

“The Merits of the ‘Christianization’ of Early American Blacks”

Zachary Paone
English
Keene State College

Christianity prevails as a liberating theme throughout the works of nearly every black writer during the period of American slavery. For Olaudah Equiano, faith provides the catalyst for his social resurrection from slavery, and in Frederick Douglass's *1845 Narrative* the desire to believe in a good Christian God pushed him to defy his Southern bonds. Phillis Wheatley wrote her way to freedom primarily through her love of Christ and self-reflection as a Christian. John Marrant distinguished himself first as an evangelist, and then led a distinctly black creed of Christianity. David Walker and Maria Stewart would come to invalidate the institution of slavery by citing bible passages and promising God's wrath onto slaveholders. Such spiritual works were made possible by a white-dominant clerical effort to "Christianize" slaves into obedience, lending some credence to the Nation of Islam's assertion that "Christianity is a slave religion" (Nason-Clark 334). This has produced great ethical debate amongst historians and civil rights leaders as they attempt to canonize the treasured black writers and preachers who were so directly a product of a bigoted movement. Ultimately, it is the ability of black writers and preachers to adapt biblical text that distinguishes their success in the shadow of this movement. It is nearly impossible to find an eighteenth or nineteenth century black text without mention of Christ's works, and almost as difficult to read one without coming across the name of the white English missionary, George Whitefield. Having written thirty percent of all the published works of the year 1740, and whose connection to the Countess of Huntington may have influenced the publication of Wheatley (Brooks 30), Whitefield is rightfully named the "hero-founder of American evangelism" and "the first media star in American History" (Emerson 34). Though evangelism's Calvinist doctrine existed before, Whitefield's power while preaching and itinerancy made evangelism not only accessible, but also appealing to free and enslaved blacks, particularly in the antebellum South. Whitefield's sermons specifically caused a ripple in the narratives of Douglass, Marrant, and especially Equiano. According to Brooks, Equiano was most touched by the physical exertion Whitefield put into his preaching—an exertion he had only previously seen in the whipping motions of his overseers (Brooks 30).

A general tenet of the evangelism that Whitefield brought to America, such as the promotion of the spiritual world over the physical one, and the "promise that the last shall be first" (Emerson 26), may have been inherently attractive to oppressed 18th-century blacks. It may well be then that Whitefield's success stemmed more from how he opposed the church doctrine by choosing neither side of the ongoing debate as to whether good works of faith made up divine judgment. Rather, Whitefield preached of an unrelated intervention by Christ who selected Christians for heaven regardless of sins (Holifield 85), and believed that before the eyes of God a white child and a black child are born equal and just as liable to sin and corruption; and that it was his task to encourage religious improvement for all people to meet Christ with humility (Jordan 214). This view made Whitefield's sermons a popular, albeit controversial novelty, and resulted in the conversion of thousands of black slaves (Emerson 26). Evangelism reached slaves by selecting their predicament as a holy experience, through which they should passively endure

and become humble. This design to reach slaves may seem generous, but there is a darker layer to Whitefield.

Whitefield seems to present another contradiction: he was a slave-owner, and had personally lead testimony before Parliament in 1741 in support of the introduction of slavery into Georgia, which—despite being one of the more notorious slave states in history—had not yet *legally* allowed slavery (Emerson 26). In legalizing slavery, Whitefield spoke for a majority of church leaders, conveniently the same ones who sought to “Christianize” the mass population of slaves. The movement to “Christianize” black slaves began in the seventeenth century “In a stance then seen as enlightened and humane,” (Emerson 22) with a divided public opinion. The debate as to whether Christianity would “humble” blacks and make them more “obedient” workers or inspire them to become individuals and revolt manifested mostly in the church’s insistence to Parliament that all slave’s be baptized. Slaveholders believed, as Christian doctrine dictates, that baptism in Christ absolved blacks of all sins, as well as spiritual and physical enslavement, and as loyal servants of God, masters would have to free their slaves.

In 1664 clergy responded with an unprecedented break from biblical doctrine, and “encouraged several colonial legislatures to declare that slaves remained slaves even when baptized...[and they] argued that Christian liberty in no way changed temporal bondage.” (Emerson 23). While slaveholders’ initial reactions to the Christianization question was to assume that blacks were below the dignity of baptism, the clergy decided to invert this claim by altering the rights of Baptism to accommodate slavery. Famous missionary Francis LeJau’s amended baptismal vow for slaves went as follows: “You declare in the presence of God and before this congregation that you do not ask for the holy baptism out of any design to free yourself from the Duty and Obedience you owe to your Master” (Emerson 24). This adaptability of doctrine seemed outrageous to the American colonies, but it very quickly became accepted by slaveholders who were eager to humble their free labor source.

This black humility was not kept a white secret, but preached directly to its intended audience. Cotton Mather preached to blacks, citing a famous execution of a free black who murdered his wife as an example that they “must view their position with humbleness, patience, and sweet contentment, for in return for serving their masters, their needs were cared for. Pride is the enemy that led this black freeman down the wrong path, and it is pride that tempts slaves to desire the freedom God did not ordain for them,” (Emerson 24). However, these damning sermons lacked the attractiveness of Whitefield, and while most black slaves accepted this message with passive humility and a fear of God, other black Christians such as Douglass were not so convinced: “I have met many religious colored people...who are under the delusion that God requires them to submit to slavery and to wear chains with meekness and humility” (Douglass 159). The fact that Douglass could so easily note his own susceptibility to white social norms as conformity demonstrates that the movement met the goals of white supremacy on a massive scale.

Letters from Whitefield indicate that, despite his success to convert even disobedient slaves, he was not separate from this white agenda. “In an open letter to planters in the colonies, Whitefield urged kinder treatment of slaves, but noted that cruelty can have the positive effect of heightening ‘the sense of their natural misery,’ thereby increasing receptivity to the Christian message,” (Emerson 26-27). Whitefield’s indication that black slaves belong to a ‘natural misery’ is perhaps the greatest contradiction to his testimony that blacks and whites are equal under God, and stands as the strongest evidence that he may have unabashedly lied from his pulpit. The insistence of a naturally ordained black oppression parallels the idea that baptism

does not excuse them from temporal sufferings. It is no surprise then, that when other sects of Christianity began citing the bible as a document against slavery, the evangelical movement united to assert that “race-based slavery is perfectly compatible with the law of God” (Emerson 48). Evangelism’s adherence to furthering the status quo made it indelibly more dangerous to the American black Diaspora, even if some slaves managed to take from preachers like Whitefield, an enthusiasm to transcend their bonds.

However, Whitefield’s success implies that to some extent a level of religious choice was available to blacks. His converting power was used only after masters had failed to fully devote their slaves to Christianity, and blacks received him with a religious vigour that could no longer be confused with force-feedings. Theological scholar E. Brooks Holifield establishes the two sides of early black Christianity as one that is *traditional* and uses love of God to appease the pain of their oppressed state, and the other, *in protest*, which uses the bible as a document against slavery (313). Contemporary historical criticism of this period also corresponds with this view, but conversely: while scholars like Emerson and Smith use the appeasing humility as a check against Christian merits in early America, defenders of Christianity like Holifield and Raboteau use the black Christian enthusiasm to present that the “Christianization” of blacks was a failed ploy: white slavery may have prevailed had Christianity not enabled their slaves to find inner joy, rebel, and eventually transcend their ‘natural misery.’ Whitefield’s politics aside, his statement of ‘religious equalitarianism’—that blacks “were ‘by Nature’ the equals of white men, because they possessed immortal souls” (Jordan 215)—would begin to fuel abolitionist rhetoric. Given a choice between an existence in which they have nothing or one with a spiritual promise, slaves like Equiano or Marrant inevitably turned inward. Even though evangelicals first depicted God as an accomplice to slavery, time and black biblical critique would morph this view so slaves saw first that God was more powerful than their masters, and second that he may not so willingly approve of their dominion over slaves.

Raboteau’s *Slave Religion* asserts most strongly the idea that Christianity inspired rebellion. Detailing slave worship in the antebellum south, Raboteau shows the careful measures blacks took to hold private prayer meetings on weeknights. Prevalent at these meetings was singing, dancing and prayer over liturgy, but none of these things were present at the degrading segregated congregations whites forced their slaves to attend. Masters who found these slaves singing in secrecy whipped them within an inch of their lives, but numerous slave narratives show the slaves continuing to disobey, and a declining sense of guilt after each beating (Raboteau 212-213). The master’s opposition was not so much to indoctrination, but the enthusiasm the slaves showed. Slaveholders only liked religious practice on their own terms, and it just so happens that their mode of celebration showed subservient degradation to their slaves. According to Raboteau, this increase in prayer *and* insubordination marks a significant change in the interpretation of Christianity among blacks. He writes “In the context of divine authority, the limited authority of any human was placed in perspective,” (318). The fatal flaw slaveholders made in trying to implement Christianity, is that, regardless of doctrinal truths, the moral judgments inherent in the faith pervade the evils of the slaveholder. If slaves were meant to remain captive in Christianity, they were also meant to do so by falling in love with it, and such Stockholm Syndrome afforded slaves to believe in a contract through which God—who by definition was more powerful and pure than their masters—would eventually set them free.

The ingenuity of black writers and preachers presents distinctions from standard Christian teaching that diminish the arguments those who would hold Christianity as a “slave religion.” April Langley argues that biblical literacy united blacks in a group charged with the

ability to “refit or retool the purposes through which [Christian] doctrine may have originally been used” (65) to explain slavery as an unholy institution, and hold whites “accountable” to God (58). Though Langley’s view represents a tip of a powerful grassroots movement of black bible worship, numerous white preachers, such as Lemuel Haynes, had cited the bible as a document against slavery long before widespread slave conversion. Haynes “interpreted slaveholding as the bitter fruit of Adam’s fall and urged that disinterested benevolence ought to banish slavery as well as every other unjust disparity in society,” (Holifield 313). Citations of biblical text against slavery were not so much new readings but old perspectives pulled from the time before the clergy morphed the rights of baptism to accommodate slavery. The elasticity of biblical interpretation on either end of the abolitionist movement expresses a dynamic unique only to religion, in which one can believe in the invisible, but cite a document for proof of its existence. For this reason, those whites who would cite the scripture for slavery, could also have the same document turned against their position.

Amidst this discourse between biblical interpretation and temporal truth, black preachers, like John Marrant developed their own theology. Though a protégé of none other than George Whitefield, Marrant’s missionary narratives demonstrate cultivated theology outside orthodox evangelism. In 1785, Marrant went on to the largest settlement of free blacks outside of Africa, Birchtown, Nova Scotia on what he believed to be a mission from God to “initiate the redemption of scattered Africa” (Brooks 87). The town had first been settled by blacks whom the British freed from slavery in the northern colonies in exchange for loyalty to Britain . When the war was lost, the British retreated with the freed slaves into Nova Scotia, but abandoned them to the cold elements, where many perished in the first winter, and the spring brought a violent onslaught of white raids from a nearby village (Brooks 90-92).

Brooks interprets Marrant as an open-minded preacher who adapted doctrine and reached his community through a notion that blacks share a unique covenant with God in which their sufferings provide a dialogue, that “blackness” was a marker of “choseness” (Brooks 94). He claimed that slavery is the catalyst for a unique relationship between blacks and God, which scholars now refer to as “The Black Covenant.” For Marrant, the racism and bigotry in the temporal world which has singled out blacks as inferior slaves is actually a disguised selection process by which God shows himself to the oppressed through their supreme suffering (Brooks 94). However, unlike the early humility arguments by southern clergy for Christianization, Marrant’s theology does not allow blacks to embrace the covenant passively, but insists that they choose to what extent they listen to God within their time of suffering (95). Because “Black Covenant” ideology does not provide spiritual benefit only through suffering, but needs an active acceptance by the ‘chosen’ sufferer, blacks within the covenant are more empowered by their choice than simply passively accepting their station. The “Black Covenant” is not about humility, but raising blacks up, and while it compromises with the horrors of the temporal slave world, it ceaselessly insists upon a better spiritual promise that blacks can engage in.

Marrant believed the members of the community must enjoy their everyday lives as scripture and seek revelation in common places (Brooks 89). Marrant’s most specific modification of biblical interpretation came from his focus on captivity within the Old and New testament, as Marrant highlighted Moses and Christ as captives rather than redeemers (Brooks 99). Marrant did not lower the value of Christ or Moses, but rather emphasized the less praised conditions they endured. Since their heroism was well known, his slave-based perspective on the two biblical figures actually strengthened their power in being redeemed because they had so much more resistance while trying to embrace God. Rather than mulling over the same story of

triumph, he allowed that story to compliment the harsh realities of their existence. Within that context, Marrant proposed that black suffering, for all the years it had endured, was actually worse than the crucifixion of Christ (Brooks 101). This particular bible interpretation humbled the classic incarnation of Christ in classical doctrine and generated a sense of kinship with the oppressed.

Giving additional credence to this trend, Phillip M. Richards contends that early black writers recognized “an alienating process stemming from a dehumanizing estrangement from civic and social life,” and in response they sought “to overcome this alienation from civic life through the assumption of prophetic stances in the revivalist evangelical movements” (81). Marrant, too, believed in prophecy, and was really the first Christian preacher to glorify prophecy, which had long since been glorified within Islam but had been discredited in American Christianity, as it was believed to debase human choice (Brooks 95). From this Marrant amended the idea—perpetuating the status quo—that “slavery was a sinful albeit providential mode of introducing Christianity to Africa” by empowering blacks “not as the passive and unfortunate objects of this design but as actors in their own divinely intended history,” (Brooks 95). The subtleties promoting black choice implied by Whitefield’s success, were doubled and reorganized as blatant black power through Marrant’s sermons. As he preached that choice to accept God not only transcended the physical conditions of slavery, he also believed that choice allowed blacks to redeem their own prophecy. The choice for each member of his congregation to attend—despite being free to roam in a wilderness of white alienation and abandonment—established Marrant as a messenger to the alienated, conveying the news that their prophecy had been redeemed, and his role going forward would be to facilitate their resurrection from slavery.

Marrant’s most controversial evidence of the ‘Black Covenant’ was that near death experiences, which, were uniquely common to the demographic of oppressed blacks, also were moments of clarity and revelation (Brooks 100). Providence through near-death prevails as a theme, not only in Marrant’s narrative in which God frees him from execution, but also Oladauh Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* in which multiple whip-wrecks lead inspire him “to seek the Lord with full purpose of heart ere it be too late,” (Equiano 178). Rather than continue living what Douglass called a half-life in a “beast-like stupor,” on Covey’s plantation, he openly embraced the possibility of death and runs from the plantation, fully aware that his temporal life may be destroyed, staking his faith against the chances of the temporal world’s consequences. In some ways, it seems Douglass would rather die throwing himself against a lie that God will save him, than continue to be lied to while waiting for it to happen. This also exemplifies the trend of black preachers and writers to assert themselves within the active position, rather than the passive position of their faith. This active pursuit of God against the oppressing factors of temporal slavery, shows the central idea of black resurrection. In essence, the true province of black adaptation of Christian thought came not from the “good works” doctrine advised in the temporal world, but an internal, often secret faith in a freedom which could be achieved outside of the harsh physical world, and was worth casting away physical existence to achieve.

The intentions of these writers and preachers can be re-read and misread to comfort to numerous political, cultural and religious ideals, but the entire body of early black American works establishes that religious text is just as open to adaptable interpretation. The adaptability and interpretive powers these writers needed to take hold of their world may only have been achievable in writing, as literacy was perhaps the greatest stride one could make out of slavery. The fine execution of these powers may very well be why so many of these texts are taught in

literature courses. Their literacy takes route in the bible more so than anywhere else, and through their power to interpret and write their lives around scripture, early American blacks achieved a double victory because they managed to obtain spiritual and physical freedom from a stepping stone set before them by white slaveholders who meant to humble them.

The interpretive relationship biblical text has with its readers creates a dichotomy which transcends political, national and state lines to defend both sides of the conversations going on and not going on about slavery. White slaveholders and the clergy prevalent within their culture painted perhaps the greatest stretch of doctrinal truths to accommodate the inhumanity of slavery; meanwhile, preachers like Marrant and writers like Wheatley, Douglass and Equiano share in translating the bible to usurp the notion of white supremacy and elevate black suffering to a chosen covenant with God. These multiple perspectives are undeniable facets of reading, as much as holding stock in a renewable faith, and if the merits of Christianization can be judged by its product among black liturgy and literature, its impact shows a positive abolitionist force manifested through careful reinterpretation of biblical text, and the movement ultimately granted a far greater resurrection from slavery than it was ever intended to offer. While corrupt founders of evangelism may have once sought to use Christianity as a ‘slave religion’ they have failed to understand the power that faith instills in its followers—and the power of scripture on its readers—to find proof, at all costs, of a God who loves them. No such power existed in slavery.

Works Cited:

- Brooks, Joanna. *American Lazarus*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Phillip S. Foner, Ed. New York, Dover Publications, Inc. 1969.
- Emerson, Michael O. and Christian Smith. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Gates, Henry Louis. *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Holifield, E. Brooks. *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the age of the Puritans to the Civil War*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Jordan, Winthrop D. *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968.
- Langley, April. "The Eighteenth-Century Black Wor(l)d and Early Writers' Biblical Literacy." *Beyond Douglas*. Ed. Michael J. Drexler and Ed White. New Jersey: Rosemont, 2008 55-68.
- Nason-Clark, Nancy. "Nation of Islam." *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*. William H. Swathos, Ed. California: Alta Mira Press, 1998.
- Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Richards, Phillip M. "Anglo-American Continuities of Civic and Religious Thought in the Institutional World of Early Black Writing." *Beyond Douglas*. Ed. Michael J. Drexler and Ed White. New Jersey: Rosemont, 2008. 69-90.

