

Christianity and Religion as Characterized in Frederick Douglass's Slave Narrative

America is a country founded on Christian principles but built on the backs of slaves. Frederick Douglass' slave narrative uses religion to spotlight that incongruity. In it, white Southerners profess to be followers of Christ but own, sell, and horribly mistreat Black slaves, beating them, starving them, raping them, and murdering them, while using the Word of God to sanction their sins. According to Douglass, they are reminiscent of the Old Testament Pharisees, whose faith was not a matter of an inward conversion but a display of pomp and pretension. As a result, their brand of religion provides for and catalyzes a host of atrocities. Conversely, Douglass uses his personal relationship with God as well as his relationship with his fellow slaves not only to underscore the false religion of white Southerners, but also to demonstrate true Christianity in practice. As a result, his faith brings comfort, strength, encouragement, hope, and love, even in the darkest of times. Ultimately, Douglass' slave narrative characterizes religion as a powerful instrument that people can wield for good or for evil, while true Christianity is represented as relationship with Christ and others that is founded on the precepts of sacrifice, love, and righteousness and that stands in direct opposition to the institution of slavery.

Though Douglass suffered tremendously at the hands of self-professed Christians, their unimaginable brutality and unbridled hatred did not dampen his trust in God or his belief in God's presence and active involvement in his life. For instance, Douglass calls his move from Colonel Lloyd's plantation "... a special interposition of divine Providence in [his] favor" (350). As a child, he alone, was chosen from a number of other slaves to move to Baltimore to serve Mr. and Mrs. Auld. Some might call the change coincidence or luck; others may have seen it as little more than a business deal between slave owners, but Douglass credits God,

believing that every living thing is subject to his sovereign will. In addition to God's predestiny, Douglass also believes in God's palpable and ever-present help even in the most hopeless circumstances. He draws strength from the Word of God, or Biblical scriptures, as well as from the Holy Spirit, crediting them for buoying him. "...in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise" (350).

There's a key distinction between Douglass' Christianity and the Christianity of southern white slaveowners: relationship versus religion. Douglass' Christianity is founded upon a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Douglass sees God in the indelibly monumental as well as in the seemingly inconsequential. God is everywhere and in all things, including Douglass' external circumstances, which are often inconceivably grim, and his internal condition, which, more often than not, reflects optimism and gratitude, but occasionally falls victim to bouts of anger and despondency. Still, even during his darkest hour as a slave, Douglass holds fast to his belief in the Almighty's ability to rescue him, at times addressing the him directly and with confidence that God knows his plight and hears his pleas. "...with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way ... O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free" (365)! Briefly, in the throes of desperation, he questions if he will ever be free. But his doubt proves fleeting, and his faith prevails. He concludes, "Yes! God helping me, I will" (365).

Douglass' faith reflects the pervading attitude among Black slaves, who rely on their belief and hope in God to see them through and ultimately deliver them from their oppressors. Douglass writes specifically about the spirituals slaves would sing. "Every tone was a

testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains” (343). Rather than foster resentment toward God, their suffering draws them closer to him. They don’t blame him for their suffering, but instead they look to him as a source of relief and redemption. Unlike their white owners, the slaves’ put their profession of faith into practice. He calls the other slaves in his community “...noble souls [who] not only possessed loving hearts, but brave ones” (373). Douglass and his fellow slaves confided in one another, uplifted one another, and protected one another. He asserts, “I believe we would have died for each other” (373), a claim reminiscent of the New Testament scripture that reads, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends” (*NIV Bible*, John 15.13) and, more importantly, alludes to Christ’s ultimate sacrifice on the cross.

Southern whites and their brand of Christianity stand in stark contrast to what Douglass refers to as “... the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ” (389). With regard to slaveowners, he characterizes Christianity as nothing more than a shield behind which they justify and rationalize slavery and its accompanying atrocities.

I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes, —a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds, —and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection. (371)

Though whites make a show of upholding the religious practices of praying, attending church, holding revivals, singing hymns, and reading the Bible, they not only live contradictorily to their professed faith, but they also use their religion to justify their evil deeds. Douglass denounces their faith as “... the corrupt slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land” (389). He also likens

white Southerners who own and abuse slaves but profess to be followers of Christ to Pharisees, a sect of Jews in the Old Testament whose system of religion was characterized by outward form more so than genuine faith.

Captain Auld, one of Douglass' owners serves as an example of a false Christian who uses religion to sanction his sins. Douglass recounts Auld's treatment of a female slave:

I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—"He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes. (361)

The irony, as Douglass points out, is that Captain Auld grows crueler after experiencing religion at a Methodist camp-meeting. Douglass initially holds out hope that Captain Auld's conversion is genuine but soon discovers that religion has "... made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways" (360). Douglass reasons this is because before finding religion, Auld can only look to his own sinful nature to condone his indefensible actions. However, after his conversion, he is emboldened by the belief that his behavior is permitted by God. Consequently, his barbarity toward his slaves intensifies, even as his role and status within the church grows. Of this incongruity, Douglass notes:

He made the greatest pretensions to piety. His house was the house of prayer. He prayed morning, noon, and night. He very soon distinguished himself among his brethren, and was soon made a class-leader and exhorter. His activity in revivals was great, and he proved himself an instrument in the hands of the church in converting many souls. His house was the preachers' home. (360-361)

Edward Covey, to whom Douglass' Master Thomas, lends or rents Douglass for one year, is also an example of religious incongruity. He is simultaneously a professor of religion, a leader of the Methodist church, and a reputed "nigger-breaker" (362). And, he earns himself this title among the other slaveowners by breaking or taming into submission young, obdurate slaves. But, Covey, much like Auld before him, can only occupy the disparate and conflicting roles of devout Christian and merciless slaveowner by conforming his Christian teachings to validate his decidedly un-Christian ways. Covey lives up to his name as a soul-crusher. For months, he overworks, half-starves, and brutally beats Douglass, who eventually concedes to being broken in mind, body, and soul. At the same time Covey abuses his slaves, however, he carries himself as an exceedingly righteous man. He prays in the morning and again at night. He hosts family devotionals. He leads his family and associates in signing hymns. But he does so beneath a shroud of deceit. Douglass, who is of the belief that one cannot be a participant or a proponent of slavery and a true Christian, concludes that Covey succeeds not only in deceiving others, but also in deceiving himself. "I do verily believe that he sometimes deceived himself into the solemn belief that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God" (364). In the end, after years of harrowing struggle at the hands of a string of owners and masters, Douglass makes the acquaintance of only one true Christian who is white: Mr. David Ruggles. A man Douglass meets as a runaway slave in New York, Mr. Ruggles offers Douglass to place to stay at his boarding house, arranges for a reverend to wed Douglass and his fiancée Anna, and provides the couple a marriage certificate and money with which to start their new lives in Bedford. Douglass describes Ruggles as vigilant, kind, and persevering. But perhaps more so than any of those notable qualities, Ruggles is courageous,

considering that "... the slightest manifestation of humanity toward a colored person was denounced as abolitionism" (380), a label that brought with it "frightful liabilities" (380).

Frederick Douglass' slave narrative makes a clear distinction between Christianity and religion, while showing how both are powerful tools that can be wielded for good or for evil. True followers of Christ reflect God's love and put that love into action through relationship as is illustrated through both Douglass' own relationship with God as well as his relationships with his fellow slaves. Conversely, religion alone is a falsity rooted in outward show rather inward heart conversion. Consequently, it is used by white Southern slave owners to uphold slavery and to sanction their sins against their Black brethren.

Works Cited

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