Slavery and African American Irreligion

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In his influential 1835 work *Slavery*, Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing noted of southern slaves: “Of all the races of men, the African is the mildest and most susceptible of attachment. He loves, where the European would hate. He watches the life of a master, whom the North-American Indian, in like circumstances, would stab to the heart. The African is affectionate.” The primary reason for this supposedly loving and affectionate nature of African Americans, in Channing’s view, was that “the colored race are said to be peculiarly susceptible of the religious sentiment.” As Curtis Evans notes in *The Burden of Black Religion*, Channing’s argument was seized upon by both abolitionists and proslavery thinkers alike. These groups thus bolstered the nineteenth-century view that blacks were naturally religious, which has continued to influence perceptions of African American religiosity.[1]

This notion has had significant ramifications for scholarship on African American religion. The overwhelming focus of works on slave religion has been on variants of Protestant Christianity and their intersection with African religious traditions. During the early eighteenth century, most scholars note, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel attempted to Christianize the slave population but was unsuccessful because of resistance from masters, language barriers, and an emphasis on religious education that precluded many illiterate slaves from converting. This started to change during the First Great Awakening and accelerated during the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century, as sects such as the Methodists and Baptists deemphasized religious education and posited the primacy of the conversion experience. Rituals such as baptism by immersion were similar to African traditions and thus also appealed to

southern slaves. Scholars such as Edward Curtis IV, Michael Gomez, and Yvonne Chireau have added to this picture by demonstrating the importance of alternate faiths such as Islam and conjure throughout slave communities. Yet the assumption still remains that some form of religiosity was endemic to the enslaved population and that few if any slaves embraced religious skepticism.[2]

Some scholars have recently challenged the assumption of Black religiosity and adherence to Protestant Christianity during the era of slavery. Daniel Fountain's *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation* argues that while Christianity was a significant component of slaves' religious worldview, most slaves rejected the faith or never came to believe in it in the first place. We have come to believe that a majority of slaves were Christians because of the ubiquity of comments about slaves' religious practices, yet these comments were so frequent, according to Fountain, because religion was the most visible form of public behavior for blacks in the South. While Fountain's argument leaves the door open for other forms of religiosity, including adherence to traditional African religions, it also includes the likelihood that many slaves were nonreligious. Anthony Pinn has explored this latter point in depth for the past two decades, noting the presence of humanism among slaves in works that include *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, *Introducing African American Religion*, and *The End of God-Talk*. While Pinn's body of work has been less historically focused and geared more toward the creation of black humanist theology as a field, his works have included significant and original explorations of humanism and secularism among slaves.[3]

Greater recognition of secularism among southern slaves both complements and challenges the major thrust of the broader scholarship on southern irreligion. For early America, scholarship on southern irreligion has been anything but robust. This is of course true for scholarship on American freethought more broadly but particularly applies to the South. Classic works such as Herbert Morais's *Deism in Eighteenth Century America* tend to focus on northerners, as does recent scholarship by Kerry Walters, Christopher Grasso, and Eric Schlereth. Those who do mention southern freethinkers tend to focus on two figures—James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. Most of this scholarship posits freethought, both northern and southern, stemmed from Enlightenment philosophy and Newtonian science. Focusing on slaves who rejected prevailing religious beliefs, however, demonstrates an alternative origin to southern irreligion, namely the brutality of the institution of slavery itself. The constant presence of physical violence, sexual assault, hunger, and breakup of families, among other facets of American slavery, pushed many slaves to question not only Christianity but the very idea of God. While James Turner argues in his seminal work *Without God, Without Creed* that atheism "seemed almost palpably absurd" before the Civil War, this was not the case for some slaves. For them, evolution was

unnecessary to justify rejecting God. The brutality of slavery provided the necessary foundation for rejecting prevailing theodicies and embracing atheism or agnosticism.[4]

Scholars have long used slave narratives to document the rich and textured religious worldview of southern slaves but these sources also provide a window into the growth of southern black irreligion. After discussing a particularly brutal whipping his sister received at the hands of their master, a whipping that occurred on a Sabbath morning, Austin Steward asked his readers: "Can any one wonder that I, and other slaves, often doubted the sincerity of every white man's religion? Can it be a matter of astonishment, that slaves often feel that there is no just God for the poor African?" Steward, an enslaved man in Prince William Country, Virginia, voiced his and other slaves' opposition to proslavery Christianity but went even further to an embrace of atheism among enslaved blacks, a mindset he noted occurred "often." Just how often slaves felt this way is unclear. But it seems very likely that atheism was more prevalent than historians have recognized because the conditions that fostered it were normal occurrences among slaves. Charles Ball, an enslaved man in Maryland during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, likewise reflects on the irreligiosity present within slave communities in his autobiography. "There is, in general, very little sense of religious obligation, or duty, amongst the slaves on the cotton plantations," he wrote. "And Christianity cannot be, with propriety, called the religion of these people…They have not the slightest religious regard for the Sabbath-day, and their masters make no efforts to impress them with the least respect for this sacred institution."[5]

Both Steward and Ball speak to a key aspect of southern black irreligion—a disregard for the Christian Sabbath. Overwork as well as the opposition of masters to converting their slaves were the prime factors behind this hostility to the Sabbath. As Henry Bibb proclaimed, "the Sabbath is not regarded by a large number of the slaves as a day of rest. They have no schools to go to; no moral or religious instruction at all in many localities where there are hundreds of slaves. Hence they resort to some kind of amusement. Those who make no profession of religion, resort to the woods in large numbers on that day to gamble, fight, get drunk, and break the Sabbath." Masters tolerated and even encouraged this behavior by giving slaves whiskey and urging them to fight and wrestle one another. And for Bibb, it did not seem strange at all to mention what appears to be a significant number of slaves who adhere to no religious creeds. Peter Randolph makes a similar argument in his 1855 autobiography, *Sketches of Slave Life*. He noted that in some places masters whip their slaves if they catch them praying and would sooner have slaves dance than practice religion. "Sometimes, when a slave, on being whipped," Randolph writes, "calls upon God, he is forbidden to do so, under threat of having his throat cut, or brains blown out." The result of this was that many slaves rejected religion and did not observe the Sabbath, he recalls.

Instead, they spent their Sundays "in playing with marbles, and other games, for each other's food."[6]

For William Wells Brown, his disgust with the Sabbath came about not because of his master's refusal to help convert slaves but because of his master's hypocritical religious practices. Before his master became born again, slaves were allowed their leisure time on Sundays for hunting, fishing, and spending other ways as desired. But after his master converted he became much stricter, making slaves attend services every Sunday and even go to church during the week on occasion. During family worship, Brown writes, "my master and mistress were great lovers of mint julep, and every morning, a pitcher-full was made, of which they partook freely…I cannot say but I loved the julep as well as any of them, and during prayer was always careful to seat myself close to the table where it stood, so as to help myself when they were all busily engaged in their devotions. By the time prayer was over, I was about as happy as any of them." Brown's lack of adherence to religion continued after he gained his freedom and became one of the most prominent abolitionists in the country. His biographer Ezra Greenspan notes that throughout his career, Brown "took special pleasure in mocking the bigoted pieties of religious groups in speech after speech, book after book. Beginning with the 'Farmer of Ashland,' he typically exposed their hypocrisy to the public by letting them speak through his mediating voice."[7]

The proslavery religion of ministers such as A. T. Holmes of Hayneville, Georgia or Thornton Stringfellow of Fredericksburg, Virginia drove many slaves to reject Christianity and embrace atheism. As Christine Heyrman demonstrates in *Southern Cross*, evangelical Protestantism's spread to the South after the American Revolution came about because sects such as the Methodists and Baptists accepted, and eventually defended, the institution of slavery. In order to become relevant, these sects had to broaden their appeal beyond women and poor whites. They did so by accommodating slaveholders and strengthening the institution. As the nineteenth century progressed, it became increasingly common for ministers such as Holmes to use Christianity to justify slavery. Holmes urged masters to "enter the dark cabin of thy servant, and with the lamp of truth in thy hand, light up his darker soul with the knowledge of him, whom to know is life eternal." Thornton Stringfellow similarly claimed that slavery has received "the sanction of the Almighty in the Patriarchal age" and that "its legality was recognized, and its relative duties regulated, by Jesus Christ in his kingdom."[8]

This support for slavery among white southern Christians fostered the growth of African American irreligion. William Wells Brown never took his master's prayer sessions very seriously in part because of slavery's "evangelical bloodhounds, and its religious slaveholders." Henry Bibb reported that enslaved people "with but few exceptions, have no confidence at all in [white ministers'] preaching because they preach a pro-slavery doctrine. They say, 'Servants be obedient to your masters; and he

that knoweth his masters will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.'" Most slaves feel they are destined to die in bondage unless they are delivered by some deity, Bibb noted, but when that does not happen "they cannot believe or trust in such a religion, as above named."[9]

Probably the most well-known slave to embrace atheism, at least for a time, was Frederick Douglass. In multiple works, but especially his three slave narratives, Douglass speaks to the same themes prevalent in the narratives of Steward, Bibb, Ball, and Brown, namely a disregard for the Sabbath, a strident anticlericalism, and disgust with hypocritical Christians. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass posits that over the course of his life, his religious beliefs "pass[ed] over the whole scale and circle of belief and unbelief, from faith in the overruling Providence of God, to the blackest atheism." One reason for his atheism was the brutality and hypocrisy of religious masters. "In August, 1832," he writes, "my master attended a Methodist camp-meeting held in the Bay-side, Talbot county, and there experienced religion. I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty." Douglass was likewise disappointed with churches' support for slavery, noting that Christianity "has made itself the bulwark of American slavery, and the shield of American slavehunters." Instead of supporting such an institution, Douglass pronounced, "I would say welcome infidelity! Welcome atheism! Welcome anything! In preference to the gospel, *as preached by those Divines*!"[10]

According to some outside observers, many slaves did indeed welcome atheism rather than adhere to the religion of their masters. As early as 1724, Rev. Francis Varnard, the minister at St. George's Parish, South Carolina, recounted hearing a slave remark upon the hypocrisy of his Christian mistress cursing at him on the way to church and noted that situations such as those were common impediments to the Christianization of slaves. William Tibbs, minister to St. Paul's Parish in Baltimore County, Maryland reported that most slaves he encountered refused baptism and religious instruction, while masters in Santee, South Carolina told a missionary there that when a slave becomes a Christian the other slaves laugh at him. More than a century later, Daniel Payne's speech "Slavery Brutalizes Man" reflected on his journeys throughout the slave South and the impact that the institution had on the culture of the people, including the way it fostered atheism. Many slaves "hear their masters professing Christianity," he claimed. "They see these masters preaching the gospel; they hear

these masters praying in their families, and they know that oppression and slavery are inconsistent with the Christian religion; therefore they scoff at religion itself—mock their masters, and distrust both the goodness and justice of God. Yes, I have known them even to question his existence."[11]

Daniel Payne's speech lends credence to the evidence of slave irreligion garnered from narratives of former bondmen. Like those authors, Payne reported that slaves saw their masters' religion as hypocritical and came to believe that Christianity actually hindered morality rather than promoting it. Their liminal position in southern society, according to Payne, likewise made slaves disbelieve in the idea of an omnipotent and loving deity watching out for their interests.

While it is impossible to know just how many slaves felt this way, a careful reading of slave narratives and travel accounts to the South suggests that during the nineteenth century, southern black irreligion was much more pronounced than scholars have realized. This fact has the potential to open up new avenues in the scholarship on both African American religion and the study of southern freethought, showing especially how the latter was intimately tied to the South's most important institution.

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[1] William E. Channing, *Slavery* (Boston: James Munroe & Co., 1835), 100, 108; Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 28, 44–45.

[2] Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 63-148; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 116, 120–121, 132; Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 101; Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 21–48; Edward Curtis IV, *Muslims in America: A Short History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–46; Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

[3] Daniel L. Fountain, *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830–1870* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 1–3, 8; Anthony B. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious*

Experience (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998); Anthony B. Pinn, *Introducing African American Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[4] Herbert M. Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America* (1934; New York: Russell & Russell, 1960); Kerry Walters, *Revolutionary Deists: Early America's Rational Infidels* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2011); Christopher Grasso, "Skepticism and American Faith: Infidels, Converts, and Religious Doubt in the Early Nineteenth Century" *Journal of the Early Republic* 22 (2002): 465–508; Eric R. Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), xii.

[5] Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman; Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, while President of Wilberforce Colony, London, Canada West* (Rochester: William Alling, 1857), 99 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/steward/steward.html> (accessed July 28, 2016); Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave Under Various Masters, and was One Year in the Navy with Commodore Barney, During the Late War* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1837), 165 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/ballslavery/ball.html> (accessed 21 September 2013).

[6] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself. With an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack* (New York: Published by the Author, 1849) , 22–23 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html> (accessed September 24, 2013); Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life: Or, Illustrations of the 'Peculiar Institution'* (Boston: Published for the Author, 1855), 31–32, 30.

[7] William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself* (Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1847) in Yuval Taylor, ed. *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Volume I: 1772–1849* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 691; Ezra Greenspan, *William Wells Brown: An African American Life* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 175.

[8] Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 24, 155–158; A. T. Holmes, "The Duties of Christian Masters (1851)" in Paul Finkelman, ed. *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South, A Brief History with Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003), 106; Thornton

Stringfellow, “The Bible Argument: Or, Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation (1860)” in Finkelman, ed., *Defending Slavery*, 123.

[9] *Narrative of William W. Brown*, 702; *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 23–24.

[10] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Two: Autobiographical Writings*, vol. 2, ed. John W. Blassingame, et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 130; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1845), 54 <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/douglass.html> (accessed July 23, 2014); Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” in David W. Blight, ed. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself, with Related Documents*, 2nd ed. (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 164.

[11] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 121–122; Daniel Payne, “Slavery Brutalizes Man” *Lutheran Herald and Journal of the Fort Plain, N.Y., Franckean Synod* 1:15 (August 1, 1839), 113.