

# The face of religiopolitical concept: nat turner and his confession

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## **The Religiopolitical Power in Nat Turner's Confession**

David Chidester, a professor of comparative religions, considers religion and politics to be two realms of power which together exist as religiopolitical systems of power. He claims that religiopolitical systems may conflict with other such systems, when their force fields of violence overlap. Nat Turner's 1831 confession is both deeply religious and political, and lends itself to Chidester's theory. This is a deeply complicated issue, which will only briefly and broadly be covered here. The enslaved, Black, Christian (EBC) system of power conflicted with the oppressive, White, Christian system of power (OWC). The OWC force field was implicitly coercive as the State was enforcing the legality of slavery. As well, it was explicitly coercive in its physical response to slave escapes and rebellions. The EBC force field was explicit in the form of rebellions, using violence to oppose the OWC.

Slavery was an institution so far reaching it was an ethnic tradition. Slaves experienced what their parents and grandparents had, even what their children someday might experience. In order to state his motives he claimed, "[he] must go back to the days of [his] infancy, and even before [he] was born." He understood himself as member of the slave community both his contemporaries and his predecessors. He wasn't motivated by how he was treated as an individual slave, but by the system's fundamental immorality. This raises the stakes for his rebellion to a level beyond criminal or sensual.

Nat Turner's intelligence marked him as unique amongst slaves, which blurred the lines of racial dominance. The lack of education and intelligence amongst slaves diminished their capability and cemented their role as

chattel. He claimed that as a child he was told, “[he] had too much sense to be raised, and if [he] was, [he] would never be of any service to anyone as a slave.” His grandmother and master, amongst others, speculated that his inquisitive nature would hinder his performance as a slave because he would be more likely to question than to obey. The immense intelligence he showed “ was a source of wonder to all in the neighborhood, particularly the blacks” because it disturbed the racial intelligence status quo.

Religion was the source of Turner’s passion and guided him. Because of his unique situation, he had no guidance and was peerless so to speak. Turner had a vision in which, “[he] saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle.” He never explicitly explained what he interpreted the vision to mean. However, on the assumption that he was describing the spirits’ race, it is evident his vision was of racial violence. Thus he claimed he received a divine revelation from the Spirit, a “ true knowledge of faith”. The racial component of his vision corroborates the racial and religious components of his reality. Furthermore, it justifies what he perceives to be wrong, racial discrimination, with what he absolutely knows is true and righteous, the Spirit.

The evidence provided prior the present piece suggests that race is a fundamental component, along with slavery and religion, in his motivation. Nat Turner described an instance, “ when the white people would not let us be baptized by the church, we went down into the water together, in the sight of many who reviled us, and were baptized by the Spirit.” The racial discrimination is explicitly evident in the prohibition of being baptized by the

church, and the offense taken by Turner and Etheldred T. Brantley's subsequent baptism in public water, most likely a river. However, in one fell swoop the place of race in his motivation falls into question. Brantley was white, and prior to meeting Turner, a man of "wickedness", likely to do with slavery. Although this requires speculation, it would seem to suggest that anyone, even a man of "wickedness" could receive redemption and liberation from the Spirit. If this was the case, then what would justify the ruthless and indiscriminately violent nature of his rebellion? Unfortunately, the limits of speculation become evident, with no indication of his reasoning. Nevertheless, the anomaly of Brantley does not change the majority reaction of discrimination on the behalf of the white people.

Turner's reality depicts a society in which slavery played a fundamental role. Johnson contends that, "[The United State] was a slave society. Its fundamental architecture of freedom, its social systems, and its racial taxonomy and cultural mythology - all were derived largely through the system of totally dominating African peoples." The United States reality was so deeply structured around slavery, that its moral institution was able to sustain itself in spite of it. In Turner claimed that his master, Joseph Travis, was a kind man; he proceeded to kill him and his family. Only in a slave society, could a man be simultaneously kind and oppressive.

William Thornton was both a philanthropist and a slave holder. He represented the contradiction which seemed pervasive in the United States. Johnson claimed that Thornton, "held it as axiomatic that liberal democracy was to be enjoyed as an exclusive racial property of the White race." On a

purely rational standpoint, liberal democracy does not tolerate discrimination. However, by circumventing the illogical through claiming it an essential truth, Thornton rationalized his theory. It was this rationalization of liberal democracy that allowed for a man to be kind and oppressive. Slavery is an institution and a symbol, it exists, thus it is neither true nor false. Thus it seems that what was wrong with the system which Turner rebelled against wasn't fundamentally slavery, but rather the mutated form of liberal democracy which supported it in the United States.