ABSTRACT

‘Some Evangelical Missionaries’ Understanding of Negro Character in Jamaica, 1834 – 1870: With particular reference to selected Baptist missionaries’

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The concept of Negro character was an integral element in the discourse of Evangelical missionaries about blacks in the post-emancipation era in Jamaica. This investigation undertakes to understand what the missionaries meant by the phrase and to demonstrate their conviction that both blacks’ African and slavery experience shaped their character. Because of the way in which missionaries referred to Negro character there have been times when they have made what could be considered disparaging comments about black people. These comments have been viewed by some as indicative of a racist stance or attributing to them the deployment of terms of disrespect. This study will challenge that position by examining and seeking to understand the missionaries in their context.

The terms the missionaries used to describe Negro character were ideas that were current in English society of the poor and those considered to be of the ‘lower orders’. The applicability of the same terms to English underprivileged and Africans and ex-slaves was due to the English belief that the environment inevitably shaped people’s character. This study challenges the absoluteness of the environmental theory and makes a clear distinction between how missionaries’ attitude to blacks and those of detractors of the blacks differed in fundamental ways.

The uncritical acceptance of the environmental theory established a stereotypical and deterministic understanding of the blacks by some missionaries which led to their adoption of another characteristic of English society – a paternalistic approach to their dealing with the ex-slaves because they saw them as infants at the start of the civilization process. The study will show how this led to the stifling hold some missionaries had on the blacks. It will also show how it established a serious distrust of blacks and led to serious conflicts between missionaries of the different societies.

It will be demonstrated that the majority of blacks did not bow to the culturally superior approach of the missionaries but remained militant and assertive and used legitimate means to exercise authority over missionaries. Those outside the church were not hesitant to engage the missionaries in cultural clashes as they established their counter-culture. These last founded their own religious organizations which some missionaries and civil authorities tried to suppress for they were seen as socially revolutionary and destabilizing.