

Weaponizing Religion: A Document Analysis of the Religious Indoctrination
of Slaves in Service of White Labor Elites

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Abstract

The use of religion in the dehumanization of Black bodies spans religions. Whether it's the ascribing of a black body to Satan at the ecumenical Council of Toledo or the cursed black skins of Talmudic and Mormon lore, sacred scripture has been a fertile ground for the sowing of racist seeds. Given this history, it should come as no surprise that the rise in religious fervor in colonial America witnessed a concomitant rise in the use of religious scripture in the subjugation of black bodies and minds. This article examines the product of this subjugation by engaging in a document analysis of official catechisms produced by the Protestant-Episcopal church for both whites and enslaved blacks during the antebellum period. In contextualizing these documents, this study analyzes the fluctuating milieu of white religious fervor in the colonial south. Particular attention is paid to the economic and social justifications of the religious indoctrination of slaves that themselves were informed by the racialized alterity permeating colonial society. These economic and social justifications ensured the ascendancy of the white labor class at the expense of the anxiously perceived humanization of enslaved black people. A thematic analysis of the respective catechisms will elucidate the particularly pernicious way in which religious indoctrination was weaponized against the psycho-spiritual functioning of the enslaved. By foregrounding these documents, the brazen nature of the assault on black humanity in service of white anxiety (economic and social) is laid bare.

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For some observant Americans, the candidacy and subsequent presidency of Donald Trump have blurred the boundaries between racism¹ and the conventional view of religion. Despite Trump's history of housing discrimination, of referring to black people as "too stupid" to vote for him, of making racist remarks against Haitians and Nigerians, and of labeling neo-Nazis as "very fine people"², the record support of Donald Trump by white evangelicals³ is part of a long standing, historically intertwined relationship between religion and racism. This relationship is attested to by decades of research documenting the link between high religiosity and racism.⁴ Additionally, this relationship is rooted in the alterity displayed throughout the history of American religious practice from colonial times up to the present.

Alterity is defined as "the quality or state of being radically alien to the conscious or a particular cultural orientation".⁵ Additionally, alterity has been viewed as denoting "otherness" and is most often conceptualized as the state or quality of being "different". The divergent and dichotomous nature of alterity has resulted in various configurations of alteric relationships. For example, alterity can be displayed through gender (male/female), through religion (Christian/Muslim), through nationality (America/Canadian), and through any of the other ways

¹ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic define racism as "any program or practice of discrimination, segregation, persecution, or mistreatment based on membership in a race or ethnic group." *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 171.

² Jennifer Rubin, "Like His Lies, Trump's Racist Comments Don't Surprise, But They Should Be Counted," *Washington Post*, November 4, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/opinions/wp/2018/11/04/like-his-lies-trumps-racist-comments-dont-surprise-but-they-should-be-counted/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9261e8a4590b

³ Robert P. Jones, "White Evangelical Support for Donald Trump at All Time High", Washington, DC: Public Religion Research Institute, 2018, Accessed November 12, 2018. <https://www.pri.org/spotlight/white-evangelical-support-for-donald-trump-at-all-time-high/>

⁴ Debra L. Hall, David C. Matz, and Wendy Wood, "Why Don't We Practice What We Preach? A Meta-Analytic Review of Religious Racism", *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, no. 1, (December 2009): 126-139.

⁵ *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. "Alterity," Accessed June 8, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alterity>.

that us/them constructions can be made. Arguably the most salient alteric relationship in the history of American society has been racial (Black/White). This racialized alterity has provided the foundation for much of the demonization of blackness exhibited in several Judeo-Christian religious traditions (as described in the next section). With racialized alterity at its core, it was the combination of religion and racism that fueled the elevation of whiteness and the denigration of blackness throughout the religious and secular practices of American society.

In an effort to document the alterity infused nexus of religion and racism, the current study uses document analysis to investigate the Christian indoctrination of enslaved black people in America from 1620 to 1862. In this analysis, a brief history of racism within the Christian tradition will be explored. Next, the fluctuating history of religious fervor in America will be discussed to contextualize the shifting positions both for and against the religious instruction of slaves. After that, rationales for the religious indoctrination of slaves, including both material and spiritual profits of the white clergy and planter class, will be presented as well as the means by which said indoctrination was administered to slaves.

While the overall theme of this analysis focuses on the use of religious indoctrination as mitigation against loss,⁶ the guiding framework of the current study is the broad, ontological understanding of religion as discussed by Charles H. Long. According to Long, religion is, simply, a matter of orientation; of “how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world.”⁷ By enlisting historical documents, the current study will highlight the way white evangelicals and the white labor elite (planters/slave owners) conspired to devise a systematic and deliberate form of religious instruction as a means of orienting both themselves

⁶ Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order: 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 219-256.

⁷ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 1995), 7.

and enslaved blacks. These socially constructed, religiously anchored orientations served to insulate the white clergy and labor elites, from spiritual, material, physical, and economic loss at the expense of enslaved blacks' "place in the world".

Christian Anti-Blackness

One of the most well-known examples of racist orienting in Christian doctrine is the curse of Ham. Documented in the 9th chapter of Genesis, the biblical story depicts Noah's curse upon his son Ham for failing to cover his nakedness during a wine induced sleep. In actuality, Noah's curse was laid upon his grandson Canaan, Ham's son. The Bible informs us that the curse consisted of Canaan being condemned to be a servant of his uncles Shem and Japheth, Ham's brothers. Over the years, the curse morphed into being marred with black skin and the ordained servitude of black people. Fittingly, the "curse of Ham" became one of the primary justifications for the enslavement, dehumanization, and subjugation of black people during the Atlantic slave trade.⁸

While Whitford located the source of the Hamitic curse to the "early modern era" (during the 16th century)⁹, the Christian demonization of black skin extends back much further. According to Burton, "the Devil's color is usually black, in conformity with Christian tradition and almost worldwide symbolism".¹⁰ Burton's reference to the "Christian tradition" is perhaps a nod to the Council of Toledo where in 447 a.d. the official description of Satan himself was determined to be "a large, black, monstrous apparition with horns on his head, cloven hooves, ass's ears, claws, fiery eyes, gnashing teeth, huge phallus, and sulphurous smell".¹¹ Here, the

⁸ David Whitford, "A Calvinist Heritage to the "Curse of Ham": Assessing the Accuracy of a Claim About Racial Subordination", *Church History and Religious Culture* 90, no. 1, (2010): 27.

⁹ Whitford, "A Calvinist Heritage", 27. However, much earlier Jewish traditions recount a curse of black skin as well. The Babylonian Talmud, produced between the 3rd and 6th centuries, also identifies black skin as the curse brought down upon Ham for sexual activities aboard the ark.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

greatest force of evil in the universe and the arch enemy of God himself is depicted as having black skin and possessing the stereotypical “huge phallus”.

Even the doctrines of lesser known Christian traditions have incorporated anti-blackness into their religious doctrine. In the Book of Mormon, we meet with a tradition similar to that of the Hamitic Curse in the Bible. In detailing the curse levelled against the Lamanites, we are told in 2nd Book of Nephi,

Wherefore, the word of the Lord was fulfilled which he spake unto me, saying that:

Inasmuch as they will not hearken unto thy words they shall be cut off from the presence of the lord...And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint, wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they may not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.¹²

Each of these examples from Christian traditions laid the groundwork for the justification and subsequent use of religion in the subjugation of black bodies in America. While the use of religion against enslaved blacks has a long and definitive history, agreement on whether to teach slaves Christianity was far from unanimous.¹³

White Religious Fervor and the Christianizing of Enslaved Blacks

Support for the religious conversion of enslaved blacks from their traditional “heathen” religions to Christianity waxed and waned over the course of American history. Opposition was due, in large part, to the pervasive notion of “hereditary heathenism”, the idea that “religion is an

¹² 2 Nephi 5:20-21.

¹³ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2016), 64.

essential characteristic, inborn, and determinant of future ideas and attitudes.”¹⁴ The futile nature of Christianizing African “pagans” was due as much to the notion of hereditary heathenism as it was to the foreign beliefs and practices that enslaved Africans brought to American shores.

Despite traditional African religions sharing with Christianity Mbiti’s five components of religion, 1) beliefs 2) practices, ceremonies and festivals 3) religious objects and places 4) values and morals and 5) religious officials or leaders,¹⁵ the prevailing view toward converting enslaved Africans was that “the gross bestiality and rudeness of their manners, the variety and strangeness of their languages, and the weakness and shallowness of their minds render it in a manner impossible to make any progress in their conversion.”¹⁶

Despite this general feeling, there proved to be a concomitant relationship between white religious fervor and support for the religious instruction (indoctrination/conversion) of slaves. For whites, religious fervor manifested throughout early American history as seeking increased spiritual renewal, increased spiritual zeal, increased membership in religious denominations, and a spike in attendance at popular religious revivals.¹⁷ For enslaved Africans, the religious fervor of whites translated into an increase in the establishment of churches for slaves, Sabbath schools for the formal religious instruction of slaves, and targeted, systematic efforts of religious conversion through routine plantation meetings.¹⁸ That is to say, as white religious fervor gained traction, so too did the idea of giving religious instruction to black slaves. As a brief overview of history will show, arguments for and against the religious indoctrination of

¹⁴ Rebecca Anne Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 12.

¹⁵ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, (Lone Grove, IL: Waveland Press Inc., 1991), 11-12.

¹⁶ Kendi, *Stamped*, 65.

¹⁷ Cynthia A. Rice, “The First American Great Awakening: Lessons Learned and What Can Be Done to Foster a Habitat for the Next Great Awakening”, *International Congregational Journal* 9, no. 2, (Winter 2010): 104-105.

¹⁸ Annual Report of the Missionary to the Negroes in Liberty County, Ga., 1833.

slaves were always buttressed by factors that were thought to have some perceived impact on the fate of the white community.

In keeping with the document analysis methodology of the current study, this overview is drawn from historic, archival documents. Spotlighting an early twentieth century analysis by C. V. Bruner, the historical writings of Charles. C. Jones (a Presbyterian pastor, a slave owner, and “the preeminent advocate of religious instruction of the Negroes”),¹⁹ and an exemplar from Cotton Mather (the prolific New England pastor and slave owner), the following discussion outlines the fluctuating tides of white religious fervor and attitudes toward the religious instruction of slaves. In what follows, I deliberately utilize these historic writings to lay the foundation for white religious fervor as a context for religious instruction as a means to circumvent perceived losses on the part of clergy, the labor elite, and ordinary white workers. In doing so, the following overview additionally serves as a document analysis of important historical texts.

First Period

According to Bruner, there were five distinct periods in American history where slaveholders, clergy, and society in general actively considered the religious conversion of slaves.²⁰ The first period, from 1620 (the year the first group of African slaves entered and were settled in the colonies) until 1740, was marked by religious indifference on the part of slaveholders and religious institutions. Slaveholders deemed converting slaves to Christianity a risky endeavor for various reasons. For one, the allegiance of the “original stock” of Africans to their “absolute Heathenism” was viewed as a barrier to conversion.²¹ Other reasons contributing

¹⁹ Donald G. Matthews, “Charles Colcock Jones and the Southern Evangelical Crusade to Form a Biracial Community”, *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 3, (August 1975): 319.

²⁰ C. V. Bruner, “An Abstract of the Religious Instruction of the Slaves in the Antebellum South”, *Peabody Journal of Education* 11, no. 3, (November 1933): 117-121.

²¹ Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*, (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842), 6.

to the lack of conversions among slaves during the first century of colonial history included the belief that the slaves were incapable of comprehending Christian beliefs, the lack of concern on the part of slaveholders for their own Christian salvation let alone the salvation of their slaves, and, most importantly, the prevailing belief at that time that a Christians could not be held in bondage.²² According to Morgan, “Before the 1660s it seems to have been assumed that Christianity and slavery were incompatible. Negroes and Indians held in slavery who could prove that they had been baptized sometimes sued for their freedom and won it”.²³ While some Christianizing of slaves did indeed take place during this era, the perceived loss of black labor due to slave conversions to Christianity was an effective deterrent to mass conversion efforts on the part of white planters.

The trepidation that existed in the minds of slave owners due to the fear that Christianized slaves would seek their freedom under laws that prevented the enslavement of Christians would soon be removed. Eventually, “as slavery became more profitable, the assembly moved to protect masters by building a wall between conversion and emancipation”.²⁴ As a result, slaveholder fears of losing property were forever put to rest by the passage of laws preventing the manumission of slaves upon conversion. Once slaveholders’ fears of the loss of slave labor were allayed, the push for the religious instruction of black slaves was once again outwardly professed in a most vigorous manner under the guise of saving souls in accord with one’s religious duty. However, in an effort to reinforce in the mind of the slave the reality that conversion, for them, did not mean manumission, some slaves who converted to Christianity were made to profess the following declaration,

²² Bruner, “Religious Instruction of the Slaves”, 117.

²³ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 331.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

You declare in the Presence of God and before his 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 while you live, but merely for the good of Your Soul and to partake of the Graces and Blessing promised to the Members of the Church of Jesus Christ.²⁵

The Negro Christianized

Early in the first period of black conversion, though limited, there were some attempts and arguments for the Christianizing of slaves. Emblematic of the arguments for Christianizing slaves during this period was a pamphlet produced by Cotton Mather, the influential, slave holding, Christian pastor of Boston, Massachusetts. His pamphlet, *The Negro Christianized* published in 1706, details several arguments in favor of Christianizing efforts (fig. 1). Broadly, Mather presented four detailed arguments for the Christianizing of slaves and offered rebuttals to common arguments against their religious instruction. A recurring theme throughout the pamphlet was the duty of Christian slave owners; their duty to God and their duty to their servants entrusted to them by God. The paternalistic tone of Mather was rich in appeals to scripture, historians, and philosophers. His arguments hinged upon the responsibility endowed upon Christian slave owners because of their “belief in Christ.” Interspersed between Mather’s faith-based appeals were indications of his views of black people in general. In various portions of the pamphlet he described black slaves as “the blackest instances of blindness and baseness”, as “the most brutish creatures on Earth”, and acknowledged that “the state of your Negroes in this world must be low, and mean, and abject; a state of servitude.”²⁶

²⁵ Frank Lambert, “I Saw the Book Talk: Slave Readings of the First Great Awakening”, *The Journal of African American History* 87, (2002): 15.

²⁶ Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity*, (Boston: B. Green, 1706), 14.

Despite the aspersions cast on black people, Mather used their salvation to invoke a doctrine of perceived spiritual loss in an effort to spur the mass Christianizing of slaves. In doing so, he admonished Christian slave owners who neglected Christianizing their slaves by saying,

The blood of the souls of your poor Negroes, lies upon you, and the guilt of their barbarous Impieties, and superstitions, and their neglect of God and their souls: If you are willing to have nothing done toward the salvation of their souls...If you withhold knowledge from your Black people they will be destroy'd [sic]. But their destruction must very much ly [sic] at your doors; you must answer for it.²⁷

In Mather's view, the loss of the white labor elite's own salvation in the hereafter was the cost of neglecting their Christian duty to Christianize the slaves in servitude to them.

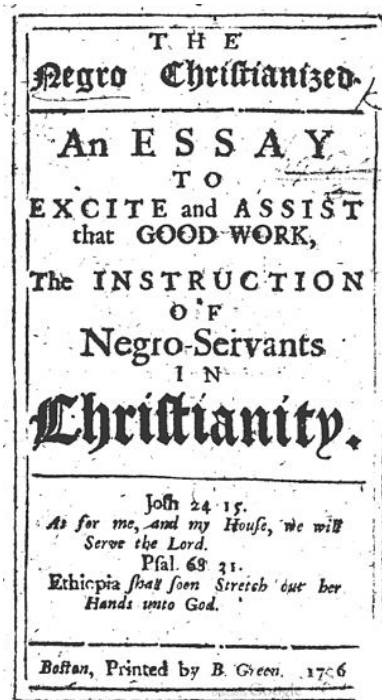


Fig. 1. Cotton Mather's. *The Negro Christianized*.

²⁷ Ibid., 16.

Second Period

According to Bruner, the second period dealing with the conversion of slaves took place between 1740 and 1790. This period saw a deliberate effort to bring religion to Whites and slaves alike. This was due in large part to the Great Awakening.²⁸ Cynthia A. Rice described the Great Awakening as “a spiritual renewal movement that was targeted at the common man and woman, rich and the poor, black and white, male and female, all were welcome, they emphasized the importance of each individual and they simplified the gospel message to make it more accessible and applicable to everyday life.”²⁹ While there is disagreement among historians regarding how many awakenings there actually were, it is generally accepted that what are termed the Great Awakenings occurred during the 18th and 19th centuries and these movements impacted every aspect of religious, societal, and political life in America.³⁰

The embrace of religious fervor by whites and the subsequent conversion of slaves were themes running through all of the major Christian denominations of the era.³¹ In the South, the first to undergo the awakenings were the Presbyterians, followed by the Baptists, and then the Methodists.³² After the Revolutionary War, all three denominations simultaneously pushed for converts and their proselytizing efforts included enslaved blacks.³³ The religious zeal spurred by the Great Awakening and the idea of equality and independence brought on by the Revolutionary War greatly increased the number of slaves converted to Christianity. Fueled by the wave of equality and independence that came on the heels of the Revolutionary War, Christianized slaves

²⁸ Bruner, “Religious Instruction of the Slaves”, 118.

²⁹ Rice, “Great Awakening”, 104.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 227-231.

³² Bruner, “Religious Instruction of the Slaves”, 118.

³³ *ibid.*

during this period appeared to achieve a degree of progress by their being seen as spiritual equals with whites and in their ability to establish several self-governing, slave-only congregations.

Third Period

The third period, from 1790 to 1830, was marked by a disregard for, then a subsequent resurgence in the conversion of slaves. Bruner notes that, despite the proliferation of religious sentiment among whites during the second period instigated by the Great Awakening, the third period saw an increase in atheism throughout the colonies of America brought on by the French Revolution.³⁴ This led to yet another period of waning religious interest on the part of slaveholders that, in turn, led to decreased religious attention being given to their slaves.

Bruner points out that, simultaneously happening during the era were the increased activity of anti-slavery movements and the occurrences of notable slave rebellions. It's worth noting that, the two most noteworthy planned rebellions of the era, those of Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser, were both initiated by slave preachers and were devised during the religious meetings of the slaves.³⁵ This critical point encompasses one of the primary fears of white society when considering converting slaves to Christianity, that being, the engendering of a spirit of radical independence. In the case of Vesey, despite white clergy and planters attempting to "peddle their vision of a proslavery God to black congregants",³⁶ Vesey "fashioned a theology of liberation that fused the demanding faith of the Israelites with the sacred values of Africa", and in so doing, "his lessons were employed as a means by which to produce a profound sense of racial identity among his adherents".³⁷ Rebellions, like Vesey's, reinforced in the minds of white

³⁴ Bruner, "Religious Instruction of the Slaves", 119.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁶ Douglas R. Egerton, "'Why They Did Not Preach Up This Thing': Denmark Vesey and Revolutionary Theology", *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 100, no. 4, (October 1999): 304.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

clergy and white workers (the planting elite and white workers in general) the potential loss of property, wealth and even life that comes with the Christianizing of slaves. The gains that were believed to have accrued to enslaved blacks (their spiritual equality and a radical sense of personhood) were unintended consequences of Christianizing slaves that were to be avoided at all costs.

Fourth Period

Bruner notes that the fourth period of slave conversion spanning from 1830 to 1845, “was in some respects a repetition of the preceding period, beginning with another reaction but closing with a very decided recovery and an increase in interest and religious activity that surpassed that of the former periods.”³⁸ The decline in slave conversions came on the heels of the rise in radical abolitionist activity throughout the south. In addition to the affront that abolitionists caused to slaveholding society, the abolitionists were also thought to have added fuel to the fires of slave insurrections culminating in the deadly revolt by Nat Turner, another slave preacher. The increased abolitionist activity and the perceived link between slave insurrections and religious instruction led to sweeping legislative action in the south restricting the education, religious teaching, and spheres of activity of slaves. The close of the fourth period however, saw the birth of The Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in Liberty County, Georgia and various other plantation missions. The religious clergy behind these organizations attempted to convey to slave holders/planters that Christianizing slaves, rather than jeopardizing their material well-being, would in fact serve to buttress the “peculiar institution” by making slaves more “orderly and obedient”.³⁹ While slave rebellions had been used as evidence against the religious instruction of slaves, clergy began using the rebellions as evidence of the need for the *proper*

³⁸ Bruner, “Religious Instruction of the Slaves”, 119.

³⁹ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 225.

religious instruction of slaves. The Association for the Religious Instruction of Negroes in Liberty County, Ga and other organizations ultimately won the support of slaveholders by showing the economic and managerial benefits that come with the “proper”, Christian indoctrination of slaves. The religious fervor ignited by this religious response to slave rebellions set the stage for the most active period of Christian indoctrination efforts directed at slaves.

Fifth Period

The fifth and final period of slave instruction, from 1845-1860, was, “a period of remarkable religious development among the Negroes. Slave owners displayed a far greater interest in the work than ever before.”⁴⁰ Bruner details four principle reasons for this dramatic increase in white religious fervor around Christianizing slaves. First, given the split over slavery between the churches of the north and south, the abolitionist strain had been removed from southern churches. Second, slaveholders became convinced of the value of religiously educated slaves. Third, “civilizing” the slaves with religion would undermine a core tenet of abolitionist rhetoric, that the institution of slavery fostered paganism among the slaves. And fourth, slaveholders determined that material benefit could come from happy and content slaves. It was these events that served as accelerants for the white, religious fervor directed toward Christianizing slaves and, as we’ll see, the religious response of indoctrination was to be the tool of choice in the production of both a submissive work force and the material benefit that comes from their effective management.

To summarize this section, fluctuations in the desire to Christianize slaves during the various periods of history share a common theme. In addition to religious trends in white society, opinions on religiously indoctrinating slaves were influenced by perceptions of loss on the part

⁴⁰ Bruner, “Religious Instruction of the Slaves”, 120.

of white labor elites (slave owners) and white religious leaders. The losses in question were both spiritual (such as the spiritual damnation described by Cotton Mather) and material. At varying points throughout history, the perceived losses associated with converting slaves included 1) the loss of property (slaves) upon conversion in accord with colonial law 2) the perceived insubordination of slaves brought on by their equal spiritual standing as Christians and 3) the loss of white life due to slave revolts inspired by liberation themed biblical interpretations. In an effort to shield themselves against these losses, white evangelical and white labor elites used codified laws as well as the religious mechanism of theological indoctrination to inhibit both the physical and spiritual progress of Christianized slaves while simultaneously exacerbating black mental, spiritual, and psychological inferiority. But while evangelicals canvassed the south extolling the virtue and responsibility of Christianizing enslaved blacks, the use of religion in the “management” of slaves in order to maximize profits was more quietly acknowledged in publications directed toward slave holders.

The Charleston Meeting of 1845

In the writings of their proceedings and meeting minutes, evangelicals in their organizations and denominations constantly appealed to the religious duty of bringing enslaved black souls to Christ. Their use of scripture, their suggestions to slaveholders on their religious duties to their slaves, as well as the particulars of working, educating, clothing, feeding, disciplining, and allowing for the social upkeep of slaves all buttressed the institution of slavery. But in the proceedings of a particularly influential meeting of slaveholders in Charleston, South Carolina in 1845, a glimpse into the more salient motivation for the religious instruction of slaves is uncovered.

The Charleston meeting in 1845 (fig. 2) was described by Bruner as, “a very significant meeting of planters...which had been called for the purpose of discussing the religious instruction of the Negroes.”⁴¹ Bruner writes further that, “Reports of planters to a questionnaire which had been sent out before the meeting were almost unanimous as to the wisdom of training slaves in religious matters and as to the general interest in the movement.”⁴² In a section of the meeting’s proceedings entitled, “Address to the Holders of Slaves in South-Carolina”, slave holding labor elites are told that,

A wise management would combine kindness with discipline; and aim at making labour effective, and the labourer happy. But these ends can only be effected by moral causes; causes that act upon character—that form, or reform the moral being. Would we most naturally look for effective labour, in the dissolute, the unprincipled, and the discontented; or in those who are godly and honest, regular in their habits, and satisfied with their condition?⁴³

In this section alone we see the emergence of a very pertinent theme. First, there is the framing of the discussion in terms of establishing a process of “wise management”. Such management is focused squarely on the goal of making “labour” (the slaves) both “effective” (profitable) and “happy” (contentment with their condition as slaves). Going further, it is declared that the most sensible means of finding both an effective and happy labor force is in those who are “godly and honest, regular in their habits, and satisfied with their condition”.

⁴¹ Bruner, “Religious Instruction of the Slaves”, 121.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Meeting in Charleston, S.C., *Proceedings of the Meeting in Charleston, S.C. May 13-15 1845 on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes, Together with the Report of the Committee, and the Address to the Public*, (Charleston, S: B. Jenkins, 1845), 9.

Continuing with their discussion, slave holders were briefed on the type of doctrine that would adequately facilitate such a “wise management”. In identifying Christianity as the ideal source of this teaching, slave holders were assured that it would instill in the slave,

Precepts that inculcate good-will, forbearance and forgiveness; that enjoin meekness and patience under evils; that demand truth and faithfulness under all circumstances; a teaching that sets before men a righteous judgment, and happiness or misery in the life to come, according to our course of faith and practice in the life that now is, must, unless counteracted by extraordinary causes, so change the general character of persons thus taught.⁴⁴

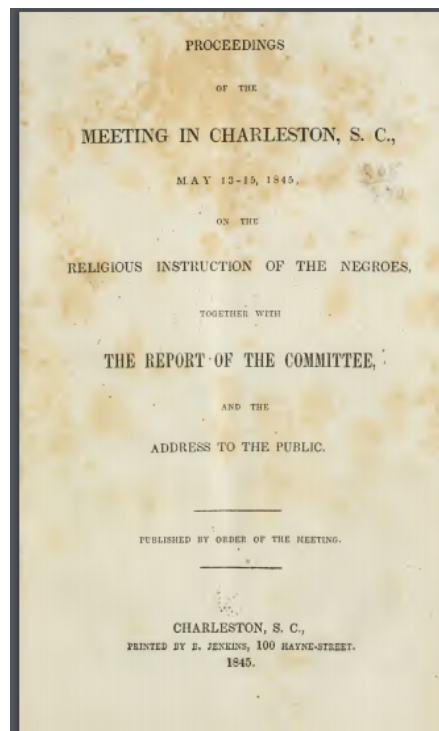


Fig. 2. Proceedings of the Meeting in Charleston, S.C. May 13-15 1845.

The meeting of slave holders in Charleston was not alone in its quest to justify and orchestrate the systematic indoctrination of enslaved blacks as a means of maintaining the social

⁴⁴ Meeting in Charleston, S.C., 9-10.

order and limiting the possibility of black progress in any form. By 1845 virtually every religious denomination was committed to the goal of Christianizing slaves. Organizations, missionaries, committees, associations, and pastors channeled the wave of religious fervor into an industry of “plantation missions” charged with bringing what would prove to be a customized and weaponized form of Christianity to the slaves in an effort to mitigate any spiritual, material, and financial loss to whites. Organizations like the Association for the Religious Instruction of Negroes in Liberty County, Georgia worked tirelessly to set up processes and procedures for the “salvation” of slaves. The proceedings of their annual meetings detailed progress reports on Sabbath Schools founded for the instruction of slaves, membership tallies of converted slaves, reports on the conversion of slaves throughout the various counties in Georgia, and the continued development of the religious and economic justifications for bringing slaves to the faith. Slaveholders and denominations alike were so committed to converting the slave to Christianity that, “Even after the outbreak of the Civil War the efforts of the Southern churches in behalf of the slaves continued; and when the Confederacy was threatened with bankruptcy the appropriations for Negro missions were scarcely diminished.”⁴⁵ As with the proceedings of the 1845 meeting in Charleston, publications of the ARIN detailed their motivations for Christianizing slaves with no ambiguity.

In their 13th annual report the association made sure to remind slave owners of the dire need and incalculable value that comes with religiously indoctrinating their slaves.

Regarding the relation of slaves to their owners they write,

They are...“your money”. They are the source, the means of your wealth; by their labour do you obtain the necessaries, the conveniences and comforts of life. The increase of

⁴⁵ Bruner, “Religious Instruction of the Slaves”, 121.

them is the general standard of your worldly prosperity; without them you would be comparatively poor. They are consequently sought after and desired as property, and when possessed, must be so taken care of and managed as to be made profitable.⁴⁶

Leaving nothing to the imagination, the association identified religious instruction as the means by which slaves could be “managed as to be made profitable”. In a section outlining the “desirable purposes” of the association, they identify one of its goals as demonstrating to slave owners that the religious instruction of slaves “would diminish the pain and trouble of their management, and by making them better servants and better men, tend directly to promote the peace and prosperity of owners and communities.”⁴⁷

Both the Charleston meeting and the ARIN exemplify, in clear language, the motivations for the religious instruction of enslaved black people. These documents, and countless others, highlight the role of perceived loss in the white labor elites’ drive to indoctrinate slaves into Christianity. This loss, be it the loss of their salvation for not bringing the gospel to the “heathens” under their care, or the loss of material “conveniences and comforts of life” due to the loss of the labor of black bodies, was the driving force in their use of a weaponized form of Christianity; a form that simultaneously reinforced white supremacy and black subservience.

The Catechisms: White Labor Elites’ Weaponized Religious Doctrine

To this point the current study has documented the motivations for using religion as a tool in the mitigation of perceived loss on the part of the white evangelicals and the white labor elites (planters/slave owners). This loss, perceived as both spiritual and material, was abated through the religious indoctrination of slaves into Christianity via a particularly virulent doctrine.

⁴⁶ Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in Liberty County, Georgia, *13th Annual Report*, 1848, 40. <https://archive.org/details/12960556.4723.emory.edu/page/n5>

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 60.

This type of doctrine had to be designed and delivered in a way that instilled both white supremacy as well as black inferiority. The identification and analysis of such a doctrine is the focus of the final section of this paper. Under investigation are two catechisms, one meant for white adherents and the other, enslaved blacks. Through an analysis of the content and themes in each catechism a clear picture of the indoctrination of slaves with a weaponized doctrine of Christianity becomes apparent.

The Protestant Episcopal Catechisms of the Confederacy

The primary documents under analysis were two catechisms published in 1862 by the Office of the Church Intelligencer in the Confederate states. The first is an 8-page document entitled *the Catechism of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States* (hereafter referred to as the White Catechism) (fig. 3). A second document, published in the same year and by the same Office of the Church Intelligencer, had a more specialized audience. Entitled, *A Catechism to be Taught Orally to Those Who Cannot Read; Designed Especially for the Instruction of the Slaves in the Prot. Episcopal Church in the Cofederate [sic] States* (hereafter referred to as the Slave Catechism) (fig. 4), this document, at 48 pages, was six times the size of the eight-page White Catechism.

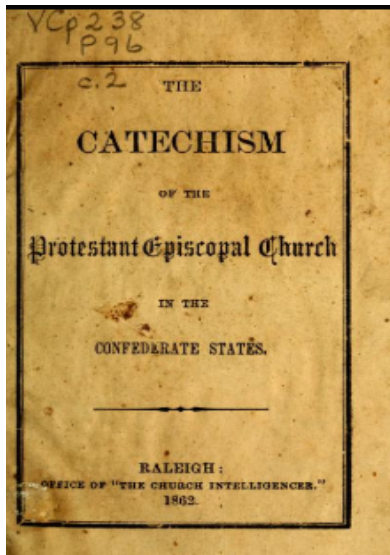


Fig. 3. The Catechism of the Protestant Episcopal Church.

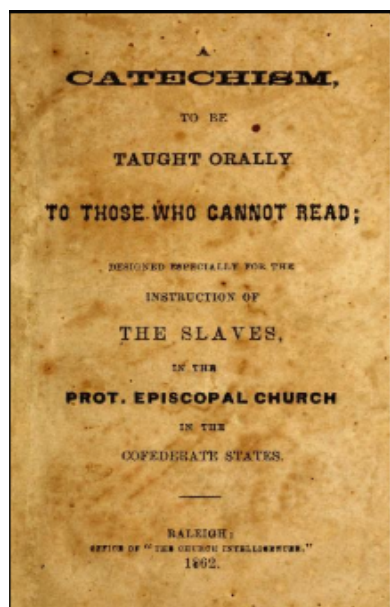


Fig. 4. A Catechism to be Taught Orally to Those Who Cannot Read.

Content

Upon investigation, the makeup of the Original Catechism was a straightforward question and answer format emblematic of catechisms. The tenets of the faith were clearly foregrounded in the question and answer format. Questions regarding the Trinity, the Ten Commandments, the sacraments, baptism, the Lord's Prayer, and other core concepts of

Christianity are asked and answered in a straightforward, matter of fact way. Taken together, the contents of the White Catechism are a succinct embodiment of the major beliefs of the faith and how they are to be understood.⁴⁸

The Slave Catechism, on the other hand, presents itself as a completely different document altogether. Throughout its 48 pages, recurring themes revolve around God's omniscient and ever-watchful eye, sin and the wages of sin, Christ bringing salvation from sin, seeking eternal life, engaging in chaste behavior, obeying and the consequences of disobeying, guarding against the influence of the Devil, how to act in order to get to heaven, doing God's will, and interpretations/applications of the Lord's Prayer. Undoubtedly the most prominent theme of the 48 pages was insisting that the slave have no malice of thought, harbor no ill will, and constantly exercise forgiveness toward their masters.⁴⁹

The difference in length of the two documents was exceptionally interesting. Conventional wisdom in the Antebellum south was that black people were intellectually inferior to whites. In fact, many Christian missionaries, when charged with the task of giving religious instruction to slaves, communicated their disbelief in the effectiveness of such an endeavor. Generally, black slaves were thought to be "slow of apprehension, of dull understanding, and soon forgetting what they learned", and particularly, it was deemed "difficult for black men to understand the principles of education."⁵⁰ The duplicitous nature of this belief is exposed by the

⁴⁸ Office of the Church Intelligencer, *The Catechism of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States*, (Raleigh, NC: Office of the Church Intelligencer, 1862), 1-8.

⁴⁹ Office of the Church Intelligencer, *A Catechism to be Taught Orally to those Who Cannot Read; Designed Especially for the Instruction of the Slaves in the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States*, (Raleigh, NC: Office of the Church Intelligencer, 1862), 1-48.

⁵⁰ James Conroy Jackson, "The Religious Education of the Negro in South Carolina Prior to 1850", *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 36, no. 1, (1976): 45.

48 pages of the slave catechism. Why would a catechism for those of “dull understanding” contain six times the content of the catechism for presumably superior whites?

Likewise, given the supposed inability of black people to understand “the principles of education”, why does the Slave Catechism cover a much wider breadth of complex religious concepts? Some of the articles covered in the Slave Catechism address fairly complex examples of religious thought like the meaning and praxis of the Lord’s Prayer for example. The discussion of the sacrament is yet another example of a complex principle being taught to a supposedly inferior people. As discussed in the Slave Catechism, the sacrament is described as the “outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace”.⁵¹ The discussion of the “visible” as opposed to the “inward” manifestations of the sacrament was also included in the White Catechism. The inclusion of this discussion in both documents is just one example that belies the conventional idea of a supposedly inferior people being unable to digest and comprehend complex religious thought.

Emerging Themes: Personalization, Forgiveness, and God’s Watchful Eye

From the very first page of each catechism, we see other differences emerge. In the White Catechism, we see that almost immediately the adherent is personalized by the asking of their name. The adherent states their name and subsequently recites the titles “member of Christ”, “child of God”, and “inheritor of the kingdom of heaven,”⁵² all of which were bestowed upon them after the act of baptism. Contrast this with the first page of the slave catechism. We see no such personalization, there is no asking of their name. Even if the slaves chose to find themselves in the text of the first page under the generalized description of “men”, we find that “men” is linked with such nonhuman entities such as “trees”, “water”, and “cattle”.

⁵¹ Office of the Church Intelligencer, *A Catechism to be Taught Orally*, 43.

⁵² Office of the Church Intelligencer, *The Catechism*, 1.

Additionally, in response to the question “What were you made of” the slaves respond with “of the dust of the ground.”⁵³ In religious symbology, the dust of the ground is often a metaphor depicting the insignificance of a thing. For example, scriptural references to “dust” have been used as “a symbol of man’s frailty”, as an expression of “deep humiliation, abasement or lamentation”, and to denote a “state of lowliness.”⁵⁴ So here, from the very beginning of each catechism, we see whites personalized and adorned with lofty titles while slaves are grouped with cattle and reminded of their insignificant and lowly origins.

But eventually (and by eventually is meant nearly halfway through their catechism) the slave is made aware of their becoming a member of Christ and child of God upon baptism, but with a catch. Here we see the question asked “Were you a child of God when you were born?” To which, the slaves are directed to respond, “No, I was the child of the wicked one”. Next, they’re asked, “What is it then to be made a child of God in holy baptism?” To which the slave responds, “it is to be taken out of the family of the wicked one and put into the family of God.”⁵⁵ Here, the slave catechism is highlighting the “wicked”, pre-baptismal nature of slaves, but in the White Catechism we find no mention of a wicked pre-baptismal nature whatsoever.

Likewise, there are things that appear in the White Catechism that don’t appear in the catechism for slaves. For example, a biblical reference to being freed from bondage. When asked about the Ten Commandments, the white adherent answers by describing them as “the same which God spake in the 20th chapter of exodus saying I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”⁵⁶ The conspicuous

⁵³ Office of the Church Intelligencer, *A Catechism to be Taught Orally*, 1.

⁵⁴ James Orr. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. “Dust.” Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., (1939).

⁵⁵ Office of the Church Intelligencer, *A Catechism to be Taught Orally*, 20.

⁵⁶ Office of the Church Intelligencer, *The Catechism*, 3.

absence of this reference in the slave catechism could be explained by one of the previously discussed arguments made against the religious instruction of slaves. As we saw, it was thought that exposing slaves to the bible and biblical stories about God's emancipation of slaves was bound to put the wrong ideas in their heads. The rebellion of Nat Turner (who killed over 60 whites) and the planned rebellion of Denmark Vesey for example, both turned the tide against the religious instruction of slaves. This sentiment was exemplified by the residents of Charleston, South Carolina who opposed the establishment of a Negro church because they "were fearful that an independent Negro congregation would create another Vesey or Nat Turner insurrection, and it was their duty to prevent this from happening by refusing to permit the church to exist in the city."⁵⁷

Within the Slave Catechism, we find a host of other telling themes. Take for instance, the idea of self-regulation of thoughts. For nearly a full page the Slave Catechism insists that the slave harbor "no bad thoughts", mind their words and actions, and never hate, never "wish to hurt anybody", or never "wish to do any wrong."⁵⁸ Contrasted with nearly a page of self-regulatory instructions in the Slave Catechism, outside of one sentence about bearing "no malice or hatred in my heart, to keep my hands from picking and stealing, and my tongue from evil speaking, lying and slandering",⁵⁹ we find no extensive treatment or emphasis on admonishing the thoughts, words or wishes of the white adherent within the White Catechism.

Along with the regulation of "harmful" thoughts, forgiveness is another theme we find heavily stressed in the Slave Catechism. In response to the question "How do others sin against

⁵⁷ Jackson, "The Religious Education of the Negro", 58.

⁵⁸ Office of the Church Intelligencer, *A Catechism to be Taught Orally*, 22-23.

⁵⁹ Office of the Church Intelligencer, *The Catechism*, 5.

you” the slave responds, “By cursing me, telling lies about me, or striking me”, all of which slave masters were frequently prone to do.⁶⁰ From there we read,

Q: What must you do to those who thus sin against you?

A: I must forgive them.

Q: What, if you do not forgive them?

A: Then God will not forgive me.

Q: Why?

A: Because, I pray to Him to forgive me, just as I forgive others.

Q: How are you to forgive others when they trespass against you?

A: I am not to hurt them because they hurt me-but I must pray for them and try to do them good

Q: What if you do to them just as they do to you?

A: Then God will not forgive my sins, but will punish me.⁶¹

In the white catechism, we find three significant references to forgiveness. The first appears in the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer (“*forgive* us our trespasses as we *forgive* those who trespass against us”) and the second is a passing reference to God’s forgiveness of sins.⁶²

Contrasted with the full page of instruction given to slaves on forgiveness, in the White Catechism, the only reference to whites showing forgiveness is when the white adherent recites, “I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Catholic Church; the Communion of Saints; the Forgiveness of sins; the Resurrection of the body; And the Life everlasting. Amen.”⁶³

Yet another significant theme interspersed throughout the slave catechism is the

⁶⁰ Office of the Church Intelligencer, *A Catechism to be Taught Orally*, 39.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁶² Office of the Church Intelligencer, *The Catechism*, 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2.

omniscience and omnipresence of God. In these entries, we see how important it is for the slave to know that God can see persons “when they are alone in some secret place” and that God “knows everything”, “sees everything”, and “is always everywhere”.⁶⁴ It absolutely had to be stressed to the slave that God “sees into our hearts, and knows all the thoughts we think”⁶⁵. The omniscience and omnipresence of God is critical to establish in the mind of the slave because, at all costs, the slave must come to know that, even if they think they got away with disobeying the slave master, they never really escape damnation because “*God* knows it; for God always sees” them⁶⁶. In comparison, no such discussion of the ever-watchful, omniscient, and omnipresent God is found anywhere in the White Catechism.

Conclusion

Springing forth from a racialized alterity, one that antagonistically pits white against black, the Christian religious tradition has historically been rife with anti-black references and iconography. This tradition includes representing the Devil as black and associating black skin with vileness, servitude, and divine damnation. Given this tradition, Christianity was well suited as a tool for the religious subjugation of black people in America. Guided by the fluctuating trends in white religious fervor throughout early American history, white evangelicals, white labor elites, and even ordinary white workers ultimately enacted a systematized and specialized program of religious instruction for slaves, especially in the south. Specifically geared toward the mental, physical and spiritual subjugation of slaves, and simultaneously constructed to both maximize the profitability of slaves and minimize any black progress whatsoever, this customized doctrine’s ultimate purpose was the mitigation of material, spiritual and economic loss to whites at the

⁶⁴ Office of the Church Intelligencer, *A Catechism to be Taught Orally*, 8, 11.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 25.

expense of black life and religiosity. In the current study, through the use of primary sources (original catechisms and the proceedings of a pro-slavery organizations), both the rationale and exemplars of this “weaponized” form of Christianity were uncovered and discussed. By highlighting the deliberately pernicious doctrine given strictly to slaves, the current study spotlighted the self-serving interests of white clergy, white labor elites, and ordinary white workers in their proselytizing efforts. It is hoped that this analysis would engender a more critical discussion of black Christian endorsement, and in so doing, replace the “taken for grantedness” that seemingly accompanys aspects of black Christian expression today.

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