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# From "Heathens" to Heaven EnSLAVED

LaToya Abraham

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# From "Heathens" to Heaven EnSLAVED

## **Abstract**

The effects of having one's culture taken from him/her can be catastrophic, and unremitting ramifications have plagued Black Americans as a consequence of living in a culturally oppressive environment.<sup>1</sup> This cultural negation is devastating, for African Americans have been denied their very connection to their humanity and self-worth. During slavery, Europeans used Christianity as a tool of oppression.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Christianity has never served the purpose of liberation, and the purpose of this paper is not to attack the Christian religion. However, religion can be used as a tool of oppression, for religion has the ability to control the actions and self-image of large groups of people. To fully alleviate an oppressed mentality that began with the subjugation of Africans and was fostered through different avenues thereafter, one must look at all the ways which Africans were oppressed,<sup>3</sup> including the use of religion. This thesis examines how Europeans used Christianity to oppress people of African descent.

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# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
The enslavement of Africans .....	2-8
European Christianity's inception amongst indigenous Africans .....	8-15
The attitudes and behaviors of Christianized African slaves .....	15-18
Does Christianity still oppress or negatively control the behaviors of Black Americans? .....	18-19
Endnotes .....	20-21
Bibliography .....	22-24

## enSlAVED

The effects of having one's culture taken from him/her can be catastrophic, and unremitting ramifications have plagued Black Americans as a consequence of living in a culturally oppressive environment.<sup>1</sup> This cultural negation is devastating, for African Americans have been denied their very connection to their humanity and self-worth. During slavery, Europeans used Christianity as a tool of oppression.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Christianity has never served the purpose of liberation, and the purpose of this paper is not to attack the Christian religion. However, religion can be used as a tool of oppression, for religion has the ability to control the actions and self-image of large groups of people. To fully alleviate an oppressed mentality that began with the subjugation of Africans and was fostered through different avenues thereafter, one must look at all the ways which Africans were oppressed,<sup>3</sup> including the use of religion. This thesis examines how Europeans used Christianity to oppress people of African descent.

This paper is divided into four major parts. First, I examine the process of suppressing traditional African culture during the enslavement of Africans. Second, I explore the peculiar fashion by which European forms of Christianity were introduced to African slaves. Third, I investigate the attitudes and behaviors of Christianized African slaves and the purpose Christianity served for them. Fourth, I probe the question, Does Christianity still oppress or negatively control the behaviors of Black Americans?

The teaching of the history and humanity of Africans is much too frequently neglected, and the lives and culture that African slaves had to give up are too often ignored.<sup>4</sup> For example, the public school system often neglects African history or teaches the subject incorrectly, creating a disconnection between Black Americans and

their past.<sup>5</sup> How can one understand the transition from Africans' indigenous cultures and religions to European Christianity if one does not learn the complexity of the condition of the slave?

### **The enslavement of Africans**

John Hope Franklin illustrated in *From slavery to freedom* what happened to African slaves before and during slavery. Africans had their own traditional religions, social and political structures, and culture. The political institutions and economic life varied from place to place. However, it was common to see large families (clans) or kinships. Family structure was important, as Africans knew that the larger the family, the more the work could be divided amongst different people. By lightening the work load, it helped to strengthen the community. This was one of the reasons that polygamy was practiced.<sup>6</sup>

As to traditional religions, Africans believed in one God or Supreme Being who influenced people's lives through lesser gods and spirits. Ancestors, who remained involved with families after death, held a great deal of importance. Prayers and songs were commonplace as well as poring libations and practicing magic. European forms of Christianity were not well known in Africa until the Portuguese brought their practice in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Once introduced, European Christianity was not well received as Africans thought it was hypocritical to preach love and equality but transport Africans to foreign lands to be slaves.<sup>7</sup> Islam was also practiced in West Africa.<sup>8</sup> Diouf explained, "When the first Africans were shipped to the New World, beginning in 1501, Islam was already well established in West Africa. The religion revealed to the Arabian trader Muhammad between 609 and 632 C.E. had been introduced to North Africa as early as

660.”<sup>9</sup> Franklin felt that reports on the number of Africans who practiced Islam were a bit exaggerated. He recognized that Muslims came from Arabia and went to Egypt in the seventh century and later further into North Africa. Yet, Franklin felt that Muslim conversion struggled below the Sahara. Here, traditional African religions were commonly practiced.<sup>10</sup>

Olaudah Equiano described what his culture was like in West Africa in great detail, which supports Franklin’s historical information. Equiano’s narrative had great importance, for it dispelled the myth that Africans had no culture. A myth circulated for centuries that Africans were merely sub-human heathens with no greater purpose in life other than to be the property of their slaveholders.<sup>11</sup> Equiano discussed his native rituals involving marriage, music, dance, law, clothing, and meals. He often compared his native religion with the Jewish religion, which placed a great emphasis on cleanliness.<sup>12</sup> For example, Equiano explained, “The head of the family usually eats alone; his wives and slaves have also their separate tables. Before we taste food we always wash our hands: indeed our cleanliness on all occasions is extreme; but on this it is an indispensable ceremony.”<sup>13</sup>

Equiano was kidnapped into slavery at the age of eight but still was able to recall many details of his African life prior to being sold. When Equiano mentioned his native religion he supported Franklin when he stated:

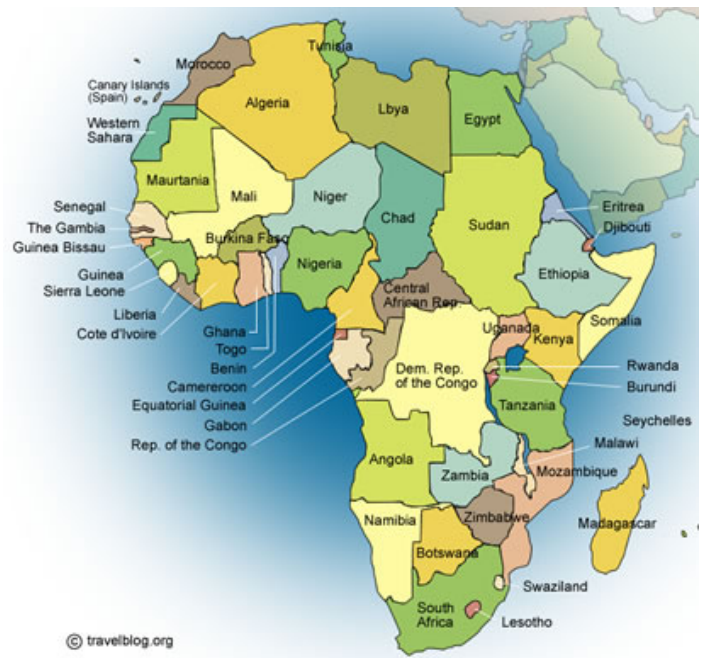
As to religion, the natives' believe that there is one Creator of all things, and that he lives in the sun, and is girthed round with a belt that he may never eat nor drink; but, according to some, he smokes a pipe, which is our own favorite luxury. They believe he governs events, especially our deaths or captivity; but, as for the doctrine of eternity, I do not remember to have ever heard of it: some however believe in the transmigration of souls in a certain degree.<sup>14</sup>

Africans were soon forced to give up their native beliefs. Slaves underwent a terrible amount of mental anguish during the duration of the trans-Atlantic slave trade through the abolishment of slavery in 1865.<sup>15</sup> Slaves were forced to give up nearly all cultural aspects of their former lives.<sup>16</sup> Slaves were taken from the West Coast of Africa and “a majority of them belonged to the Ibo, Ewe, Biafada, Bakongo, Wolof, Bambara, Ibibio, Serer, and Arada peoples.”<sup>17</sup> Blassingame stated that an estimated ten million Africans were enslaved between the 16<sup>th</sup> and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the New World.<sup>18</sup> They were no longer allowed to identify with their indigenous people, land, or culture.<sup>19</sup> A transition from treatment as a person to mere property was continuously reinforced during chattel slavery. Blassingame explained:

The process of enslavement was almost unbelievably painful and bewildering for the Africans. Completely cut off from their native land, they were frightened by the artifacts of the White man’s civilization and terrified by his cruelty until they learned that they were only expected to work for him as they had been accustomed to doing in their native land. Still, some were so morose they committed suicide; others refused to learn the customs of whites and held on to the memory of the African cultural determinants of their own status.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>i</sup>The slave trade in Africa

was first organized by the Spaniards and Portuguese but was later dominated by the English. Europeans used Christianity as a justification for slavery, which was supported by their governments and their churches. Realistically the



<sup>i</sup> Image taken from <http://images.google.com>

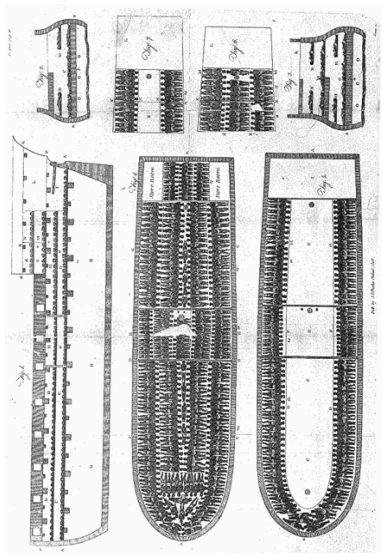


enslavement of Africans was completely economical. Africans were identifiable by color, were not as susceptible to diseases as Native Americans, were easily purchased, and could be “morally and spiritually degraded for the sake of stability on the plantation.”<sup>21</sup>

The cruel practice of the slave trade went through many changes. Commonly

<sup>ii</sup> African slaves were chained together during what was described as the “Middle Passage.” Africans were then crammed into ships, which caused diseases to spread. Many Africans went on hunger strikes to show defiance of their cruel conditions.<sup>22</sup> Baraka stated:

Many of the Africans resisted enslavement at every step in their forced emigration. Conscious of the wrongs they suffered, they began trying to escape on the long march to the coast. Failing this and suicide attempts while still in sight of their native shores, the Africans often mutinied while being transported to the New World and killed their white captors. In spite of their chains and lack of arms, they rebelled so frequently that a number of ship owners took out insurance to cover losses from mutinies.<sup>23</sup>



Blassingame explained that it is false that slaves were “docile and submissive,” because Africans came from a “warrior tradition.” African slaves had to give up their former lives of being a strong warrior people within their own cultures and sets of beliefs the day they set foot into the middle passage. For many it was either too much to handle or they had too much pride to give up all of their native beliefs and attitudes. Many slaves refused to go from being warriors to property and committed suicide by jumping overboard on slave ships before even making it to the New World.<sup>24</sup>

During the slave trade, slave holders calculated that young African males would be the most strategic group to sell in the New World and that adolescent males were less likely to have the ability to cling to their cultural heritage. Slave traders felt that this group became detached from their original culture quickly.<sup>25</sup> Equiano described in his

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<sup>ii</sup> Image taken from <http://blog.hakmao.com/archives/images/brookes-thumb.gif>

narrative that slavery was not a foreign concept, as there had been slavery in his native land. The difference remained with how the slaves were treated. Equiano speaks of slaves having practically normal lives outside of their scheduled work hours. Slaves had sometimes been criminals or prisoners of war, yet they were not led to believe they were sub-human.<sup>26</sup> Chattel slavery developed a new mentality of inferiority and dehumanization. Baraka stated, “To be brought to a country, a culture, a society, that was, and is, in terms of purely philosophical correlative, the complete antithesis of one’s own version of man’s life on earth— that is the cruelest aspect of this particular enslavement.”<sup>27</sup>

Blassingame discussed how hurt and mentally exhausted slaves were when forcibly being beaten into total physical and mental submission.<sup>28</sup> The experience was so traumatic, slaves often committed self-immolation once on the plantation. African slaves worked on plantations, first in the Caribbean islands mostly producing tobacco and then in the Americas, where other types of plantations existed. The rate of death was terribly high from the intense labor with no compassion for age or gender. In the Caribbean, no schools, churches or any other functions of society were produced. Slaveholders merely wanted to make money and return to their homes with no regard for the African slaves.<sup>29</sup> In place of schools and other societal norms, the most recent Africans were “broke in” by the “seasoned” or veteran slaves who were forced to teach slaves how to survive in the New World. Frazier commented on this experience to be much like the experience of immigrants. “Everything that marked him as an alien was regarded as ridiculous and barbaric.”<sup>30</sup> Any reminiscence of the African’s former life was constantly reinforced as a

heathen or a ridiculous practice on the plantation. Slaves who had just entered the New World were separated to help prevent holding on to traditional practices. Franklin stated:

The newcomers were kept apart and supervised by a special staff of guardians and inspectors who were experienced in breaking in those who might offer resistance to adjusting to their new environment. The mortality rate among newly arrived slaves was exceptionally high, with estimates of deaths running to as much as 30 percent in a seasoning period of three or four years. Old and new diseases, change of climate and food, exposure incurred in running away, suicide, and excessive flogging were among the main causes of the high mortality rate.<sup>31</sup>

Africans were forced to work literally from sun up to sun down. Women were beaten when they could not keep up with the work load. Beatings were given to women when they were pregnant or when they carried their small children on their backs.<sup>32</sup>

Women were not allowed to select their own mates. “There were masters who, without any regard for the preferences of their slaves, mated their human chattel as they did their stock.”<sup>33</sup> Motherhood then became a burden, as children were just one more duty to worry about during their enslavement. Having children did not release women from any of their work duties. Families were often sold to different slaveholders. Families also had little to no time to develop a family structure on plantations. Unfortunately, the concept of family life became distorted or destroyed among many African slaves.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>iii</sup>Both men and women under the severe working conditions were barely fed enough food to survive. When slaves became poor workers from the lack of rations, they were whipped. Slaves were often severely punished, leaving their bodies permanently disfigured. Some were even beaten to death and no consequences were served by their slaveholders. Other punishments consisted of, but were not limited to, being branded

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<sup>iii</sup> Image taken from <http://images.google.com/imghp?hl=en&tab=wi>

with a hot iron, suspending slaves from tree ropes with iron weights around their necks and waists, and floggings.<sup>35</sup>

This treatment led certain slaves to revolt but for others made them feel sub-human. The dehumanization of slaves resulted from the cruel practice of cultural hegemony.<sup>36</sup> <sup>iv</sup> The purpose of cultural hegemony was simple, to control the actions and behaviors of the slaves.<sup>37</sup> Without the ability to control the slave, slaveholders knew their financial stability could be threatened. Moreover, dehumanizing slaves became a normal practice in order to instill in the minds of the African slaves a belief in their own inferiority and dependence on the slave master.<sup>38</sup> Slaveholders also desired to control the thoughts and beliefs of Africans because they feared what African slaves might do if they were to mobilize. Slave revolts and insurrections commonly took place and resulted in the torture and killing of the slaves involved. “In the New World slave control was based on the eradication of all forms of African cultures because of its power to unify the slaves and thus enable them to resist or rebel.”<sup>39</sup> There was always the need to mitigate the risk that a slaveholder’s slaves might runaway, rebel, kill their masters, or commit suicide.<sup>40</sup>

### **European Christianity’s inception amongst indigenous Africans**

Quakers tried to convince slaveholders to allow African slaves to learn how to read so they could practice Christianity. They wanted to make the condition of the slave better. Some slaveholders complied, as Franklin observed that “Because Christian slaves were regarded as more obedient and adjusted, they were recruited into the church.”<sup>41</sup> No distinction was made by slaveholders if African slaves were Christian or not; all slaves suffered the same cruelties during chattel slavery. There were many cruel practices

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<sup>iv</sup> Cultural Hegemony— The systematic negation of one culture by another. {*Cultural Hegemony & African American Development*, Clovis E. Semmes.}

during slavery: slave breeding, the complete destruction and separation of families, harsh labor, refusal to educate, language barriers, and disgraceful living conditions were only the start.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, slaves had no protection under the law; were the victims of rape; suffered complete and total servitude 24 hours a day/seven days a week; were severely beaten by overseers; received poor clothing, where shoes were only provided in the winter months; and were forced to live in poor housing.<sup>43</sup> Brutal punishment was always given to those who dared to deviate from the slaveholder's rules. Inviting slaves to attend religious services was another way slaveholders could keep an eye on their slaves.<sup>44</sup>

African slaves' traditional religions were central to their lives. The mentality of the slaves changed when their God, who was a reflection of them, was replaced with the God of the oppressor.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, there was much dispute over whether or not to convert the slave. According to *The religious instruction of the slaves in the antebellum south*, "It was the common belief of that day that one Christian might not hold another in servitude; the conversion of the slave therefore, would necessitate manumission and the consequent loss of property."<sup>46</sup> The loss of property simply meant the loss of wealth. Capitalism is the pervasive dominant means of financial stability in the United States, and many slaveholders understood that the loss of their slaves could cause financial ruin.

The fear was that conversion would create difficulty in maintaining the belief of slave inferiority because African slaves would be fellow Christians. Eventually, "Legislation by many of the colonial assemblies and judicial opinions by court officials in England gradually removed the fear that conversion would necessitate manumission."<sup>47</sup> However, after the removal of the fear of manumission, slaveholders still did not rush to convert enslaved Africans. Slaveholders felt that as Christian

slaveholders, they would be obligated to give their Christian slaves time to practice their religion. However, between 1740 and 1790 slaveholders began to view the conversion of slaves with a positive regard.<sup>48</sup> They began to believe that there was a chance that conversion could be “a means of making the slave a more trustworthy and valuable servant.”<sup>49</sup> Frazier revealed, “Where slavery developed as a patriarchal institution, a certain amount of formal religious instruction supplemented the unconscious assimilation of the white man’s moral and religious ideas.”<sup>50</sup> The point of converting slaves then was not for the religious salvation of the slave, but to find more ways to control the slave.<sup>51</sup> Churches were segregated and “ministers were encouraged to instruct slaves along the lines of obedience and subservience.”<sup>52</sup>

Riggins revealed, “Southern diviners learned the importance of helping anxiety-ridden masters to see the direct correlation between converted slaves and obedient ones. In short, they taught that conversion to Jesus actually made better slaves.”<sup>53</sup> *The Black American* featured a slave catechism<sup>v</sup> Frederick Douglass disclosed from his personal experience. This was a sermon given by a White slaveholder to a Black congregation, June 2, 1854. The catechism was taken from a sermon at the Southern Episcopalian Church. Riggins described the intention of these catechisms saying, “The intellectual elite of the clergy produced a body of pedagogy<sup>vi</sup> (consisting of sermons, pastoral letters, catechisms, and addresses) to make African Americans both good Christians and good slaves.”<sup>54</sup> Douglas referenced a sermon given in Charleston, South Carolina. He pointed out that:

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<sup>v</sup> Catechism— *Ecclesiastical*. a. an elementary book containing a summary of the principles of the Christian religion, esp. as maintained by a particular church, in the form of questions and answers. {Dictionary.com}

<sup>vi</sup> Pedagogy— a. the function or work of a teacher; teaching. b. the art or science of teaching; education; instructional methods. {Dictionary.com}

Control of the slave was exercised through religion, whether encouraged as a type of escape from the trouble of the world or used as a form of indoctrination.<sup>55</sup>

This control was completed by creating a focus on the *afterlife*. Douglas illustrated how the slave master used religious thinking to exploit their workers. The slave master took this devotion to God and heaven and used it to control the behavior of the slaves. In the catechism Douglas provided, a White preacher told the slaves what their replies were to be to his questions. Messages of African inferiority, being a “good slave,” and maintaining loyalty to the slave master were written within their contents.<sup>56</sup>

Q. Who keeps the snakes and all bad things from hurting you? /A. God does. /Q. Who gave you a master and a mistress? /A. God gave them to me. /Q. Who says that you must obey them? /A. God says that I must. /Q. What book tells you these things? /A. The Bible. /Q. How does God do all his work? /A. He always does it right. /Q. Does God love to work? /A. Yes, God is always at work. /Q. Do the angels work? /A. Yes, they do what God tells them. /Q. Do they love to work? /A. Yes, they love to please God. /Q. What does God say about your work? /A. He that will not work shall not eat. /Q. Did Adam and Eve have to work? /A. Yes, they had to keep the garden. /Q. Was it hard to keep that garden? /A. No, it was very easy. /Q. What makes the crops so hard to grow now? /A. Sin makes it. /Q. What makes you lazy? /A. My wicked heart. /Q. How do you know your heart is wicked? /A. I feel it every day. /Q. Who teaches you so many wicked things? /A. The Devil. /Q. Must you let the Devil teach you? /A. No, I must not.<sup>57</sup>

Slave masters hoped a number of results would come from ingraining these messages, including: working without complaining or breaking tools, belief in the promise of heaven, belief that one was naturally wicked and needed to prove to God his/her devotion by obeying the slave master, the deterrence of running away and revolts, belief that it was one’s own fault that work was difficult, and belief that one was responsible for the predicament in which he/she lived.<sup>58</sup> “This minority group of divines was careful to interpret the scripture so as to accommodate slave masters’ economic

interests.”<sup>59</sup> As a result, African slaves internalized the beliefs of their White slave masters.

The Southern slaveholders were always careful about how slaves received their religion, for they feared that slaves would use Christianity as a tool of liberation. Many restrictions were made, especially after Nat Turner’s revolt of 1831. Nat Turner’s rebellion, like many others, put fear in the hearts of White slaveholders. Slaveholders feared that Christian slave revolts would become common place in addition to the general rebellion that was already taking place. Nat Turner used evidence from the New and Old Testaments to support his revolt and even testified that he had been beseeched by God to lead his revolt. Turner claimed to have visions and described many signs that led to his insurrection.<sup>60</sup> Blassingame spoke of the solutions slaveholders used to attempt to prevent Christian slave revolts like Turners.

The inevitable result was a wave of legislation, which had as its object, the restriction of Negro meetings and Negro education so as to safeguard against the work of the abolitionists. These laws forbade preaching by Negroes except when licensed by Southern Church bodies, and meetings except when a specified number of acceptable White persons were in attendance. The laws also forbade the teachings of the Negroes to read or write.<sup>61</sup>

In the Frederick Douglass slave narrative, Douglass mentioned the reason why White slaveholders had no desire to teach or allow their slaves to learn to read. He commented that a White woman attempted to teach him to read, not knowing that this was frowned upon. Douglass’ master quickly told her not to do so, because having education would forever make him unfit to be a slave. Slaveholders knew that in order to keep control over their slaves, they had to control the minds of their slaves.<sup>62</sup> Woodson said it best when he stated, “If you can control a mans thinking you don’t have to worry



about his actions.”<sup>63</sup> Woodson argued that teaching Black people to feel inferior made Black people behave in an inferior manner, a problem that resurfaces among Black people today.<sup>64</sup> Some of this inferiority complex was taught by racist Christians. Even in their writings, some missionaries and abolitionists who appealed to the masses to allow all Black people to become Christians still used racist descriptions while doing so.<sup>65</sup>

In one of his sermons in 1847, John B. Adger discussed the need to teach Blacks Christianity. However, Adger described the slave population as inferior. He claimed that although Christianity should be preached to slaves, it should not happen in the same churches as Whites, for Black people were not intelligent enough to understand or keep up with a regular White congregation. Adger even said, “Do not point me to those few remarkable cases which certainly do exist, wherein, notwithstanding every disadvantage of circumstances, even their intellect has worked itself out into the light of truth, as though a block of marble should chisel itself into a statue.”<sup>66</sup>

During this sermon Adger attempted to make the point that African slaves would either go to heaven or hell, and it was the job of White Christians to let slaves know about the possibility of eternal life. He described the slaves as an ignorant and corrupted people who needed enlightenment. Adger asserted, “These rough diamonds, worn, as they must necessarily be, on the bosom of our domestic life, the more perfectly they are freed from their natural incrustations of ignorance and corruption, will all the more enrich and adorn.”<sup>67</sup> The religion itself and what it taught became secondary to Whites who delivered this religion to slaves. They first wanted slaves to believe they were inferior beings. A mentality of inferiority was transferred to African slaves during the

transference of the religion because the slaveholders connected Christianity to the idea that Africans were inferior.<sup>68</sup>

Often the argument to convert slaves was centered on heaven and hell, but the language used by these ministers still suggested that Blacks were inferior beings. Even the title of a prominent Christian text of the period, *The duty of Christians to propagate their religion among heathens*, suggested superiority and inferiority between Whites and Blacks. The word “heathen” and all its negative connotations were directed to the slave. In a sermon preached in 1757 by J. Oliver, he stated, “In this view, the crowds of neglected Negro slaves among us, have often appeared to me as creatures of the utmost importance. The same immortality is entailed upon them, as upon us. They are candidates for the same eternal state with us, and bound for the same heaven or hell.”<sup>69</sup> The inexplicable fact that African slaves were referred to as heathens or creatures in the first place is a clear statement of the mentality of the person giving the sermon. To have to explain to people that Africans had souls and shared the same fate in the afterlife was deeply troubling.<sup>70</sup> Riggins explained:

Ministers of the plantations believed it was their responsibility to do the following for the perpetuation of right relationships between slaves and masters: to teach and convert slave masters to the idea that their slaves possessed souls; to convince masters that converting slaves to Jesus Christ actually made them better servants, enhancing the value of their bodies on the trade market; and, to create adequate pedagogical resources that would facilitate the instruction of slaves in the knowledge necessary for Christian conversion.<sup>71</sup>

As an African slave, to accept preaching from slaveholders was to accept the belief of one’s own inferiority and develop a mental bond with the slaveholder. Christianity’s focus from the slaveholder’s point of view was on controlling slaves, not saving them.

The religion became “business as usual” as slaveholders tried to think of ways to profit from the conversion of their slaves.<sup>72</sup>

The topic of the inferiority of slaves stimulated much debate. Riggins discussed the different phases of this debate. He said:

Whites seemed unequivocally certain in their belief that God had created them superior to those of African origin. Ensnared with this notion, liberal Whites spent much time and energy debating the theological question of the nature of the slave’s being. At the very heart of the master/slave relationship, masters had to face the question of whether the African American was created in the image of God. This question required more than a simple “yes” or “no” answer in a society that affirmed the Christian worldview as being normative.<sup>73</sup>

Riggins explained that there were two main purposes and rationales for converting slaves to Christianity. The first was “The theological and ethical teaching proved that God had ordained slavery as a moral means of preparing the African for the introduction of Christianity. God had suffered the White humanity to enslave Africans to bring their souls to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.”<sup>74</sup> Slaveholders often tried to convince Black slaves that it was the slaveholder’s *suffered* duty to keep the Africans in their hellish captivity. To some, this sounded like blasphemy but to slaves at the time a revelation of truth and understanding as to why they were living in that horrific position. This was particularly true for those who were born into slavery and had no memories of their own native land. Secondly, “The soul salvation of the White Christian was invariably intertwined with the soul salvation of the slave.”<sup>75</sup> This meant that without converting slaves, slaveholders would not be in the good graces of God.

### **The attitudes and behaviors of Christianized African slaves**

The response from converted slaves definitely created a change in their behavior, as they shared the mentality of the oppressor. Many slave narratives discussed what

living on a plantation was like after being converted to Christianity. They discussed in great detail what slaves saw, how they were treated, and what slaves felt. The Social Science Institute at Fisk University compiled 40 narratives in one book called *God struck me dead*. Its contents illustrated some of the lowest moments of a slave's life, but more importantly, each narrative focused on the conversion of the slave. These conversion narratives showed the change in the mentality of Christianized African slaves.<sup>76</sup>

The book *Dark symbols and obscure signs* gave additional examples of catechisms used to mentally control slaves. The 37<sup>th</sup> question had a direct correlation with a slave narrative in *God struck me dead*. The question was, "When Negroes become religious, how must they behave to their masters?" The reply was, "The scriptures in many places command them to be honest, diligent and faithful in all things, and not to give saucy answers; and even when they are whipped when doing well, to take it patiently and look to God for their reward."<sup>77</sup> A narrative entitled "I Am Blessed but You Are Damned" described a man who did exactly what that catechism taught. He was working hard in a field when his horse ran off. The slave was certain that he was to be whipped but claimed not to be fearful or complain, because he knew God was with him. He said, "I had a deep feeling of satisfaction and no longer dreaded the whipping I knew I would get. My master looked at me and seemed to tremble."<sup>78</sup> I cannot be certain that God did not speak to this slave and tell him not to fear being whipped by his slave master. Yet, with catechisms like the ones listed above, one must question whether or not such a catechism had influenced this man's response to the slaveholder. He did not mention that God would protect him from the abuse or be with him if he tried to fight back; instead, the slave granted complete submission to the slaveholder.

Another important excerpt from the same catechism is as follows:

Q. Which do you think is the happiest person, the master or the slave? /A. When I rise on a cold morning and make a fire, and my master in bed; or when I labor in the sun, on a hot day, and my master in the shade; then I think him happier than I am. /Q. Do you think you are happier than he? /A. Yes: When I come in from my work; eat my hearty supper, worship my maker; lie down without care on my mind; sleep sound; get up in the morning strong and fresh; and hear that my master could not sleep, for thinking on his debts and taxes; and how he shall provide victual and clothes for his family, or what he shall do for them when they are sick- then I bless God that he has placed me in my humble station; I pity my master, and feel myself happier than he is. /Q. Then it seems every body is best, just where God has placed them? /A. Yes: the Scriptures say, if I am called, being a slave, I am not to care for it; for every true Christian, is Christ's free man, whether he be bound or free in this world."<sup>79</sup>

Sadly the message in this catechism can be found in other slave narratives. In many of the narratives in *God struck me dead*, slaves discussed serving God, God calling out to them, and where they would spend eternity. An excerpt from "To Hell With A Prayer In My Mouth" showed a slave woman who said, "I saw myself sailing along in midair one day, and when I leave this world I am going to take the wings of the morning and go into the building where there is eternal joy. Amen and thank God."<sup>80</sup> Her narrative did not spend any time on how God would help free slaves from captivity.

In the narratives, slaves frequently discussed being happy and rejoicing for God. Outside of Nat Turner's confession, there were no discussions of how God was to liberate the slaves from their oppression on earth. The discussion focused on how God had *spiritually* released slaves from their imprisonment. Great gratitude and praise were always given to God about the *afterlife*. Many slaves claimed to have visions seeing heaven, hell, or angels. Some slaves asked for deliverance from their specific situation, but they did not mention praying for God to release them from the institution of slavery as a whole.<sup>81</sup> This is not to say this never happened, but why did so many slaves pray for

only temporary peace and not for the liberation of all peoples? Had the slaveholder's words seeped deep into the psyche of the slave? Did the slaves begin to believe that it really was the slaveholder's suffered duty to keep them in captivity, or had Christianity simply become the place where the disappearance of caring about the collective upheld by Afrocentric values was replaced with Eurocentric individualism?

### **Does Christianity still oppress or negatively control the behaviors of Black Americans?**

If Christianity once impeded members of the Black community from seeking complete and total liberation from oppression in America, is the same true today? I argue that people are still waiting on heaven as opposed to demanding their equality and their rights. During slavery, slaves were forced to accept the circumstances in which they existed. European Christianity was a way slaveholders tried to make oppression invisible. Christianity taught by White churches hindered Black peoples' ability to stay connected with their original African culture and values and forced them to accept the cultures of the oppressor.<sup>82</sup> Of course there are examples of Christians who demanded equal rights like civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. Yet there were those who were less willing to take a stand like King. Frazier revealed, "The churches became and have remained until the past twenty years or so, the most important agency of social control among Negroes."<sup>83</sup> The Church has had positive and negative effects, but few efforts have been made to recognize these negative effects and create change.

Frazier observed, "The enslavement of the Negro not only destroyed the traditional African system of kinship and other forms of organized social life, but it made insecure and precarious the most elementary form of social life which tended to sprout

anew, so to speak on American soil, the family.”<sup>84</sup> Slaves’ original cultures, families, and religions were destroyed; understandably they took on whatever belief system that was available to them. Although slaves were persuaded to follow a new religion, that does not mean Black people must continue to embrace the same beliefs and practices once their circumstances have changed.

Black people were oppressed through religious education during slavery, and they are oppressed through the educational system today. Slaves were oppressed economically, and Blacks are economically exploited today. Black people were portrayed as inferior during slavery and are portrayed as inferior today; and in the same way Black people were oppressed culturally, there is cultural deprivation today.<sup>85</sup> When circumstances improved for Black people, it should not be assumed that the problem of oppression was eradicated. Undoubtedly Black people during slavery were oppressed religiously and religious oppression exists now. Religion transformation is needed to fix *all* of the ways Black people are oppressed.

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Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Clovis E. Semmes, *Cultural hegemony and African American development* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1992), x-xiii.
- <sup>2</sup> Earl R. Riggins Jr., *Dark symbols, obscure signs: God, self, and community in the slave mind* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003). ; Albert Raboteau, *Slave religion: the "invisible institution" in the antebellum south* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Leslie H. Fishel Jr. and Benjamin, Quarles eds. *The Black American: a brief documentary history* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1970), 5,77.
- <sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (England: Penguin Books, 1993), 18.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The mis-education of the Negro* (Chicago: African American Images, 2000), 9-16.
- <sup>6</sup> John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *From slavery to freedom: a history of African Americans, Eighth Edition* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2000), 21.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 27.
- <sup>8</sup> Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 1.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Franklin, *From slavery*, 26.
- <sup>11</sup> Vincent Caretta, *Equiano, the African: biography of a self-made man.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), xi-xix.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 28.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> John W., Blassingame, *The slave community: plantation life in the antebellum south.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 5.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 5.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Franklin, *From slavery*, 39.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 44.
- <sup>23</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Blues people; Negro music in white America* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher Inc., 1999),10.
- <sup>24</sup> Blassingame, *The slave community*, 3-4.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, 9.
- <sup>26</sup> Caretta, *Equiano*, 23.
- <sup>27</sup> Baraka, *Blues people*, 1.
- <sup>28</sup> Blassingame, *The slave community*, 47.
- <sup>29</sup> Franklin, *From slavery*, 52.
- <sup>30</sup> Franklin E. Frazier, *The Negro family in the United States* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1948), 6.
- <sup>31</sup> Franklin, *From slavery*, 53.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 54.
- <sup>33</sup> Frazier, *The Negro family*, 18.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 35-37.
- <sup>35</sup> Franklin, *From slavery*, 54.
- <sup>36</sup> Semmes, *Cultural hegemony*, 1.
- <sup>37</sup> Raboteau, *Slave religion*.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 4.
- <sup>40</sup> Fishel and Quarles, *The Black American*, 20.
- <sup>41</sup> Franklin, *From slavery* 73.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 133.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 149.



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- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 153.
- <sup>45</sup> Blassingame, *The slave community*, 130-133.
- <sup>46</sup> Clarence Vernon Bruner, *The religious instruction of the slaves in the antebellum south* (Ph. D. diss., George Peabody College, 1933), 2.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 2.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 2.
- <sup>50</sup> Frazier, *The Negro family*, 29.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Franklin, 154.
- <sup>53</sup> Riggins, *Dark symbols*, 24.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>55</sup> Fishel and Quarles, *Black American*, 114.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 114.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., 114.
- <sup>58</sup> Riggins, *Dark symbols*.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>60</sup> Fishel and Quarles, "Nat Turner's Confession," *The Black American*, 120.
- <sup>61</sup> Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 4.
- <sup>62</sup> Frederick, Douglas, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave, written by himself* (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press 1993), 57.
- <sup>63</sup> Woodson, *The mis-education*, 84.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> John Bailey Adger, *The religious instruction of the colored population: A sermon* (Charleston: T.W. Haynes, 1847).
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., 8.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., 12.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> Samuel Davies, *The duty of Christians to propagate their religion among heathens, earnestly recommended to the masters of Negro slaves in Virginia a sermon preached in Hanover, January 8, 1757* (London: Pr. by J Oliver, 1758), 4.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>71</sup> Riggins, *Dark symbols*, 24.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>76</sup> Johnson, *God struck me dead*, xvi.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., 41.
- <sup>78</sup> Clifton H. Johnson, "I am blessed but you are damned" *God struck me dead: religious conversion experience and autobiographies of Negro ex-slaves* (Nashville: Social Science Institute, 1945), 14.
- <sup>79</sup> Riggins, *Dark symbols*, 41.
- <sup>80</sup> Fisk, *God struck me dead*, 93-96.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>82</sup> Raboteau.
- <sup>83</sup> Frazier, *The Negro church in America*, 40.
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid., 13.
- <sup>85</sup> Woodson, *The mis-education*, 111-119.

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\_\_\_\_\_. *God struck me dead: religious conversion experience and autobiographies of Negro ex-slaves*. Nashville: Social Science Institute, 1945, p xv-xix.

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