

The church and slavery



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Throughout Harriet Jacobs' powerful and informative autobiography, Christianity is repeatedly mentioned as a direct and indirect influence on the episodes of her life as an enslaved woman. Jacobs depicts religion amongst the enslaved as an assuaging escape from their suffering and exposes the Christianity of the White slaveholder as a hypocritical contrast to their lack of morality. Within her autobiography, she dedicates a chapter, entitled "The Church and Slavery," to Christianity's place in Southern society. Her accounts within this chapter show Northern Christian readers how their religion was being corrupted under the institution of slavery. Jacobs' intended effect on the anti-slavery movement was influenced by the effects of the Second Great Awakening and the cohesion between abolition and religious revival. Although many Christians in the North were in favor of immediate emancipation, they were focusing their religious energy on the conversion of native people abroad rather than the moral education of White slaveholders within their own country. However, Jacobs recognizes that there were too many obstacles to overcome in order to inspire moral revolution amongst Southern slaveholders. Within this section of Harriet Jacobs' narrative, the author attempts to connect with the Northern Christian in order to expand the abolitionist movement; Since her call to action is ultimately unrealistic, we get a sense of how difficult it was for abolitionists to achieve widespread change.

Christianity in Harriet Jacobs' community was used as a means of further controlling enslaved people. Since slaveowners feared that their slaves would plan an uprising against them, religious instruction was used to encourage enslaved people to subject to their master and, therefore, to God.

Reverend Pike taught the enslaved people within his community his interpretation of Christian morality. This was ironic because, according to Jacobs, “ many of them [were] sincere, and nearer to the gate of heaven than sanctimonious Mr. Pike” (Jacobs 78). Although White Southerners sought to prevent uprising through moral education, African Americans had a more pure connection to God and a better moral understanding than any slaveholder or hypocritical Southern preacher. The most haunting aspect of any abusive slaveowner she described was that, “ he...boasted the name and standing of a Christian, though Satan never had a truer follower” (Jacobs 55). A slaveowner’s Christianity was used as a means of justifying to themselves and to others that they had a moral conscience and that God would save them for it. Jacobs writes of this religious corruption to grab the attention of Northern Christians. The Second Great Awakening inspired religion that focused on morality, philanthropy, and reform. Therefore, any Protestant that was devoted to the values of the religious revival would be offended by the events in Jacobs’ narrative. Religion should not be used as a means of controlling the enslaved people, but rather, as a means of freeing them.

Many Northern Christians were oblivious to the true sufferings of the enslaved people. This is partially because slaveholders were manipulative and made it appear as if their slaves were content with their position. Any religious leaders that travel to the South were deceived into believing that enslaved people were allowed to freely worship and that they did not want to be emancipated. Therefore, Jacobs took it upon herself to expose the condition of the enslaved person to those who were deceived. She used the

theme of religion in conjunction with the suffering of the enslaved people to build a connection with religious readers. The pressure to motivate readers to sympathize with the anti-slavery movement had an impact on the topics Harriet Jacobs' focused on and the themes she incorporated in her narrative. Jacobs saw the importance of religion in her story partially due to the fact that religious Northerners could most likely be swayed to join the abolitionist movement if she connected with them.

Since Jacobs was influenced by the anti-slavery movement and wrote her narrative for the cause, she was pressured to call on others to do their part in the movement. She criticized the religious revival and asked them to focus on domestic missionary work rather than international. She wrote: " They send the Bible to heathen abroad, and neglect the heathen at home...I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home" (Jacobs 82). Here, she refers to the Southern Christians as heathen because they did not have a proper understanding of Christianity and its core values. They treated men as property, took children from their mothers, and physically assaulted enslaved people, yet deemed themselves ethical and in touch with God. If religious revivalists worked with Southern slaveholders, in theory, they would leave their positions as slave owners to follow more Christian lives. Since she personally saw the healing powers of religion within her own community, she hoped that people with money and higher status could utilize it as a weapon against the institution of slavery. Her connection to Northern Christians in conjunction with a call for their help in the South should have been beneficial to the anti-slavery movement. However, Jacobs acknowledged that change was not so simple.

Due to the conflict between the North and the South and the aversion Southerners had towards abolitionists, it would have been nearly impossible for missionaries to effectively inspire change amongst the slaveholders. Although there may have been some missionaries willing to teach in the South, they would have been run out of the region or punished for their work. In order for slaveholders to have been cognizant of their own sins, they would have had to be accepting of reformed religion and the teachings of the missionaries. Therefore, it was unrealistic to assume that missionaries would have the same influence over White Southerners as they did over other peoples. Jacobs tried to achieve what the anti-slavery movement asked of her by giving Northerners incentive to help enslaved people. Her retraction of her call to action represents the difficulty many anti-slavery activists faced. There were too many obstacles to overcome due to the immense power of slaveholders and the legal system that backed them. Social influence and the dehumanization of enslaved people allowed every day people to become blind to how evil the institution of slavery was. Even the most powerful of anti-slavery arguments, including Jacobs' emotionally provoking narrative, had difficulty incorporating realistic plans to abolish the institution. Harriet Jacobs only weapon was her narrative. Although it was powerful, it was not enough to convince all Southern slaveholders to emancipate their slaves.

Jacobs' incorporation of religious themes is representative of the relation religion had to all aspects of slavery. She made it easy for others to connect with her narrative by relating it to something many people were familiar with. In a broader sense, Jacobs' narrative was meant to influence others by

giving them an outlet to sympathize with the suffering of an enslaved person. Although religion was an important part of this autobiography, other aspects such as motherhood, familial ties, and the kindness of others gave readers something to think about and relate to. Jacobs saw how difficult it was to get others to sympathize with your story, believe your story, and be so influenced by it that they are inspired to take action and her writing conveys this. Although she was restrained by trying to get readers to care about her cause, her awareness of the power of her autobiography as a persuasive piece made it that much more memorable and significant.