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Alexander Pyrges (Trier)

Placing Action, Experiencing Space, and Imagining Geography: The Topography of an Eighteenth-Century Protestant Communication Network

Wide-range interactions across borders shaped the history of eighteenth-century Protestantism. New publishing networks, Lutheran and Anglican missionary enterprises and Pietist webs of correspondence, eastward and westward migration and settlement projects as well as ecumenical activities and unionist schemes relied on movements across space and the emergence and use of spatial structures. Despite the importance of the imagining, symbolizing, and using of space in Protestantism historians of the eighteenth-century hardly ever include the relationship between religion and space in their narratives. They view space as a given. In fact, however, eighteenth-century Protestant communication did not only take place in given spaces but also granted meaning to spaces, embedding them in imagined geographies, tying them to particular cultural symbols and semantics, organizing them through infrastructures, and filling them with action. Re-actualizing topographical structures in historically specific situations, eighteenth-century religious communication created spaces, territories, and places.

In this paper I will examine the spatial dimensions of an eighteenth-century Protestant communication network. From the 1730s until the end of the century, Lutheran Pietist and (proto-evangelical) Anglican individuals and institutions, among others, in Augsburg, Halle, London, and the British colony of Georgia in the North American Southeast maintained a web of communication and interaction through the exchange of letters, books, money, commodities, and personnel. The network mainly organized and coordinated the selecting, transporting, and settling (in Georgia) of so-called persecuted Protestants from continental Europe, the collecting and distributing of financial and material support for these migrants, and the compiling of information and publishing of reports from and about the migrants' settlement of Ebenezer in the Georgia colony.

The notion of the North American Southeast as an uncultivated wilderness, desert or wasteland constituted one of the main conceptual underpinnings of the topographical dimension of this communication network. In the literature on the European and European-American expansion to and across North America the notion of the appropriated space as a wilderness to be 'improved' figures prominently. However, in these studies, the notion stands either for a metaphor employed to represent nature and living beings surrounding European colonizers but disconnected from actual social interaction or for a mere rhetoric instrument in the justification of colonial and national expansion. In contrast, examining the topographical dimension of the Ebenezer communication network, I argue that the concept of the wasteland played a complex role in the cultural web of signification.

In the late seventeenth century, following the beginnings of the open English-Spanish imperial competition in the North American Southeast, English colonizers and colonists for the first time adopted cultural forms to describe this region that differed from the hitherto dominant Spanish semantics. One of these forms was the notion of the Southeast as a wasteland and an

uncultivated wilderness. The idea that North America represented an uncultivated desert came to dominate British discussions on the landscape beyond the narrow strip of colonial settlements on the Atlantic seaboard from the mid-seventeenth century and appeared, among others, as the main rationale for the legitimate appropriation of space. The Ebenezer communication network as the authoritative description of the region took up this concept. After public cooperation in the founding of Ebenezer, the settlement came to occupy a distinct place in the wasteland. The frequent comparing of the migrants' journey to Georgia with the Exodus from Egypt underpinned the interpretation of the colonial space as a desert and guaranteed the persecuted Protestants a distinguished role in it. Also, the design of the town of Ebenezer can be interpreted as an attempt to grant order to the chaos of the wilderness. The interpretation and use of space within the network thereby underpinned and stabilized the notion of the colonial wasteland. In addition, the concept of the wilderness strongly influenced what was expected from the settlement and its inhabitants. Because the place of the settlement, the behavior and development of the migrants, the activities of the network partners and the image of the colony were so closely interwoven the 1734 re-location of Ebenezer functioned as a general re-interpretation of the colonial space inside the communication network. From the settlement that provided spiritually exceptional conditions to its inhabitants Ebenezer grew to be a religious center that provided church infrastructure for the colony of Georgia. From an external precondition for spiritual development inside the community, the colonial space of wilderness evolved into a demand to act upon this space religiously.

The notion of the wasteland played a crucial role in the synthesizing of space but at the same time was a cultural concept subject to constant re-actualizing and transformation. The spatial dimensions of this Protestant network grew out of a complex interplay between the distinct cultural image of a region, the interpreting and generalizing of experiences in and with this given space, and the moving between and transforming of distinct places identified within this space.