

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“In the Bowels of Our Lord”

IN 1743, IN THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS of the Caribbean, a small community of the Religious Society of Friends—better known as “Quakers”—wrote to the Yearly Meeting of Quakers in London, “Dear Friends + Brethren, This comes with the Salutation of true + tender Love, in the Bowels of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and in his everlasting Covenant, we tenderly Salute you” (BYMFH Epistles Received 3:100). In the eighteenth century, *bowels* had a somewhat different meaning than it does now, when it inspires images of the least appealing parts of the human body; two and a half centuries ago it also meant the innermost parts more generally and, by extension, the source of compassion, pity, and true, loving emotions. Phrases like “the bowels of compassion,” “in the bowels of the Father’s love,” and “bowels mercies” were common, and some appear in the letters this small group of Quakers sent to England. Converts to Quakerism, they came together in 1740 “in the bowels of the Lord” and embraced a religion that promised a simple holy life, equality, and peace as well as connections among and beyond the isolated small plantations in the British Virgin Islands (BVI). For more than two decades, Quakerism offered a sense of community, practical mutual support, and religious fulfillment in a land with little stability.

But just like the word *bowels*, our understanding of this community has changed because, despite Quaker ideals of equality and nonviolence, nearly every member of the group held other people enslaved. Members forced African women and men to work their lands and cook their meals, and they bought and sold the enslaved people as chattel. Today, our initial reaction to this idea is much like that we may have to the intestines: we are disgusted by what appears to be hypocrisy, and we are angered by violent slavery practiced by a group claiming to believe in equality and pacifism.

If told well, however, our stories of the past are not this simple. This story is

about how “equality” and slavery could coexist for the members of a Quaker community. The charge of hypocrisy may be justified from a modern standpoint, but in anthropology we seek to understand people on their own terms as well as from our outsider’s view. In trying to understand the past (and indeed the present), a conflict between emic (insider’s) and etic (outsider’s) perspectives needs to be the beginning, not the end, of the analysis. Far from serving as an apology for the enslavers or just accepting that people are “products of their time,” though, this book seeks to facilitate an understanding of how the Quaker group negotiated this apparent contradiction and to permit readers to gain insight into religious communities more generally. As members converted to Quakerism in the British Virgin Islands, their daily lives and broad world-views alike were altered, and in this volume I argue that their new religion itself was also changed by their membership.

Despite the fact that I use the word *story* to describe this book, my aim here is to push beyond mere narrative. More than an anecdote to be filed away, this story also interrogates the nature of religion and religious groups. By studying the Tortola Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, as it was formally known, we hope to learn something about how religious communities work that cannot be learned by studying the written works on Quakerism alone: what happens when Quaker ideals are put into practice and what happens when they conflict with other demands. What happens—in short—when Quakerism is lived? We are apt to think of religions as lists of rules or actions carried out by rote: Quakers wear broad-brimmed hats, Catholics burn incense during mass, Muslims and Jews avoid eating pork, and so on. But as discussed more below, religions and religious communities as social creations are functions of what people do: how the ideas of these rules actually get played out, tweaked, changed, forgotten, or reinvented.

This understanding draws on a body of literature known as practice theory. In brief, this approach seeks the origins of broad cultural phenomena in the actions performed by individuals. Social groups exist only insofar as they are replicated by their members in daily actions, for instance. The goal of this book is not to provide a full theoretical review of this large and diverse body of work or to outline the details of a theoretical approach to religion. That is a task for other works (Chenoweth 2014; Ortner 1984; Schatzki 2001). Rather, this book is an extended example of the kind of considerations that become important when one seeks to examine culture, particularly social groups or “identities” centered on religious ideas, through the lens of practice. If religion is what people do, then what happens when some do it differently? Are they not “really”

members? How is the group united? How does it change, and what role do other concerns (such as money, status, and fear) have in those changes?

The little group in Tortola provides a perfect study for these questions because Quakerism seems so out of place in the rural, marginal Caribbean in the days of slavery. The British Virgin Islands (along with what were, in the eighteenth century, Danish islands but are now their U.S. counterparts) lie in the northeast corner of the Caribbean (figure 1.1) at the north end of the chain known as the Leeward Islands, the northern half of the Lesser Antilles. The British Virgin Islands consist of more than forty islands and cays (figure 1.2) and countless rocks, reefs, and pinnacles, many too small, steep, or dry to be inhabited. Far from the colonial core and agriculturally marginal compared to the great sugar islands, a poorer version of the plantation economy developed here simultaneously with the arrival of Quakerism. As Tortola Quakers negoti-

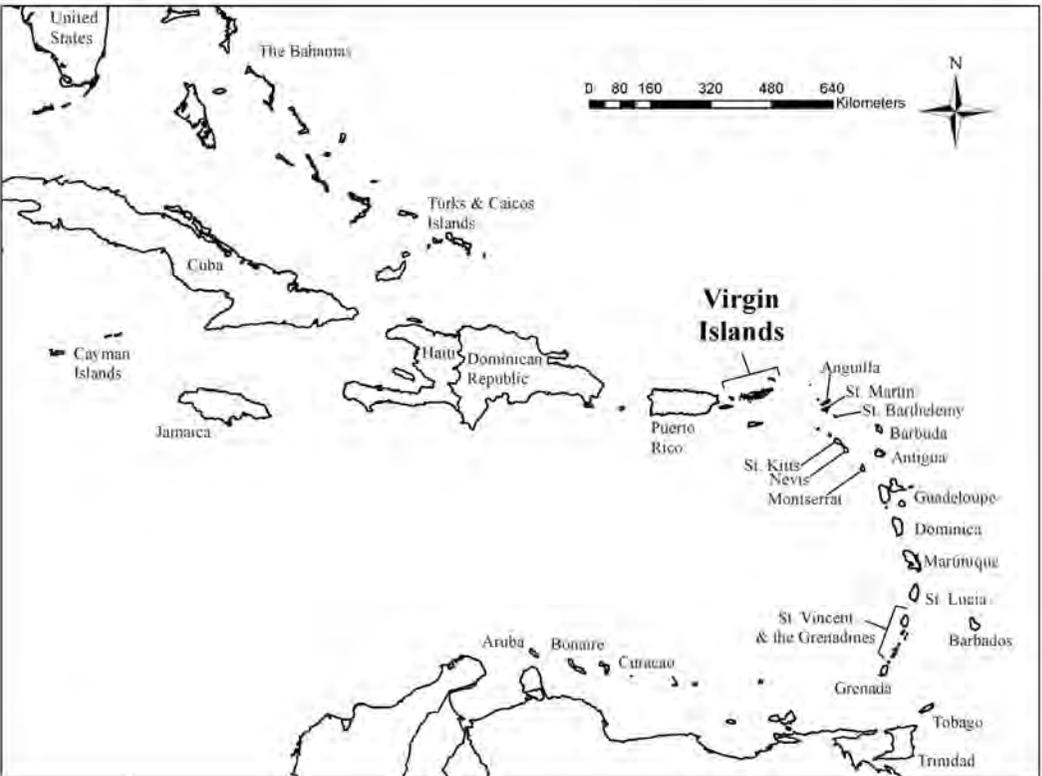


Figure 1.1. Map of the Caribbean with the Virgin Islands indicated. Map by the author based on data from the Pacific Disaster Center (<http://ghin.pdc.org>).

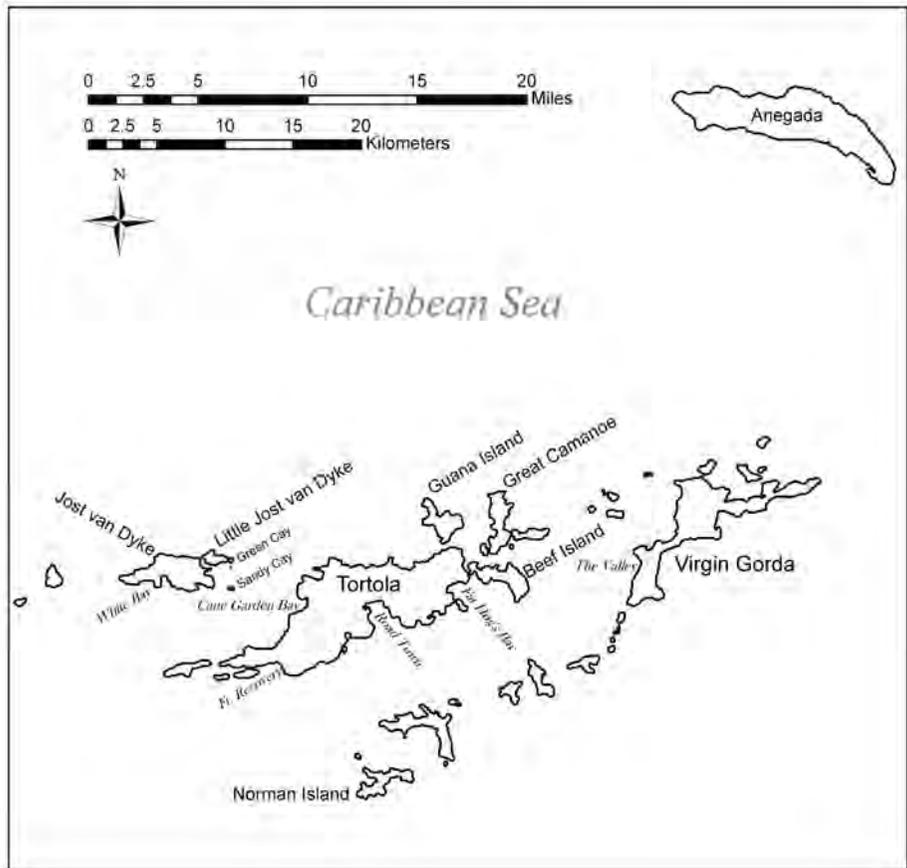


Figure 1.2. Map of the British Virgin Islands labeling islands and sites mentioned in the text. Map by the author based on data from the Pacific Disaster Center (<http://ghin.pdc.org>).

ated what modern eyes cannot help but see as stark contradictions between religion on the one hand and Caribbean economic and social systems on the other, what they actually *did* is an open question.

While we have many useful documents, what people do is the realm of archaeology. Shifting between written records and archaeology, the focus in this volume is primarily on one of the smaller islands, Little Jost van Dyke. This island was once owned by the Lettsom family, active members of the Tortola Quaker group at its founding who lived on the island with several enslaved people whom they held. The goal of this study is to help us understand how one set of individuals dealt with contradictions between different important parts of their lives: religion, economics, race, class, gender, and so on. By consider-

ing the communities of Quakerism in the British Virgin Islands, we can learn something about this particular corner of the world but also about religion as a whole. Then, as now, religion clashes with (and sometimes works with) politics, class, race, greed, and wealth as well as equality, simplicity, and peace—some of the ideals of Quakerism on which I focus throughout this work. Although this is a study of the eighteenth century, I think and hope that in these themes it will not be irrelevant to today.

Digging Up God: Archaeology and Religion

At first glance, archaeology may seem an unlikely way to study a group centered on religious belief, as religion is not generally thought of as material in nature and has not traditionally been a focus for archaeology. Any review of religion and archaeology almost inevitably begins with the statement of Christopher Hawkes that the ideological realm, the religious included, is the most difficult aspect of past human life to approach as an archaeologist (Hawkes 1954). Often referred to as “Hawkes Ladder” (although he never uses the phrase in the article usually cited), his pessimistic statement considers the more “specifically human” aspects of human life to be the most difficult to approach archaeologically, while the more physical or “animal” are the easiest. Thus, the physical “techniques” producing archaeological phenomena may be “relatively easy” to see and understand, while the economic and sociopolitical are progressively more difficult, and the “religious institutions and spiritual life” of a past people, often summed up by later writers as the “ideological,” are most difficult of all. These ideas are echoes of even more pointed sentiments by the famous archaeologist V. Gordon Childe a few years earlier, when he went so far as to say that religious belief is “irretrievably lost” (Childe 1951: 54–55). Beginning from these positions, many have assumed that an archaeology of religion is impossible without written documents and unnecessary with them.

Many archaeologists have engaged with questions that depart considerably from the “animal,” however. The pots, as has often been said, do not “speak for themselves” in any sense, and in reality our knowledge of all aspects of past life is the result of the interpretation of these mute records. In this sense, how is “religion” as a human phenomenon really more amorphous than “structure” or even “economy” (Fogelin 2007), both of which have seen a great deal of archaeological attention?

But more important, written documents themselves do not define a religion, which only comes into being as a social group in and through the things people

do as members (Chenoweth 2012, 2014). Religion is not a list of rules but a product of social action and is better seen through peoples' daily lives, as the abstract ideals that might be written down (at least in one person's view at one moment) are put into practice by individuals in different situations. Religion is sometimes seen as static, rooted, and ancient, but its shape and meaning in peoples' lives change constantly. As discussed more in the concluding chapter to this volume, this view of religion is practice centered and, following the work of Catherine Bell (1992), focuses on how religiously important differences are drawn between different things, moments, and ideas: how these are "ritualized" in daily life. This study examines how and why some objects and actions become marked as more important than others, defining a more flexible and fluid notion of "sacred" and "secular" that permeates daily life rather than being restricted to churches, shrines, or meetinghouses.

In this way, we can examine religion much like any other social grouping or "identity." Identity is understood here, in keeping with the past two decades of archaeological scholarship, as an ongoing process rather than a static list of traits or features (Chenoweth 2009; Clark and Wilkie 2006; Conlin Casella and Fowler 2004; Meskell 2001; Meskell and Preucel 2004; Wilkie and Hayes 2006). Identity is "performed," created through being enacted (*sensu* Butler 1993). More than this, a religion, like any identity, is itself changed in the process of daily reinterpretation. As these works and others have shown, material culture—from buildings to the smallest archaeological artifacts—is an integral part of the creation of identity.

Religion is a part of daily life and thus has a material aspect so that it is archaeologically accessible (Keane 2008; Renfrew 1994; Spielman 2002), and these moments of ritualization come to define socially created groups: religions. Written evidence is a vital part of this project, despite the fact that there is far less of it for the British Virgin Islands than some other places in the contemporary Caribbean. Still, the use of this body of material comes with dangers for the analysis of religion. Disjunctions between what people say, write, and do are found everywhere in historical archaeology, and we should no longer be surprised at them. In place of a "gotcha archaeology" of religion (Chenoweth 2012), the focus here is on the variety of ways in which religion is *lived*.

If this is so, then the local context where religious ideas are practiced must have an important role in the shaping of the religion that results. The same objects and actions cannot have been ritualized in the same way in, say, eighteenth-century London, where many material goods were plentiful, as they were in the marginal Caribbean, where they were scarce. To make the role of such other

local forces as economy, social structure, and the natural environment clearer, this study examines a place very different from where Quakerism originated. In the eighteenth-century Caribbean, the Quaker religion, centered on ideas of simplicity, equality, and peace, might be expected to often conflict with other demands, particularly those of a slavery-based socioeconomic system. Archaeology is in a position to see the results of these conflicts as individuals interpret religious ideas, enact them, and, in so doing, create a religious community.

THIS IS NOT THE ONLY WAY to approach religion as an archaeologist, of course. In some cases, the archaeology of a religion can be approached normatively, as a cultural and political horizon in keeping with a cultural historical approach, as when Islamic archaeology is defined as the study of times and places where the “ruling elite has professed the faith of Islam,” thus incorporating the lives of non-Muslims under Muslim rule (Millwright 2010: 6). Perhaps more relevant here, as outlined by Mark P. Leone (1982), some of the earliest archaeological work to return to religion itself as a serious topic of inquiry after Hawkes came through structuralism, which held that all objects were shaped by the same grammar and therefore revealed elements of underlying structure, including religion. The work of Marxists on ideology (in the Marxist sense, somewhat different from how it is used by Hawkes and here) is another avenue where Hawkes’s pessimism was confronted, and postprocessual approaches continued this push in a variety of ways. From whatever motivation or theoretical stance, writers have returned to religion and religious social life as serious, accessible, and important topics for archaeological work. This has resulted in several edited volumes (Hodder 2010; Insoll, ed. 2004; Rakita and Buikstra 2008; Whitley and Hays-Gilpin 2008) and overviews (Insoll 2004a) as well as numerous articles both theoretical and methodological (Aldenderfer 2012; Bradley 2003; Edwards 2005; Fogelin 2007; Joyce 2001; Spielman 2002; Tanyeri-Erdemir 2007; Whitley 2004; Whitley and Keyser 2003).

In historical archaeology, several studies and collections have recently made a point of examining religious sites (e.g., Baugher et al. 2009; Hodge 2005), and others have expanded from this to identify religion in other places, such as magico-religious deposits in houses (e.g., Fennell and Manning 2014; Merrifield 1987). Still others have begun to seek the influence of religion more broadly, such as in the more mundane aspects of material culture (e.g., Chenoweth 2006, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014; Delle 2001; Fennell 2003; Kruczek-Aaron 2015; Lenik 2009; Miller and Gilmore 2016; Wilkie 1997), yet these studies are