

## Book Review

Engel, Katherine Carté, *Religion and Profit: Moravians in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). Reviewed by Donald Frey.

Katherine Engel's book tells the story of the Bethlehem Moravians from the community's founding through the early years of the Republic. Even within this long time-frame, Engel shows great familiarity with details of the economic dealings, structures, and organization of this "pilgrim congregation." Engel argues that the rise and decline of Bethlehem must be understood in terms of the community's degree of involvement with missions.

According to Engel, Bethlehem's early communal economy (the Oeconomy or General Economy) was mainly a practical strategy meant to cover the large expenses of mission work. She is not alone in stating that the General Economy, with its socialist elements, was not a fundamental tenet of Moravian belief. Indeed, the General Economy was quickly disbanded by the Unity when Bethlehem's role in missionary activity was downgraded after 1760.

Readers of Engel's book may wonder: Was the General Economy anything more than a practical strategy, to be discarded when no longer needed? Engel makes a good case that that is all it was to Unity leaders in Herrnhut (and even in Bethlehem). However, some details in the book show the General Economy in another light. When average congregation members were polled about discontinuing the General Economy, several of the answers "imbued the Oeconomy with religious meaning beyond its pragmatic origins ... and assumed that the communal household had value in and of itself" (150). And some residents stated how "it fitted Moravian religious beliefs." Some residents saw the common housekeeping as the Savior's household. For average members, the General Economy had become "a way of expressing devotion to God" (151). It appears that what may have started as a practical measure to meet missionary expenses had gained deeper, spiritual meaning to participants in the General Economy.

Engel gives only passing mention to the Brotherly Agreement of 1754; but the wording of the Agreement suggests that the General Economy held religious significance to the signers. The Brotherly Agreement, in my view, stated a fragmentary Christian critique of the economics practiced in the outside world; it also highlighted the spiritual nature of the brotherhood and sisterhood that made a communal economy work. So, while religious socialism surely was not a formal tenet of Moravian belief, it probably was more than a mere tactic to many of the Moravians who participated in it. Craig Atwood, in his *Community of the Cross* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), appears to support this view. Engel's book gives evidence that a spiritual interpretation existed, but Engel does not develop it.

In relating to non-Moravians, the community adopted the economic practices of the times, within the bounds of Christian ethics, which called for honest dealings (including what we now call “transparency”), fair pricing, good quality, and property rights constrained by stewardship. When the General Economy was abandoned, the same ethical rules were in force for the “privatized” businesses and the ongoing church-owned businesses of Bethlehem. This Moravian commercial morality differed little from that of other colonial Protestants (but differed greatly from nineteenth-century American economics, a topic outside Engel’s research).

This book will be engaging to anyone interested in Moravian history. Katherine Engel covers much more than what I have considered in this short review. For example, she shows how the missionary work of the pilgrim congregation was distinctly counter-cultural for its day: the unique work and relationship of the Moravians with the Native Americans caused their European-American neighbors to see them as a potential threat when war loomed and many Indian tribes allied themselves with the French. Indeed this history can be read as a tragedy in which world politics, war, and even Unity decisions disrupted and finally ended the kind of Indian mission that had made Bethlehem unique.

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