Religion and Southern Slavery:
Hermeneutics, White Culture and the Autonomous Minds of the Slaves

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MHIS300 Making History: Capstone Unit

In the context of American slave history, discourse has wrestled with the contentious debate surrounding the role religion played within black emancipation and self-determination. Two rival schools of thought examine the relative merits of religion’s role in either empowering the slaves’ resolve to combat repressive white ideology, or alternatively, in serving as the hegemonic cultural paradigm into which black slaves were assimilated to foster docility. Consequently this project will investigate this polemical discourse to ascertain the influence religion had both on black consciousness and attitudes, as well as on the dissemination of a supremacist, hierarchical, and overtly Christian white cultural milieu. Primary sources such as the slave narratives of Henry Bibb: Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself (1815), Thomas Anderson's novel Interesting Account of Thomas Anderson, A Slave. Taken From his own Lips (1854) Charles Ball's autobiography Fifty Years in Chains: or The life of an American Slave (1859) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) will provide insight into the zeitgeist of white hegemonic culture. Through such insightful sources I wish to assess whether or not Christianity helped better the slave experience, or further perpetuated the slave’s subjugation.

The aforementioned primary sources are significant as they show particular facets of the slave experience, depicted from varying viewpoints. For example, Henry Bibb wrote his autobiography during his time as a fugitive from American slaveholders. He criticises quite passionately the heinous behaviour of white men towards blacks and the overtly hypocritical nature of sermons in the Southern Protestant religion. Ball's autobiography instead writes of his experiences being bought and sold as a slave and separated from his
family. He criticises many of the values and morals of the pious slaveholders and their hypocritical reverential facades. Thomas Anderson differs from both Ball and Bibb in highlighting the enriching and empowering experience he had with Christianity. He describes how it helped him gain a sense of identity and confidence during his time as a slave, however he criticises white preaching profusely in his account. And lastly, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* illustrates the common perceptions of black slaves, and inadvertently reinforces the stereotypical image of black subservience through religious adherence.

One of the first criticisms of religious influence on the minds of society was from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who quite passionately expressed that religion cultivated moral slaves or a ‘subjection of the spirit’. While he indignantly repudiated religion, he also posited an interesting notion: that emancipation from slavery occurred through a simultaneous abandonment of religious adherence, and instead was enacted through an objective and secular psyche. He said, ‘It was always not the faith, but the freedom from the faith, the half-stoical and smiling indifference to the seriousness of the faith, which made the slaves indignant to their masters and revolt against them.’

Nietzsche's claims about the repressive nature of religion are, however, contested amongst scholars in regards to black slavery in the South. In particular, historians such as Eugene Genovese highlight that religion provided a tool by which blacks could combat the repressive white ideology.

In order to examine the ways in which the Southern religion influenced black slaves, it is prudent to identify first the roots of its ideological underpinnings and its hermeneutic grounding. The Bible was indeed the prominent tool by which Southern slaveholders founded their beliefs and rationalisations of black slavery, often through erroneous interpretations of the Old Testament. In particular, the biblical story of the Curse of Ham, in which Noah, while intoxicated, momentously curses Canaan and his son Ham for an obscure sexual indiscretion: ‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.’

2 Ibid.
4 Genesis 9: 25.
The Southern interpretation of this allegory meant that slavery was not only condoned within the Bible, but also that the descendants of Canaan, who was believed to be of black appearance, were ultimately subject to slavery under the racially superior whites in the nineteenth century. Contemporary research however reveals that Southerners misinterpreted the biblical story as Canaan was not necessarily black-skinned but of Phoenician descent. It was in fact Cush, Noah’s other son, who had Ethiopian and African descendants.\(^5\) However, the Southern interpretation of the biblical story was consolidated in Leviticus: ‘Both thy bondmen and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids.’\(^6\) The literal interpretations of such passages imbued a sense of paternalistic duty in the minds of the white slaveholders, and suggested that they were not necessarily enslaving blacks but endeavouring to teach and father a heathen society.

However, whatever paternalism there may have been in white slaveholders’ minds, it was ultimately undercut by the pervading desire to exploit a cheap labour force and propel their own individual prosperity. Henry Bibb highlights the slaveholder’s underlying priorities stating: ‘And at the busy season of the year, they were compelled to work just as hard on the Sabbath, as on any other day.’\(^7\) While work illustrated the impiety and hypocrisy of white slaveholders, their heinous and torturous punishment of the slaves implied a devilish disposition, devoid of any paternalistic benevolence. Bibb notes while arriving at a new plantation, ‘My first impressions when I arrived on the Deacon’s farm, were that he was far more like what the people call the devil, than he was like a deacon.’\(^8\) Similarly, Thomas Anderson in his slave account highlighted the inflamed despotic attitudes that the Southern slaveholders held over the blacks. ‘He took me up and tie[d] me, and scourged me until feeling of flesh was almost gone. At length I fall before him and lift up my cries to heaven, and ask my great Creator '"What have I done?" My master cursed me, and said:

\(^6\) Leviticus 25: 44.
“Will you preach to me?”.

Ironically, the supposedly black heathen devoid of Christian civility and values can be observed as exhibiting greater adherence to and recognition of their faith than the despotastic slaveholder who whips his slave until he proclaims his master’s Godliness.

However, the repressive white culture progressively changed its position from a staunch rejection of slaves as too savage to receive Christianity, to an immersion of slaves in a white, selectively chosen, and politically/denominationally slanted reading of the Bible. The paternalistic approach that the Southerners preached in the nineteenth century was starkly contrasted to the Calvinist approach taken throughout the late 1700s. Originally, blacks were not looked upon as subjects for indoctrination but instead objectified as inherently savage and ‘too dull’ or ‘without souls’ and otherwise incapable of Christian adherence. As orthodoxy started to decline at the turn of the nineteenth century, there began a conscious search for its revival. And as the Great Awakening spread Evangelist fervour throughout the colonies, blacks became aroused by its religiously introspective focus coupled with the appeal of the songs and hymns that encompassed its teachings. What ensued was an epiphany in the minds of slaveholders who began to see their elitist and exclusive Episcopalian religion as a tool that could instead be used to improve the control they had on their slaves and further exacerbate obedience.

Historian Eric Lincoln illustrates this realisation stating, ‘Planters discovered that substantial benefits could indeed be derived from turning the heathen blacks, who were often considered surly and unpredictable, into Christians motivated with the desire to merit God’s Favour through service to the masters he had set over them.’ This subsequently gave favourable rise to the ideology that their religion, far from being elitist, could become widely encompassing, with however the underlying purpose of exploiting its model for further slave control. The implications of such ideological thought can be observed through

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9 Thomas Anderson, *Interesting Account of Thomas Anderson, A Slave. Taken From His Own Lips* (1854), p. 3, retrieved from *Documenting the American South*.

10 Calvinism is a branch of Christianity that emphasises the supreme sovereignty of God and the weakness of humans. Its particular use here relates to the tenet that God has preselected those who are worthy of his grace, and salvation (whites were preselected over blacks). Retrieved from ‘Calvinism,’ *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989).


two distinct lenses reflecting a dichotomy in historical discourse. On the one hand, are those historians who espouse that religion empowered the blacks or at the very least provided them with a platform for which they could re-establish their own sense of meaning and purpose defined through spirituality. Converse is the view that religion, despite providing initial empowerment, ultimately assimilated the blacks into a white culture that was predicated on inherent societal hierarchies and black subservience.

Though the accounts of Henry Bibb, Thomas Anderson and Charles Ball all exude an adherence to the Christianity, they are however heavily critical of the Southern-white understanding and Christian preaching. In particular, Charles Ball notes the ways in which the Southern religion was manipulated to indoctrinate the slaves with the idea that they were racially inferior and natural servants to the whites. ‘It is not strange that he believed the religion of his oppressors to be the invention of designing men, for the text oftenest quoted in his hearing was, Servants, be obedient to your masters.’

It is important to note that while slaves became exposed to the Southern religion, over time and through their own self-directed exploration of the Bible they were able to extrapolate their own meaning and understanding, untainted by white hegemonic pursuits. In fact, over time as the barriers of religious exclusion lowered within slave communities, and with the introduction of black preachers, a whole new array of egalitarian ideologies began to swell within the minds of blacks, even if it were only on an introverted and clandestine level. The pervading belief that disseminated among black slaves was the notion that all were equal under the eyes of God, a realisation that could not be fathomed in the culturally and religiously repressive slaveholder society that existed in the nineteenth century. ‘And I here pledge myself, God being my helper, ever to contend for the natural equality of the human family, without regard to colour...’ Furthermore in Charles Ball’s account he similarly notes that ‘rather as a matter of favor, to the intercession of some slave, than as matter of strict justice to the whites, who will, by no means, be of an equal rank with those who shall be raised from the depths of misery, in this world.’

In many ways the introduction Christianity to blacks hindered the slaveholder’s control as much as it further exacerbated docility. In particular,

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13 Charles Ball, *A Slave, Fifty Years in Chains: or The life of an American Slave* (1859), p. 15, retrieved from *Documenting the American South*.
14 Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures*, p. 204.
15 Ball, *A Slave*, p. 150.
as slaves slowly became dismayed by the bastardised and slanted preachings of Southerners, they began to search for and formulate their own belief systems. This in effect was the catalyst that led to the formation of the clandestine underground slave church, also known as the Invisible Church.

Bibb's autobiographical narrative confirms the surreptitious existence of the Invisible Church, and the ramifications for participating in such secretive religious gatherings. ‘We had a very good meeting, although our exercises were not conducted in accordance with an enlightened Christianity; for we had no Bible—no intelligent leader— but a conscience, prompted by our own reason, constrained us to worship God the Creator of all things.’ Bibb furthermore describes the punishments he received for his behaviour as he returned to the Deacon’s, who became aware of his transgression. ‘She [a slave friend of Bibb called Melinda] finally informed me that her master had found out that I had violated his law, and I should suffer the penalty, which was five hundred lashes, on my naked back.’ Bibb fortunately averted a heinous punishment from the Deacon, fleeing from the plantation on horseback. However, one is left to question just how beneficial or indeed worthwhile adherence to the Invisible Church was, as Bibb’s participation in it ultimately led to serious detriment.

The Invisible Church, however, is viewed within contemporary discourse as marking the foundations upon which black self-determination and empowerment were established. Such clandestine organisations came at great risk, with undoubtedly severe beatings and punishments had slaves been caught being part of these underground gatherings. However, even despite such grave repercussions blacks were still willing to risk it, which to some degree highlights the importance religion played within black consciousness. At the very least the Invisible Church allowed for autonomous and unrestrained discussion, as well as cathartic support between the slaves that afforded them a sense of unity in an enclave surrounded by incessant white subjugation. The historian Lincoln affirms the symbolic significance of the Invisible church, stating that ‘it contributed substantially to the self-esteem that made survival possible, and hope [as being] something more than fantasy.’

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16 Bibb. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures*, pp. 119-120.
17 *Ibid*.
Moreover, setting aside the emotional impact it had on disenfranchised blacks, the underground church laid the ideological foundations in which hope in liberation and emancipation became viable; through religion, blacks could progressively erode the feebly supported biblical rationalisations to which the Southern slaveholders clung.

One of the pervading arguments within historical discourse that endeavours to debunk the significance attributed to the Invisible Church is the fact that in the process of dismantling Southern pro-slavery views, blacks had to usurp the same religious culture and biblical canon. Consequently, while blacks gained spiritual empowerment they simultaneously expunged any individual cultural identity, and instead integrated and assimilated themselves into the imperialistic white culture. And by confining themselves to a hermeneutical quarrel with Southern ideology, they inherited the limited parameters of the bible. In other words, had the black slaves congregated as a secular clandestine group, and disseminated criticisms of Southern slaveholders based on humanistic principles, their ideological rebuttal could have been much more critical and indeed forceful. However, what this does reveal is that Nietzsche may have been mistaken to assume that protests from slaves towards their masters only operated on a secular level; instead, they could be enacted through intangible forms such as ideological-religious quarrels.

Indeed this was one of the main implications of religious piety, regarding slaves' attitudes towards black emancipation, as not only did the confines of the bible limit ideological rebuttal, but it also created 'moral slaves'. From a Christian eschatological standpoint, slaves’ actions and violent protests were suppressed by the conscious desire to maintain obedience to religious teachings as well as the desire for ultimate salvation. This notion resonates in the prominent semi-fictional novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, which narrates the inspirational accounts of slaves and their experiences with barbaric white slaveholders. Within the story, that depicts the struggles between Uncle Tom and his master Simon Legree, Uncle Tom is presented with a situation where he could kill his sleeping master but refrains because of his Christian morality, and is eventually killed himself. And despite being

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19 Jonathan M. Bryant, ""My Soul Ain't Yours, Mas'r": The Records of the African Church at Penfield 1848-1863,' *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75.2 (1991).
20 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. 
a semi-fictional account, the story nonetheless invokes further insight into the moral conundrum that hindered slaves from exacting forceful protests to slavery.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was unquestionably popular at the time, engendering abolitionist fervour, as well as illuminating to indifferent and seemingly oblivious North Americans the unknown horrors of Southern slavery. However, contemporary criticisms have impelled us to look deeper into the underlying themes of the novel to reveal its inadvertent contribution to racial stereotyping. In particular the novel celebrates Tom’s reverent and obedient disposition at the hands of a despotic and violent master. Despite Stowe’s intentions of revealing the experience of unjustly treated black slaves, she simultaneously reinforced the stereotypical themes upon which many imperialistic and supremacist views were founded, such as the obsequious, sycophantic nature of slaves towards their masters. Such criticisms are substantiated in the illustrations of the original and revised editions (1852 and 1853).

Part-page illustration by Hammat Billings for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*[^22]


Consequently Uncle Tom, far from evolving into a heroic pro-abolitionist character, is instead utilised to slander black self-determination. The internalisation of such subservient ideologies was consolidated through various cultural and societal mores that were however instigated well before Stowe’s novel. The conscious desire to maintain racial hierarchies, exemplified in the segregated seating of white churches, reinforced the institutionalising of blacks into the hegemonic culture’s stereotype. Moreover, as the slave's reluctance to accept the Southern religion began to wane, their subsequent participation unconsciously contributed to its perpetual renewal. Indeed their acceptance of Southern Christianity not only condoned the its presence but also enmeshed their identity within its racial model, thus further compromising their pursuit for freedom from slavery, and white domination.

The slave accounts of Bibb, Anderson and Ball all exemplify morally reserved dispositions and reverences that in some instances impinges on their ability to forcefully criticise their enslaved conditions. Anderson illustrates his inner strength and zeal as channelled through faith in God, which is however, ironically paradoxical as his testimony reveals the placidity of this source of influence. ‘For a long time I cry, unworthy to undertake the task; but God at length prepare, and I promised to do the best I could. And God prepare me to this day.’ 23 Indeed this religious encumbrance greatly perpetuates a sobered resolve, which consequently has very little influence on dismantling Southern ideology. In fact, their introverted piety and subdued morality can to some extent be construed to elucidate an inadvertent complicity, as the religious indoctrination of the Southern slaveholders was met with little ideological resistance.

French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault examines the way the human body is subjected to disciplines and imposed routines that ultimately enhance human docility. ‘The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it.’ 24 Foucault’s concept of ‘docile bodies’ can be seen operating on two distinct levels here. Firstly in the routines of work and rules, and their associated disciplines, that were enforced coercively on the slaveholder’s plantations and designed to suppress the slave’s individual autonomy, cultivating a mentality of speed and efficiency.

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23 Anderson, Interesting Account, p. 5.  
Secondly, by accepting the Christian religion, slaves were also subjecting themselves to self-discipline, governed through the rules of the Bible. What can be surmised from this is that historians such as Eugene Genovese who affirm the positive influence of Christianity, stating that it ‘taught [slaves] to love and value each other, to take a critical view of their masters, and to reject the ideological rationales for their own enslavement,’ ultimately overlook the self-discipline that it instilled, which exacerbated submissiveness.  

Henry Bibb also discusses how in his dealings with white slaveholders he experimented with conjuring and witchcraft, in efforts to alleviate the violent disposition of his master. He states that:

> But there was another old slave in that neighbourhood, who professed to understand all about conjuration, and I thought I would try his skill. He told me that the first one was only a quack, and if I would only pay him a certain amount in cash, that he would tell me how to prevent any person from striking me...This was to act upon them as what is called a kind of love powder, to change their sentiments of anger, to those of love, towards me, but this all proved to be vain imagination.  

Consequently, the turn towards religion, be it pagan or Christian, effectively symbolises the desperation of black slaves who simply wanted to alleviate the violent and repressive burdens of slave life.

Historians may misconstrue this sudden turn towards devout piety as a progression towards a more spiritually uplifting experience, and consequently as a betterment of the enslaved condition. However, one must discern the difference between enriching someone’s life through spirituality, and the stark, repressive and ideologically dominant nature that religion exacted on the Southern slaves. Religion was as much a tool for the slaveholder’s control and subjugation as it was for their betterment. In some ways, it can be said that Christianity imbued a false sense of hope within slaves as they struggled with slaveholders’ violence and repression. Furthermore, my research shows that religion had greater effect on the latter, as opposed to the positively noble implications that some historians attribute to Christianity and its effects on Southern slaves.

Many scholars maintain that religion played an important role in cultivating slaves' individual autonomy and strength in their convictions. However, in order to appropriately assess the influence of the Christian religion in the context of the antebellum South, then

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the Southern hermeneutical ideology must be given proper attention, especially in the impact it had on slaves both mentally and physically. By addressing such factors, it becomes clear that Christianity, shaped by slaveholders to meet their own social and political designs, ultimately operated as a mechanism for greater control and subjugation. Blacks usurped its teachings and rules in order to gain a greater sense of spiritual autonomy as well as to provide purpose in their life of slavery. However they unconsciously contributed to their own subjugation by assimilating themselves into the white religious culture, which through its disciplines and governance facilitated their docility. In response to the foregoing religious assessment, religion in the context of American Southern slavery represented another form of social and political control, and while affording slaves with a sense of spiritual inspiration, it ultimately created moral slaves and enhanced the manipulative control of slaveholders.

Bibliography

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