

Conflict of slavery and religion



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Abstract

This paper argues that religion and slavery are in conflict based on Frederick Douglass' Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave.

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Slavery and religion are oxymoronic. Indeed, no one spirituality (of spirit), revealed and otherwise, endorses slavery as a system consistent with a belief in mercy, compassion and, ultimately, man's emancipation from all forms of bondage and subjugation except for God. Slavery is, in fact, one unique human / inhuman(e) universe in which meaning-making is perpetually created and-recreated in order to maintain a status quo of control on master's side and dependence and exploitation on slave's side. If the case against slavery should not be one negotiated based on " humane" reasons, suffice it to dispel slavery as an antithesis to religion based on *raison d'tre* grounds alone. That is, no one man can truly claim he is a man (small letter) of God unless he not only subjects himself to God's - and only God's - will. Therefore, a man subjugating a fellow man by means of enslavement and exploitation is only one who claims a divine status. In essence, all claims of anti-slavery abolitionists coalesce around one fundamental creed that is; all men are God's children. Probably, one outspoken and specially gifted orator who voiced religion vs. slavery case most eloquently during Antebellum is Fredrick Douglass.

In his Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Douglass employs a set of rhetorical as well as narrative strategies by which <https://assignbuster.com/conflict-of-slavery-and-religion/>

he not only dispels slavery as an antithesis to religion but also reclaims slavery discourse as an African American meaning-making universe par excellence.

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Indeed, Douglass' Narrative is a bible unto itself against slavery and for man's ultimate liberation as realized by an attachment to God's own words - as opposed to slaveholders' - worthy of an African American made free.

Of particular interest is Douglass' relationship with his former master, Captain Auld, whom he qualifies as "cruel". In a context speaking to an ex-slave who finds refuge and solace in religion as a meaning maker and a vehicle for salvation and ultimate liberation, Douglass appears detached from himself as he reflects on his master's Slaveholding Christianity as opposed to Christianity of Christ:

Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty. He made the greatest pretensions to piety. (Douglass, 1845, Chap. IX, para. 2)

Thus, Christianity is made Masters' (in capitals) religion, a Slaveholder's religion from which lesser beings are excluded and hence a justified cruelty. In fact, "cruel" echoes deep in all Douglass' narrative(s). Unsurprisingly, Douglass' emphatic defense of (Christ's) religion as a belief in values of mercy and compassion ushers in his whole set of arguments against slavery as an antithesis to religion. For example, in his speech at Finsbury Chapel, Moorfields, London, Douglass is no clearer about his conception of religion and slavery as he

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sets about to dismantle slavery as experienced by him and fellow brethren and to reconstruct religion, slaveholder's religion, as practiced in his home country in his audience's minds lashing at underlying hypocrisies all along.

Most notably,

I need not do more than state the general fact, that slavery has existed under the droppings of the sanctuary of the south, for the last 200 years, and there has not been any war between the religion and the slavery of the south. (Douglass, 1846, para. 33)

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References

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