

Slavery and religious rhetoric

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October 29, 2013

The 1853 slave narrative [Twelve Years a Slave](#) is now a [major motion picture](#) directed by Steve McQueen. [The film is a faithful rendering of the life of Solomon Northup](#), a free African American man who is sold into chattel bondage and brutally enslaved. Northup's life story highlights one of the little-known facets of American slavery: the dangers that free black people faced during the antebellum era, with little legal recourse if they were cheated, harmed, brutalized or even sold into slavery.

Northup was eventually freed. But there were countless others whose names we cannot know, who never escaped the institution of slavery despite their legal status as "free" people of color. The film forces the observer to think about the various hypocrisies inherent in a system of chattel bondage—not the least of which was the religious justification used to support, sustain and reinforce American slavery.

In the film, slaveholders use Christian rhetoric and biblical passages to insist that slavery was ordained by God and consistent with being a "good" Christian. This is juxtaposed with scenes of enslaved men and women singing songs and hymns of the same Christian tradition, the very tradition used to justify their enslavement. It's a fundamental religious question: how can the same scripture, the same songs and the same religious rhetoric be used both to justify slavery and to insist that it's evil? The institution of slavery served as a religious battleground. Whose version of the divine and whose version of scriptural faithfulness would dominate public discourse?

There is no doubt that enslaved people were able to adapt and transform the very religious rhetoric used to enslave them. They did this largely by making a distinction between the "true" Christianity that was emblematic in the person of Jesus Christ and the "slaveholding religion" as practiced in the United States. The stories, symbols and messages of Christianity were adopted by enslaved people as polemical arguments against slavery. By using Christian rhetoric—essentially the language of early American political discourse—enslaved people vigorously participated in a theological and political conversation concerning slavery and

freedom, thus undermining racist readings of the biblical text.

Nor is there any doubt that these same stories, symbols and messages formed the basis of African American Christian belief: enslaved people embraced the spiritual message of Christianity, a necessary message of hope about the world that was and the world that was to come. The pathos of religious belief, its focus on the “sorrowful joys,” provided comfort, catharsis and healing under the most brutal conditions of American slavery. Religion helped the enslaved person to survive.

But these facts do not negate the fundamental use of Christian rhetoric and scriptures to justify a system of chattel bondage. When economic arguments failed, proslavery advocates turned to religion, insisting that God had ordained slavery for the current age.

They also argued that because one form of slavery had been sanctioned in the patriarchal age, it continued to be a valid system. Proslavery advocates believed that the system of slavery was one full of mercy: enslaved people were like children who required the paternalistic guidance of slaveholders to both come to a full knowledge of God and experience all the “civilizing” effects of Christianity. Some slaveholders continued to rely on the “myth of Ham,” the belief that the descendants of Ham were cursed to eternal bondage, as evidenced by their dark skin. Others relied on New Testament readings, insisting that because Paul tells a slave to return to his master or because Christ himself made no condemnation of slavery, that slavery was biblically justified and sanctioned.

Two different groups with two different goals; both appealing to the same scriptures and, apparently, the same God. How did the two sides even share the umbrella title of “Christian”? Is there room for both under that banner?

This is a question we can ask retrospectively of the slave era in America. But it’s also a question with contemporary implications. Can those who advocate policies that appear completely antithetical to the message of Christ share the same banner of “Christian” with those who insist that Christ came to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and minister to the “least of these”?

Former slave, minister, and [abolitionist Frederick Douglass](#) challenges us to consider this with these words from 1845:

Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference--so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked.

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