

Church-State Relations in the Anglophone Caribbean

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The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) message arrived in the Caribbean between the late 1880s-early 1890s. This essay seeks to explain why, notwithstanding the prejudices of the state and the established churches, SDA members managed to establish a foothold in the Anglophone Caribbean. In this submission, hereafter, unless specifically otherwise stated, the term Caribbean is used in reference to the Anglophone Caribbean.

In the case of this region, the Church of England (also referred to as the Anglican Church and, sometimes, the Episcopal Church) arrived with the first English settlers in the 1620s, and, up to the 1890s, it occupied a privileged place in the local society.² All of the leading politicians in the House of Assembly, as the local parliament was so styled in all British West Indian colonies except for British Guiana (later Guyana), were members of this denomination. Moreover, the bishop of this church sat as a member of the Executive Council, which stood at the pinnacle of the local political establishments.³

Additionally, there was another layer of government in the various English colonies. In that case, the various territories were divided into parishes, and each parish had a local government system called the vestry system. In order to vote or to be elected to a seat in the vestry in the early years of English colonization in the Caribbean, the requirement was that one had to be white, male, over 21 years of age, and a member of the Church of England.⁴ The race-related requirement was dropped after the emancipation of the enslaved African and Afro-Caribbean laborers in 1834, but, well into the 20th century, the reality was that of a social system in which the Church of England was the dominant social institution.⁵

This dominance was evidenced almost immediately in the interaction between European colonists and so-called “non-conformist” groups, namely the Quakers (or Friends as they were called) and adherents to the Hebrew faith, who arrived in the region within 30 years of the arrival of the first white colonists. One historian, Professor Larry Gragg, observes that, while Quakers were not treated as badly in such colonies as Barbados as they were in England, persecution drove several out of the island, and many faced arrest for refusing to serve in the local militia, for refusing to follow the doctrine and teachings of the Anglican Church, and for keeping their businesses

open on the "Sabbath," by which the authorities meant Sunday. The Quakers also attempted to convert the enslaved to Christianity, which caused further persecution against their members.⁶

After the passage of the Emancipation Act in 1834, white planter dominated assemblies in the Caribbean facilitated the importation of East Indian and Chinese laborers into several of the colonies. These were largely imported into the larger territories of British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica, although some laborers were also recruited in the smaller territories of St. Vincent, St. Lucia, and Grenada, with a few being found in other islands. The main purpose for the importation of these laborers was to swell the numbers of the laboring population at large and, through this, provide competition for the available work, thus driving down wage levels that were already very low in most cases.

The effect of this artificial expansion in the labor market strengthened the hegemony of the white planter class over the colonial political establishment. Most of the imported indentured laborers were Hindu or Muslim, and, while there was no official sanction on the religious practice of the newcomers, the bias of the state towards the Church of England did have its impact on the socio-political and economic life of the immigrants and the wider creole population.⁷

Moreover, the masses had little access to political power, being largely excluded from political representation by a very restrictive political franchise that offered significant advantage to the propertied classes. By the time that the SDA members arrived in the various territories in the late 19th century, changes in Britain leading to greater religious toleration in her colonies as well meant that this new denomination, as well as several others that had entered the region between the 1760s and the 1890s, could count on some protection by the state.

In 1689, Britain had passed a Toleration Act that extended freedom of worship with some restrictions to non-conformists but excluded Roman Catholics. The terms of the Toleration Act were extended to the British colonies in the Caribbean and North America through instructions delivered by the governors as the leading officials of the crown. When the Moravians arrived in Barbados in the 1760s and the Wesleyan Methodists arrived by the 1790s, they found that hostility to non-conformists was palpably visible everywhere, particularly where local authorities felt that the entry of such groups might contribute to subversion among the enslaved population. The Wesleyans were attacked, and some of their churches were destroyed. However, when news of this reached Britain, the local authorities in Barbados were instructed by the colonial officers of the crown to provide protection to the non-conformists.

Toleration was also extended to the Jewish communities in the Caribbean. For centuries in Barbados, beginning in the 1650s, Jews had been permitted residence, and they had established synagogues where they worshipped on their Sabbath, Saturday. Possibly, the small size of the Jewish community did not appear to the authorities to constitute a threat to the established social order. While they suffered from restrictions on their economic activity and were refused access to the political franchise, familiarity to their practices, including Sabbath-keeping, both in Barbados and other British colonies might well have presented a template that would later

govern the way that the authorities received Adventists in the 1890s.

In the 1830s, Jews and Catholics alike in Barbados were relieved from the restrictions, which still limited their religious and political lives. Thus, as non-conformist religious activity spread throughout the various colonies, the way was paved for the later arrival of SDA members. Adventists in the Caribbean, in general, had relative freedom to practice their faith. Thus, when Pastor Elam Van Deusen and his wife arrived in Barbados after the initial pioneering work by Pastor Dexter Ball in the 1890s, they faced no state objections to their work.⁸ The same was true of Adventist pioneers in other territories such as St. Kitts, Jamaica, and Trinidad. It also does not appear that, in the French and Spanish colonies, any special obstacles were placed by the state to the work of the church. At the same time, if the state did not place legal obstacles to the spread of the Adventist doctrine, the same might not have been true of state officials, particularly those who were members of the dominant Catholic or Anglican faiths.

In St. Kitts, members of local government councils placed obstacles against the church in its attempts to purchase land. In Barbados and St. Kitts, as elsewhere in the region, church officials, many of whom were agents of the state, used their control over the broader educational system to harass teachers and other employees, even to the point of dismissal. Thus, Joseph Laurence of St. Kitts and Charles Cave of Barbados, both of whom converted to Adventism in the 1890s, were fired from their work as teachers.⁹ Both later journeyed to the U.S.A. and became outstanding Adventist pioneers: Laurence as an ordained minister in the American South and elsewhere in the U.S.A.; and Cave as a physician and credentialed missionary in the Barbados field, where he provided yeoman service in the medical and evangelism work. Another Barbadian who faced discrimination in the job market was Vasco Boyce, who later became a senior administrator of the SDA Church in the Caribbean.¹⁰

From those early years, the work of the SDA Church has grown. In this contemporary period, the organs of the state largely respect the church, and some members have even been promoted or elected to high offices in the political and administrative system. Thus, Adventists are to be found as Permanent Secretaries, members of Parliament and Ministers of government, and even as Heads of State.

Indeed, one appointment that illustrates how far the SDA Church has traveled in the area of church-state relations has been the appointment of Jamaican-born Pastor Patrick Linton Allen, who had previously served as president of the West Indies Union Conference, as governor general of Jamaica.¹¹ This office is, perhaps, the highest position in state governance to which an individual may be appointed in the majority of Caribbean states. In some Caribbean territories, the office of president, which is roughly analogous to that of the governor general, is the highest state office.

Other notable political appointments in Caribbean territories include: Sir James Carlisle, who once served as governor general of Antigua and Barbuda; William Henry Bramble and Percival Austin Bramble, who both served various terms as Chief Ministers in the British overseas territory of Montserrat; and Andrew Holness, who, as of November 2019, is the serving Prime Minister of Jamaica. Also noted is the saga of James Ronald Webster, who

served as Chief Minister of Anguilla. In the field of law, worth mention are the careers of Emerson Graham and Robert Simmons, who served as Magistrates in Barbados, and Sherman McNicholls, who rose to become Chief Magistrate of Trinidad and Tobago.

The church has established educational and medical institutions that work in close collaboration with state educational and medical institutions. Adventist missionaries are permitted into the prisons to pursue rehabilitation work for inmates, and some members of the church have been named to head important state bodies. SDA members have also served in senior positions in parastatal bodies in various Caribbean countries. Perhaps the greatest evidence of an environment in which SDA members have few state-sponsored obstacles to their advancement in secular society may rest in the provisions in the various independent Caribbean countries' constitutions for freedom of religion. In cases where some countries have not as yet thrown off their colonial status, freedom of religion is guaranteed under British law and by local statute. Noted are examples from some state constitutions.¹²

In Trinidad and Tobago, the constitution states *inter alia* that "it is hereby recognized and declared that...there have existed and shall continue to exist without discrimination by reason of race, origin, colour, religion or sex the following fundamental human rights and freedoms, namely ... freedom of conscience and religious belief and observance ... freedom of thought and expression ..." These provisions acquire greater meaning when it is noted that in this Caribbean nation exists, perhaps, the greatest ethnic and faith diversity to be found anywhere in the region or, perhaps, in the world.

In the case of Barbados, the constitution follows a similar path as that of Trinidad and Tobago. In this latter case, the constitution guarantees freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly and association. Under these constitutional provisions, labor laws have been passed that guarantee the right to a day of worship for employees, although these do not guarantee the right to employment for job seekers that have declared a prior adherence to an SDA faith. Where workers convert to the SDA Church, the laws recommend that accommodation be sought where possible in guaranteeing freedom of worship to such members.

Our final example is lifted from the constitution of Guyana. Like Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana is a multi-ethnic, multi-faith community. There, the constitutional arrangement declares *inter alia* that: "... Except with his own consent, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of conscience and for the purpose of this section the said freedom includes freedom of thought and of religion, freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others, and both in public and in private, to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance."

Additionally, provision is made that "Every religious community shall be entitled, at its own expense, to establish and maintain places of education and to manage any place of education which it wholly maintains. ...[and further] No religious community shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for persons of that

community in the course of any education provided by that community..."

It is clear, therefore, that, some minimalist departures apart, church-state relations in the Anglophone Caribbean are among the most favorable in the world for SDA members. The historical development of church-state relations in the region, therefore, represents a continuous movement to greater freedoms such that the post-independence constitutions of the various Caribbean states have built on antecedent provisions of English Common Law. This Common Law foundation guarantees their citizens the right to hold a religious faith and to protection under the law for adherents of the various faiths, including SDA members.

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NOTES

1. For a comprehensive survey of the situation in the wider Latin American and Caribbean context, the two volume series by Floyd Greenleaf is, perhaps, required reading. See Floyd Greenleaf, *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1992).
2. For a comprehensive look at the Anglican Church in the New World, see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1972).; See also Peter F. Campbell, *The Church in Barbados in the Seventeenth Century* (St Ann's Garrison, St. Michael, Barbados: Barbados Museum and Historical Society, 1982).
3. See Alfred Caldecott, *The Church in the West Indies* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1898).
4. See Pedro L. V. Welch, *Slave Society in the City: Bridgetown, Barbados, 1680-1834* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), 190.
5. For a commentary on the position of the Church of England in the island of Trinidad and Tobago, see Bridget Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad, 1783-1962* (Kingston, Jamaica: Heinemann Educational Books (Caribbean) Ltd, 1981), 120-125.
6. Larry Gragg, *The Quaker Community on Barbados: Challenging the Culture of the Planter Class* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2009).
7. Useful commentary on East Indians in the Caribbean may be seen in Parbattie Ramsarran, "The Indentured contract and its Impact on Labor Relationship and Community Reconstruction in British Guiana," *International Journal of Criminology and Sociological Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 2, December 2008, 177-188.; See also K. O. Laurence, *Immigration into the West Indies in the Nineteenth Century* (Kingston, Jamaica: Caribbean Universities Press, Ginn and Co. Ltd, 1982).
8. Glenn O. Phillips, *Seventh-day Adventists in Barbados: Over a Century of Adventism 1894-1991* (Barbados, West Indies: East Caribbean Conference of SDA, 1991).
9. The information for St Kitts is derived from a manuscript prepared by a member of the SDA Church on that island. For a commentary Joseph Laurence's career as an SDA minister, see S. E. Wellman, "In the Colorful Caribbean," *Youth Instructor*, Vol. 101, No. 20, May 19, 1953, 19.; For Charles Cave in Barbados, see Phillips.
10. Glenn O. Phillips, "The Life and Work of Vasco Boyce," unpublished research paper, November 2019.
11. An announcement and a brief commentary on Allen's appointment as governor general are located in a periodical, the RECORD, January 31, 2009, 5.
12. Extracts, which follow, are taken from online publications of the Constitutions of Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and Guyana.

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