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Capstone Seminar

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Introduction

To completely comprehend “Thomas Bacon’s Sermon to the Negro Slaves” given in 1749, there must be a clear understanding of background information about the time he was preaching, where, and why he was preaching there. Having a grasp of this contextual information as a first-time reader is crucial to understanding the message being conveyed in the sermon and in this research paper that will focus on the sermon itself. The purpose of this paper is to explain why specifically Thomas Bacon's Sermon to the Negro Slaves is a valuable piece of human history and a productive site of analysis for my research which is the power dynamic between African/African American slaves and their slave owners. Understanding the historical backdrop, the location, and the motivations behind Bacon’s sermon becomes pivotal for any reader approaching this material for the first time. This contextual description serves as a gateway to unraveling the nuanced layers of meaning embedded in the sermon and forms the cornerstone of this research paper’s exploration. The period in which Bacon delivered his sermon represents a critical juncture in the history of slavery, demanding a meticulous examination of the prevailing societal norms, rhetoric, attitudes, religion, and power. By scrutinizing the historical context, readers can better grasp the forces shaping both the message within the sermon and the broader power dynamics active between African/African American slaves and their owners. Following this introduction, this paper will be formatted with a concrete contextual description of the sermon, then will end with a conclusion and closing remarks on my initial observation of the sermon and its historical context.

Context & Description

Understanding the importance of contextualizing a text such as this sermon there must be clear knowledge of who presented the sermon and to whom. The sermon was delivered by an Episcopalian priest by the name of Thomas Bacon who was a musician, poet, publisher, author, and Slaveowner of three to five black slaves. Considered the most learned man in Maryland of his day, Bacon is still known as the first compiler of Maryland statutes. In the beginning of the biographical essay titled "Thomas Bacon" author Robert Micklus stated, "The Reverend Thomas Bacon, one of colonial Maryland's most prolific authors, is remembered today primarily for his sermons on charity schools and for his compilation Laws of Maryland At Large". This information emphasizes Thomas Bacon's multifaceted contributions to colonial Maryland, ranging from religious teachings to legal compilations, making him a notable figure in the historical context of that region. Little is known about the early life of Thomas Bacon other than him being born in England, so it has been difficult for historians to accurately piece together the episcopal priest's actual date and town of his birth. Not making any claims but it has been inferred that he was born around 1711-1712 possibly in Whitehaven, a town and port on the northwest coast of Cumberland, Cumbria, England to his father and mother, William and Elizabeth Bacon. A Journal article titled "Rev. Thomas Bacon" published by Whitehaven and Western Lake Land Co. stated that, "No record of his birth in Whitehaven can be found but his father William Bacon, a merchant captain resided here, his mother Elizabeth Richardson was from Whitehaven and his brother Anthony Bacon, the great merchant and industrialist was born here in 1716". This citation provides insight into how difficult it is to determine the early timeline of Thomas Bacon's life due to the lack of records and information available. What is known about Thomas Bacon is that he must have been highly educated at an early age, because

documents convey that during the 1730s he resided in Ireland and worked in the royal customs services managing vessels in the coal trade between Whitehaven and Dublin while he also began publishing the Dublin Mercury, a biweekly newspaper, January 1742. By September 27, 1742 Bacon was printing the official newspaper of Ireland, the Dublin Gazette, which he published only until July of 1743, when he began preparing for the ministry. In another Biography titled, ‘Thomas Bacon’ author K.J Kroha discusses, “The Reverend Thomas Bacon was born in Dublin, Ireland around 1700. Little is known about Bacon’s early life. Records show that he was working for the Custom House in Dublin by 1737, and that he began publishing the Dublin Mercury, a biweekly newspaper in January, 1742. By September, 1742, Bacon was printing the Dublin Gazette, which he published only until July, 1743, when he began preparing for the ministry. He emigrated to America in June, 1745, and was appointed rector of St. Peter’s Church in Talbot County by Thomas Bladen, the governor of Maryland”. This information highlights the actual accounts of Thomas Bacon and whereabouts right before his ministry journey while he was working in Dublin, Ireland and a short description of his accomplishment right after his immigration to America for his ministry journey. After migrating to America and being appointed rector of St. Peters Parish in Talbot County, Maryland, Thomas Bacon popularity grew and gained a name for himself by publishing numerous sermons and essays while living in Maryland. He was even involved in a scandal with a mulatto(mixed race) woman named Rachel Beck who accused him of rape and the father of her child, Thomas Bacon was troubled and sued the woman for defamation in which he won the case(Whitehaven and Westernlake Land Co).

Now that I have discussed the background of Thomas Bacon and his journey into the ministry, it is now suitable to discuss the background/context of his sermon he preached and also the parameters of what was going on during the year of 1749 for negro slaves. The sermon notes

document that the congregation of black slaves Thomas Bacon was addressing existed at the Parish Church of Saint Peters(S.P.) in the Province of Maryland. The context of the sermon should be viewed from the perspective of the time period it was written in. In 1749, there was much taking place especially on the east coast of the United States in regards of the slave trade, slavery, and religioning. For example, the Transatlantic Slave Trade was a big part of the America and the econmic system. The Transatlantic Slave Trade was essentially a triangular route from Europe to Africa, to the Americas and back to Europe. In the era of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, approximately 13 million individuals of African descent were forcibly taken from their homes, abducted onto European and American vessels, and transported across the Atlantic Ocean. Subsequently, they endured enslavement, mistreatment, and enduring separation from their families, ancestral roots, and cultural heritage. CEO of Equal Justice Initiative and author Bryan Stevenson discussed in the journal article titled ‘The Transatlantic Slave Trade’ that, “The Transatlantic Slave Trade represents one of the most violent, traumatizing, and horrific eras in world history. Nearly two million people died during the barbaric Middle Passage across the ocean. The African continent was left destabilized and vulnerable to conquest and violence for centuries. The Americas became a place where race and color created a caste system defined by inequality and abuse”(Introduction). This citation shows the extent of the devastation and dehumanization of African slaves that were brought to the Americas which ultimately led to the success of the American economy. The Middle Passage is a term used to describe the journey from Africa to America, and was historically accounted for and documented during the year of 1749. What took place during the Middle Passage was enslaved Africans, numbering in the millions, were subjected to dehumanizing and overcrowded ship conditions. Shackled together in cramped spaces, they endured unsanitary environments, fostering the rapid spread of many

diseases. The ships were a breeding ground for suffering, as the captives were often malnourished due to insufficient and even spoiled food supplies. The duration of the journey, often spanning several months, exacerbated the physical toll on the captives, leading to high mortality rates. This tragedy of an account can be found by author Olaudah Equiano, who was an former enslaved African who wrote about his horrific experiences during the Middle Passage in his autobiography titled 'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano' he stated, "The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocating us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now becoming insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated"(Page 14). This passage is significant because it depicts an account from an actual African former slave who actively experienced the horrors of the slave trade in the Middle Passage and was educated enough to document his accounts. Another significant account that is documented in regards to slavery and the year of 1749 is the sloop 'Rhode Island', which was owned by the 'Livingston Family' who were a prominent family that migrated from Ireland to the Dutch Republic, and then to the Province of New York in the 17th century. This ship was known to leave New York to Africa in 1748 acquiring 120 men, women, and children slaves, but

by the time the vessel arrived back in New York in 1749, they buried 43 African slaves. This is known because Robert Livingston himself reported the incident in his letter Petrus Dewitt that states, “We have thank God had the good fortune of having one of our Guinea Sloops come in, tho after along passage of 79 days in which time they buried 37 Slaves & Since 3 more & 2 more likely to die which is an accident not to be helped, and which if had not happened we Should have made a Golden Voyage but as it is there will not be much left I fear, unless the other Sloop meets with better Luck”(The Middle Passage 1749). This account from Robert Livingston who owned the sloop and ordered the captain to acquire slaves from the coast of Africa, is a prime illustration of the white slave owner supremacist demonstrating the slave-trade's emphasis on the financial loss rather than the cost of morality and humanity.

While slave ships were traveling constantly from the east American coast to the African continent during the 1700s, there was a turn in religious history in America that led to slave owners expanding their beliefs and practices of christianity to the African/African American slaves. This reasoning may have been highly influenced by the Great Awakening period which was a religious revival when spirituality and religious devotion were revived. This feeling swept through the American colonies between the 1730s and 1770s. In the article titled ‘Great Awakening ‘ the History organization stated, “The movement came at a time when the idea of secular rationalism was being emphasized, and passion for religion had grown stale. Christian leaders often traveled from town to town, preaching about the gospel, emphasizing salvation from sins and promoting enthusiasm for Christianity”(History.com). This information points to the impact the Great Awakening had on the American colonies from white preachers like Thomas Bacon traveling town to town, door to door, spreading the word of christianity. In spite of these events taking place in the colonies, many Christian slave owners were still reluctant to

convert their slaves to Christianity, fearing that conversion might loosen their bonds of their slavery condition. Other Christian slave owners feared that their slaves would learn how to read and write which could foment rebellion through their gathering for preaching and worshipping purposes. Despite the unfolding events in the colonies, numerous Christian slave owners hesitated to convert their slaves to Christianity. Their apprehension stemmed from the concern that conversion might weaken the control they held over their enslaved individuals and also were wary that if their slaves learned how to read and write, it could potentially fuel rebellion, especially as slaves gathered for preaching and worship. The reluctance to embrace religious conversion and literacy among slaves reflected a complex interplay of social, economic, and political dynamics during this historical period.

Although slaveowners feared converting their slaves to Christianity, some slaveowners and slave congregations in Maryland and other more eastern colonies were influenced by the Great Awakening period, Thomas Bacon's congregation of slaveowner and negro slaves was a prime example. In the book 'Masters & Slaves In The House Of The Lord' author John B. Boles discussed how, "During the second quarter of the eighteenth century, Evangelicalism and Pietism swept across England and Europe, and the quickening of heartfelt religion soon leapfrogged to the New World in the person of George Whitefield. The resulting Great Awakening occurred primarily north of Maryland"(Page 7). This account from John B. Boles book highlights the influence other white clergymen and evangelist had during Great Awakening specifically in the regions and colonies of Maryland, which is the same colony and culture that Thomas Bacon and the congregation of negro slaves were located. From the rhetoric use of Thomas Bacon and how he addressed of the negros much can be learned about the knowledge and understanding of Christianity these slaves had. The word use of Thomas Bacon in this sermon shows that the

negro slaves he was addressing knew an significant amount of christian beliefs but not as much theological doctrine. I say this because Thomas Bacon uses the biblical teachings in a manipulative, contradictory, and hypocritical strategy in order to justify dehumanization and to keep control over the negro slaves. He accomplishes this strategy by using the tactic of fear by citing lines such as 'GOD' will punish you and your soul if you disobey your 'Masters' or slave owners and misbehave. He also threatens the congregation with the terms 'Heaven and Hell' and that 'GOD' is always watching all slaves taking notice of their Behavior. Continuing with the concept of fear that Thomas Bacon utilized and along the terms heaven and hell, he also mentions an extremely antagonistic biblical being 'The Devil' or 'Satan' by informing the slaves to refrain from all lying unless GOD will hand them over to the Devil. These biblical terms and concepts were definitely taught to the negro congregation as a fear tactic because Thomas Bacon knows these are gruesome topics which are typically feared when it comes to christian thinkers and doctrines. Lastly, what makes this sermon so significant in terms of its meaning is that Thomas Bacon organized the sermon in a way that it was strongly influenced around the teachings of the Apostle Paul and the reformed theological Christian perspective of the Messiah and God himself Jesus Christ from the Bible. For example, from the context of the sermons he used scriptures Ephesians 6:8, Matthew 10:28, & Galatians 5:22-23. The importance of this information is due to each of those scriptures either refers to obedience, self-behavior, fear, and slaves.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of Thomas Bacon's Sermon to the Negro Slaves emerges as a crucial exploration within the broader context of my research, which delves into the intricate power dynamics between African/African American slaves and their owners. This historical

sermon serves as a valuable artifact, shedding light on the complexities of the relationships during a pivotal period in human history. While my focus remained on dissecting the sermon's significance, it is essential to acknowledge that comprehending the broader narrative requires thorough background and contextual analysis. This contextual exploration is imperative for readers unfamiliar with my research, providing a foundational understanding of the subject matter and ensuring a more nuanced interpretation of the intricate dynamics at play in the power structures between slaves and their owners. The historical depth and analytical richness encapsulated in Thomas Bacon's Sermon contribute significantly to the broader discourse on the experiences of enslaved individuals and their interactions with those who held power over them.

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