

Co-opting Conversion

Southern Slaves (Un)Acceptance of Christian Conversion in the Antebellum Era

David T. Shackelford

Abstract

Traditional scholarship would assert that during the Civil War, African American slaves converted to Christianity in large numbers. Many scholars argue that a large majority of southern slaves committed and converted to the common religious principles to create what they term Afro-Christianity. This perspective is a bit too simplistic however. Using slave narratives, stories, and biographies from the antebellum era, this paper suggests that the conversion of slaves to Christianity might not have happened the way the Afro-Christian scholars suggest and that in fact, many slaves did not convert to Christianity. The argument advanced is that, under the slave system, Christianity did not meet the majority of slaves' needs and most did not convert because of the content of the gospel being taught to them and the hypocrisy of a nation supporting slavery through Christianity. Additionally, those that did accept Christianity did so for reasons other than faith. African American slaves "converted" to Christianity because of societal opportunities, literacy, and because it offered them a tool for resistance and rebellion. It was only the resulting freedom and salvation of the Civil war that caused true conversions of African Americans to the Christian faith.



David Shackelford graduated from the Honors College at the University of Utah receiving a Bachelors of Science degree in both Political Science and Social Science Teaching with a minor in History.

Co-opting Conversion

A large group of scholars describe the history of the conversion of African American slaves in the antebellum period by arguing that most slaves adhered to a unique form of Christianity. Albert J. Raboteau, Mechal Sobel, and Margaret Washington Creel, characterize some of the most thorough research that depicts the emergence and growth of this Afro-Christianity.¹ Raboteau presents West African religions as containing many beliefs similar to that of evangelical Christianity. Likewise Mechal Sobel's seminal work on Afro-Baptists explains how and why this religious fusion took place by defining what exactly made the Baptist faith more attractive to African-Americans. According to their analysis of antebellum slave religion, these works imply that a large majority of southern slaves committed and converted to the principles of Christianity.

Other scholars, however, find this interpretation too simplistic. Historians such as Allan D. Austin and Sylvaine A. Diouf emphasize that the antebellum South was more religiously diverse, even consisting of Islamic communities.² These scholars argue that there are still numerous questions left unanswered. Why did Slaves accept or deny Christianity in the first place and why did the white masters decide to teach it or oppose it? Answering such questions reveals the ambiguity of Christianity during the antebellum period and how it was used as a tool, a weapon, and ultimately a community builder.

Using slave narratives and stories from the antebellum era, specifically focusing from 1800 to 1860 and shortly after the Civil War, this paper suggests that the conversion of slaves to Christianity might not have happened the way Raboteau suggest and that in fact, many slaves did not convert to Christianity. The argument I advance is that, under slavery, Christianity did not meet the majority of slaves' needs and most did not convert because of the content of the gospel being taught to them and the hypocrisy of a nation supporting slavery through Christianity. Those that did accept Christianity did so for reasons other than faith. African Americans "converted" to Christianity because of societal opportunities,

¹ See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Mechal Sobel, *Travelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); and Margaret W. Creel, *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community Culture among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).

² See Alan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Sylvaine Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved In The Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

literacy, and because it offered them a tool for resistance and rebellion. It was only the resulting freedom and salvation of the Civil war that caused true conversions of African Americans to the Christian faith.

My analysis opposes the view of scholars who stress the significance of the similarities between Christianity and West African religions as being crucial to converting slaves to the Christian faith. Rather, this paper proposes that the societal benefits gained from Christian involvement, more so than mere religious belief, was, in fact, the primary catalyst for southern slaves switch to Christianity. While part of the slaves' Christian faith may have had characteristics of some aspects of African culture, it was rebellion, and the hope and realization of freedom that caused true conversion. Without the hope of freedom, the missionaries efforts to convert slaves to Christianity, no matter how tailored to slaves, were meaningless for most of them.

For this discussion to continue, a definition of slave piety or "true conversion" is necessary. I propose that true conversion only happens when the individual accepts the faith, beliefs, and teachings of a religion. Some scholars might beg to differ bringing up many accounts of slaves attending Christian services, but they would do well to remember that attendance does not correlate to conversion. Just because a slave attended Christian churches does not make that slave a Christian. This phenomenon is well observed in modern times where children and adults only attend church for family reasons such as pleasing their parents without actually considering themselves religious at all.

Most slaves that did attend weekly services did not do so based on the teachings they were receiving or even willingly at all. Slave C. B. Burton explained that, "We had no school and no church: but was made to go to de white folks church and set in de gallery."³ In addition to being representative of the slave population, Burton's comment illustrates that slaves did not invest their spiritual being in the "white folks' church." Slave Henry Wright gets to the crux of the matter when he astutely observes that "none of the slaves believed in the sermons but they pretended to do so."⁴ Exactly why they pretended to do so is another matter and the crux of my study.

³ Rawick, *The American Slave*, Series 1, South Carolina, pts 1 & 2 (C. B. Burton).

⁴ Rawick, *The American Slave*, Series 2, Georgia, pts. 3 & 4, 13:201 (Henry Wright).

Co-opting Conversion

To understand slaves' reasons for pretending to accept the Christian church, one must first understand the context of religious life in the antebellum period. The key date for the start of the masters' attempts to convert slaves to Christianity was 1830 during the peak of the Second Great Awakening where slaves began to be confronted with Christianity like never before in history. The Second Great Awakening led to masters' growth in faith and, conversely, resulted in the increase of interactions between slave and white religion. Southern slaves, no less than whites, began to seek conversion, attend revivals, and view their lives in biblical terms.⁵ The slaves' introduction to Christianity deeply affected themselves, their culture, and the development of black churches. As Daniel Fountain eloquently puts "the middle passage and slavery did not leave Africans as a religious tabular rasa"⁶ thus implying African slaves came to the New World with strong religious beliefs and thoughts of the afterlife. But in the New World, blacks received Christian teaching in strenuous doses to counter their previous beliefs.

White masters were resistant to the idea of a Christian slave during the early nineteenth century at first. Owners often opposed attempts to make slaves Christians, masking fear of loss of control of their property with arguments of insufficient black intellect for the religion or inappropriateness of doctrine. Evangelical Americans rejected the evangelization of their slaves for three main reasons: 1) there was an English tradition of long-standing that once a slave became a Christian he could no longer be held a slave; 2) slaves gathered together in a religious assembly might become conscious of their own strength and plot insurrections under cover of religious instruction; 3) and most importantly that the hearing of the gospel required time that could be economically productive.⁷ If masters didn't even want to teach their slaves Christianity, then slaves could not be expected to have the opportunity to convert nor care much for it.

Missionaries, however, persuaded slaveholders by appeal to their conscious, specifically their profit motive. Missionaries made their case by pointing out that converted slaves "do better for their masters' profit than

⁵ Olli Alho, *The Religion of the Slaves: A Study of the Religious Tradition and Behavior of Plantation Slaves in the United States, 1830-1865* (Helsinki: Academia Scientarium Fennica, 1980), 228.

⁶ Daniel L. Fountain, *Slavery Civil War and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 4.

⁷ Gayraud S. Wilmore, ed., *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1989), 13.

formerly, for they are taught to serve out of Christian love and duty.”⁸ The evangelistic appeal was powerful, causing those slaveholders who may have had concerns over the ethics of slavery to believe that if they converted their slaves then owning a slave would not be as sinful. Additionally, the slaveholders discovered that slaves who were Christianized became more tractable and less troublesome. Scholar Donald Wright notes that “to many slave owners this was a selection of Christian teachings that stressed meekness, humility, obedience, discipline, and work. Brotherhood of man or the escape of the Hebrews from bondage was noticeably absent from the Gospel according to the master.”⁹ Slaves apparently agreed as bondsmen William Wells Brown explained in 1850 that religious instruction for his fellow-bondsmen consisted solely of “teaching the slave that he must never strike a white man, that God made him a slave, and that when whipped he must find no fault.”¹⁰ Instead of rejecting the conversion of their slaves, masters began to encourage this process and used it for their own advantage.

Masters intentional presented the gospel as a tool of social control, but they also sought to bring individuals closer to God. Southern masters were convinced they had a religious duty and obligation to bring the Christian faith to bondsmen as a way of civilizing the “heathen” of Africa. Consequently, missionaries filtered through the South and attempted to instruct slaves in the proper faith. During the early 1830s, slave missions developed officially in southern states.¹¹ There was a concentrated endeavor by major southern churches to offer religious education to slaves for the primary purpose of protecting them from abolitionist propaganda. Missionaries sold the idea of plantation missions to white masters by promising to instruct and convert slaves in a way that would make them more hardworking, obedient, and honest. More importantly, the missionaries convinced slave owners that this form of religious teaching would protect slavery from attacks from abolitionists against its ethicalness.

To get their message across, missionaries and denominations used print to illustrate the importance of instructing slaves. The Bethel Baptist

⁸ Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah, GA: Thomas Purse, 1842), 17.

⁹ Donald R. Wright, *African Americans in the Colonial Era* (Arlington Heights, 1990) 95-8.

¹⁰ William Wells Brown, *Narrative of the Life of William Wells Brown: A Fugitive Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1847), 22-83.

¹¹ Carol V.R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 53-55.

Co-opting Conversion

Association of Alabama circulated a letter in the *Biblical Recorder* encouraging readers to offer their slaves religious teachings.¹² “The religious instruction of our servants is a duty,” wrote author E. T. Baird in 1840, “any man with a conscious may be made to feel it. It can be discharged, It must be discharged...as speedily as possible.”¹³ This would not only win the approval of God and the slave owners’ own conscience, he argued, but also the respect of the North. Religious journals featured stories of the missionary work being done by Charles Colcock Jones in Georgia and William Capers in South Carolina as paradigms for converting slaves.¹⁴ Residing on the plantation and providing permanent instruction to the Negroes were very important factors. Jones maintained these features would counter the abolitionists’ propaganda that southerners neglected the spiritual welfare of Negroes and slave holders.¹⁵ In this manner, missionaries were able to perpetuate the image of the hierarchical system of slavery using religious teachings while also administering the word of God.

To effectively instill the gospel into the slaves, missionaries had to mold their teachings to fit with the slaves learning styles. Charles C. Jones was a perceptive observer of slave culture, and he used his familiarity of black community life to modify his sermons to his appropriate audience. He was well aware that many slaves believed “in second-sight, in apparitions, charms, witchcraft, and in a kind of irresistible Satanic influence,”¹⁶ and so he used his congregation’s predisposition to believe in Satan’s power as an instrument for conversion. Jones conducted his religious instruction orally using his own *Catechism of Scripture Doctrine and Practice*.¹⁷ He argued that oral teaching worked well among slaves because of the Africans’ reliance on “rhythm, memory, and the human voice.”¹⁸ Oral traditions had an added benefit of not relying on the literacy of slaves which, Jones reasoned, would be more suitable for masters who feared a literate slave.

¹² E. T. Baird, “The Religious Instruction of our Coloured Population” *Biblical Recorder*, (October 17 1840).

¹³ E. T. Baird, “The Religious Instruction of our Coloured Population” *Biblical Recorder*, (October 17 1840).

¹⁴ William Capers, “Religious Instruction of the Negroes,” *Quarterly Review of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (July 1847): 319-38; Charles Colcock Jones, “Suggestions on the Religious Instructions of the Negroes in the Southern States,” *Princeton Review* 20, (January 1848): 1-30.

¹⁵ Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah, GA: Thomas Purse, 1842), 249

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

In this way it made masters more open to the idea of conversion; not slaves.

The problem, however, was not the form of the sermons but their content. Haunted by thoughts of slaves using religious inspiration to rebel against slavery, Southern masters insisted that missionaries and ministers present slaves with a restricted form of Christianity. After the use of religious meetings and imagery in the Gabriel Rebellion in 1800 and the Turner Rebellion in 1829, masters and ministers made significant changes to the content of sermons that were preached. As the abolitionist threat grew in the South, Methodist missionary William Capers assured the people of South Carolina that “our missionaries inculcate the duties of servants to their masters, as we find those duties stated in the scriptures.”¹⁹ Instead of losing their religious grip on slaves or endanger the system of slavery they held so dear, Southern missionaries like Capers readily created a slave-specific adaptation of the Gospel that stressed a slave could only obtain heavenly salvation through earthly obedience to white masters. The hypocrisy of a Christian nation using the same Christianity to uphold and defend slavery confronted slaves with a moral imperative question: How should Christianity function within the life of a slave, if it were a white man’s religion? Answering this question would be very difficult, and sometimes even impossible, for most slaves.

This paper analyzes numerous slave narratives, autobiographies, and interviews from 1830 onward. These sources, specifically the Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives, are some of the most significant pieces of evidence existing for the study of antebellum slave religion. These same sources have been used extensively by Albert J. Raboteau, Charles W. Joyner, John B. Boles, and Mechal Sobel to name a few prominent scholars in the field. It is important to note, however, that the overall number sources from slaves surveyed are small. Some states are less represented than others, and of course the four thousand or so slave narratives represent only a small percent of the millions of slaves in the antebellum era. With this in mind, none of the claims presented in this paper are definitive; they are just mere suggestions for looking at the same sources in a different way.

¹⁹ William May Wightman, *Life of William Capers D.D., One of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church South: Including an Autobiography* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1859), 296.

Co-opting Conversion

The use of these sources is the best, if not the only, way to determine slaves' perception of Christianity and how they reacted to it. Analyses of these interviews reveal that slaves simply did not see the benefit of joining the white church. "I ain't never jined up wid no church. I ain't got no reason why, only I jus' ain't never had no urge from inside of me to jine,"²⁰ explained ex-slave Ed McCree. Similarly, on the subject of religion, bondsmen Joe Rolins exclaimed "I don't never fool along wid it."²¹ Paul Smith spoke on a larger scale of slave society when he observed that "[s]ome of dem slaves never wanted no'ligion, and dey jus' laughed at us cause us testified and shouted."²² These quotes reveal a number of things, most simply, that there was a significant number of slaves who did not care for, nor convert to Christianity. Ed McCree's statement highlights the fact that slaves saw "no reason" to join the church because it didn't appeal to them. Additionally, Joe Rolins notes that slaves who did join were laughed at and ridiculed. The underlying issue advanced by each of these southern slaves is that most of them could not fully accept Christianity as it was presented to them. But what is even more important is identifying the reasons behind such rejection.

This paper argues that there were two primary explanations for this resistance: the first one being the restrictions on content and church lifestyle endured by the slaves. Missionaries and preachers micromanagement and "corruption" of the Gospel resulted in reduced satisfaction and value that slaves received from these teachings. Both Raboteau and Genovese argue that Christian teachings were beneficial to both master and slave because both parties had responsibilities and duties toward the other.²³ However, slaves like Emma Tidwell understood the one-way nature of duty. "Mind yo mistress..." was what was expected, "...don't steal der potatoes; don't lie bout nothin' an don' talk back tuh yo boss; ifn yo does yo'll be tied tuh a tree an stripped necked. When dey tell yuh tuh do somethin' run an do hit."²⁴ When this statement is compared to a passage from Charles C. Jones's *Catechism*, it is no wonder that Emma and other slaves perceived Christianity to be flawed:

²⁰George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1972): Series 2, Georgia. Pts. 3 & 4, 13:65 (Ed McCree).

²¹ George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1972): Series 1, Mississippi, pt. 4, 9:1900 (Joe Rollins).

²²George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1972): Series 2, Georgia, pts. 3 & 4, 13:29 (Paul Smith).

²³ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1974).

²⁴ Rawick, *The American Slave*, Series 2, Arkansas, pts.. 5 & 6, 10:332 (Emma Tidwell).

*To count their Masters 'worthy of all honour,' as those whom God has placed over them in this world; 'with all fear,' they are to be 'subject to them' and obey them in all things, possible and lawful, with good will and endeavor to please them well, . . . and let Servants serve their masters as faithfully behind their backs as before their faces. God is present to see, if their masters are not.*²⁵

After hearing sermons such as the one above, slave Tom Hawkins questions: "How could anybody be converted on dat kind of preachin'?"²⁶ Most slaves complained that discussions of Christian duties focused solely on their obligations to their master, leading Hannah Austin to lament that she and her fellow Georgia slaves "seldom heard a true religious sermon."²⁷ These secular sermons, one can reason, led to very few conversions among slaves. Even Margaret Creel admitted that religious teachings were typically one sided and didn't stress reciprocity as other scholars have claimed.²⁸

Sermons focusing on slave behavior were accompanied by rigid church etiquette. Slaves had to sit a certain way, dress a certain way, and were not allowed to freely socialize.²⁹ Few slave owners let slaves go to church without enforcing restrictions or special conditions on slave participation. Slave Anna Scott was "forbidden to sing, talk, or make any sound" at church, "under penalty of severe beatings."³⁰ In some other cases, slaves were not even allowed to attend church. Masters often gave overseers the discretion to determine who could attend church or required them to monitor any services where their slaves were present. Both Susan Bledsoe of Tennessee and Ella Grandberry of Alabama noted that slaves could not go to church unless a white person or overseer went with them.³¹ While belief and religion were an individual's choice free from outside

²⁵ Charles Colcock Jones, *A Catechism, of Scripture Doctrine and Practice: For Families and Sabbath Schools: Designed Also for the Oral Instruction of Colored Persons* (Savannah: John M. Cooper, 1844), 204-5.

²⁶ Rawick, *The American Slave*, Series 2, Georgia, pts. 1 & 2, 12: 131 (Tom Hawkins).

²⁷ George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1972): Series 2, Georgia, pts.. 1 & 2, 12:20 (Hannah Austin).

²⁸ Margaret Washington Creel, *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community Culture among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 7.

²⁹ Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 48.

³⁰ Rawick, *The American Slave*, Series 2, Florida, 17:279 (Anna Scott).

³¹ Rawick, *The American Slave*, Series 2, Kansas et al., 16:7 (Susan Bledsoe), Series 1, Alabama and Indiana, 6:160 (Ella Grandberry).

Co-opting Conversion

interference, how, when, and where the slaves celebrated that religion was subject to white approval and control.

Religious restrictions may have had the consequence of easing the master's fear of religion-induced rebellion but such strenuous measures worked against slave conversion: "Us didn' have nowhar to go 'cep' church..." complained Mingo White, "...an' we didn' git no pleasure outten it 'case we warn't 'lowed to talk from de time we lef' home 'twell we got back."³² This strict environment of the church resulted in slaves turning away from the church. Ella Grandberry told an interviewer that the white master's religious restrictions led her to cease attending church. She and other slaves "didn't git no pleasure outten goin' to church, 'caze we warn't 'lowed to say nothin'."³³ White efforts to shape the slaves' religious expressions actually limited both their access to and their interest in Christianity.

The second reason for the slaves' rejection of Christianity was the hypocritical nature between the beliefs and actions of most southern Christians. Slaves understandably had a negative reaction towards church services, but they were astonished when they realized that the masters were not even "practicing what they were preaching." Slaves were very observant of white behavior relating to Christian teachings. Slaves assumed whites should be held to the same standards as themselves. "They always tell us it am wrong to lie and steal," recalled Josephine Howard, "but why did the white folks steal my mammy and her mammy? That's the sinfullest stealin' there is."³⁴ This quote demonstrates slaves' confusion and frustration towards the Christianity their masters followed. The inconsistent actions of masters who considered themselves devout Christians undermined the conversion efforts of slave. In his narrative, Frederick Douglass eloquently wrote how many slaves felt towards Southern Christians and their paradoxical behavior:

³² Rawick, *The American Slave*, Series 1, Alabama and Indiana, 6:416 (Mingo White).

³³ Rawick, *The American Slave*, Series 1, Alabama and Indiana, 162 (Ella Grandberry).

³⁴ Rawick, *The American Slave*, Vol. 17, 163, (Josephine Howard).

I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which every where surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week, fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus.³⁵

Countless other narratives and biographies illustrate the slaves' discontent with Christianity because of whites' obvious unchristian lifestyles. Moses Roper offered a similar narrative describing his master as "a member of a Baptist church" but revealed that "his slaves, thinking him a very bad sample of what a professing Christian ought to be, would not join the connexion he belonged to, thinking they must be a very bad set of people."³⁶ Slave Austin Steward told a story of how his "Christian" master brutally beat his younger sister one Sabbath morning. Reflecting on this heartless act Steward asked, "Can anyone 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?"³⁷ It is not at all astonishing and certainly should not be assumed in the history of antebellum slaves. Many slaves saw the Christianity presented to them as a perversion of the truth or as evidence that Christianity was a false religion. Justifiably, such a division hindered the conversion of slaves to Christianity and eventually led to the development of segregated churches. The hypocrisy of pro-slavery missionaries and Christianity created a spiritual rift between white and black that few slaves were willing to reach across.

Slaves found themselves being forced to attend white churches, so as anyone would do, they made the most of it. Skeptic slaves ultimately ended up "accepting" Christianity, but they did so more for societal reasons than for spiritual ones. Slaves soon discovered a myriad of benefits that attending church held for them. Bondsmen and bondswomen attended church for the chance to meet and socialize with fellow slaves. Robert Falls, a North Carolina slave, recalled that the only place where slaves could go to get away from their master's plantation was

³⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York City: Doubleday, 1845), 153-54.

³⁶ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn Printers, 1838), 51.

³⁷ 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* (Canandaigua, NY: Austin Steward, 1867), 98.

Co-opting Conversion

church.³⁸ Slaves were not allowed to go off the plantation without an overseer or master present. On top of this, slaves did not have many means of traveling besides their feet. Such travel restrictions meant that church provided one of the only sanctioned occasions where large numbers of slaves could meet in peace. As church meetings usually occurred only once or twice a month and often required long-distance travel, Sunday services could last all day. Additionally, services usually included a scrumptious dinner on the grounds followed by dancing or other festivities. These rare outings offered slaves an opportunity to form friendships and reunite with families who had been separated through the slave market or interplantation marriage.³⁹ As these and other accounts suggest, many, if not all, slaves attended church regularly for a plethora of reasons other than seeking conversion.

In addition to meeting up with old and new friends, most slaves only attended church to learn how to read. Despite the masters' fears of a literate slave, many missionaries and preachers did in fact teach slaves how to read and write.⁴⁰ Slaves were aware of the advantages literacy and many used their spare time to attend missionaries' meetings in order to learn more about the Bible and how to read and write in the English language. Southern Baptists readily acknowledged the importance of literacy for slave conversion declaring, "The reading of his word we consider next in importance to the preaching of it."⁴¹ However, in spite of the obvious religious advantages literacy afforded, most southern states prohibited teaching slaves to read for fear of triggering insurrection and helping runaways forge passes. In addition, "by 1855 nine of the fifteen slave states had made it illegal to distribute Bibles among the slaves."⁴² With the ban on slave literacy, most slaves lost their primary incentive in going to church and thus ceased to attend. Moravian missionaries in North Carolina blamed the lack of slave attendance to Sunday schools on the fact that they were "no longer permitted to teach them to read."⁴³ This statement casts doubt on the authenticity of most conversions before

³⁸ Rawick, *The American Slave*, Series 2, Kansas, 16:14 (Robert Falls).

³⁹ Daniel L. Fountain, *Slavery Civil War and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 63.

⁴⁰ Donald R. Wright, *African Americans in the Colonial Era: From African Origins Through the American Revolution* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson Inc, 1990), 128.

⁴¹ Report on the Instruction of the Colored Population," *Southern Baptist Missionary Journal* (July 1849): 39.

⁴² Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism*, 65.

⁴³ "Report of the Directors of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen," *United Brethren's Missionary Intelligence and Religious Miscellany* 5, no. 6 (1835): 245-46

this period. Even if some numbers show that a large amount of slave conversions occurred in the antebellum period, which some historians bring up while others contest, most these conversions were merely the side effect of becoming literate and can hardly be considered genuine.

As in the case of literacy, slaves chose whether or not to receive the white Christian message and selected, squeezed, and shaped features of white Christianity for themselves. As Charles Joyner observed, “slaves did not so much adapt to Christianity as adapt Christianity to themselves.”⁴⁴ This fusion and new spirituality was used as a survival mechanism in the New World. Slaves that were taken from Africa into a strange and exotic environment selected from that environment what they needed to survive and circumstance dictated part of that was Christianity. They combined some of the Christian lifestyle and teachings with their own African culture they shared to adapt to the situation they were in. Blassingame notes that their “distinctive culture helped the slaves to develop a strong sense of group solidarity. They united to protect themselves from the most oppressive features of slavery and to preserve their self-esteem.”⁴⁵ In this manner, the conversion of Christianity into Afro-Christianity was crucial to the slaves’ survival.

This co-option of Christianity is most prevalent in what historians call the “Invisible Institution.” The slaves’ rejection of the traditional Christianity taught to them by their masters led them to develop their own informal Christianity where slaves would go off into the forest and hidden enclaves at night for services and scripture reading. These “invisible churches” taught a different message from the white controlled churches that emphasized obedience. At these services, African traditions of dancing, ring shouts, and call and response chants prevailed. Also called “Hush Harbors,” these meetings allowed slaves to create a space outside of the plantation to further express their devotion to God in a way that the white churches did not allow slaves to do. As slave Emily Dixon explained, “Us could go to the white folk’s church, but us wanter go whar us could sing all the way thourgh, an’ hum’ long...” a place where “...yo’ all know, jist turn loose lack.”⁴⁶ Far from being evidence in support of slaves’ conversion to Christianity, this quote demonstrates that slaves were very

⁴⁴ Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 35.

⁴⁵ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 147.

⁴⁶ Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1960), 17.

Co-opting Conversion

unhappy with the religion that was presented to them, so much so that they had to entirely change the foundations and forms of services.

African American slaves, for instance, adopted English prayers into their own religion. Through African cadence and creativity, blacks' co-opted prayers to make them meaningful for their circumstance. Using the biblical prayers they learned, slaves discovered similarities between their African perspective of God and the conception of the Christian God. For instance, the African Yoruba description of the father God as "the Mighty Immovable Rock that never dies" was close to the psalm verse "He is a rock in a weary land."⁴⁷ While the recitation of this psalm verse might have appeared Christian, it was just a mask used by the slaves to maintain their traditional African faith. Slaves did not convert to Christianity, they converted Christianity to themselves.

African American slaves also paraphrased Bible verses, such as the story of the ancient Israelites' exodus from slavery in Egypt, and made them their own. Genovese explains that Christian prayer meetings "gave the slaves strength derived from direct communion with God and each other...But above all, the meetings provided a sense of autonomy—of constituting not merely a community unto themselves but a community with leaders of their own choice."⁴⁸ Instead of focusing on the faith aspect, slaves themselves, built a community using the tools presented to them by Christianity but they did not genuinely convert. Slaves would ultimately continue to use these prayer meetings and this new found community of leaders to establish resistance against the institution of slavery under the backdrop of Christianity.

Unsatisfied by the masters' Christianity, fed up slaves co-opted Christianity and used it as a tool of rebellion. Religious prayer meetings and "preachings" offered slaves an opportunity to converge and plot their insurrection against their masters. In his narrative, Frederick Douglass insightfully claims that "Slaves knew enough of the orthodox theology of the time to consign all bad slaveholders to hell."⁴⁹ The first one to utilize this knowledge was a slave from Richmond Virginia, Gabriel Prosser. In 1800 Gabriel and his brother Martin gathered both free and enslaved African Americans for "religious services." In these meetings, Martin used

⁴⁷ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 171.

⁴⁸ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 238.

⁴⁹ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Reprint 1962, London: Collier-Macmillan, 1892), 41.

the Bible to argue that their plight “was similar to the Israelites,” and that in the God of the Bible had promised “five of you shall conquer a hundred & a hundred a thousand of our enemies.”⁵⁰ Using this imagery, the slaves were able to rally a rebellion and gain supporters who were sympathetic towards Christian teachings. An attendee at one of these religious services observed that “an impassioned exposition of Scripture...” was set forth and “the Israelites were glowingly portrayed as a type of successful resistance to tyranny...”⁵¹ These prayer meetings were not used for faith based services by any means; the slaves used the “exposition of scripture” to rile up the slaves against their masters.

By adopting Christianity, African American slaves discovered a powerful tool to use against the Christian slave institution presented by the masters, functionally fighting fire with fire, or in this case Christianity with Afro-Christianity. In his article “Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Slaves,” Vincent Harding follows the correlation between black rebellion and the Christian religion.⁵² He argues that black rebellion is now fused together with the tradition of Afro-Christianity. The primary evidence would agree, as slave owner Richard Byrd wrote to his Governor saying: “slave preachers used their religious meetings as veils for revolutionary schemes.”⁵³ The masters had given the slaves a weapon in the form of Afro-Christianity and this fact caused widespread panic among the white community.

This fear would increase exponentially come the outset of the Turner Rebellion. In 1831 Nathaniel Turner led a slave rebellion in Virginia that fused together religion and resistance even more so than Gabriel’s rebellion. Turner’s Confession reveals a lot about the religious mindset he and his followers held. He was convinced he “was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty,” and he clearly convinced his fellow slaves of the same.⁵⁴ Not a preacher by any sense of the word, as he did not belong to any structured church or group, Turner was an

⁵⁰ Harvey Wish, “American Slave Insurrections Before 1861,” *Journal of Negro History*, xxii, 3 (July, 1937), 300-3.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Harding, Vincent. “Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Slaves” in Fulop, Timothy E., and Albert J. Raboteau eds. *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 111.

⁵³ Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 224.

⁵⁴ Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner’s Slave Rebellion* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966); *Turner’s Confession, Trial and Execution* was originally published in 1881 by T. R. Gray in Petersburg, Virginia.

Co-opting Conversion

exhorter who appealed to his followers through the use of Christian imagery. Even after the rebellion failed, African American slaves everywhere adopted this Christian imagery into their fights and resistance towards the master.⁵⁵

In the end, slaves did convert but only when they stopped being slaves and became free. Emancipation proved to be the greatest catalyst of conversion. The postbellum era provided African Americans far more authentic incentive and opportunities for Christian conversion than existed in the antebellum era. Emancipation proved that God was faithful to his people, so the long held belief that a Christian God would not allow African Americans to suffer was discarded. With the end of the war, even semi-religious African Americans saw their coming freedom as the fulfillment of their prayers for emancipation being answered by a merciful God. This led to an explosion of preaching, missions, and ultimately conversion.⁵⁶ Mr. Ballard recalled that “I joined de church when I was 17 years old, because big preaching was going on after freedom for the colored people.”⁵⁷ Other slave narratives attest that this was characteristic of the time. The newly freed Tom Robinson admitted, “I’ve heard them pray for freedom. I thought it was foolishness then, but the old time folks always felt they was to be free. It must have been something ‘vealed unto them.”⁵⁸ Statements such as these reveal that Christian and non-Christian African Americans alike began to view their new found freedom as either the fulfillment of biblical promise or as the answer to decades of prayer. Regardless, the perceived reward of faithfulness to Christian prayer attracted many skeptical African Americans to Christianity.

After the war, in newly freed African American communities, independent churches and denominations began to spring rapidly such as National Baptist Convention (NBC) and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME).⁵⁹ Quasi-independent black churches obviously existed in the antebellum era, but white authorities monitored them closely. It was during this time that the “Invisible Churches” and “Hush Harbors” came

⁵⁵ Harding, Vincent. “Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Slaves” in Fulop, Timothy E., and Albert J. Raboteau eds. *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 117.

⁵⁶ Daniel L. Fountain, *Slavery Civil War and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 110.

⁵⁷ Rawick, *The American Slave*, Series 1, South Carolina, 2:26 (William Ballard).

⁵⁸ Rawick, *The American Slave*, Series 2, Arkansas, pts. 5 & 6, 10:64 (Tom Robinson).

⁵⁹ Daniel L. Fountain, *Slavery Civil War and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 112.

out of the woodwork to openly worship and convert individuals to Christianity. Within a decade after emancipation, nearly all African American parishioners had ceased worshipping in white Southern churches.⁶⁰ Genuine conversion did not happen during the antebellum era as previously argued. Whether because of the hypocrisy of Christian masters or because Christianity did not meet their needs, slaves before the Civil War rejected Christianity. Slaves still used Christianity and the church for societal benefits, a means of literacy, and rebellion, but true conversion only occurred after emancipation when African Americans were ready to accept Christianity and not have it forced on them.

Emancipation, ultimately, won more converts to Christianity than Charles Colcock Jones or William Capers combined. Christianity emerged from slavery and the Civil War to become the dominate faith among African Americans. Blacks used the foundations of the previously established “Invisible Institution” and the tools they developed during the antebellum period to make their new Afro-Christian churches into “mediating institutions” that advocated for the rights and liberties of their congregation.⁶¹ But this was only the case because of the slaves’ interaction with Christianity previously. During the antebellum period, African Americans quickly perceived that Christianity afforded them an opportunity to create a small space in the oppressive conditions of slavery: to conduct their own meetings, to take advantage of the privileges of leadership, to seize chance for literacy, and to build the black community and the black church. Christianity during the antebellum period was a double edged sword, but it was a sword seized and then wielded by African Americans to fight against slavery and not only find secular freedom but spiritual freedom as well.

⁶⁰ Milton C. Sernett. *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 310.

⁶¹ Lawrence H Mamiya, and Lincoln, Eric C. Lincoln, *The Black Church In the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 15.

Bibliography

- Alho, Olli. *The Religion of the Slaves: A Study of the Religious Tradition and Behavior of Plantation Slaves in the United States, 1830-1865*. Helsinki: Academia Scientarium Fennica, 1980.
- Aptheker, Herbert. *American Negro Slave Revolts*. New York: International Publishers, 1963.
- . *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*. New York: Humanities Press, 1966.
- Austin, Alan D. *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Bacon, Thomas. *Sermons Addressed to Masters and Servants*. Winchester: John Heiskell, 1743.
- Baird, E. T. "The Religious Instruction of our Coloured Population" *Biblical Recorder*, (October 17 1840).
- Baker, Lindsay T., and Julie P. Baker, eds. *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.
- Ball, Charles. *Fifty Years in Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave*. New York: H. Dayton, 1859.
- Benedict, David. *Fifty Years Among the Baptists*. New York: Sheldon, 1860.
- Bibb, Henry. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*. New York: Published by the Author, 1850.
- Billingsley, Andrew. *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Blassingame, John W. *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977.
- . *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Boles, John B., ed. *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988.
- Capers, William. *A Catechism for Little Children, The Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina*. Charleston, SC: J. S. Burges, 1833.
- . "Religious Instruction of the Negroes." *Quarterly Review of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (July 1847): 319-38.

- Creel, Margaret Washington. *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community Culture among the Gullahs*. New York: New York University Press, 1988.
- Diouf, Sylvaine. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved In The Americas*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. 1892. Reprint, London: Collier-Macmillan, 1962.
- . *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Ed. Houston Baker. 1845. Reprint, Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin Classics, 1986.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903. Reprint, Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1964.
- Fountain, Daniel L. *Slavery Civil War and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010.
- Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage, 1974.
- Grandy, Moses. *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America*. Boston: Oliver Johnson, 1844.
- Harding, Vincent. "Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Slaves" in Fulop, Timothy E., and Albert J. Raboteau eds. *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1997: 108-29.
- Herskovits, Melville J. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. With a new preface by the author. 1958. Third printing, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- Jones, Charles Colcock. *A Catechism, of Scripture Doctrine and Practice: For Families and Sabbath Schools: Designed Also for the Oral Instruction of Colored Persons*. Savannah: John M. Cooper, 1844.
- . "Suggestions on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the Southern States." *Princeton Review* 20, (January 1848): 1-30.
- . *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*. Savannah, GA: Thomas Purse, 1842.
- Joyner, Charles. *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984.
- Mamiya, Lawrence H, and Lincoln, Eric C. *The Black Church In the African American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990.

Co-opting Conversion

- Perkins, Haven P. "Religion for Slaves: Difficulties and Methods." *Church History* 3 (September 1941): 228-45.
- Plumer, William S. *Thoughts on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes of this Country*. Savannah: E. J. Purse, 1848.
- Raboteau, Albert J. "African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," in Paul Johnson, *African-American Christianity*. California: University of California Press, 1994.
- . *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Rawick, George P., ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Vols. 2-19; Supplement Series 1, vols. 1-12; Supplement Series 2, vols. 1-10. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1973-1981.
- Roper, Moses. *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery*. Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn, Printers, 1838.
- Sernett, Milton C. *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity, 1787-1865*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975.
- Sobel, Mechal. *Travelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- Steward, Austin. *Twenty-two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman: Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years While President of Wilberforce Colony, London, Canada West*. Canandaigua, NY: Austin Steward, 1867.
- Wightman, William May. *Life of William Capers D.D., One of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church South; Including an Autobiography*. Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1859.
- Wilmore, Gayraud S, ed. *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1989.
- Wish, Harvey. "American Slave Insurrections Before 1861," *Journal of Negro History*, xxii, 3, (July 1937)
- Woodson, Carter G. *History of the Negro Church*. Washington: Associated Publishers, 1921.
- Wright, Donald R. *African Americans in the Colonial Era: From African Origins Through the American Revolution*. Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson Inc, 1990.