists in much of New England. Despite the reality of religious establishment, several dissenting religious factions gained widespread prominence throughout the colonies, including the Baptists and Moravians. Historians of this period have conventionally conceived of “dissent” as a political category. In this conventional view, disparate religious factions such as the Baptists and Moravians are grouped into one conceptual category based on the precarious political implications of their respective theologies regarding topics such as military service and ministerial taxes. However, the findings of this project point toward an understanding of religious dissent rooted in sociological, intellectual, and cultural factors, rather than the mere ecclesiastical and political divisions which have traditionally classified the dissenters from the mainstream religious establishment. A thorough survey of printed theological tracts, personal conversion narratives, as well as private manuscript diaries demonstrates that certain religious groups, such as the Baptists, were participating along with the mainstream religious establishment in a theological discourse deeply influenced by British Enlightenment thinking. Conversely, the Moravians refused to participate in this same type of Enlightenment-influenced religious discourse, thereby marking themselves as true religious pariahs. This, then, proves to be an often overlooked and important dividing line amongst dissenting groups: how they responded to the ubiquitous, regnant Enlightenment moral discourse of the day.