

Devils in the Livery of Heaven

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*“...stealing the livery of the court of
heaven to serve the devil in.”*

Frederick Douglass

Using religion as a justification for slavery goes far back into the creation of America, for in New England the Puritans thought it acceptable to take over anyone whom they felt was lesser. According to Zinn, they “...appealed to the Bible, Psalms 2:8: ‘Ask of me, and I shall give thee, the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession’” (14). They used this scripture to defend their enslavement of the Native Americans and then later the Africans. As slaves in America, Harriett Jacobs and Frederick Douglass both experienced and understood how religion was used—specifically in the South. In their memoirs, they examine the hypocrisy of religion being used to moralize treatment and excuse atrocities done towards slaves. They also examine how slaveowners condoned their actions under religious guise by practicing religion and not spirituality, using religion as a ticket to improve reputation and excuse actions, and as a form of control. Finally, Jacobs and Douglass demonstrate the distinction between the religion and spirituality of Christianity through their interactions with others and, despite everything, had their own spiritual relationships with God.

Despite the adoption of religion, unbelievable hypocrisy was passed down to and practiced by the slaveowners of the South in how they moralized the treatment of their slaves for monetary gain. Like their Puritans forefathers, they looked upon the Africans as heathens to be mistreated while simultaneously helping heathens in other countries. As Jacobs says, “They seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. What a libel upon the heavenly Father, who ‘made of one blood all nations of men!’ And then who are Africans? Who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves?” (69). Africans were considered to be heathens, and therefore, slave-worthy, despite how intermixed was the blood of many slaves with that of the whites. Many masters would have sexual relations and children with their female slaves and consider it perfectly moral, despite clearly going against the Biblical commandment against adultery—not to mention rape. They were “represented as professing to love God whom they have not seen, whilst they hate their brother whom they have seen. They love the heathen on the other side of the globe...while they despise and totally neglect the heathen at their own doors” (Douglass 104). Douglass shows the tip of the iceberg of Southern Christian hypocrisy in this quote where the slaveowners of the South did not

care whether a slave was a heathen to be loved or what the Bible commands but whether religion could justify using someone viewed as lesser for a slaveowners' profit.

The religion of the South was used as an excuse for atrocities done towards slaves. Douglass says 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" (67). The religion that ruled the land was framed in such a way to allow for all sorts of mistreatment to slaves including rape, starvation, abuse, and more. Because men could call themselves religious and say they were just treating the heathen as they should be treated, religion was the perfect justifier.

Slaveowners who converted to the religion of the South not only rejected Christianity's teachings of love and grace but were crueler because of it for it allowed them to condone their actions under a religious guise. It is also clear that what they adopted was the religious part of Christianity and not the spirituality aspect. When Douglass was with Mr. Auld, he hoped that after his master attended a meeting and learned about religion that Auld would come back the better for it, and maybe even free his slaves; however, Auld's conversion made him even crueler than before. For "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 47). The religion he ascribed to not only neglected to better him but aided in making him even less humane by justifying his actions by letting him believe he was in the right. Auld only ascribed to the religious element of Christianity, for he went through the rituals required of him and said he believed what he needed to believe. He made pretensions of being extremely devout and religious, but he didn't truly attempt to have a spiritual relationship of his own with God.

Because masters were able to use their association with religion as a ticket to excuse their actions and improve their reputation, they were some of the basest slaveowners around. Jacobs witnessed her master take up religion and become worse for it as well, for he, like Auld, used it to justify his actions, and he also did it largely to improve his reputation. Jacobs said she "...supposed that religion had a purifying effect on the character of men; but the worst persecutions I endured from him were after he was a communicant. The conversation of the doctor, the day after he had been confirmed, certainly gave me no indication that he had 'renounced the devil and all his works'" (115). He hadn't joined the church to become a holy person or to follow God. He joined, as he told her, to improve his reputation with the community so his actions of abuse and general cruelty towards his slaves would be less frowned upon (115). As a doctor, he needed to keep the reputation he'd built up, and religion was a prime way to do so. Religion gave him a guise of goodness to hide underneath and gave him a way to condone

the way he treated Jacobs and the rest of his slaves in the eyes of the community. Douglass says in his memoir, “being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. It was my unhappy lot not only to belong to a religious slaveholder, but to live in a community of such religionists (67). For, like Dr. Flint, Mr. Covey also joined the church to increase his rank in society and the way he was viewed by those around him. In fact, his rank as a Christian even increased his ability in the eyes of the town to break slaves because he had religion to back him up. Religion was a way not to become close to God or to be a better person but to help masters justify the actions of themselves and those around them. However, slave owners didn’t only use religion to ease their own consciences and bring them up in society.

Religion was also used as a form of control towards the slaves because masters could use slaves’ religious devotion against them for their own benefit. According to Zinn, “A book consulted by many planters was the Cotton Plantation Record and Account Book, which gave these instructions to overseers: ‘You will find that an hour devoted every Sabbath morning to their moral and religious instruction would prove a great aid to you in bringing about a better state of things amongst the Negroes’” (160). The masters of this time most definitely took up determined to use this advice and encouraged their slaves towards religious instruction. Religion was not held back from the slaves but was orchestrated in such a way that would be beneficial to the slaveowners. In Jacobs’ narrative, she explains how the services arranged for slaves were of a singularly manipulative nature, pushing towards the master’s agenda. The minister preached on the text, “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ” which is the King James Version of Ephesians 6:5 in the Bible, but it’s doubtful that the Apostle Paul ever intended the minister’s twist to be put upon it. He said, “Although your masters may not find you out, God sees you; and he will punish you. You must forsake your sinful ways, and be faithful servants. Obey your old master and your young master—your old mistress and your young mistress. If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master. You must obey God’s commandments” (Jacobs 106). As religion was used to back up the actions of the masters, it was also used to convince slaves of their errors and how they could obey their masters better to be more valuable to them. This sermon clearly was preached in order to gain control over the slaves and encourage them to have complete submission towards their masters.

Despite witnessing the horrible ways that religion was interpreted and acted out towards him, Douglass still understood what Christianity ought to be and the distinction between religion and spirituality. He clarifies at the end of his memoir that he isn’t trying to insult Christianity as a whole, but the religion

of the South. He says, “I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, 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” (Douglass 101). To Douglass, there is a difference between the way he was treated by these so-called Christians and the real, true religion of Christianity. Again, we can see the difference between spirituality and religion. Douglass understands that God is a good God and that having a relationship with Him is valuable, but he also understands that religion is something that is corrupt and used for masters’ gain. Similar to Douglass, Jacobs was also able to see the distinction between spirituality and the religion of the South.

Jacobs had two opportunities to see Christianity lived out in a more spiritual aspect in contrast to the religious one of her master and other so-called Christians of the South. After the sermon when the preacher explained the importance of obeying their masters, she also heard a sermon where the minister spoke to the black congregation with a completely different goal. He said, “‘Try to live according to the word of God, my friends. Your skin is darker than mine; but God judges men by their hearts, not by the color of their skins.’ This was strange doctrine from a Southern pulpit. It was very offensive to slaveholders” (Jacobs 111). Instead of catering to the slave owners and sticking to the status quo, this minister spoke Biblical truth to his audience without an agenda for obedience and profit. Jacobs also knew a young lady who had some authenticity in her religion, for, “She taught her slaves to lead pure lives, and wished them to enjoy the fruit of their own industry. Her religion was not a garb put on for Sunday, and laid aside till Sunday returned again” (77). Jacobs was able to recognize this and see the charade of the religion practiced by Dr. Flint and many other slaveowners in contrast to an example of true Christianity.

Douglass and Jacobs also had their own relationships with God, which is surprising after all the torture they faced with their masters doing their work “in God’s name.” While religion was used to control them, it was also a way for them to retain their independence, for “Music, magic, art, religion, were all ways... for slaves to hold on to their humanity” (Zinn 163). It allowed them to maintain their humanity against the inhumane treatment they suffered, for they were able to have their own relationship with God distinct from the religion of the time or the way religion was used to control them. Both Jacobs and Douglass appealed to God in times of trial. They never stopped praying, hoping that He would deliver them. They did have their doubts, however, for Jacobs was stuck in the garret, it seemed to her there “was no justice or mercy in the divine government. I asked why the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been so persecuted and wronged from youth upward” (186). She questioned why God had let all these things happen to her, but she still prayed and sought God for comfort amid

her trials (202). She understood the distinction between religion and spirituality and took spirituality upon herself in the midst of these trials even when the religion claiming to practice following the same God she worshipped had failed her. Similarly, Douglass sought for God, ridden with similar doubts as Jacobs, when he was seeking freedom: “O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave?” (56). It is no wonder that both Jacobs and Douglass sought for God (and questioned if He existed) because of what happened to them, but it is important to note that they did seek Him despite it all.

The religion of the South was an atrocity to the name of Christianity and of God. At the end of his book, Douglass says, “Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of ‘stealing the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in’” (101), and this could not be a more accurate description. The way religion was used in the South to justify the cruelty done to the slaves, to control them, and to take away their independence is a direct attack not only on people but on the name of Christianity. Christianity is a religion about a kind God coming down, dying for His people, and encouraging them to love their neighbor as themselves. The Southern slaveholders used it to justify cruelty, giving it a reputation of hatred. However, the way Jacobs and Douglass still chose to have spirituality and seek after God despite their experiences shows that this religion can be stronger than what men try to turn it into, for the religion of the South was truly full of devils in the livery of heaven.