

RELIGIOUS RADICALISM IN THE COLONIAL SOUTHERN BACKCOUNTRY

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In February 1761 a small sect under the leadership of Jacob Weber murdered three men near Saxe-Gotha township in the South Carolina backcountry. The killings, explained Lieutenant Governor William Bull, were precisely the kind of thing one might expect in such a “remote part of the Province, where there is no Dutch Minister.” In the absence of the kind of institutional controls that could steer religious feelings into orthodox and orderly channels, the “ignorant Germans” of the Congarees region “from a pious desire of having some religion had unhappily formed a Sect of Enthusiasts.” Jacob Weber, “who unpiously called himself the most High, pronounced to them that Smith Pieter, the person murdered, who it seems differed with him in some points of doctrine, was the old Serpent, and unless he was put to death, the World could not be saved. The deluded people immediately seized Smith Pieter and with all the rage of religious persecution beat him to death without remorse.” Bull said nothing about the deaths of the other victims, Michael Hans and the slave Dauber, although they too were apparently killed in “a fit of religious delusion or enthusiasm.” Weber and six of his followers were arrested and tried, four were convicted and sentenced to death, and in April Weber was executed. The three others were reprieved by Bull, for Weber’s execution had “put a stop to this Evil” while the “Public Justice” was “satisfied for the blood of Murder.”¹

The Weberite episode lodged deep in the memory of eighteenth-century American religionists. In 1768 the Anglican itinerant Charles Woodmason declaimed against the

¹ William Bull to William Pitt, April 26, 1761, Records of the British Public Records Office related to South Carolina, 1663-1782, vol. 29, 80-82; *South-Carolina Gazette*, April 25, 1761; May 16, 1761. Contemporaries routinely used “Dutch” to describe German-speaking settlers and communities. The people in question were Swiss and German; there were no Dutch among them.

“Diabolical Minds” of the Weberites, who in Woodmason’s erroneous account had “kill’d a Travelling Person, and cut Him into Atoms singing Hymns, making Processions and Prayers, and offering up this inhuman Sacrifice to the Deity, as an acceptable Oblation.” In 1774 the Lutheran divine Henry Melchior Muhlenberg left a lengthy and detailed account of the “pernicious sect” based on eyewitness testimony, in which he inserted a copy of Weber’s prison “confession.” As late as 1786 Francis Asbury, the father of American Methodism, shuddered as he passed through the Congarees and remembered “that strange, deranged mortal, who proclaimed himself to be God.” That contemporaries repeatedly invoked the Weber sect suggests that they were anxious about spiritual excesses in an age of awakenings, carefully guarding the porous borders of orthodox practice which seemed everywhere threatened by the “New Monsters” who “infest[ed] the whole Back Country,” in Woodmason’s words. By the mid-nineteenth century the “Weber heresy” had become stock material for denominational and local historians, and the bizarre tale of the deluded Weberites entered into the lore of the early southern backcountry.²

For reasons not quite clear, however, academic historians have overlooked the Weberite episode. This is all the more surprising given the recent revival of interest in popular belief,

² Richard J. Hooker, ed., *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant* (Chapel Hill, 1953), 78; Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia, 1942-1958), II, 577-80 [quotation 577]; Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (Nashville, TN, 1958), I, 507; Ernest L. Hazelius, *History of the American Lutheran Church* (Zanesville, OH, 1846), 103; G.D. Bernheim, *History of the German Settlements and of the Lutheran Church in North and South Carolina* (Philadelphia, 1872), 195-205; A.S. Salley, *The History of Orangeburg County, South Carolina* (Baltimore, 1898, reprint 1969), 238-45; South Carolina Synod, of the Lutheran Church in America, *A History of the Lutheran Church in South Carolina* (Columbia, SC, 1971), 61-62; Robert Meriwether, *The Expansion of South Carolina, 1729-1765* (Kingsport, TN, 1940), 155.

supernaturalism, and religious enthusiasm.³ An earlier generation of historians would have found a place for Jacob Weber in their frontier mythos, but he does not fit so comfortably in the new story historians have fashioned for eighteenth-century southern religion – the story of a largely unchurched and irreligious region that would eventually evolve into the Bible Belt as it molded evangelical Protestantism to its peculiar institutions.⁴ Eighteenth-century religionists would have been at pains to understand this story, for they pictured a very different kind of south, one rife with dangerous sects and wild-eyed enthusiasts, where the threat of spiritual excesses was just as real as that of worldliness and unbelief.

These discrepancies point to a hidden story. The enmity of eighteenth-century religionists threatened by enthusiasm, the dismissive attitude of their nineteenth-century chroniclers who saw only delusion and heresy, and the neglect of present-day academic historians preoccupied with evangelicalism – all have combined to distort and finally bury the story of the Weber sect. Uncovering this hidden story has broad and significant implications. First, it invites historians to look at the eighteenth century South with new eyes, to see the region

³ The most prominent examples are Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, 1990); and Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, 1999).

⁴ The preoccupation with evangelicalism is an old one, dating back to the triumphalism of nineteenth-century denominational historians. It was given new life in the 1970s as southern religious history entered the academic mainstream and historians struggled to understand the origins of southern religious conservatism. For prominent recent examples see Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York, 1997); and Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810* (New York, 1998). Likewise, Taves' treatment of eighteenth-century enthusiasm focuses primarily on Methodism; see *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 20-117. However, a number of recent studies have moved away from this evangelical focus in an attempt to revise the view of eighteenth-century Anglicanism. See especially John K. Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776* (Chapel Hill, 2001); chapter three of Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790* (Ithaca, NY, 1998); and an earlier work by S. Charles Bolton, *Southern Anglicanism: The Church of England in Colonial South Carolina* (Westport, CT, 1982).

on its own terms and not merely as the seedbed of the evangelical Bible Belt. Before the pressures of inhabiting a slave society tamed southern religion, before the South became fearful of dissent, and even as the region's upstart evangelical sects began to vie for members, the southern backcountry was a place of wandering prophets, self-deifying mystics, and immigrant sects from the fringes of the still-radiating Reformation. Second, such a view challenges historians to broaden their definition of the mainstream. For at its base what animated the Weberites was also the central force of the Great Awakening itself: Pietism, or in the case of the Weber sect, Radical Pietism gone awry. "Deluded" though they might have been, the Weberites and similar sects were the scattered storm cells of a greater evangelical awakening that spanned a century. It was their similarities with more than their differences from evangelicals, their common attachment to an experiential, spirit-led awakening, that seemed so threatening to religionists like Asbury.⁵ In this regard, thirdly, the Weberite episode reminds us of something eighteenth-century civil and religious leaders took for granted: that being unchurched did not necessarily lead to the absence of religiosity, but that it might indeed lead to a kind of hyper-religiosity, or in eighteenth-century terms, enthusiasm. In the Congarees and elsewhere across the southern backcountry, people stepped into this unchurched void and invented their own faith. Looking through the lens of the Weber sect, the early southern backcountry thus becomes a place of intense religious energy and creativity, not merely a spiritual backwater waiting for

⁵ Since Wesley Gewehr's pathbreaking study of the Great Awakening in Virginia, southern historians' treatment of the revival has rarely ventured beyond denominational boundaries. See Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Gloucester, MA, 1965); Alan Galloway, "The Origins of Slaveholders' Paternalism: George Whitefield, the Bryan Family, and the Great Awakening in the South.," *Journal of Southern History*, 53 (August 1987): 369-94; Bolton, *Southern Anglicanism*, 50-55. The most original treatment of the Virginia awakening still belongs to Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982).

revival.⁶

More often than not, the stuff out of which sectarians wove their new religion was European Pietism. The Pietist movement, which took root in Germany and Switzerland in the late seventeenth century, was largely a reaction against doctrinal controversy and the churches' emphasis on orthodox belief. Instead, Pietists made religious experience, feeling, and personal behavior or piety the central, essential elements of true Christianity. Pietists often met in small, intimate groups that provided encouragement, support, and a more intense religiosity. Pietism left a deep impression on continental Lutheran and Reformed churches, and by the 1730s it had made inroads within the mainline Protestant churches of Britain and North America. This Pietist undercurrent drove the Great Awakening. Yet the Pietist movement also had a more radical separatist element that took the form of ecstatic Inspirationists and Dunkers. Frequently suppressed where institutional Christianity was strong, Radical Pietism flourished in the remote backcountry, far from the constraints of the state church. The Weberites tapped into this radical stream. Thus while the relative isolation of the backcountry explains in part why the Weber sect took root, the specific forms this sect adopted grew from the region's connectedness to the ideological currents of the Atlantic world.

This paper will first examine the local context in order to better understand why the backcountry in general and the Saxe-Gotha/Congarees area in particular were such fertile fields for radical spirituality. It will then attempt to sort out from the scattered and incomplete sources precisely what happened in the Congarees in the years leading up to February 1761, for the basic

⁶ On the unchurched South see Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992), esp. 31-40; and Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 5, 10-11, 22-23, 261-63.

facts of the Weber episode are murky. Turning from the local to the transatlantic perspective, it will analyze the theological links between the Weberites and European radical sectarianism. It will then look briefly at radical sectarianism as a form of social protest. Finally, it will explore the implications of the Weberite episode and how it challenges historians' assumptions about the backcountry, the Great Awakening, and religion in the eighteenth-century south.

Jacob Weber and his followers lived in the Dutch Fork community, so called because of its predominately German-speaking population and its location in the fork between the Broad and Saluda Rivers. These rivers converged about 125 miles northwest of Charleston to form the Congaree River. Now encompassed by Columbia, the state capitol, in the mid-eighteenth century the Dutch Fork was in the remote backcountry, a region of rolling hills and fertile soils but poor access to coastal markets, since it was by definition above the fall line, where shallows and shoals made the rivers unnavigable. Just south of the Dutch Fork, and south of the fall line, stood Saxe-Gotha township. Established in 1738, Saxe-Gotha straddled the Cherokee trading path and was ideally situated for an inland trading center between piedmont and lowcountry. The Dutch Fork, Saxe-Gotha, and their environs, known more generally as the Congarees, had long been abandoned by Indian communities when the first permanent European settlers established themselves there in the late 1730s. The region was settled in the 1740s and 1750s by Swiss and German immigrants, with only a scattering of English. Its population numbered

perhaps one thousand or more by the late 1750s.⁷

Two local factors made the Dutch Fork ripe for the kind of hyper-religiosity of the Weberites: the absence of an institutional church tied to either the community or the state, and the presence of hostile Indians attacking the frontier settlements.

Three of the four eighteenth-century accounts of the Weberites connect the sect to the absence of institutional Christianity in the backcountry. Religious institutions were understandably weak in the interior – this was, after all, a developing region – though the degree to which the region was churched varied from community to community. Yet there was nothing ambiguous about the Saxe-Gotha/Congress/Dutch Fork area; it was notoriously under-churches. Much of the evidence regarding the state of religion in the Congress comes from the voluminous reports of Johann Bolzius, the Lutheran leader of the Salzburger settlement in Ebenezer, Georgia. In 1749 Bolzius reported that the people of the Congarees lived “swinishly, filthily, and in a disorderly fashion, and that their Reformed minister” was “said to be a very bad man.” There was “great discord” among the settlers, ostensibly over the religious differences between Lutheran and Reformed. A year later Bolzius compared the Congarees to the trading center at Augusta, where “life goes on . . . in a godless way, and it is more scandalous than the heathen.” In such “gathering places of evil” they “live together in a brutish way and respect their Reformed minister little.” Instead of enjoying the stability, order, and civilizing influences of a well-ordered community like Ebenezer, the South Carolinians had scattered themselves across a godless frontier for the love of liberty and good land, leaving each man to inhabit “his own

⁷ Meriwether, *Expansion*, 53-56, 61.

wilderness.” They had only themselves to blame, Bolzius concluded, for their spiritual destitution, for “their bellies are their God, as one must imagine of most German people in this region.”⁸

Ironically, the very circumstance that occasioned this hostility from Bolzius was the Saxe-Gothans’ appeal for a minister. When some 280 German Lutheran families petitioned Bolzius for help in organizing a congregation, he sent them a parcel of books and vented his scorn for them in his report to the missionary board, barely concealing his resentment of the economic success of the South Carolina settlement. Thus unlike Lutheran settlements in Georgia and Pennsylvania, the Lutherans of the Congarees were unable to secure ministerial support from overseas. This left only one German-speaking minister devoting his full time to the area: the Reformed preacher Christian Theus, who for a number of reasons was largely ineffective. Not only did he stay close to Saxe-Gotha and neglect the scores of families “beyond the Congarees,” but he had difficulty earning the respect of his people. As we shall see, he was belittled and nearly drowned by the Weberites, and even his own congregation, according to Bolzius, treated him “with less respect than they do the humblest member of the congregation.” Such disrespect became the defining feature of his life and even followed him to the grave. As his tombstone read, Theus “labored through a long life as a faithful servant in his Master’s vineyard, and the

⁸ George Fenwick Jones, ed., *Detailed Reports on the Salzburger Emigrants who Settled in America . . .* edited by Samuel Urlsperger (Athens, GA, 1968-1985), XIII, 83[first three quotations]; XIV, 23 [fourth quotation], 55-6 [fifth, sixth, and eighth quotations], 52 [seventh quotation]. Admittedly, Bolzius’ remarks must be treated with caution. He got much of his information second-hand and was generally hostile toward the South Carolina Germans. He was angered by the refusal of South Carolina authorities to assist in the return of fugitive servants, by the defection of two Ebenezer families to Saxe-Gotha, and not least of all by the stream of immigrants to the Congarees (as opposed to the trickle into the fully-churched Ebenezer). Despite Bolzius’ bias, his assessment of the religious condition of the Dutch Fork is supported by the others sources cited below. For an analysis see Salley, *History of Orangeburg County*, 85-86.

reward which he received from many for his labor was ingratitude.”⁹

Unhappy with Theus and frustrated with the intransigence of the Ebenezer Lutherans, in 1754 a group of “divers Inhabitants and settlers” from the Congarees took matters into the own hands. About forty Reformed residents of the Dutch Fork rallied around a former butcher and Swiss army chaplain named John Jacob Gasser and petitioned the South Carolina Council for support for “a Church and school Master.” The petition was rejected, but this did not deter Gasser, who was also negotiating with the twice-spurned and disgruntled Lutherans of Saxe-Gotha. In 1755 he sailed to Europe in an effort to garner missionary aid from Holland and Germany, from both Reformed and Lutheran confessions, apparently hoping to land at least one position in the South Carolina backcountry. In the end, however, Gasser turned out to be a fraud. His fundraising tour in Europe came to nought when word reached Amsterdam that Gasser was a “sharp rascal” who had tried to seduce a peasant girl and knew how to fleece a congregation, having tried to insinuate himself once before into an established church in Pennsylvania. The Gasser project collapsed by the fall of 1756, and the Congarees continued, in the words of the petitioners, “to Labour under a very great hardship for want of having the Gospel propagated and promoted in their Settlement.”¹⁰

Even as the Gasser episode reached its conclusion, Jacob Weber was taking the first steps

⁹ Ibid., XIV, 56 [petition to Bolzius]; South Carolina Synod, *Lutheran Church in South Carolina*, 63 [Bolzius quotation]; Salley, *History of Orangeburg County*, 83 [tombstone inscription]. John Ulrich Giessendanner II, a minister from neighboring Orangeburg township, also made occasional visits to the Dutch Fork. Originally Swiss Reformed, Giessendanner took orders in the Anglican church and by 1750 was serving more English than German settlers. See *Lutheran Church in South Carolina*, 48-55, esp. p. 54.

¹⁰ Council Journals, April 2, 1754 [first, second, and fourth quotations]; Leo Schelbert, ed., *America Experienced: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Accounts of Swiss Immigrants to the United States* (Camden, ME, 1996), 126 [third quotation, peasant girl]. On Gasser’s career see South Carolina Synod, *Lutheran Church in South Carolina*, 66-70.

that would eventually lead to delusion, murder, and execution. While Weber himself was undergoing a spiritual transformation, the religious life of the Dutch Fork was reaching an all time low. The one thousand or so inhabitants of the Congarees were served by an ineffective Swiss-German minister who rarely left the safe confines of the township and who was moreover held in low esteem by his own people. Efforts to remedy this condition through appeals to the Lutherans at Ebenezer and through the Gasser scheme had failed. For many of the German inhabitants of the Congarees, the main meaning attached to religion was the “great discord” it produced between Lutheran and Reformed neighbors. Yet the failure of the churches in the Dutch Fork did not lead exclusively to the spiritual “wilderness” Bolzius depicted. For institutions merely channel and control religious impulses and feelings; they do not create religiosity. It was in precisely this kind of unchurched, discordant, institutionally weak environment that Jacob Weber invented his own religion.

Never was the need for religion – with its power to provide comfort, explain suffering, and strengthen communal bonds – felt more acutely in the Dutch Fork than during the Cherokee War of 1760-61. Although the relatively high population of the Congarees offered a measure of protection against Indian attack – there were certainly more vulnerable European settlements in the South Carolina backcountry – the area was by no means immune to fear. As early as 1756 news of the “impending Danger” of a French and Indian assault on the Congarees reached provincial authorities. In January 1757 bands of unidentified Indians plundered, burned, and finally drove settlers from the upper Broad and Saluda Rivers, causing such “unspeakable Uneasiness” in the Dutch Fork “that almost the whole Place threatens to break up, declaring they cannot possibly stay much longer, for Fear worse should happen.” In response, Dutch Fork

settlers began construction on a fort. But the worst was yet to come. The scalping of fourteen white settlers in western North Carolina in 1759 renewed fears that “Broad River and Saludy will get a Stroke soon.” The stroke finally came in February 1760, when an angry Cherokee war party fell on the South Carolina frontier and killed dozens of settlers. Refugees abandoned the frontier and fled to Saxe-Gotha and beyond, noted one correspondent from the Dutch Fork, “so that I may say *we* are now the back Inhabitants.” Rumors that the Creeks might join the French and Cherokees kept tensions at a fever pitch into the summer of 1760. Although the immediate threat to the frontier subsided soon thereafter, it took another year for the British to mount a decisive campaign against the Cherokee and force them into submission.¹¹

The “unspeakable Uneasyness” of hundreds of people huddling in forts along the South Carolina frontier, whispered rumors of “impending Danger” of attack, stories of the brutal murder and kidnaping of defenseless women and children – all generated deep-seated anxiety, a strong sense of interdependency coupled with helplessness, and a tremendous physical and psychological burden. To lift this burden the people of Dutch Fork would naturally have turned to their religious traditions. But where was the comfort of religion to be found in such a “godless” place? The Cherokee War had heightened the “very great hardship” of life without the gospel. As the stream of refugees abandoning the frontier passed through the Dutch Fork, leaving the community increasingly exposed to attack, it is not surprising that many settlers turned to Jacob Weber for peace and security. Nor is it surprising that they would deify him, given the climate of fear in the Dutch Fork, for they participated vicariously in the

¹¹ William McDowell, Jr., ed., *Documents Relating to Indian Affairs, 1754-1765* (Columbia, SC: 1970), 149-50, 324, 485, 496 (emphasis added); Meriwether, *Expansion*, 222-23, 225, 238-40.

invulnerability they ascribed to their leader.

This leader had come from humble beginnings, and the realization that he was God no doubt took him by surprise. Jacob Weber was born in Zurich canton, Switzerland on December 30, 1725. Almost nothing is known of his childhood, though he claimed to have been “reared and instructed in the Reformed church.” It is certainly possible that he came into contact with Radical Pietist teachings in his youth, for Zurich and the surrounding cantons of northeast Switzerland were a hotbed of radicalism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In any event, at age fourteen he left his parents and immigrated to America with his older brother, Heinrich, taking up residence near Saxe-Gotha. Heinrich died at some point shortly after they settled in South Carolina, leaving young Jacob “forsaken of man and without father and mother,” according to his confession. After enduring a period of “much adversity and suffering” Weber married and started a family. By 1754 he and his wife, Hannah, had two children and had acquired grants for 200 acres of land in the Dutch Fork area west of Saxe-Gotha, above the juncture of the Broad and Saluda Rivers.¹²

Around this time Weber underwent a spiritual crisis. In typical Reformed fashion, Weber later recounted this conversion experience as unfolding in three stages. First, in the midst of his “adversity and suffering” following Heinrich’s death, he recalled how “the Lord God had compassion on me.” This compassion took the form of both mercy and judgment, grace and fear. Young Weber delighted in God, taking “more pleasure in . . . godliness, and in God’s word

¹² Albert B. Faust, *List of Swiss Emigrants in the Eighteenth Century to the American Colonies* (Washington, DC, 1920), I, 58 [birth]; Muhlenberg, *Journals*, II, 578-79 [immigration and quotations]; South Carolina Council Journal, March 9, 1747 [date of marriage]; *ibid.*, January 2, 1754 [children]; South Carolina colonial plats, 8, 621 [location of land].

than in the world.” Yet at the same time, he wrote, “I was often troubled about my soul's salvation when I thought of how God would require of me a strict accounting and how I would then hear the judgment pronounced upon me, not knowing what it would be.” Forsaken of man but drawn to God, Weber tried to justify himself by his own good works, an exercise that left him uncertain of his fate, for he was “inclined towards love of the world” by his “corrupt nature.” Observing the “externals,” Weber constantly suspected that he was simply religious, not converted. These suspicions turned to terror in the second stage of his conversion experience, probably when he was around thirty years old, as he came “through a stirring of [his] heart” into a painful awareness of his sin. “I realized how terribly the human race has fallen from God and also how deeply all of us without exception are sunk in corruption by our very nature.” Withdrawing into prayer and silence, Weber “forgot all the tumult of the world so that I felt as if God and I were alone in the world.” He now realized that only “being born again of water and the Spirit” could save him. He began to pray more fervently and was further convicted of his sinfulness, so that he felt that he “deserved a thousand times to be cast out by God” and saw “that the whole world was in wickedness.” This “horrible realization” led him deeper into prayer, after several days of which he “passed from death to life.” And thus he reached the third stage, assurance of his salvation, sometime in May of 1756. This “peace and communion with God” that followed, grounded in the “Blood-surety of Jesus,” bore him through two years of “much cross and many burdens.” “By the grace that was in me,” he concluded, somewhat curiously, “I was able to rule over temporal goods without harm to my soul.”¹³

¹³ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, II, 579. Much has been written on the morphology of Reformed conversion. On the three steps described here see George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, 2003), 26-27.

Two to three years after his conversion, Weber underwent a further transformation. He inexplicably passed over it in his confession, but according to Muhlenberg, the affair began innocently enough. Filled with the conviction of the recently converted, Weber began to gather neighbors at his house on Sundays for worship, which consisted mainly of singing hymns and hearing Weber read from a book of sermons. “But gradually,” Muhlenberg wrote, “the hearers began to admire and honor and praise the reader, which in turn caused him to begin to admire himself.” Soon Weber was preaching extempore “out of his own spirit,” which eventually led the “astonished” neighbors “to deify him.” Before long two others, John George Smithpeter and a slave known only as Dauber, laid claim to “the most extraordinary revelations and helped hatch out a sect.” The three “adjusted their differences” and agreed to impersonate the trinity, with Weber acting as God the Father, Smithpeter as the Son, and Dauber as the Holy Spirit. By one later account Hannah Weber assumed the part of the Virgin Mary. All of this apparently took place around 1759.¹⁴

According to Muhlenberg, self-deification was only the beginning of the “atrocious blasphemies” the Weberites practiced. They also indulged in free love, as “groups of both sexes went about unclothed and naked, and practiced the most abominable wantonness.” Either because or in spite of these practices, the sect grew over the course of its first two years, encompassing much of the neighborhood by late 1760.¹⁵

Around this time, however, things began to go wrong. Some neighbors apparently

¹⁴ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, II, 577. Hazelius, *History of Lutheran Church*, 103, mentions Hannah Weber, as does Asbury in Clark, ed., *Journal and Sermons of Asbury*, I, 507.

¹⁵ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, II, 578.

claimed later that they were coerced into joining the sect. Such claims could be dismissed as self-serving if not for the encounter between the Weberites and the Reverend Christian Theus. Theus was the Reformed minister who lived in Saxe-Gotha, about twenty-five miles from the Weberite center. Although Theus did not itinerate widely and had little if any contact with the Dutch Fork settlers, he did attend a Weberite meeting, as he told Muhlenberg several years later, and it nearly cost him his life. As Theus described the scene, the three leaders sat on an elevated platform while the group “sat at their feet.” Disdainfully addressing Theus as “little parson,” Smithpeter asked, “do you believe that I am the redeemer and savior of the world and that no man can be saved without me?” After similar “blasphemous questions” from the other leaders, Theus replied with a “stern rebuke,” whereupon the leaders and congregation sentenced him to death and debated whether he should be “hanged from the nearest tree” or “drowned in the deepest depths.” Evidently drowning was the only acceptable punishment for such blasphemy, but the little parson fortunately proved to be fleet of foot. Before the Weberites could seize him, Theus fled to the Broad River, where he was delivered from the depths by a passing Negro boatman.¹⁶

By February 1761 things were falling apart. The sources conflict at several points here – concerning both the identities of the victims and the sequence of events – so piecing together this final chapter in the story of the Weberites requires much conjecture. Yet by all indications the leaders had a falling out, perhaps over the increasingly coercive and heavy-handed tactics of Smithpeter. Dauber apparently grew “lukewarm,” having failed in “properly exercising the

¹⁶ Ibid. On Theus’ woeful career see South Carolina Synod, *Lutheran Church in South Carolina*, 58-65.

office of the Spirit,” and was taken into the forest and smothered between two mattresses. Dauber’s death is mentioned only in Muhlenberg’s account. Since he was a slave, the Weberites would not necessarily have been prosecuted for his murder; this explains the silence regarding Dauber in the accounts by the *Gazette* and William Bull, which were based on the court proceedings. The murder of Michael Hans is even cloudier. Hans had come to South Carolina in 1750 as an indentured servant and had lived in the Dutch Fork at least since 1754. In all likelihood he suffered the fate that Theus barely escaped. Perhaps he resisted the coercive recruiting tactics of the sect or even openly defied the “holy assembly” as Theus had done. Given Smithpeter’s lead role in the attack on Theus, he probably orchestrated the murder of Hans. His death is mentioned only in the *Gazette*; Bull’s failure to connect Hans’ murder with the surviving Weberites suggests that the man primarily responsible for it, Smithpeter, was already dead, and that Weber and the other three conspirators were only guilty of murdering Smithpeter. In fact, Smithpeter was probably the moving force behind the murders of both Dauber and Hans as well as the architect of the coercive methods used against the neighbors. Perhaps Weber believed Smithpeter had gone too far. The two leaders “quarreled.” Unable to rein in Smithpeter, Weber “declared him to be the dragon . . . and had him chained to a tree,” as Muhlenberg recorded it. “The members of the band surrounded him, struck him with their fists, and beat him until he fell to the ground, and finally they danced around him and trampled upon his throat until he had had enough.” This comports with Bull’s account, in which Weber identified Smithpeter as the “old Serpent” whose death was necessary in order to save the world. It also squares at some points with Woodmason’s mangled version of events.¹⁷

¹⁷ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, II, 578 [all quotations]; Council Journal, January 1, 1764; South Carolina colonial

Shortly after Smithpeter's murder, seven of the Weberites were arrested and taken to Charleston for trial. In addition to Jacob and Hannah Weber, John Geiger and Jacob Bourghart were convicted and sentenced to death. Little is known of the other defendants. Like Weber, Bourghart had found himself an orphan after his arrival in South Carolina in 1742. Geiger had immigrated and taken up land in the Congarees at the same time as Weber; the two men had probably long been friends. Despite their criminal behavior, Bull described the three surviving defendants as "long known, orderly, and industrious Members of civil Society." They were "very poor" with "numerous Families," and being deluded by religious enthusiasm, they were not entirely responsible for their criminal acts, thus he granted them a reprieve. Jacob Weber was hanged. According to the *Gazette*, he went to his death "in a very becoming manner" and died "a true penitent." As we shall soon see, however, Weber was more ambivalent about his guilt than the *Gazette* led its readers to believe.¹⁸

Certainly there was a good bit of delusion behind Weber's claim to God-hood, but it would be a mistake to dismiss the Weberites as merely deluded or to stress their pathology while ignoring their inventiveness. There was a method to Weber's madness. This sect did not simply materialize out of the free air of the backcountry; it had historical precedents and parallels; it was part of a long tradition of European radical Christianity, perhaps stretching back into the Middle Ages. The Dutch Fork circa 1760 provided one occasion for its emergence, but the ideas that gave it substance were transmitted across the Atlantic and woven together by Jacob Weber and

plats, 9, 482 [Hans]. See notes 1 and 2 for the accounts by Bull, the *Gazette*, and Woodmason.

¹⁸ *South-Carolina Gazette*, April 25, 1761 and May 16, 1761 [arrest, conviction, and execution]; Council Journals, February 10, 1746 [Bourghart], and March 9, 1747 [Geiger]; Bull to Pitt [second, third, and fourth quotations].

his followers.

The basic impulse for the Weberites' practices came out of continental Radical Pietism. This far-flung movement flourished in the Netherlands, the German Palatinate, and parts of Switzerland in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; it also had adherents in Britain and British North America. Like their Pietist cousins in the Lutheran and Reformed churches, Radical Pietists emphasized small group meetings, conversion, personal piety and devotion, and religious feeling; but they departed from mainstream Pietism in a number of ways. Radicals were typically separatists who distrusted organized religion; they had a strong millenarian streak; and their chief messengers were uneducated, itinerant lay preachers, not ordained clergy. Like the Mennonites and Moravians – groups that antedated Pietism but imbibed much of its language and spirit in the eighteenth century – they were generally committed to simple living and personal holiness. Beyond these basic similarities, Radical Pietists were distinguished by a number of more heterodox practices. Some, like the Dunkers or Church of the Brethren, practiced adult baptism by threefold immersion. Others celebrated the Sabbath on the seventh day, practiced ritual foot washing, held love feasts, believed in universal salvation, preached celibacy, or strove for sinless perfectionism. Many emphasized direct revelation from the Holy Spirit; given to visions and ecstatic utterances, some, like the wandering Inspirationists, traveled from town to town and trembled as they prophesied.¹⁹

The Weberites belonged in spirit to this broad stream of Radical Pietist belief and practice, but they went well beyond it in their practice of self-deification, free love, and ritual

¹⁹ Bach, *Voices of the Turtledoves*, 10-19, 43, 57.

murder. For Muhlenberg, more extreme groups like “the old sect of Jan van Leiden and Knipperdolling and the more recent Butler sect” bore a better resemblance to the Weberites. The parallels with van Leiden and Knipperdolling are tenuous. These were the leaders of the Anabaptists who took control of the German town of Munster in the 1530s, proclaiming the imminent millennium, establishing communism, and forcing conversion and absolute obedience and conformity on the population at the pain of death. Perhaps Muhlenberg had van Leiden’s coercion and terror in mind when comparing him to the Weberites, who “gained such ascendancy that neighboring families joined it because they feared for the safety of their lives.” Although van Leiden declared himself to be God’s prophet and anointed king, he did not make any claims to divinity, as the Weberites leaders had done. The comparison with the Buttlar sect is somewhat more apt. Eva von Buttlar was a German Radical Pietist who started her own sect in 1702. The Buttlarites lived communally and practiced free love as a means of conquering sexual desire through complete indulgence. “Mother Eva” took two lovers, and together the threesome declared themselves to be the Holy Trinity. Both the Buttlarites and the Munster Anabaptists repudiated conventional marriage and engaged in various forms of polygamy.²⁰

The genealogy of the Buttlar sect is uncertain, but it bears striking similarity to the Ranters of Civil War-era England. The Ranters essentially believed, as one observer wrote, that “they are very God, infinite and almighty as the very God is,” that God is in all things and “God

²⁰ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, II, 577 [quotation]. The literature on the Munster Anabaptists is vast; I have drawn from Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1970), 252-80. On the other hand, there are few English sources on Buttlar, and most are hostile. See *The Brethren Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia, 1983), I, 236; *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1951), II, 322; and for a more even-handed summary, Jeff Bach, *Voices of the Turtledoves: The Sacred World of Ephrata* (University Park, PA, 2003), 110.

doth all things” and that therefore nothing is unclean or impure. The Ranters overcame sin simply by refusing to recognize any acts as sinful: blasphemy, adultery, profanity, stealing, incest, murder, all are “in their own nature as holy and righteous as the duties of prayer, and giving of thanks.” The Ranters themselves, as historian Norman Cohn has written, were descended from a medieval heretical movement known as the Brethren of the Free Spirit. Through renouncing worldly goods, embracing voluntary poverty, and living as wandering beggars, these mystics sought a complete and permanent union with God, through which they might shed their humanity and actually become God. “Transformed wholly into God,” said one adherent, “one can be, according to one’s wish, Father or Son or Holy Spirit.” But if the road to deification lay through self-denial and suffering, the final destination was complete moral and spiritual freedom. All things were permitted to the adepts of the Free Spirit, and they indulged their appetites accordingly. There was no theft for the adept, for “all created things are his property,” made for his use. Their “total amoralism,” in Cohn’s words, might take the form of unbridled hedonism, “ritual nakedness,” free love, ostentatious dress, even murder, all practiced without a tinge of remorse.²¹

It would be a mistake to draw the parallels between the Weberites and their predecessors too closely, but one cannot ignore the basic similarities. The most striking parallel is the practice of self-deification. According to Muhlenberg, Weber’s deification came about gradually; it stemmed from his preaching and was imputed to him by his listeners. One can only speculate about the particulars, but it no doubt took more than powerful preaching to convince the

²¹ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 172-86 *passim*; 291 [first and second quotation], 292 [third quotation], 174-75 [fourth quotation], 179 [fifth quotation], 177 [sixth quotation], 180 [seventh quotation].

neighbors that Weber was God. It is possible that Weber not only accepted but also promoted his deification, as Smithpeter and Dauber apparently did, but Muhlenberg's account, along with the devotion of Weber's core followers, suggests that they were genuinely convinced of it.

Perhaps Weber began to use mystical language or have fits of ecstasy. He may have begun to prophesy or claim "extraordinary revelations." He had certainly undergone a profound conversion experience in which, he wrote in his confession, "Jesus revealed himself in my soul."

This experience made a deep and long-lasting impression, enabling Weber "under all circumstances to submit [his] will to the will of God" for nearly two years – and this without the benefit of a religious community. His conversion had made him supremely confident. Whatever the case, Weber's words obviously met a deeply felt need in the Dutch Fork, providing security and comfort in a time of great anxiety and stress. His personal charisma and confidence would have led others to accept his divinity, while his spiritual ordeal and triumph may have fed his self-delusion.²²

What did such deification entail? What did it mean to be God? For people steeped in the Reformed tradition, God's most salient features were his absolute holiness and his ability to grant salvation – in contrast to the absolute depravity of humans and their powerlessness to save themselves. As God incarnate Weber could assure his followers of their salvation. In fact, some neighbors may have embraced Weber's deification precisely in order to resolve their salvation anxiety – anxiety that would have been heightened during the Cherokee War. Smithpeter made this point explicit when he rhetorically asked Theus, "do you believe that I am the redeemer and

²²Muhlenberg, *Journals*, II, 579.

savior of the world and that no man can be saved without me?” The very spatial organization of the meeting house reflected this relationship: the persons of the Trinity were elevated above and set apart from the congregation, who sat worshipfully at their feet, transformed into a “holy assembly” through their devotion and proximity to their deified leaders. The way to individual holiness and salvation lay through the three persons seated on the elevated platform.

Yet Weber apparently promised more than individual salvation. As he wrote in his confession, he had long ago come to the “horrible realization” that “the whole world was lying in wickedness.” “I realized how terribly the human race has fallen from God and also how deeply all of us without exception are sunk in corruption by our very nature.” Twice Weber had this revelation, and both instances were turning points in his conversion, pushing him deeper into silence and fervent prayer. Like God himself, Weber was concerned about the salvation of the “whole world,” not just individual souls. This concern finally drove him to order Smithpeter’s murder, for “unless he was put to death, the World could not be saved.” This emphasis suggests that there was a millennial or more broadly eschatological dimension to the Weberites’ belief. This should come as no surprise, given the climate of fear that gripped the Dutch Fork in 1760-61; war generally breeds doom and feeds anxiety about the end times. What is unique about Weber is that he apparently established himself as the agent of millennial change, not just its messenger. He had a plan to save the world, a plan that included the murder of John George Smithpeter.²³

Contemporaries were especially struck by the Weberites’ complete lack of remorse for

²³ Ibid. [first three quotations]; Bull to Pitt, 81 [fourth quotation].

the murders they had committed. According to the *South-Carolina Gazette*, the accused persons “acknowledged the murders, and for some days attempted to justify themselves.” Bull also noted how the “deluded people” beat Smithpeter to death “without remorse.” Years later even Woodmason recalled that “not all the Expostulations, Reasonings and Remonstrances of our Gentry and Clergy could make any Impression in their Diabolical Minds, or bring them back to Reason or Reflection.” Only Weber’s execution “made Impression on them” so that they finally showed “Marks of Penitence and Contrition.” Nor did Weber himself, contrary to the *Gazette’s* claim, die “a true penitent.” His confession blames Satan and Smithpeter for his “great calamity.” Weber was the victim; Satan lured him into sin, using Smithpeter as the “author and instrument” of his “ghastly fall.” Even his apology to those he had harmed was vague and little more than an afterthought. Indeed, Jacob Weber had been fully restored to God’s grace. He wrote as a martyr unjustly imprisoned for his beliefs, not as one deserving punishment. “I am again experiencing the testimony of the Holy Spirit,” he proclaimed to his “beloved children” from prison. “The Spirit of God is bearing witness with my spirit that I am the child of God.” According to Francis Asbury, Weber even “promised to rise the third day” when confronting the gallows as Charleston – hardly the words of a broken man.²⁴

Like the Ranters and the adepts of the Free Spirit before them, the Weberites seemingly had no conscience. They openly and unapologetically committed “the most atrocious blasphemies.” They practiced ritual nakedness, probably as a means of expressing their moral liberation. They indulged in “the most abominable wantonness,” apparently assured of their

²⁴ *South-Carolina Gazette*, April 25, 1761; Bull to Pitt, 81; Hooker, ed., *Carolina Backcountry*, 78; Muhlenberg, *Journals*, II, 579; Clark, ed., *Journal and Sermons of Asbury*, I, 507.

righteousness despite violating their society's carefully guarded sexual taboos. Their attitude toward material goods is not as clear, but Weber's confession suggests that "worldliness" was not a problem. For the young Weber, his "love of the world" had seemed insurmountable. This was his greatest weakness, a "corrupt nature" drawn irresistibly toward "honor, riches, and an easy life in the world." But his conversion released him from the hold of materialism, so that he "was able to rule over temporal goods without harm to my soul." Weber became as it were indifferent to worldly things; they no longer held power for him, hence he could "rule over temporal goods," perhaps even indulge himself in them, without being corrupted by them – not unlike the adepts of the Free Spirit who, once liberated, abandoned their stark asceticism and acquired a huge appetite for worldly possessions. As it turned out, the Weberites were willing to go much further than most adepts of the Free Spirit; they were able to murder with impunity, "without remorse."²⁵

The basic defining features of Weberite religion – self-deification, millenarianism, sexual freedom, sensual and material indulgence, and a conscienceless amoralism – have precedents that reach deep into the history of radical Christianity. But these connections are not merely theoretical. The sources are too thin to specifically trace the transmission of ideas, but there is ample evidence that such ideas entered the Carolina backcountry in the mid-eighteenth century as Radical Pietists settled or passed through the region.

Charles Woodmason certainly thought so. "Africk never abounded with New Monsters," he complained in 1768, "than Pennsylvania does with New Sects, who are continually sending

²⁵ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, II, 578, 579. On the indifference of the Brethren of the Free Spirit toward material things, see Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 185.

out their Emissaries around.” Among these emissaries were the “*Gifted Brethren* (for they pretend to Inspiration),” who “now infest the whole Back Country, and have even penetrated South Carolina.” Woodmason was fond of hyperbole, but he was not far from the mark in connecting Pennsylvania to the Dutch Fork. One emissary in particular was Israel Seymour, a fugitive from the Ephrata community, a Radical Pietist commune in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Seymour was a man of “special natural gifts” who was ordained at Ephrata and quickly gained a following there. He ran afoul of the leadership, however, over his questionable relationship with a young female convert, and the subsequent dispute “caused him to lose his senses” before he finally fled to South Carolina. There he settled in a community of Seventh Day Baptists on the Broad River opposite the Dutch Fork. Members of this congregation also had ties to Ephrata and had migrated from Pennsylvania in the early 1750s. The eighteenth-century Baptist historian Morgan Edwards described Seymour as “a man of some wit and learning, but unstable as water.” He preached at Broad River “while he behaved well.” Apparently he did not last long, for he later confessed to committing “all kinds of wickedness” before he finally reformed, moved to the Pee Dee region of South Carolina, and “returned to his former faith.”²⁶

It is certainly possible that Weber came into contact with the Ephrata Sabbatarians; he may well have been converted through the charismatic preaching of Seymour, who served the Broad River congregation in the mid-1750s, during Weber’s spiritual crisis. There is no direct

²⁶ Hooker, ed., *Carolina Backcountry*, 78 [Woodmason quotations]; *Chronicon Ephratense: A History of the Community of Seventh Day Baptists at Ephrata*, trans. by J. Max Hark (New York, 1889, reprint 1972), 197-99 [Seymour quotations]; Morgan Edwards, *Materials toward a History of the Baptists*, vol. 2, South Carolina (Philadelphia, 1770, reprint Danielsville, GA, 1984), 153-54; Bach, *Voices of the Turtledoves*, 22.

evidence that the Weberites adopted the peculiar practices of this sect – which included love feasts, ritual foot washing, pacifism, and seventh-day worship – but Weber would have found something familiar in their Reformed sentiments, and given his penchant for spiritual drama, he would have been mesmerized by Seymour’s powerful preaching. In addition to the Broad River Sabbatarians, there were congregations of Dunkers in the vicinity of the Dutch Fork, with whom Weber could easily have had contact. Weber hardly had to leave the Dutch Fork to gain access to a range of Radical Pietist influences – from the simplicity and intimacy of the Dunkers to the inspired, prophetic preaching of Seymour and the mysticism of the Ephrata emissaries.²⁷

The Weberites were not the first of South Carolina’s “deluded fanatics” to come by their beliefs via Ephrata. Around 1722 the Dutartres, a French Protestant family from the low country, came under the influence of a traveling Pietist preacher who “filled their Heads with many wild and fantastic Notions,” as Anglican Commissary Alexander Garden later told it. Although in one account Garden identified this preacher as Christian George, it was very likely Michael Wolfhart, a Radical Pietist from Pennsylvania who took a missionary journey to South Carolina in 1722 and later became one of the key figures at Ephrata.²⁸ In any event, George or

²⁷ Edwards, *Materials toward a History of the Baptists*, 154; Leah Townsend, *South Carolina Baptists, 1670-1805* (Florence, SC, 1935), 167-74.

²⁸ Alexander Garden, *A Brief Account of the Deluded Dutartres* (New Haven, 1762), 5. There is a compelling case to be made that Christian George was actually Michael Wolfhart. First, Wolfhart was known to have taken a missionary journey to South Carolina in 1722; see Bach, *Voices of the Turtledoves*, 18. Second, the Dutartres’ preacher relied heavily on the work of Jakob Boehme, a seventeenth-century German mystic who was central to the spirituality at Ephrata and with whom Wolfhart was very familiar. Third, a second account of the Dutartres attributed to Garden and reprinted in the nineteenth century does not name the traveling preacher, simply identifying him as a Moravian. Yet the Moravians did not come to America until 1735. For this account see George Howe, *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina* (Columbia, SC, 1870), 194-97. The earlier account by Garden identifies Christian George more uncertainly as a “strolling Moravian, Dutch, or Swiss Enthusiast,” which more accurately describes Wolfhart. These two accounts are very similar but not identical; it is quite possible that they were based on two different sermon manuscripts.

Wolfhart came and went, but over time the Dutartres grew reclusive and eventually came to believe that “they were the *alone* Family upon Earth who had the true Knowledge and Worship of God.” Soon enough one of their number, Peter Rombert, began to prophesy. Through a series of revelations he announced God’s intentions to destroy the world save for “one Family, whom he would preserve as he did Noah’s, for raising up a Godly Seed again upon it.” God also revealed that Rombert was to divorce his wife, who had been previously married and widowed, and “take to Wife her Youngest Sister who is a Virgin,” all in order that the family’s “Holy Seed be preserved pure and undefiled.” To this the family reluctantly consented. But when Rombert announced that the Dutartres were no longer to submit to civil authority and that they must refuse to participate in the militia, the magistrate swore out a warrant for their arrest. Rombert urged the family to resist arrest and persuaded them that they were impervious to the bullets of “the Men of the Earth.” They learned otherwise in the violent encounter that followed, when one of the Dutartres women along with the militia captain were killed. Five were arrested, convicted, and condemned to die. Yet “they confidently persisted in their Delusion till their last Breath,” Garden noted, for “they had obeyed the Voice of God, and were about to suffer Martyrdom for it.” After the martyrs failed to rise from the dead, the surviving family members “became sensible of their Delusion . . . and were pardoned.” Yet one son suffered a relapse and murdered again “for no other Reason . . . but that God had revealed it to him, it was his Duty to do it.”²⁹

There were still others. John Ulrich Giessendanner had a long and checkered career as an Inspirationist in Switzerland before he immigrated to Orangeburg, South Carolina, just below the

²⁹ Garden, *Brief Account*, 5 [first quotation], 6 [second through fourth quotations], 7 [fifth through seventh quotations], 8 [ninth and tenth quotations].

Congarees, in 1738. Giessendanner was subject to ecstatic fits, after which he would prophesy while two associates wrote down his utterances. He remained an unreformed Pietist agitator into old age and continued a somewhat more subdued ministry in South Carolina until his death shortly after immigrating.³⁰

Nor did Weber's death "put a stop to this Evil" of wild enthusiasm, as Bull predicted it would. According to Muhlenberg, the Weberite sect spread through the Carolinas and into Virginia and Maryland, "and has left some seed behind in various places."³¹ Indeed, people like Giessendanner, Weber, and the Dutartes were exceptional only in their notoriety; many others of lesser note had varying degrees of contact with Radical Pietism before immigrating and carried bits and pieces of its belief and practice with them to the New World. Such people were drawn irresistibly to the "back parts," as William Bull later wrote, where they found a home for their "illiterate enthusiasm and wild imagination." Weber and his kind might be far "remov'd from the center" of civilized religion, at least from Bull's perspective, but they were attuned to the currents of Radical Pietism that flowed directly into the backcountry.³²

³⁰ On Giessendanner see H. George Anderson, "The European Phase of John Ulrich Giessendanner's Life," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 67, 3 (1966), 129-37; and Alexander S. Salley, *The History of Orangeburg County, South Carolina* (Orangeburg, SC, 1898), 35-48.

³¹ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, II, 578. One oral tradition holds that some of the Weberites, including John Geiger, resettled across the Broad River and started Appii Forum Church, now a Lutheran church; see South Carolina Synod, *History of the Lutheran Church*, 81. Hannah Weber apparently remained in the Dutch Fork; see South Carolina colonial plats, vol. 21, p. 102. Smithpeter's son migrated to Tennessee; see the genealogy by Brenda Helen Keck Reed, <<http://www.homestead.com/Weberites/index.html>>.

³² The quotation from Bull is in Townsend, *South Carolina Baptists*, 122.

Clearly the Weberite episode was more than an aberration, more than the work of deluded fanatics. It sprang from a religious tradition that had deep historical roots and spanned much of continental Europe in the eighteenth century. This tradition flourished in the New World as well, especially in the backcountry, where the weakness of institutional religion gave it unfettered rein. It was transmitted by traveling preachers, prophets, and migrating communities of Radical Pietists. Although this radical Christianity was by no means pervasive, it was common enough to warrant the concern of more orthodox religionists. It was visible largely when it became a problem, as with the Weberites and Dutartres. Otherwise it floated quietly under the radar, gathering adherents as local conditions made its message more relevant and meaningful.

This kind of hyper-religiosity made the civil and religious establishment uncomfortable. They stamped it out by force when necessary, but also by more proactive means: providing financial support for churches in the interior or applauding, as William Bull did, the “Northern Colleges” who sent their “apostles to enlighten the dark regions of our Western Settlements.” As Anglican missionary to the backcountry, Charles Woodmason viewed the dispersion of these fanatical “Wretches” as one of his “strongest Endeavours.” Such unease exposes another dimension of religious radicalism: its role as a medium of social protest. Radical Pietism, with its emphasis on simplicity and pacifism, was implicitly countercultural. This implicit critique was clearly part of the appeal of the more extreme forms of radicalism discussed here. The millenarianism of the Weberites and Dutartres represented a rejection of the “wicked” world that surrounded them – a world caught up in war and the relentless pursuit of wealth. These sects also had a strong egalitarian streak, appealing to the people on the social margins. The Dutartres

were “always in low Circumstances in Life,” and the Weberites were “very poor” and “with numerous Families.”³³ Nor would anyone have missed the significance – or the danger, in many minds – of the slave Dauber’s elevation to the office of Holy Spirit. Here was a blatant critique of the social inequalities and status-consciousness so characteristic of colonial South Carolina. Through their peculiar practices – ritual nakedness, bigamy and adultery, free love – these sects dramatized their rejection of societal norms. This implicit social and cultural critique became explicit in the Weberites’ attack on Christian Theus, the representative of the institutional church, and in the Dutartres’ refusal to submit to the law or the civil authorities. Overall, these sects represented a wholesale rejection of the material, social, and cultural values of colonial South Carolina.³⁴

The extent and social significance of radical sectarianism challenges historians to rethink the religious history of the early South. First, southern religious historians need to broaden the scope of the Great Awakening. Too much emphasis has been placed on George Whitefield’s tour of the seaboard, the Presbyterian awakening in Hanover County, Virginia, and the Separate Baptist firebrands who pushed into the piedmont before and after the Revolution. The religious revival in the South was not limited to the work of evangelicals; it was much more than that, especially in the backcountry, where it was fueled by the emergence of more radical sects. Like their evangelical counterparts, these sects were products of a larger pietist awakening originating

³³ Ibid. [Bull quotation]; Hooker, ed., *Carolina Backcountry*, 78 [Woodmason quotation]; Garden, *Brief Account*, 5 [Dutartres quotation]; Bull to Pitt, 81 [last quotation].

³⁴ The impact of these practices on women is unknown. The free love they practiced may or may not have included a rejection of the sexual double standard; it may have simply been an excuse for the sexual exploitation of women, as appears to be the case with Rombert and the Dutartres. Given the society out of which these sects grew, it is unlikely that their egalitarianism extended to women in any significant degree.

in seventeenth-century Europe. Any comprehensive history of early southern religion must take these radicals seriously, treating them as legitimate if extreme Pietists, not as deluded fanatics, and giving them a place in the story of eighteenth-century religion and revival.

Second, historians need to reexamine the meaning and significance of the churching of the South. The traditional picture of early southern religion – a minority of nominal Anglicans and upstart evangelicals alongside a mass of unchurched slaves and whites rooted in magic and supernaturalism – is inadequate to describe the world of the radical sectarians. The Dutartres and the Weberites recognized a felt need for God; faced with difficult, dangerous, and distressing circumstances, they turned to their faith to seek comfort and make sense of their world. The disjointed, syncretic collections of magic and occult practices inherited from Europe and Africa could not address these needs. The churches were also inadequate, for a number of reasons. Indeed, it was their very inadequacy that made radical sectarianism possible; in the more churched parts of the South, organized religion channeled and controlled religious impulses, preventing the emergence of religious radicalism. But in the institutional void of the backcountry it was both necessary and possible to invent one's own faith. In this context the sectarians did just that, creating a working religion geared to the peculiar circumstances of time, place, and people. Being "unchurched" in the eighteenth-century South did not necessarily or even typically imply irreligion, superstition, or secularism; it might very well mean that Southerners were creating a religion of their own that answered to their unique conditions, just as institutional churches in the South creatively adapted to the context of a slave society.

It is perhaps appropriate to conclude with a prophecy. By including the hidden story of the Weberites in the historical narrative – along with the Dutartres, Giessendanners, Michael

Wolfharts, Israel Seymours, and their “seed” stretching into Virginia and Maryland – it will be possible to see the early southern religious landscape more clearly. This landscape will not be peopled only by evangelicals and non-evangelicals, but by wandering prophets, mystics, millenarians, and radical sectarians, existing and in places flourishing alongside their tamer evangelical cousins. As the eighteenth-century South is seen in its own light, it may well rival the religious energy and creativity of colonial Pennsylvania and New England.