

The function of christianity in slave literature



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Much of the literature that emerged during the 19th century dealt with the then controversial and incredibly widespread institution of slavery. Nearly equally widespread, however, was white Southerners' claim to Christianity, a religion that, by the mid-19th century, had become inextricably intertwined with the institution of slavery. In his autobiographical slave narrative, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," Frederick Douglass calls attention to the vast incongruity between the doctrines of Christianity and the practice of it in a region dominated by an economic system based on the enslavement of an entire race of people. Many of the other literary works of this time echoed this sentiment, confronting the issue of slavery against the backdrop of Christianity—for example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which follows the journey of Tom and several other slaves under the ownership of several different masters, and Hannah Crafts' recently discovered *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, which chronicles a female slave's life and eventual escape from captivity into the North. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provides a criticism of the "slaveholding religion" Douglass describes, largely by depicting characters who hypocritically promote this warped version of Christianity—characters who stand in stark contrast to what Douglass would likely call "the Christianity of Christ" that Crafts' characters exhibit. Taken together, these two works ultimately affirm Douglass' argument that the Christianity of the South is not true Christianity, and underscore the subtle but crucial difference between "Christianizing" and "being Christian."

In the Appendix to his "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," Douglass takes care to note the difference between what he calls "the

slaveholding religion” of the South and “ Christianity proper” (1235), remarking that, “ between the Christianity of this Land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked” (1235). Here, Douglass is asserting that the teachings of Christianity in their original form lie in irreconcilable contradiction both to the Christianity of slaveholders and to the institution of slavery itself. He argues that, far from being an image of true Christianity as Christ intended it, the way in which southern slaveholders practice Christianity is, “ a dark shelter under which the... most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection” (1217). This assertion points to Christianity, then, as a device for masking the evils of slavery rather than a belief system for its own sake. Douglass makes clear throughout his writing that the practice slavery, which is fundamentally evil, cannot coexist with Christianity in its true and authentic form—a mutual exclusion that thus produces the chasm between what he refers to as the “ slaveholding religion” of the South and Christianity as it existed at its conception.

This contradiction, which Douglass conveys both boldly and articulately, is one that Harriet Beecher Stowe acknowledges and highlights throughout *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Stowe’s writing is ultimately a critique of the hypocrisy inherent in the slaveholding religion practiced throughout the South in the mid-19th century. Stowe’s position on the issue of Christian slaveholders, which aligns closely with Douglass’s, is made clear in the narrator’s remark that, “ that soul immortal, once bought with blood and anguish by the Son of God... can be sold, leased, mortgaged, exchanged for groceries or dry goods,

to suit the phases of trade, or the fancy of the purchaser" (881). This powerful quote calls attention to precisely what Douglass aimed to criticize, and unveils the overwhelming contradiction between Christianity—which proclaims the inherent value in every human life, regardless of race or status—and the practice of buying and selling human beings at the whim of slave owners and slave traders. Here, Stowe asserts that the evils of slavery are fundamentally at odds with the teachings of Christ, which a vast majority of white slaveholders claimed to follow. That Stowe intends to underscore this contradiction is also made clear through the character of St. Clare, who openly criticizes several of the other characters for the way in which Christianity is practiced. For instance, when Haley is attempting to sell Tom to him, and is emphasizing repeatedly Tom's value as a pious, religious slave, St. Clare says that, "the country is almost ruined with pious white people... such pious goings on in all departments of church and state, that a fellow does not know who'll cheat him next" (864). St. Clare's remark is aimed at pointing out that piousness as it is understood and practiced in the South is not a reflection of genuine honesty or integrity; in fact, he argues that the apparent piousness of many white people makes it difficult to discern their character. Through this statement, St. Clare calls attention to the fact that the religiousness of the Southerners is not a reflection of any real virtue, and is therefore not in line with true Christianity.

As a whole, therefore, Stowe's writing points out the discrepancy between Christianity and southern "Christianity," and calls attention to the fact that buying and selling of human beings is fundamentally not Christian. However, Uncle Tom's Cabin also highlights the more subtle but equally relevant issue

of using Christianity to promote slavery through the attempt to “Christianize” the slaves. This can be seen most clearly through the character of Miss Ophelia and her relationship with Topsy, a young slave who is repeatedly referred to by the other characters with words like “wicked” and “heathenish.” Miss Ophelia, who is presented as well-meaning at least in comparison to most of the other characters, tries to train and educate Topsy. She devotes much time and effort into, as the Bible instructs, “train[ing] [her] in the way she should go” (865). Although, on the surface, Miss Ophelia’s efforts seem to represent the more positive side of Christianity in the midst slavery, her actions ultimately contribute the institution of slavery. It is clear from her first interaction with Topsy that she is training her not because she perceives any worth in Topsy as a person, but because she is convinced that Topsy needs to be “Christianized.” The first words Miss Ophelia offers in response to meeting Topsy are, “Augustine, what in the world have you brought that thing here for?” (865), followed by a reference to the slave children who occupy the house as “little plagues” (866). This remarks make it apparent that, regardless of her agreement to teach Topsy—which comes only after St. Clare points out that it is unchristian of her not to take responsibility for “the labor of conversion” (866)—Miss Ophelia’s interests are not in Topsy’s personal well being, for she fails to view her as having the value of a person.

Miss Ophelia’s work with Topsy, rather, is aimed at transforming her into the ideal, “pious” slave—an image that Tom embodies and is praised for throughout the novel. He is described, most often by those who are trying to sell him, as a “pious fellow” (808), emphasizing Tom’s devotion to

Christianity as the reason for his “remarkably inoffensive and quiet character” (858). Here, it is clear that Tom’s piety is not praised simply because it is seen as a positive characteristic in itself, but because it moves him to be obedient and subservient. This becomes increasingly evident when Haley is trying to sell him to St. Clare, for he claims that Tom is, ““All the moral and Christian virtues bound in black morocco, complete!”” (863). That Tom is so heavily praised for being religious points to white Southerners’ use of religion as a means of eliciting desirable behavior from slaves, and reaffirms the idea that teachers such as Miss Ophelia exist not for the sake of obtaining salvation for the slaves by teaching them Christianity, but for the sole purpose of making them more obedient and therefore more useful.

Where Uncle Tom’s Cabin depicts characters who use Christianity to promote slavery and to “Christianize” slaves for the purpose of evoking obedience, Hannah Crafts’ *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* paints a picture of Christianity in its more genuine form. Crafts provides a foil to Miss Ophelia’s character in the form of Aunt Hetty, the kind woman who helps teach Hannah to read and write as a child. Instead of attempting to teach Hannah to “act Christian,” Aunt Hetty teaches Hannah practical skills because her Christianity moves her to see the inherent worth in Hannah as a human being. Upon meeting Hannah, Aunt Hetty says, “I was thinking of our Saviour’s words to Peter where he commands the latter to ‘feed his lambs.’ I will dispense to you such knowledge as I possess” (7). Aunt Hetty, who in teaching Hannah to read is knowingly disobeying the law, risks her own well-being for the sake of aiding Hannah, without having any personal investment in Hannah’s obedience and piety. Though she has nothing to gain from Hannah’s

being “ Christianized,” she says, “ I feel a warmer interest in your welfare than I should were you the daughter of a queen” (8). It is in this declaration that the difference between Aunt Hetty and Miss Ophelia becomes strikingly clear. Aunt Hetty, unlike Miss Ophelia, shows genuine love and kindness as a result of her belief in Christianity, and sees a value in Hannah that Miss Ophelia, because of her perception of slaves as being of lesser worth, cannot see in Topsy. This fundamental belief is what accounts for the difference in the way each teacher goes about teaching; Miss Ophelia attempts to teach Christianity in order to elicit a particular behavior, while Aunt Hetty teaches Hannah because she is Christian.

These two characters, though they appear to have very similar functions, illustrate one of the subtle but fundamental differences between the slaveholding religion of the South and the true Christianity between which Douglass notes such an important difference. Where Miss Ophelia’s practice of Christianity, though perhaps well-intended, ultimately contributes to the institution of slavery by promoting subservience, Aunt Hetty’s enables Hannah to rise above her imposed status of slave by granting her literacy. That the characters’ treatments of the slaves with whom they interact are so different despite a shared claim to Christianity as their motive points to the difference that Douglass highlights between the religion of the South and what he calls “ the Christianity of Christ” (1235). Taken together, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and The Bondswoman’s Narrative ultimately highlight two incredibly different versions of Christianity, and work to affirm Douglass’ point that Christianity had been so heavily warped by the desire to justify the

institution of slavery that it no longer represented the truth of the religion, and became instead a tactic used to cover up the evils of the system.

Works Cited

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