From Benevolent Institution to Negotiated Space: A Historiographical Examination of Slave Christianity

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Every single fact does indeed evolve, but only as an element, and the whole sum of historical existence is still not the completely adequate medium of the idea, since it is the idea’s temporality and fragmentariness... that long for the backward-looking impulse emanating, face against face, from consciousness.¹

Historically, the perspective of academics regarding slave religion has, like so much else, mirrored their perspective on race. The focus of this essay will be on how the understanding of slave Christianity in the antebellum period has evolved over time. As historians began to take the experiences of slaves more seriously, they have also taken the actions of the slaves more seriously. Consequently, the understanding of the slaves’ use of religion has evolved from an early view of religion as an outlet for primal frustrations, to a more recent view of religion as a tool used by slaves in establishing their own space and, consequently, their own humanity. Thus, while early polemical writers, such as Philip Alexander Bruce, would contend that slave religion was primarily a manifestation of frustration and boredom, modern historians, including Laurent Dubois, would take a more nuanced view. Dubois writes, “Religion was, in some sense, a space of freedom in the midst of a world of bondage.”²

Some of the earliest historical examinations of slavery came out of the South. Largely in response to the fear of a northern domination of southern history, many southern writers felt the need to present a southern perspective on the history of the South. Following the Civil War, a group of pseudo-academics sprung up in Virginia. ThorOUGHLY committed to the “Lost Cause,” these men sought to eulogize, memorialize, and idealize the South. Condescension and racism are dominant features of these early works. One of the most notable of these early historians is Philip Alexander Bruce.

Bruce was raised in the South and attended the University of Virginia and Harvard. He was a prolific writer and became an editor for the Virginia Historical Association. In an article published in the *New York Times*, Bruce summarized his attitude and goals as a writer, “Those of us who are interested in the history of the South have often ground for disputing the claim of New England writers.” Among his numerous books on the South is *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman: Observations on His Character, Condition, and Prospects in Virginia* (1889). Although primarily concerned with the post-bellum situation of freed blacks, *The Plantation Negro as a Free Man* discusses the characteristics of slaves and establishes a comparative approach to the evaluation of southern blacks.

In his writing on slave religion, Bruce mirrors many of his contemporaries. His attitude and approach are dismissive and racist. Bruce writes that many slaves did not feel comfortable worshiping alongside

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their masters. The reasons he gives for this are that the segregation in the churches reminds blacks of their “social inferiority” and further, the “average white clergyman speaks above the level of their intelligence.”6 Comments like these are indicative of the tone throughout the work, and more broadly, throughout the genre of “Lost Cause” history.

Bruce concludes his writing of black religion by asserting that slave religious gatherings should not have been a tolerated norm. He writes, “Even the good that the latter accomplish is so largely mixed with evil that there can be little doubt that the negroes of most communities would be in a better condition if they had no separate churches of their own at all.”7 Thus, in his conclusion, he maintains his dismissive racist attitude toward slave religious expression.

Given the tone of Bruce’s writing, it is not a surprise to find that he did not take slave religion very seriously. In his discussions of the way in which slaves used their religion, he was equally dismissive. He argues, “The religious emotions that sway the blacks… are merely a physical drunkenness.”8 The expression of slave religion, according to Bruce, has no connection with proper religious expression. Further, the goal of slave religious expression is simplistic and adolescent. “Their eager and susceptible natures,” Bruce writes, “[are] overcome by a desire for change and amusement.”9

This view was dominant for a time. However, its dominance would not be sustained in the academic world. In 1918, Ulrich Bonell Phillips would publish American Negro Slavery. Thoroughly researched, meticulously detailed, and well received, American Negro Slavery forever

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7 Ibid., 110.
8 Ibid., 97.
9 Ibid., 98.
altered the course of Southern historiography. Where Bruce and the “Lost Cause” historians were often careless with facts, heavy on speculation, and placed analysis over facts, Phillips offered a different approach. David M. Potter stated that Phillips “never set pen to paper without expressing cogent ideas.”10 Eugene Genovese went so far as to state that *American Negro Slavery* was “not the last word on its subject; merely the indispensable first.”11 Phillips, more than anyone before him, legitimized the study of southern history. In spite of all of this progress over earlier polemical writings, Phillips still falls victim to his own racist attitudes. Thus, his perspective on race informs his perspective on the use of religion by slaves. Phillips draws few conclusions regarding religion. For the most part, he sees as his task collection of information rather than interpretation of that information. When he writes of the propensity of slaves to worship in any given manner, he does not, for the most part, attempt an evaluation of the behavior. Where he does attempt such an investigation, he is largely dismissive. Genovese stated, “Because he did not take the Negroes seriously as men and women he could not believe that in meaningful and even decisive ways they shaped the lives of their masters.”12

Phillips’s next major work on the subject was *Life and Labor in the Old South*. Published in 1929, *Life and Labor* showed some signs of a softening of Phillips’s overt racism. However, critics have contended that any softening in tone was not a shift in perspective, “merely one of emphasis.”13 There is reason to believe that this is a bit of an exaggeration.

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12 Ibid., xix.
13 Ibid., viii.
a more nuanced evaluation of the slaves. Nonetheless, the work still fails to take seriously the slave as a person. Thus, any discussion of slave religion occurs from a top-down perspective. For example, in *Life and Labor*, Phillips discusses the passages from the Bible that were considered appropriate for slave religious functions. He also notes that often, when a black pastor was permitted to preach to slaves, the master would monitor the meetings. If the pastor dared to harp too much on the liberation of the Israelis from the Egyptians, he “risk[ed]... being lynched.” The preference of the planters was that the ministers only speak on such topics as “'servants obey your masters', ‘render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s’, and ‘well done, thou good and faithful servant.’” Although Phillips never made the connection between slave religion and resistance, he hinted at a dynamic that would lead to this view. Foreshadowing the writing of Ira Berlin, Phillips noted that, “neither planters, nor slaves... were cast in one mold... Plantation life and industry had in the last analysis as many facets as there were periods, places and persons involved.” In spite of these variations, Phillips did see a unity in southern slavery. That unity was to be found in the “responsive adjustments between masters and men of the two races.” Ultimately, Phillips failed to follow these points to their logical conclusion. He was blinded by his racism, and consequently, he was limited in his ability to analyze an institution that rests fundamentally on the concept of “race.” The result of Phillips’s work was an understanding of slavery as a “benevolent institution.” The result of Phillips’s perspective is a vision of slave Christianity that is merely one example of the civilizing gift passed on to

15 Ibid., 304.
16 John David Smith, *Introduction to Life and Labor in the Old South*, xix.
the slaves from their more culturally civilized masters. It is a lesson in the “school” of slavery.17

Phillips experienced a great deal of criticism in the years following his death in 1934. Occasionally, as was the case with criticism he received from Richard Hofstadter, the criticism was directed against his research methodology and Phillips’s disproportionate focus on the large plantation.18 Hofstadter does discuss Phillips’s racism, but it is certainly not central to Hofstadter’s critique of Phillips. The most substantive attack on Phillips’s Benevolent School view of slave religion would have to wait for the beginning of the Civil Rights Era, and it would come from Kenneth Stampp.

Following the death of Phillips, the academic mood relating to slave studies began to shift toward recognition of the horrors of the institution of slavery. However, a major work challenging the Phillips’s School would not be written until Kenneth Stampp published The Peculiar Institution in 1956. Stampp believed that there was a need for a history of slavery that was informed by modern anthropological methods and understanding.19 He set out to write such a history that was in every way as comprehensive as Phillips’, but reflected the changes in developments and attitudes that had come about in the broader academic and social milieu.

With regard to slave religion, Stampp’s perspective was similar in some ways to that of Phillips. Stampp, like Phillips, asserted that religion was something bestowed upon the slave by the master. Also, like Phillips, Stampp acknowledged the version of Christianity that was preached to the

17  Phillips, American Negro Slavery, 328.
slaves was “carefully censored.” However, unlike Phillips, religion was not a cultural gift intended for the growth and development of the slaves; it was a means of imposing control over the slaves. Physical domination was a fundamental part of slavery. Conversion of the slaves to Christianity gave the master, according to Stampp, a level of spiritual control that allowed the “master class” to shape the slave’s behavior in ways more conducive to the maintenance of peace and of the institution of slavery in general. Stampp asserted that the ideal religion, according to the master class, “should underwrite the status quo.”

As far as the way that slaves practiced Christianity, Stampp asserts, “The religion of the slaves was, in essence, strikingly similar to that of the poor, illiterate white men of the ante-bellum South.” Stampp does not attempt to make much in the way of generalizations nor does he attempt to unearth slave motivation with regard to religion. The closest Stampp comes to either is when he states, “What the slave needs now was a spiritual life in which he could participate vigorously, which transported him from the dull routine of bondage and which promised him that a better time was within his reach.” He acknowledges further that the slaves “took their religion seriously.” As much as Stampp explores the slave’s perspective on religion, he merely asserts a psychological need for escapism and offers no deeper analysis.

Stampp’s perspective on slave religion was also indicative of his larger perspective on the institution of slavery. The institution was dominated by the master class, and left virtually no room for the slaves.

21 Ibid., 158-159.
22 Ibid., 160.
23 Ibid., 377.
24 Ibid., 371.
to assert any level of control over their lives. The primary shift from the Phillips’s paradigm is that of benevolence to domination. The focus was still on what was done to the slaves rather than what they were able to accomplish within the oppressive system.

*The Peculiar Institution* was generally well received by historians. To the credit of Stampp, any work completed after *The Peculiar Institution* had to deal with the claims and tone present in Stampp’s work. For a time, Stampp was able to, if not supplant Phillips, certainly supplement him, as the author of a very significant work on southern slavery.\(^\text{25}\)

In discussing the currents in the historiography of slavery, it is vital that one mention a persistent counter-current that was only merged with the dominant matrix of slave studies after Stampp. This group of scholars never accepted the *Benevolent School* of Phillips and they, in large measure, rejected certain subtleties within Stampp’s *Domination Paradigm*. This group was composed primarily of minority scholars, who understood race from a different perspective than white scholars examining the institution of slavery. In 1953, a sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, gave a series of lectures discussing slave religion from the perspective of a black scholar. His work, unlike that of Phillips or even Stampp, takes seriously the perspective and experiences of slaves as it relates to religion. Frazier

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\(^{25}\) A cursory examination of reviews of *The Peculiar Institution* reveals an almost universal belief that while Stampp’s work was vital, his polemical presentation prevented him from living up to the standard that he had called for in his *AHR* article “The Historian and Southern Negro Slavery.” Consequently, Phillips was still important to a complete understanding of the slave system. For examples see Chase C. Mooney, review of *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, by Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Journal of Southern History* 23, no. 1 (February 1957): 125-128; Ralph B. Flanders, review of *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, by Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 43, no. 4 (March 1957): 679-680; and Keith Hopkins, review of *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, by Kenneth M. Stampp, *Population Studies* 18, no. 2 (November 1964): 204-205. Although these represent the consensus, some reviews were far more positive. An example of an overwhelmingly positive review is W. M. Brewer’s review of *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, by Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Journal of Negro History* 42, no. 2 (April 1957): 142-144.
represents something of a synthesis of certain standards of understanding related to slave Christianity. First, he states plainly that a carefully censored version of Christianity was used a means of social control.26 He adds that Christianity appealed to the slaves as it offered them a “message of hope and prospect of escape.”27 However, he does not stop there; he posits that slaves used Christianity as a way to reconstitute a social cohesion that was destroyed by the institution of slavery.28 This view of the agency of slaves in creating a social cohesion using the tools of oppression is a theme that would become dominant in the historiography of slavery sometime later. In a way, the major players of slave historiography were playing “catch up” to the currents long present in minority scholarship on the subject.

Other deviations, or at least additions, to the Stampp paradigm began to emerge soon after the release of The Peculiar Institution. One example of such a variation is found in the work of Stanley Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (1959). Elkins wrote with the same cultural understanding as Stampp. Slavery operated in the same paradigm of oppressive white domination as The Peculiar Institution, but Elkins attempts to go a step beyond Stampp. Elkins hypothesizes regarding the psychological effects of unmitigated oppression and constant dominance. The lack of slave resistance can be attributed to the “infantilizing” effects of white domination on the slaves.29 Although Elkins attempts an understanding of the psychology of slaves, his interpretation is dismissive. He assumes that there was little resistance among the slaves,

27 Ibid., 16.
28 Ibid., 13-16.
and he subsequently attempts to explain why this was so. Thus, the focus is still on the domination of the master, and not on the activity of the slave.

The Stampp paradigm began to lose its primacy among slavery research as a result of two books published in the early 1970s: John W. Blassingame’s *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* and Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. Both books altered the method of evaluating the slave community and both attempted to place the slave in the foreground of slave studies. Although Blassingame’s book was published just prior to Genovese’s, it was Genovese that would have the greater historiographical impact based on a better circulation of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.30 After the release of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, *The Slave Community* would garner much attention as a work contributing to the emerging paradigm.31

Blassingame’s contribution to the understanding of the way in which slaves used religion is fundamental. He stated, “In this test of wills the slave asserted that his master could inflict pain on his body, but he could not harm his soul… Clearly, religion was more powerful than the master, engendering more love and fear in the slave than he could.”32 Blassingame agreed with Frazier that Christianity helped to foster a “sense of group solidarity.”33 He emphatically rejected Elkins’s “Sambo” conception. He also rejected Stampp’s one-sided oppressive model.

Although Blassingame discussed slave religion, it was Eugene Genovese who took the lead in shaping the historical understanding of slave religion. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, first published in 1974, Genovese

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31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
puts to work his admirable research skills and his unmatched writing
talent. One historian stated, “Those prone to dialectical generalization
on such matters may well see a literal thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in
the Phillips-Stampp-Genovese sequence.”

There is some truth to this assertion; however, the author fails to recognize the impact of Genovese’s magnum opus. Genovese, although indebted to Phillips, does not swing the pendulum back in the direction of American Negro Slavery. He swings it further in the direction of a meaningful understanding of the slave experience. To Genovese, slaves are not passive entities to be acted upon, and they are the actors of their own history. They interact and manipulate the system. They take an active role in shaping their lives. This is fundamentally different than either Phillips’s or Stampp’s conception of the slave.

Roll, Jordan, Roll is, at its heart, about slave religion. Genovese uses slave religion to show the way that slaves coped with their existence. No longer was Christianity merely a tool used by planters for control, it also, in turn, was used by slaves to create a space of freedom. The slaves’ world was “made” by the slaves themselves, not by their masters. The cornerstone of this new paradigm was Genovese’s innovative understanding of paternalism. “Paternalism’s insistence upon mutual obligations – duties, responsibilities, and ultimately even rights – implicitly recognized the slaves’ humanity.”

This assertion, that slaves were able to maintain some control over their lives, was completely revisionist. Genovese fundamentally shifts the paradigm of slavery studies by admitting the slave had a role in shaping his or her experience.

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This role was manifest most obviously, according to Genovese, through slave religion.

Genovese acknowledges that the master was instrumental in introducing Christianity to the slaves in an attempt to serve his own purposes. However, the introduction of Christianity by the master was not made to a passive people. Genovese writes, “For good reason the whites of the Old South tried to shape the religious life of their slaves, and the slaves overtly, covertly, and even intuitively fought to shape it themselves.”

Following the publication of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, literature that specifically focused on the religion of slaves proliferated. Given a new operational paradigm, scholars were able to explore further within, and test the limits of, the concept of “paternalism” as employed by Genovese. Scholars were also able to expand on Genovese’s conception of slave agency and varying types of resistance.

The most notable and thorough examination of slave religion to appear following Genovese’s work was Albert J. Raboteau’s *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*. This book continues down the path beaten by Genovese and Blassingame. Raboteau examines in depth the concept of religion among slaves and the role it played for both the master and the slave. He takes a step further than Genovese and Blassingame by identifying the outward expression of the contending goals of slave religion. On one hand, there is the “visible institution” that represents black worship under the supervision of whites. This is a manifestation of white attempts at social control. Raboteau’s argument implies that, although social control of the slaves was a primary motivation for the allowance and encouragement of slaves’ participation in Christianity, it was not the overriding motivation of many of the white

36 Ibid., 162.
ministers. An example of this visible institution is Cotton Mather’s Society of Negroes. The other and more important portion of Raboteau’s word is about the “invisible institution” of slave religion; the portion of their religious experience that the slaves carved out for themselves without regard to their masters. For example, when discussing the role of black preachers, he writes, “They acted as crucial mediators between Christian belief and the experiential world of the slaves.”

The slaves’ Christian belief, Raboteau contends, had more significant implications than mere escapist sentiment. There was an element of futurist longings and desire for retribution amongst some slaves. Yet, there was an often overlooked, revolutionary aspect of slave Christianity. It did not serve solely to uphold the established order as Stampp had asserted. Slaves often turned the moral precepts of their masters on their heads. They “stole” from the master, supposing that they had been stolen, thus they had a right to take from their master what they required. They often considered lying to a master a “religious duty.” Raboteau shows throughout his work how slaves used Christianity to suit their needs as an enslaved and oppressed people.

Since the publication of Roll, Jordan, Roll, most of the historical literature regarding the antebellum slave’s religion has focused to some degree on the “agency” of the slave. Following the example of Genovese, historians frequently seek to tell the history of the slave, with the slave as the central character. Further, they seek to show the ways in which slaves employed various means to achieve their own ends of creating some

38 Ibid., 137.
39 For an example of this see pages 290-292 where Raboteau writes of some slaves that believed that in the “life to come” there would be white slaves and black masters.
40 Raboteau, 297.
space of operation or a place of freedom within their bondage. This has been the dominant paradigm of slave religion. It is present in the works of Raboteau; it is also present in more recent works such as John Boles’ edited work *Masters & Slaves in the House of the Lord* and in Mechel Sobel’s *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*. Boles operates in a manner similar to Raboteau; however, he points out that the dominant Christian expression in the Antebellum period was interracial fellowship.\(^41\) Thus, his focus is less on the “invisible institution” than on the “visible institution.” Nonetheless, it is still informed by, and operating within, the Genovesean paradigm.\(^42\)

Sobel, like Genovese and Blassingame, writes of the world that was constructed by the slaves. Although much of her focus is on the way the slaves incorporated their African identities into their new social realities, her paradigm is fundamentally that of Blassingame and Genovese.\(^43\) Sobel disagrees with Raboteau regarding the “visibility” of the southern antebellum black church. She asserts that the religious world that the slaves made was visible not invisible. She believes that the slaves used religion and the community it created to give coherence to their lives.\(^44\)

In spite of the general consensus that developed around the need to see the institution of slavery as it was lived by the slaves, there has been a notable push back in the other direction. This has come primarily from the advocates of a position of “social death.” One example of such a work can be found in Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative*


\(^44\) Ibid., 100-101.
Study. Patterson states that a slave, in any society, is essentially a “dead person.” The religion of the slaves, according to Patterson, was not of their own construction, but rather did not differ from their master’s religion in any essential way. Although some still cling to the idea of “social death” it never caught on as a primary means of understanding the slave system. These “social death” advocates, though not defining the path of scholarship, still make important contributions to slave studies. Most notably, as scholars such as Genovese, Blassingame, and Sobel have focused on the social and cultural aspects of the lives of the slaves, the larger picture of an exploitative, brutal system can fade into the background. The “social death” historians make sure that this does not happen.

The study of slave Christianity in the South is one that has continued, and will continue, to flourish. There is no shortage of modern scholarship on the experience and lives of the slaves. The larger shift in the historical field of incorporating the histories of marginal or oppressed groups will no doubt continue into the foreseeable future. Current scholarship on slavery is led by academics such as Ira Berlin. Berlin has been leading slave studies in a different direction. While still acknowledging the “agency” of slaves, he has divided the study of American slavery into different geographic and temporal periods. Berlin argues that the slaves’ Christianity was supremely important to the slaves in the antebellum period. Not only did it offer them hope of deliverance, but it also gave them a strong sense of “place” within their enslavement.

45 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5.
46 Ibid., 74.
47 For a notable example of a current scholar that employs the idea of “social death,” see Stephanie E. Smallwood, Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
This concept of “place” is one that is taking hold within the study of slavery. The scholarship is increasing, and it is shining a light on new ways of understanding the way that slaves reacted to, and understood, their environment. One recent work on this topic is Anthony Kaye’s *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South*. Published in 2007, Kaye is leading the way in this understanding of place by showing how slaves constructed “neighborhoods” as areas of operation. He is operating within the context of “agency.” However, this well-trodden ground is complicated by the lack of intentionality in constructing neighborhoods.\(^{49}\) This is indicative of a drift toward a more nuanced view of “agency” that incorporates unintended consequences and social realities outside of the direct control of the slaves. This unintentional space does not deny the slaves’ role in negotiating their existence; it simply adds another facet to scholarly understanding of the slaves’ world. Slave religion then operates as an intentional activity that leads to often unintended results, such as space and place. In discussing the place of Christianity in the creation of neighborhoods, Kaye writes, “[Slaves] conceived their place in the world in terms of the particular relations within the neighborhood ambit, especially kinship and Christianity.”\(^{50}\)

If historians are looking for a “completely objective study of the institution which is based upon no assumptions whose validity cannot be thoroughly proved,” as recommended by Stampp in 1952, the search will be indefinite and in vain.\(^{51}\) The goal should be, as it has been of late, to seek to flesh out the world of the slaves. If scholars cannot understand everything perfectly, they can certainly understand specifics better.


\(^{50}\) Ibid., 44.

Moving forward, the study of slave religion should focus on two vital components. The first is the system of belief itself. The Christianity of the slaves should be studied and appreciated on its own merits. This system is vital as it illuminates an important chosen lens through which the slave viewed his or her existence. Although the dominant method of “doing” history is through the prism of the three lenses, these are, to the individual, immutable realities of existence. Although they are important to the understanding of history, one cannot choose his race or gender, and the slave in particular had virtually no input regarding his class. The system is inherently deterministic and thus it makes the agency of the slave less relevant to his environment. Viewing religion as a vital lens affirms the slave’s agency and emphasizes the role the slave played in shaping his own existence. The second focus of slave religious studies should include how religion informed the social relationships and constructs of the slave. This has been manifest of late in the work of Kaye and others. Throughout the historiography of slave studies, it is important to remember that the development of historical understanding regarding slave religion parallels one’s idea of race.

52 The three lenses referenced here are race, class, and gender.