

# *Alexander Crummell and the Anti-Slavery Dilemma of the Episcopal Church*

by THOMAS STRANGE  
Felsted School, Essex  
E-mail: [ts@felsted.org](mailto:ts@felsted.org)

---

*Alexander Crummell's application to enter the General Theological Seminary in 1839 was problematic for the Episcopal Church. Admitting the African American abolitionist would have exacerbated divisions over slavery within a denomination still recovering from the American Revolution and the Second Great Awakening. The Church's increasing financial dependence on its upper-class members was a further complication. In Northern states the social elite supported anti-abolitionist violence, whilst in the South support for the Church came predominantly from slaveholders, who opposed any form of abolitionism. In order to safeguard the Episcopal Church's future, the denomination had to reject Crummell's application.*

---

**A**lexander Crummell's application to enter the General Theological Seminary in New York in 1839 created a dilemma for the Episcopal Church. Admitting the African American abolitionist would have compelled the denomination to engage with the escalating debate surrounding the morality of slavery. Otherwise, there was seemingly little ostensible reason to reject Crummell's application. Henry Hobart, the seminary's founder and bishop of New York from 1816 to 1830, had stated that coloured candidates 'would be admitted, as a matter of course, and without doubt'. Yet Crummell's application was ultimately rejected. The dean of the seminary, William Whittingham, attempted to explain the decision, commenting that 'if it were left to me you should have immediate admission to this seminary; but the matter has been taken out of my hands ... and I am sorry to say that I cannot admit you'. Ultimately the decision rested with Benjamin Treadwell Onderdonk,

I would like to thank the two anonymous readers for this JOURNAL for their very helpful suggestions for improvement, and also Patrick Doyle and John Oldfield for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Hobart's successor as bishop of New York. When Crummell appealed against the decision, he was summoned by Onderdonk, who, according to Crummell, proceeded to attack him verbally 'with a violence and grossness that I have never encountered save in one instance in Africa'.<sup>1</sup>

The rationale behind the rejection has been ascribed to racial prejudice against Crummell from within the Episcopal Church and it has been argued that his application was denied 'for purely racial reasons'.<sup>2</sup> While racial prejudice undoubtedly played some role in the decision it was not the sole factor, and the circumstances surrounding the decision were more complex than previous scholars have argued. In addition to any racial prejudices that Onderdonk held he knew that admitting Crummell would damage the denomination, as allowing an abolitionist to enter the seminary could have resulted in accusations that the Episcopal Church favoured the anti-slavery movement. During the 1830s debates over the morality of slavery and slaveholding were creating rifts and divisions within the Evangelical denominations, but in comparison the Episcopal Church avoided any discussion of the institution. Some scholars have argued that this was done to avoid internal division within the denomination.<sup>3</sup> The fear of internal division was certainly a factor, especially given the fragile position of the Episcopal Church in the early nineteenth

<sup>1</sup> *Colored American*, 27 Dec. 1839; A. Crummell, *Jubilate: the shades and the lights of a fifty years' ministry*, Washington, DC 1894, 7–8.

<sup>2</sup> W. Moses, 'Alexander Crummell', in H. L. Gates Jr and E. B. Higginbotham (eds), *African American lives*, Oxford–New York 2004, 198. Following Crummell's rejection, the anti-slavery advocate and Episcopalian John Jay castigated the denomination, claiming 'the true cause which led the Trustees to nullify the constitution and deny the rights of the candidate ... was, that he was a coloured man': *Caste and slavery in the American Church: by a churchman*, New York–London 1843, 8. Crummell also published the correspondence between himself and Onderdonk, commenting that 'I have been recognized, not as a man, but as a colored man, not as a candidate, but as a colored candidate': *Colored American*, 27 Dec. 1839. Early biographers of Crummell argued that his rejection was for racial reasons. Thomas Clark, bishop of Rhode Island, wrote that the application was refused 'solely on account of the extraordinary prejudice which prevailed against the race to which he belonged': A. Crummell, *The greatness of Christ and other sermons*, New York 1882, p. vii. W. E. B. DuBois argued that the bishops who decided to reject Crummell 'were not wicked men ... they said slowly "It is all very natural—it is even commendable; but the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church cannot admit a Negro"': *The souls of black folk*, Chicago 1903, 135. Historians have also argued that Crummell's rejection was due to race. David Hein and Gardiner Shattuck Jr argue that Crummell was rejected 'on the grounds that it was not suitable to have an African American enrolled at the seminary' and that he was 'humiliated by Onderdonk's undisguised racism': *The Episcopalians*, Westport–London 2004, 75.

<sup>3</sup> R. Prichard, *A history of the Episcopal Church, complete through the 78th General Convention*, Harrisburg 2014, 188; D. Holmes, *A brief history of the Episcopal Church*, Harrisburg 1993, 80; D. Butler, *Standing against the whirlwind: Evangelical Episcopalians in nineteenth-century America*, New York 1995, 147.

century. Yet there was also the concern that admitting Crummell could have antagonised Northern anti-abolitionists and Southern slaveholders, both of whom provided vital support for the denomination. Crummell's rejection, therefore, needs to be examined in the wider context of the social and economic challenges facing the Episcopal Church.

By the time that Alexander Crummell applied to attend the General Theological Seminary he was heavily associated with abolitionism. Both his upbringing and education had produced in him a strident opposition to slavery. His father, Boston Crummell, had helped to found *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American newspaper in America, which in its first issue commented that 'too long have others spoke for us. Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations ... which tends to the discredit of any person of colour'.<sup>4</sup> Alexander Crummell was educated at institutions run by anti-slavery activists, first at the African Free School, and then at the Noyes Academy in New Hampshire and the Oneida Institute in New York. These institutions were led by abolitionists who helped to strengthen Crummell's opinions on the subject. At the African Free School Crummell and a group of friends resolved not to celebrate the Fourth of July while slavery existed, meeting instead during the day where 'time was devoted to planning schemes for the freeing and upbuilding of our race' and planning to 'go South, start an insurrection and free our brethren in bondage'. On 4 July 1835, while at Noyes Academy, Crummell spoke at a parish meeting house in Plymouth, New Hampshire. Writing about the meeting in *The Liberator*, Nathaniel P. Rogers noted that Crummell spoke 'with a spirited, heroic and generous resolution, summoning the country to the experiment of immediate emancipation'.<sup>5</sup> Crummell also experienced the threats and attacks made against these institutions from whites who feared the anti-slavery tendencies of the schools. Whilst at Noyes Academy Crummell witnessed the school's destruction at the hands of a local mob who feared the consequences of African Americans being educated alongside whites.

Crummell's outspoken abolitionism was problematic for Onderdonk and the Episcopal Church, as the denomination sought to avoid the increasingly fractious debate surrounding slavery. The rise of abolitionism in the 1830s prompted debate, tension and, ultimately, division amongst the Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches. Yet, in comparison, the Episcopal Church not only avoided such a division, but also eschewed discussions of abolitionism. Some scholars have argued that the reason for the decision was the denomination's ideology that the Church should not

<sup>4</sup> *Freedom's Journal*, 16 Mar. 1827.

<sup>5</sup> W. J. Moses, *Alexander Crummell: a study of civilization and discontent*, New York 1989, 14; *The Liberator*, 25 July 1835. Rogers's article refers to him as 'Cromwell'.

engage with political issues.<sup>6</sup> But reluctance to engage with political issues was as much an issue of pragmatism as it was of theology. Aware that the denomination was in a fragile position due to events of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and that it would likely not survive a schism between pro- and anti-slavery factions, Episcopal clergymen made a pragmatic decision to avoid discussions of slavery in order to save the Church.<sup>7</sup>

The American Revolution had been catastrophic for the Anglican Church in the North American colonies. For Anglican clergymen, any desire to join the spirit of revolution and cast off British rule clashed with their oaths to remain loyal to the crown.<sup>8</sup> Clergymen who remained loyal often found themselves subjected to mob violence, were arrested, fined, or had their property seized for refusing to obey local laws, such as taking an oath of allegiance or praying for the patriot cause.<sup>9</sup> Those who joined the patriot cause also found their position and authority weakened by the Revolution. Not only were there lingering suspicions over their allegiance, by belonging to a denomination so heavily tied to England, but they also suffered financial consequences. Prior to independence, Anglicanism benefitted from being the established Church in many of the colonies, particularly in the South. The Revolution ended this favoured status, as Southern states ended the payment of salaries to Anglican clergy.<sup>10</sup>

With the persecution and expatriation of loyalist clergymen, lingering suspicions towards those who declared their loyalty to the patriots, and the loss of financial subsidies, by the time that the Anglican Church had reorganised into the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1789, its status was

<sup>6</sup> Craig Townsend comments that 'the church was meant to be in this world, but not of it': 'Episcopalians and race in New York City's anti-abolitionist riots of 1834: the case of Peter Williams and Benjamin Onderdonk', *Anglican and Episcopal History* lxxii (2003), 499.

<sup>7</sup> Edwin Gaustad and Philip Barlow argue that the Episcopal Church's decision to remain neutral was due to the denomination 'fearing schism above all else': *New historical atlas of religion in America*, New York 2001, 74. See also Butler, *Standing against the whirlwind*, 147.

<sup>8</sup> Within the Anglican holy communion service, prayers were said for the king, for example: 'We beseech thee also to save and defend all Christian Kings ... and especially thy Servant *George* our King; that under him we may be godly and quietly governed': D. L. Holmes, 'The Episcopal Church and the American Revolution', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* xlvii (1978), 290.

<sup>9</sup> After being locked out of his church, burned in effigy and threatened with physical violence, the Maryland minister Jonathan Boucher armed himself with two loaded pistols when he entered the pulpit: J. J. Boucher, *Reminiscences of an American Loyalist, 1738–1789*, Boston 1925, 104–41, cited in Hein and Shattuck Jr, *The Episcopalians*, 41. Hein and Shattuck note (p. 41) that numerous members of the Anglican laity who remained loyal to Britain were tarred and feathered or forced to 'ride the Tory rail'.

<sup>10</sup> See T. S. Kidd, *God of liberty: a religious history of the American Revolution*, New York 2010, 179–86.

severely weakened. Between 1770 and 1790 the Episcopal Church was the only denomination in North America to witness a drop in the number of its churches, from 356 to 170.<sup>11</sup> In his address to the North Carolina diocesan convention in 1820, Bishop Richard Moore stated ‘that our Zion does lay comparative desolate, needs no strong proofs to establish. It is written on the unfrequented walls of our Churches. It dwells in that most awful and melancholy stillness which pervades those scenes’.<sup>12</sup>

Still reeling from the American Revolution, the newly-formed Episcopal Church also had to deal with the challenges posed by the Second Great Awakening and the rise of Evangelicalism. Doctrines of spiritual equality espoused by denominations such as the Baptists and Methodists were more appealing to the democratically-minded nation than the hierarchical Gospel of the Episcopalians.<sup>13</sup> As a result, membership of the Episcopal Church declined considerably. By 1850 only 3.5 per cent of Americans identified as Episcopalian, down from 15.7 per cent in 1776. In comparison the proportion of Baptists had risen from 16.9 per cent in 1776 to 20.5 percent in 1850, and the proportion of Methodists from 2.5 to 34.2 percent.<sup>14</sup>

A further problem that the Second Great Awakening created for the Episcopal Church was the development of division within the denomination, as High Church and Low Church factions emerged over the issue of Evangelicalism. In her study of Evangelicalism within the Episcopal Church, Diana Butler notes that High Church advocates ‘promoted sober piety and rational devotion’, due to the belief that ‘liturgies, rites, and sacraments prepared men and women for salvation and formed Christian character’. In contrast, Low Church proponents argued that ‘form without spirit had choked lively piety’ and that ‘the forms of Episcopalianism were only good as long as they promoted the *spirit* of true Christianity’.<sup>15</sup> Although the two factions had been able to coexist, this division had intensified by the time that Crummell applied to enter the seminary, due to the impact of the Oxford Movement. The arguments of Anglican clergymen, such as Edward Pusey and John Newman, that the Reformation had been a mistake were published in the series *Tracts for the*

<sup>11</sup> M. A. Noll, *America’s God: from Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, Oxford 2002, 166.

<sup>12</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Annual Convention, of the Protestant Episcopal Church, in the State of North-Carolina ... 1820*, Fayetteville 1820, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Nathan Hatch argues that the American Revolution ‘eroded traditional appeals to the authority of tradition, station, and education’: ‘The democratization of Christianity and the character of American politics’, in M. A. Noll and L. E. Harlow (eds), *Religion and American politics: from the colonial period to the present*, Oxford–New York 2007, 94.

<sup>14</sup> R. Finke and R. Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: winners and losers in our religious economy*, New Brunswick 2005, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, *Standing against the whirlwind*, 13.

*Times* in the 1830s. When these tracts were first published in the United States in 1839 they generated considerable debate and consternation within the Episcopal Church, with Low Church clergymen, such as Charles McIlvaine, arguing that the *Tracts* were ‘downright Popery’ and represented ‘a systematic abandonment of the vital and distinguishing principles of the Protestant faith, and a systematic adoption of that very root and heart of Romanism, whence has issued ... all its ramified corruptions and deformities’.<sup>16</sup> At the time of Crummell’s application, Onderdonk, a High Church Episcopalian, was faced with the task of reassuring Low Church advocates that the arguments of the Oxford Movement would not be adopted by the Episcopal Church, and ensuring that High Church clergymen were not so swayed by the arguments coming from England as to be tempted to convert to Roman Catholicism. Given the escalating internal tension over Evangelicalism, inviting a fresh division over slavery could have proved disastrous for the denomination.

The Second Great Awakening and the development of High and Low Church ideologies amongst Episcopalians created a further problem for the denomination: it helped to facilitate the evolution of abolitionist arguments calling for the immediate emancipation of slaves. Constructing these arguments required a considerable departure from traditional interpretations of Scripture. This idea was amenable to Low Church Episcopalians who favoured looser biblical interpretations, but such interpretations were quickly criticised and refuted by High Church Episcopalians and proslavery advocates who favoured a literalist approach to the Bible. What further alarmed High Church and proslavery advocates was the fact that, given the extent to which abolitionists struggled to support their arguments with Scripture, some began to turn away from the Bible altogether. By 1845 William Lloyd Garrison was recommending against taking the Bible at its word, arguing that ‘to say that everything in the Bible is to be believed, simply because it is found in that volume, is ... absurd and pernicious’.<sup>17</sup>

The development of loose and radical interpretations of Scripture was a concern for both Southern proslavery clergymen and conservative anti-slavery clerics, who, as Luke Harlow argues, entered into a loose coalition to condemn advocates of abolitionism.<sup>18</sup> Statements castigating

<sup>16</sup> ‘Cranmer’ [Charles McIlvaine], ‘The Oxford Tracts’, *Gambier Observer*, 15 Mar. 1839, repr. in *Episcopal Recorder*, 6 Apr. 1839, quoted *ibid.* 103.

<sup>17</sup> W. L. Garrison, ‘Thomas Paine’, *The Liberator*, 21 Nov. 1845. Molly Oshatz highlights that making the biblical case against slavery required a huge departure from the entire Protestant understanding of revelation: *Slavery and sin: the fight against slavery and the rise of liberal Protestantism*, Oxford 2012, 10, 44.

<sup>18</sup> L. E. Harlow, *Religion, race, and the making of Confederate Kentucky, 1830–1880*, Cambridge 2014, 7, 46. April Holm argues that neutral clergy who were pressed to

abolitionism were expounded by clergymen and denominations, perhaps one of the most notable coming during the 1836 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. During the conference the committee appointed to draft a pastoral letter was instructed to ‘take notice of the subject of modern abolition’ and ‘let our preachers, members, and friends know that the General Conference are opposed to the agitation of that subject, and will use all prudent means to put it down’.<sup>19</sup> Despite efforts to suppress the subject, however, abolitionism continued to provoke debate and tension within the Evangelical denominations, ultimately resulting in schisms in the 1830s and 1840s. In comparison, the Episcopal Church remained relatively silent on the issue of abolitionism, and the minutes of the General Conventions in the 1830s show no discussion on the subject.

In her study of the issue of religion and race, Molly Oshatz argues that the Episcopal Church played ‘little if any role in the slavery debates’.<sup>20</sup> Yet while the Episcopal Church did not issue a statement on abolitionism, individual clergymen were beginning to show their support or opposition to the idea. In his 1835 Thanksgiving sermon at St Peter’s Church, New York, the Revd Thomas Pyne argued that ‘I regard the voluntary tenure of men contrary to their consent in hopeless and hereditary bondage as decidedly sinful’, and that ‘the whole of the civilized world ... now expects of America ... that she should liberate the slave’.<sup>21</sup> Other Episcopalians, however, ridiculed the loose interpretations put forward by their abolitionist counterparts. Writing in 1832, Thomas R. Dew, professor and later President, of the College of William and Mary, commented that:

With regard to the assertion that slavery is against the spirit of Christianity, we are ready to admit the general assertion, but deny most positively that there is any thing in the Old or New Testament, which would go to show that slavery, when

choose between abolitionist and pro-slavery positions often allied themselves with Southern Evangelicals: *A kingdom divided: Evangelicals, loyalty, and sectionalism in the Civil War era*, Baton Rouge 2017, 6, 35–7.

<sup>19</sup> *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, I: 1796–1836, New York 1855, 443. For examples of clergymen criticising abolitionism see R. J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and politics in antebellum America*, New Haven 1993, 139–43. Oshatz notes that ‘Southern defenders of slavery easily dispatched with the inaccurate [biblical] claims of abolitionist interpreters’: *Slavery*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Oshatz, *Slavery*, 51.

<sup>21</sup> T. Pyne, *A sermon preached in the Chapel of St. Peter’s Church, New-York, on Thursday, the 10th of December, 1835, being a day appointed by authority as a day of public thanksgiving*, New York 1835, 11, 13.



once introduced, ought at all events to be abrogated, or that the master commits any offence in holding slaves.<sup>22</sup>

Given the development of abolitionist and pro-slavery arguments amongst Episcopal clergymen, it could be considered surprising that the denomination did not become more involved in the issue. However, the conservative nature of the denomination meant that few clergymen were willing to adopt such a radical interpretation of the Bible. Furthermore, in order to prevent abolitionism from generating division within the denomination, steps were taken to quell clergymen who promoted abolitionism. Shortly after his Thanksgiving sermon, Pyne was removed from his church. Such actions prompted little opposition, as, unlike Evangelical denominations that placed greater stock in a sense of democracy amongst their clergy, Episcopalians stressed the importance of apostolic succession and a clear hierarchy within the Church.<sup>23</sup> Abolitionist clergymen such as Pyne had little option but to obey instructions from their bishop. The strict sense of hierarchy that had previously alienated the Episcopal Church in the aftermath of the American Revolution now came to the denomination's aid, enabling it to suppress the topic of abolitionism, thereby avoiding the tension and division that surfaced in Evangelical denominations. The importance of hierarchy within the Episcopal Church also provides greater context to Onderdonk's hostile response to Crummell appealing against his rejection. Although Onderdonk's hostility could be regarded as an example of the bishop's racial prejudice, it could also be argued that it was because Crummell was challenging the denomination's hierarchy.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> T. R. Dew, *Review of the debate in the Virginia legislature of 1831 and 1832*, Richmond, VA 1832, 106.

<sup>23</sup> Prichard, *History of the Episcopal Church*, 181. In defending the importance of apostolic succession Bishop Hobart cited William Law's first letter to the bishop of Bangor: Law set out that 'There is an absolute necessity of a strict succession of authorized ordainers from the apostolical times, in order to constitute a Christian priest': J. H. Hobart, *An apology for apostolic order and its advocates: in a series of letters, addressed to the Rev. John M. Mason, D.D.*, New York 1844, 115. In examining the relationship between the Churches and slavery, James Birney noted that 'smallness of ... numbers' of the Episcopal Church, 'and the authority of the Bishops, has prevented it from being much agitated with the anti-slavery question': *The American Churches, the bulwarks of American slavery*, Newburyport 1842, 39. In comparison, Oshatz notes that Evangelical denominations 'had no power to force compromise' and 'lacked the authority or even the mandate to maintain unity': *Slavery*, 98.

<sup>24</sup> Commenting on the Crummell case, Onderdonk stated that 'I had personally no objections to a colored candidate having the advantages of the Seminary; but that the subject was one of very peculiar delicacy ... great prudence was necessary in order to avoid the doing of serious injury to colored persons, where it was intended to benefit them; that considerations of the highest and holiest nature required that the subject



In rejecting Crummell's application Onderdonk could help to ensure that the Episcopal Church did not become embroiled in the debate surrounding abolitionism and thereby avoid the possibility of the same internal division that was plaguing Evangelical denominations. Rejecting the application would also have helped protect the denomination against the backlash from sections of Northern society that would probably have occurred if an abolitionist had been admitted to the seminary. The advent of abolitionism had prompted an equally militant anti-abolitionist backlash within the Northern states. Newspaper articles, pamphlets and speeches denounced abolitionists, calling for them to be silenced by either legal or extra-legal means. In the 1830s acts of anti-abolitionist violence were relatively common, with individuals and institutions connected to anti-slavery finding themselves subjected to mob attacks.<sup>25</sup> Religious institutions were often targeted during these attacks; in anti-abolitionist riots in New York in 1834 six churches were damaged for perceived ties to abolitionism. Of these six, the worst damage was inflicted on St Philip's, the African American Episcopal Church that included Crummell among its members. Stained glass windows were smashed, pews were dragged into the street and set alight, candlesticks, curtains and the organ were all destroyed, and the main altar was broken into pieces.<sup>26</sup> The rationale for the mob's actions was the rumour that the minister, Peter Williams Jr, had officiated at an interracial marriage, although this proved to be unfounded. What further drew the ire of the mob, however, was that Williams was a prominent abolitionist, and had been involved in the anti-slavery movement from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Williams's prominence in the abolitionist movement was cemented when he was appointed to the Board of Managers of the New York Anti-Slavery Society when that organisation was founded in 1833.<sup>27</sup>

To protect St Philip's, Onderdonk sought to cut any ties that Williams had to abolitionism. The day after the attack Williams wrote to Onderdonk informing him of the church's destruction. In his reply, the

should not be allowed to agitate our ecclesiastical bodies': *Colored American*, 27 Dec. 1839.

<sup>25</sup> The specific number of anti-abolitionist attacks and riots is unclear. Leonard Richards argues that there were 179 anti-abolitionist mobs in America in the 1830s and 1840s, while Michael Feldberg argues that there were 209 such incidents during the same period: L. L. Richards, *Gentlemen of property and standing: anti-abolition mobs in Jacksonian America*, New York 1970, 14; M. Feldberg, *The turbulent era: riot and disorder in Jacksonian America*, New York 1980, 5.

<sup>26</sup> See J. H. Hewitt, 'The sacking of St Philip's Church, New York', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* xli (1980), 7–20.

<sup>27</sup> J. H. Hewitt, 'Peter Williams, Jr: New York's first African-American Episcopal priest', *New York History* lxxix (1998), 104, 117.

bishop began by expressing sympathy, but then went on to request that Williams cut off his association with the American Anti-Slavery Society, saying ‘let me advise you to resign, at once, your connexion, in every department, with the Anti-Slavery Society, and to make public your resignation’. Two days later, Williams’s letter of resignation from the society was published in several newspapers, where he stated that ‘my Bishop, without giving his opinions on the subject of Abolition, has now advised me, in order that the Church under my care “may be found on the Christian side of meekness, order, and self-sacrifice to the community,” to resign connexion with the Anti-Slavery Society, and to make public my resignation’.<sup>28</sup>

Commentators criticised Williams’s decision to acquiesce in Onderdonk’s demands. An editorial in the *Liberator* commented that the minister was ‘culpably submissive’, while Crummell wrote that Williams ‘was a timid man’ and that ‘He became intimidated – nay frightened.’<sup>29</sup> Yet Williams’s situation can be compared to that of Thomas Pyne. Just as Pyne accepted his dismissal without protest due to the hierarchical nature of the Episcopal Church, Williams also felt that he had little option but to obey his bishop. On the other hand, Onderdonk’s demand that Williams renounce any association with the American Anti-Slavery Society has been regarded as evidence of the bishop’s prejudice and racism. Craig Wilder argues that Onderdonk ‘saw black people as the carriers of a political disease – the source and cause of popular strife and a perpetual threat to the social order’.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, Onderdonk’s treatment of St Philip’s was not as warm as that it had received from his predecessor. In his address to the annual meeting of the New York diocese in 1826 Bishop Hobart commented that he took ‘pleasure in stating that I confirmed at St. Philip’s, the Church of the people of colour, under their exemplary Pastor, the Rev. Peter Williams’.<sup>31</sup> After Hobart’s death and Onderdonk’s accession, however, few references to St Philip’s

<sup>28</sup> Reprinted in C. G. Woodson (ed.), *The mind of the Negro as reflected in letters written during the crisis, 1800–1860*, Washington, DC 1926, 629–34.

<sup>29</sup> C. D. Townsend, *Faith in their own color: Black Episcopalians in antebellum New York City*, New York 2005, 54; C. L. Peterson, *Black Gotham: a family history of African Americans in nineteenth-century New York City*, New Haven 2011, 102. Some scholars have also criticised Williams. Carter Woodson argued that Williams did not appear to have the ‘moral stamina ... to renounce his connection with a church seeking to muzzle a man praying for the deliverance of his people’: *The history of the Negro Church*, Washington, DC 1921, 96. Graham Hodges argues that Williams suffered ‘public humiliation’ at Onderdonk’s hands: *David Ruggles: a radical Black abolitionist and the underground railroad in New York City*, Chapel Hill, NC 2010, 65.

<sup>30</sup> C. S. Wilder, “‘Driven ... from the school of the prophets”: the colonizationist ascendance at General Theological Seminary’, *New York History* xciii (2012), 161.

<sup>31</sup> *Journal of the Proceedings of the Forty-First Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of New York ... 1826*, New York 1826, 17.

appeared in the minutes of the annual meetings and no mention was made of the damage that St Philip's suffered in the 1834 anti-abolitionist riots.

Despite Onderdonk's apparent hostility towards both Williams and St Philip's, the rationale behind his actions can be seen as more pragmatism than prejudice. The bishop's primary aim was to protect St Philip's. During the riots, Onderdonk had pleaded with the mayor of New York for help in protecting the church, citing his 'knowledge of the respectable and uniformly decent and orderly character of the congregation'.<sup>32</sup> When these efforts ultimately failed, the bishop's focus shifted to preventing any future attacks. Requesting that Williams cut off ties with anti-slavery organisations helped to temper accusations that St Philip's was connected to abolitionism. That Onderdonk's actions were driven more by pragmatism than prejudice is illustrated by Williams's letter of resignation. In stating that the bishop had avoided 'giving his opinions on the subject of Abolition', Williams highlighted the fact that Onderdonk had studiously avoided engaging with the debate surrounding slavery, even with his own clergymen.<sup>33</sup> Onderdonk's focus was on maintaining a position of neutrality, aimed at preventing any further anti-abolitionist attack.

The extent to which Onderdonk's actions were driven by pragmatism was further demonstrated by the subsequent relations between Williams, St Philip's and the bishop. Had Onderdonk's primary intention in asking Williams to renounce his abolitionist activities been to rebuke and humiliate the minister, the relationship between the two, and between the church and the bishop, would have suffered. Yet after the riots Onderdonk remained on positive terms with both St Philip's and Williams. Onderdonk preached the funeral sermon for Williams after the minister's death in 1840, stating to the congregation that 'you have lost a friend, a pastor, a beloved father, who was worthy of all the affection, esteem, and gratitude, with which I know you viewed him. You do right to mourn his loss, and in paternal and pastoral sympathy, I mourn it with you'.<sup>34</sup> Similarly the congregation of St Philip's wrote to support Onderdonk

<sup>32</sup> 'Riots target Black New Yorkers & Abolitionists', 'New York Divided: Slavery and the Civil War', exhibition, New-York Historical Society, 2006–7, <<http://www.nydivided.org/popup/People/PeterWilliamsJr.php>>, accessed 21 Jan. 2019; cited in Peterson, *Black Gotham*, 101.

<sup>33</sup> Reprinted in Woodson, *Mind of the negro*, 629–34.

<sup>34</sup> B. T. Onderdonk, *The change at the Resurrection: a sermon preached in St. Philip's Church, New York, on Tuesday, October 20, 1840, at the funeral of the Rev. Peter Williams, the rector of the Church*, New York 1840. At the 1840 New York diocesan convention, Onderdonk reported Williams's death, commenting that 'Mr. Williams added to sincere and enlightened piety, and a grade of talent and theological acquirement quite above mediocrity, great soundness of judgment, and prudence in action, and a just appreciation, a sincere love, and a consistent adoption of sound Christian principles': *Journal of the proceedings of the Fifty-Sixth Convention of the diocese of New York ... 1840*, New York 1840, 77.

when he was accused of impropriety in 1844, commenting: 'Be assured that our confidence in you remains unshaken; our love, respect, and veneration unaltered; and we shall greatly rejoice when the time shall come for us again to listen to your counsel and admonitions, and the word preached by you.'<sup>35</sup>

Onderdonk's efforts to cut any ties between the denomination and abolitionists were not only designed to prevent attacks on Episcopal churches and institutions. They were also driven by the fear that any perceived tie with abolitionism could have resulted in a loss of support for the denomination. With its increasing financial reliance on members of the upper classes, the Episcopal Church sought to reflect the values of these congregants in order to retain their support. In New York City these values were influenced by the fact that the city's prosperity was increasingly dependent upon slavery.<sup>36</sup> Due to these links, members of the social elite showed considerable hostility to abolitionism. Studies of anti-abolition violence have highlighted that members of the social and political elite were heavily involved in either participating in or in inspiring mob action. Examining the anti-abolitionist mobs in Utica (1835), Cincinnati (1836) and New York (1834), Leonard Richards argues that about three-quarters of the rioters were commercial or professional men, and nearly 40 per cent worked in professions that Richards describes as 'high-ranking'. Furthermore, Richards's analysis highlights that a significant proportion of rioters were members of the Episcopal Church. In the Utica uprising, 37 per cent of the rioters sampled identified as Episcopalian, compared with the 2 per cent of abolitionists in the city who belonged to the denomination.<sup>37</sup> Given the level of support that anti-abolitionist violence received from Episcopalians, were the denomination to show support for the anti-slavery movement, crucial support for the Church from amongst the social elite would probably have dropped significantly.

The social elite also influenced anti-abolitionist violence through the printing and disseminating of inflammatory anti-abolitionist articles. In the months leading up to the New York riots, James Watson Webb, the editor of the *New York Courier and Enquirer*, published a series of articles where he argued that abolitionists were encouraging African Americans to integrate into white society, and 'to obtrude their aromatic persons in places whence the customs of society, and, let us add, the instincts of

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Peterson, *Black Gotham*, 211.

<sup>36</sup> Eric Foner notes that by the 1830s merchants, boat companies, banks, insurance companies, clothing manufacturers and printers all had established links with Southern slavery. The city also became a major tourist destination for Southerners, with at least 100,000 visiting the city each summer. As a result hotels such as the Astor, Fifth Avenue and Metropolitan 'made special efforts to cater to southerners': *Gateway to freedom: the hidden history of America's fugitive slaves*, Oxford 2015, 45–6.

<sup>37</sup> Richards, *Gentlemen*, 134–7, 145–6.

nature, have hitherto banished them'.<sup>38</sup> A fresh series of articles inflaming anti-abolitionist sentiments had also emerged just as Crummell was applying to enter the seminary, due to the arrival of the captured slave ship *La Amistad*. The presence of Africans who had killed their Spanish captors enraged anti-abolitionists. The *Morning Herald* argued that the Africans had 'been furnished secretly with knives' by abolitionists, questioning 'for what intent were they furnished with the weapons of murder? Was it to make the prison of New Haven as red with the blood of the white man as the decks of the Amistad?'<sup>39</sup> These incendiary articles played a substantial role in inspiring rioters. Furthermore, Webb, as a staunch Episcopalian, provided a further reminder to Onderdonk of the antipathy many congregants demonstrated towards abolitionism.

Crummell was not the only African American candidate rejected by the General Theological Seminary. Isiaah de Grasse had initially been admitted in 1836. Shortly after his arrival, however, Onderdonk told him that he could not continue. According to de Grasse the bishop told him that 'there were fears that my presence there as a regular inmate, and especially my eating in common with the pious students would give rise to much dissatisfaction and bad feeling among them'. Onderdonk defended his decision by saying 'that the South, from whence they receive much support, will object to my entering'.<sup>40</sup> The fear of a Southern backlash was similarly used to justify the rejection of Crummell's application. Crummell recalled being told that the major obstacle to his application was that South Carolina 'had but recently endowed the Seminary with a \$15,000 professor's chair, and Bishop Onderdonk was determined the people of that State should not be offended by the presence of a Negro in the institution'.<sup>41</sup>

Scholars have questioned the argument that de Grasse and Crummell were prevented from attending the General Theological Seminary due to fear of a Southern backlash. Craig Townsend has argued that Onderdonk's treatment of de Grasse demonstrated the bishop's 'basic racism', and that racial prejudice was the primary cause.<sup>42</sup> The idea of using the South to conceal their own prejudice has also been promoted by Craig Wilder, who argues that 'white Northerners habitually shouted "the South" to conceal domestic bigotry'. Yet there was a genuine concern that a Southern backlash could have a significant impact on both the General Theological Seminary and the Episcopal Church. Although Wilder argues that the fear of a Southern backlash was used to mask Northern prejudice, he acknowledges that the General Theological Seminary was heavily dependent on Southern support. Twenty per cent

<sup>38</sup> 'The fanatics', *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer*, 23 June 1834, cited in L. M. Harris, *In the shadow of slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863*, Chicago–London 2003, 197.

<sup>39</sup> *Morning Herald*, 23 Oct. 1839.

<sup>40</sup> Townsend, *Faith*, 67. <sup>41</sup> Wilder, "'Driven'", 178. <sup>42</sup> Townsend, *Faith*, 67.

of the student body came from Southern states, with Southern dioceses expected to make good a quarter of the Seminary's budget deficit. In the year of Crummell's application, more than 80 per cent of all individual gifts to the seminary came from Southerners.<sup>43</sup> In order to maintain its financial security, the Seminary had to avoid alienating its Southern benefactors, which increasingly centred around the rejection of anti-slavery activism. With both de Grasse and Crummell, there was the fear that accepting them into the Seminary could have jeopardised Southern support. Rejecting them made sound financial sense.

Fears over the potential consequences of losing Southern support went beyond the financial problems that it would cause the General Theological Seminary, and extended to the possibility of the denomination losing crucial social and financial support in the slaveholding states. The loss of support that the denomination suffered as a result of the American Revolution and the Second Great Awakening meant that it was even more dependent on the support of its remaining members. In the South this support came largely from slaveholders, who were less enthralled by the democratic, egalitarian nature of the Evangelical Churches, preferring the hierarchical nature of the Episcopalians.<sup>44</sup> Yet although slaveholders were more likely to be members of the Episcopal Church, they were not necessarily its devoted supporters. Scholars have noted that the attendance of slaveholders at church services was not necessarily zealous, and that they regarded it as a burden. They were also not necessarily faithful to one particular denomination, and instead attended services at a variety of churches.<sup>45</sup> Parochial reports throughout the South in the 1830s highlighted the problems that

<sup>43</sup> Wilder, "Driven", 173–4, 177. Journals of the General Conventions of the Protestant Episcopal Church highlight how the seminary was reliant on Southern support. At the 1838 convention, South Carolina had donated over \$12,000 to the seminary, while Maryland donated over \$5,500, and North Carolina over \$4,000: *Journals of the proceedings of the bishops, clergy, and laity of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America... 1838*, New York 1838, 126.

<sup>44</sup> Cynthia Lyerly notes that the pews in Anglican churches were filled by rank, with the wealthiest and most prominent families seated near the parson: *Methodism and the Southern mind*, Oxford 1998, 81.

<sup>45</sup> See E. Fox-Genovese and E. Genovese, *The mind of the master class: history and faith in the Southern slaveholders' worldview*, Cambridge 2005, 444, 465. In his study of Episcopalians in North Carolina Richard Rankin highlights that men were intransigent towards the denomination and refused to become communicants. As a result, by 1840, female communicants outnumbered male communicants by a ratio of 4.7:1: *Ambivalent churchmen and Evangelical churchwomen*, Columbia 1993, 53. Kenneth Startup argues that throughout the antebellum era clergymen were concerned that slaveholders had too high an appetite for economic gain, which 'was leading to a deadly indifference toward higher, spiritual things': "A mere calculation of profits and loss": the Southern clergy and the economic culture of the antebellum North', in M. A. Noll (ed.), *God and mammon: Protestants, money, and the market, 1790–1860*, Oxford 2001, 218.



Episcopal churches faced, struggling with a lack of congregants, and increasing religious apathy amongst parishioners. At the 1833 diocesan convention in Virginia, the rector of Russel parish commented that ‘throughout all the regions ... there has been a general indifference toward religion. The houses of public worship are thinly and irregularly attended; the zeal of multitudes has abated; and many who gave fair promise of being faithful servants of the Cross, have returned to the world’.<sup>46</sup>

Slaveholder intransigence about fully committing to the Episcopal Church meant that they were reluctant to provide sufficient financial support to the denomination. As a result, some Episcopal ministers feared for the future of their churches. Writing in 1839, one Episcopalian minister in Demopolis, Alabama, commented that his wealthy parishioners showed ‘much coldness and indifference, particularly among the gentlemen’ when the plate was passed round and that without the donations of the ladies ‘I do not know what we should do’.<sup>47</sup> To have any chance of securing financial support, Episcopal clergymen had to ensure that the messages that they delivered from the pulpit fitted the worldviews of their congregants.<sup>48</sup>

One potential area of conflict between Episcopal ministers and their slaveholder congregants was over providing religious instruction to slaves. Although fears that religious instruction would make slaves more intractable and rebellious had been somewhat allayed by the beginning

<sup>46</sup> *Journal of the proceedings of the Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the diocese of Virginia ... 1833*, Richmond 1833, 31.

<sup>47</sup> F. R. Hanson to William Marbury, 29 Jan. 1839 (private collection), cited in B. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern honor: ethics and behavior in the Old South*, Oxford 1983, 188. In his sermon at the 1824 General Convention for the Episcopal Church in North Carolina, Bishop Ravenscroft complained that Episcopalianism were too generous in donating money to other denominations and that they should reserve ‘pecuniary means ... for the wants of our own communion’, rather than contribute to others and show ‘equal regard for all denominations’: L. F. London and S. M. Lemmon (eds), *The Episcopal Church in North Carolina, 1701–1959*, Raleigh, NC 1987, 126.

<sup>48</sup> Rankin comments that, to succeed, an Episcopal clergyman had to satisfy two powerful groups in the congregation: avoid conflict with the powerful men who sat on the vestry and satisfy the needs of his female communicants, ‘or the ladies would desert the pews and leave the church empty’: *Ambivalent churchmen*, 54–5. Startup highlights that there were occasions where Episcopal clergymen were willing to criticise slaveholders. However, the evidence that Startup uses, particularly in the 1820s and ’30s when the denomination was still fragile, illustrates that clergymen were reluctant to criticise slaveholders directly. Instead, the criticisms came through anonymous articles in the *Southern Churchman*, or through sermons delivered at diocesan conventions rather than from church pulpits: *The root of all evil: the Protestant clergy and the economic mind of the Old South*, Athens, GA 1997, 14, 15, 53. Ministers such as John Ravenscroft and Richard Moore, who were financially secure, were more willing to criticise slaveholders directly: Startup, *Root of all evil*, 53, 119.



of the nineteenth century, events such as the Vesey conspiracy in 1822 and the Baptist War in Jamaica in 1831–2 had reignited concerns. Some Episcopalians sought to distance themselves from engaging in missionary efforts to the enslaved. Following the discovery of Vesey's conspiracy, the South Carolina Episcopal minister Frederick Dalcho argued that the insurrection developed due to the efforts of Methodists to encourage religious participation by African Americans. Dalcho contrasted the Methodists with the Episcopalians, examining why the Episcopal Church had not produced any slave conspirators, and postulating it was because 'there is nothing to inflame the passions of the ignorant enthusiast; nothing left to the crude, undigested ideas of illiterate black class leaders'.<sup>49</sup>

Despite attempts to criticise other denominations for engaging in missionary efforts, some Episcopalians argued that they had a duty to provide religious instruction to the enslaved. The same year that Dalcho was criticising the Methodists, the report from the South Carolina diocese to the Episcopal Church's General Convention argued that slaves were a group '[with] whose spiritual and moral happiness, and the alleviation of their temporal lot ... we are sacredly bound to be concerned'.<sup>50</sup> Efforts to provide religious instruction, however, not only met with intransigence on the part of slaveholders but also left Episcopal clergymen open to the accusation that they were supporting abolitionism as their teachings were making slaves more rebellious. In the 1836 report of the Virginia diocesan convention, the report from St George's church, Fredericksburg, reported that 'our labors in behalf of the colored people have been sadly interrupted through the past year. This has been effected by causes, so well known and understood, and so generally deplored by the real friends of the African race, that we need not recount them here'.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in his annual address to the South Carolina annual convention in 1836, Bishop Nathaniel Bowen declared that efforts at providing religious instruction to African American slaves had been hampered 'by the systematic measures of an ill-advised, absurd and malignant philanthropy of abolitionism'.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Frederick Dalcho, *Practical considerations founded on the Scriptures relative to the slave population of South-Carolina*, Charleston 1823, 34.

<sup>50</sup> *Journal of the proceedings of the bishops, clergy, and laity of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America ... 1823*, New York 1823, 42.

<sup>51</sup> *Journal of the Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the diocese of Virginia ... 1836*, Richmond, VA 1836, 29.

<sup>52</sup> *Journal of the proceedings of the 47th Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the diocese of South-Carolina ... 1836*, Charleston, SC 1836, 13. In 1842 William Whittingham, the Episcopal bishop of Maryland, stated that 'I loathe and abhor the spirit of abolitionism as it has developed itself at the North ... The evils attendant on slavery are aggravated, not cured, by its intervention': W. F. Brand, *Life of William Rollinson Whittingham, fourth bishop of Maryland*, New York 1883, i. 264.

While Episcopal clergymen in the slaveholding states increasingly argued that it was their duty to provide religious instruction to the enslaved, doing so risked antagonising the slaveholder congregants on whom they relied for financial and social support, and whose commitment to the denomination was far from secure. Publishing pro-slavery tracts and castigating arguments raised by abolitionist counterparts helped Southern Episcopal clergymen to qualify some of the concerns of slaveholders.<sup>53</sup> Yet underlying concerns that slaves would become more rebellious as a result of religious instruction were never entirely eradicated and so Episcopal clergymen had to ensure that neither they, nor their Northern counterparts, did anything that could be conceived as showing support for abolitionism. Crummell's application was one such incident that could have jeopardised Southern support, and, as such, was too great a risk for the Episcopal Church.

Crummell was eventually ordained as a minister in the Episcopal Church. His path to ordination, and his early ministry, however, was not without controversy. In March 1841 he was invited to become a lay reader at Christ Church, an African American congregation in Rhode Island, but left in May 1842, having fallen out with both the church's vestry and its congregation. Despite this, he was eventually ordained in Philadelphia in 1844. However, when he presented himself to the bishop of Pennsylvania, Henry Onderdonk (Benjamin Onderdonk's brother), he encountered another setback. Henry Onderdonk stated that 'I cannot receive you into this diocese unless you will promise that you will never apply for a seat in my convention for yourself or for any church you may raise in this city', to which Crummell replied, 'That, sir, I will never do'.<sup>54</sup> In 1844 Crummell returned to New York as minister in St Matthew's, but three years later travelled to England. After studying at Cambridge, he and his family travelled to Liberia in 1853. He would not return permanently to the United States for twenty years.

Although Crummell denounced Benjamin Onderdonk, maintaining that he was rejected due to the bishop's racial prejudice, Onderdonk's decision was motivated to a large extent by pragmatism over the state of the Episcopal Church in the 1830s. Weakened by the impact of the American Revolution, the Second Great Awakening and internal division between High and Low Church advocates, the denomination was in a fragile position. The loss of congregants from the lower and middle classes left Northern and Southern dioceses financially dependent on members of the social elite. In the North some members, however, were active in inciting violence against individuals and institutions perceived to be supporting abolitionism. To ensure the continued support of the

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, G. W. Freeman, *The rights and duties of slave-holders: two discourses, delivered on Sunday, November 27, 1836 in Christ Church, Raleigh, North-Carolina*, Charleston 1837, 12.

<sup>54</sup> Cited in Moses, *Crummell*, 38.

social elite, it was vital for the Church to maintain a position of neutrality towards slavery. Admitting Alexander Crummell, an outspoken African American abolitionist, into the General Theological Seminary, would have undermined the denomination's neutrality towards slavery and was thus too big a risk for the Episcopal Church.