



ON THE “RELIGION OF THE SOUTH” AND SLAVERY

SELECTIONS FROM 19TH-CENTURY SLAVE NARRATIVES

In several hundred narratives, many published by abolitionist societies in the U.S. and England, formerly enslaved African Americans related their personal experiences of enslavement, escape, and freedom in the North. In straight talk they condemned the “peculiar institution” — its dominance in a nation that professed liberty and its unyielding defense by slaveholders who professed Christianity. “There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south,” writes Harriet Jacobs; Frederick Douglass calls it the “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.”¹ Presented here are four nineteenth-century African American perspectives on the “religion of the south.”

Frederick Douglass

“the religion of the south . . . is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes”

■ I assert *most unhesitatingly* that the religion of the south — as I have observed it and proved it — is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes, the justifier of the most appalling barbarity, a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds, and a secure shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal abominations fester and flourish. Were I again to be reduced to the condition of a slave, *next* to that calamity, I should regard the fact of being the slave of a religious slaveholder the greatest that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have found them, almost invariably, the vilest, meanest and basest of their class. Exceptions there may be, but this is true of religious slaveholders, *as a class*. It is not for me to explain the fact. Others may do that; I simply state it as a fact, and leave the theological and psychological inquiry which it raises to be decided by others more competent than myself.

Religious slaveholders, like religious persecutors, are ever extreme in their malice and violence. Very near my new home, on an adjoining farm, there lived the Rev. Daniel Weeden, who was both pious and cruel after the real Covey pattern.² Mr. Weeden was a local preacher of the Protestant Methodist persuasion, and a most zealous supporter of the ordinances of religion, generally. This Weeden owned a woman called “Ceal,” who was a standing proof of his mercilessness. Poor Ceal’s back, always scantily clothed, was kept literally raw by the lash of this religious man and gospel minister. The most notoriously wicked man — so called in distinction from church members — could hire hands more easily than this brute. When sent out to find a home, a slave would never enter the gates of the preacher Weeden, while a sinful sinner needed a hand. Behave ill or behave well, it was the known maxim of Weeden that it is the duty of a master to use the lash. If, for no other reason, he contended that this was essential to remind a slave of his condition, and of his master’s authority. The good slave must be whipped to be *kept* good, and the bad slave must be whipped to be *made* good. Such was Weeden’s theory, and such was his practice. The back of his slave-woman will, in the judgment, be the swiftest witness against him. . . .

The man unaccustomed to slaveholding would be astonished to observe how many *floggable* offenses



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¹ In Douglass’s appendix to his 1845 narrative; see docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/menu.html. The Douglass selection presented here is from his 1855 narrative, *My Bondage and My Freedom*; see docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/menu.html.

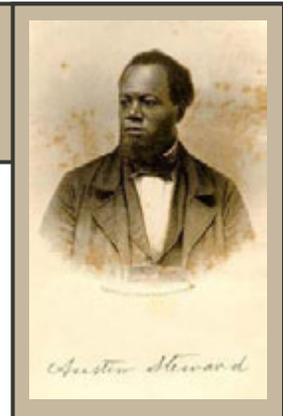
² Edward Covey: Douglass’s brutal master in 1834, whom he called a “Negro breaker.”

there are in the slaveholder's catalogue of crimes, and how easy it is to commit any one of them, even when the slave least intends it. A slaveholder, bent on finding fault, will hatch up a dozen a day if he chooses to do so, and each one of these shall be of a punishable description. A mere look, word, or motion, a mistake, accident, or want of power, are all matters for which a slave may be whipped at any time. Does a slave look dissatisfied with his condition? It is said that he has the devil in him, and it must be whipped out. Does he answer *loudly* when spoken to by his master, with an air of self-consciousness? Then must he be taken down a button-hole lower, by the lash, well laid on. Does he forget and omit to pull off his hat when approaching a white person? Then he must, or may be, whipped for his bad manners. Does he ever venture to vindicate his conduct when harshly and unjustly accused? Then he is guilty of impudence, one of the greatest crimes in the social catalogue of southern society. To allow a slave to escape punishment, who has impudently attempted to exculpate himself from unjust charges, preferred against him by some white person, is to be guilty of great dereliction of duty. Does a slave ever venture to suggest a better way of doing a thing, no matter what? He is, altogether, too officious — wise above what is written — and he deserves, even if he does not get, a flogging for his presumption. Does he, while plowing, break a plow, or while hoeing, break a hoe, or while chopping, break an ax? No matter what were the imperfections of the implement broken, or the natural liabilities for breaking, the slave can be whipped for carelessness. The *reverend* slaveholder could always find something of this sort, to justify him in using the lash several times during the week. Hopkins — like Covey and Weeden — were shunned by slaves who had the privilege (as many had) of finding their own masters at the end of each year, and yet there was not a man in all that section of country who made a louder profession of religion than did Mr. RIGBY HOPKINS.

—Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855

Austin Steward

“Can anyone wonder that I, and other slaves, often doubted the sincerity of every white man’s religion?”



■ Capt. Helm, not having demand for slave labor as much as formerly, was in the practice of hiring out his slaves to different persons, both in and out of the village; and among others, my only sister was hired out to a *professed* gentleman living in Bath. She had become the mother of two or three children, and was considered a good servant.

One pleasant Sabbath morning, as I was passing the house where she lived, on my way to the Presbyterian church, where I was sent to ring the bell as usual, I heard the most piteous cries and earnest pleadings issuing from the dwelling. To my horror and the astonishment of those with me, my poor sister made her appearance, weeping bitterly, and followed by her inhuman master who was polluting the air of that clear Sabbath morning with the most horrid imprecations and threatenings, and at the same time flourishing a large raw-hide. Very soon his bottled wrath burst forth, and the blows, aimed with all his strength, descended upon the unprotected head, shoulders and back of the helpless woman until she was literally cut to pieces. She writhed in his powerful grasp, while shriek after shriek cried away in heart-rending moanings; and yet the inhuman demon continued to beat her, though her pleading cries had ceased, until obliged to desist from the exhaustion of his own strength.

What a spectacle was that, for the sight of a brother? The God of heaven only knows the conflict of feeling I then endured; He alone witnessed the tumult of my heart at this outrage of manhood and kindred affection. God knows that my will was good enough to have wrung his neck, or to have drained from his heartless system its last drop of blood! And yet I was obliged to turn a deaf ear to her cries for assistance, which to this day ring in my ears. Strong and athletic as I was, no hand of mine could be raised in her

defense, but at the peril of both our lives — nor could her husband, had he been a witness of the scene, be allowed anything more than unresisting submission to any cruelty, any indignity which the master saw fit to inflict on *his wife*, but the other's *slave*.

Does any indignant reader feel that I was wanting in courage or brotherly affection, and say that he would have interfered and, at all hazards, rescued his sister from the power of her master; let him remember that he is a *freeman*, that he has not from his infancy been taught to cower beneath the white man's frown and bow at his bidding, or suffer all the rigor of the slave laws. Had the gentlemanly woman-whipper been seen beating his horse or his ox in the manner he beat my poor sister, and that too for no fault which the law could recognize as an offense, he would have been complained of most likely; but as it was, she was but a "slave girl" — with whom the slave law allowed her master to do what he pleased.

Well, I finally passed on, with a clinched fist and contracted brow, to the church and rung the bell, I think rather furiously, to notify the inhabitants of Bath that it was time to assemble for the worship of that God who has declared himself to be "no respecter of persons." With my own heart beating wildly with indignation and sorrow, the kind reader may imagine my feelings when I saw the smooth-faced hypocrite, the inhuman slave-whipper, enter the church, pass quietly on to his accustomed seat, and then meekly bow his hypocritical face on the damask cushion in the reverent acknowledgment of that religion which teaches its adherents "to do unto others as they would be done by," just as if nothing unusual had happened on that Sabbath morning. Can anyone wonder that I, and other slaves, often doubted the sincerity of every white man's religion? Can it be a matter of astonishment that slaves often feel that there is no just God for the poor African? Nay, verily; and were it not for the comforting and sustaining influence that these poor, illiterate and suffering creatures feel as coming from an unearthly source, they would in their ignorance all become infidels. To me, that beautiful Sabbath morning was clouded in midnight darkness, and I retired to ponder on what could be done.

—Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman*, 1857

William J. Anderson

"*I won't stay in no such a heaven, where they let such a man as massa stay dar.*"

■ In the family of another well known hard-hearted slave owner, who whipped and drove his slaves like dogs or cattle for about sixty or seventy years, there lived a colored man by the name of Joe.

One day the master was taken sick and nigh unto death. His preacher or spiritual adviser was sent for, and while attending there the old master died.

The preacher took it upon himself to give Joe some good advice on the occasion.

"Come here, my good boy," said the pious man. Joe obeyed, when his reverence began: "Your master is dead and gone to heaven. Your mistress is left a widow. Now, Joe, you must stay at home and take care of your mistress. Don't rob the smoke house, nor pig pen, nor hen roost, nor potato patch; and when you die you will go to heaven, where your master is gone."

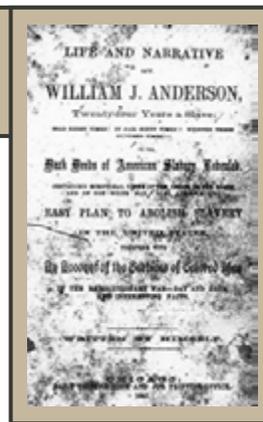
"Whar?" asked Joe.

"To heaven," replied the minister.

"Ain't God dar?"

"Yes, Joe."

"Don't He know ebbery ting?"



“Yes, Joe.”

“And He gwine to let massa come dar after he been beatin and whippin’ me for fifty years? If I go dar, and massa is dar, I’ll put on my old hat and come straight out of dar.’ I won’t stay in no such a heaven, where they let such a man as massa stay dar.”

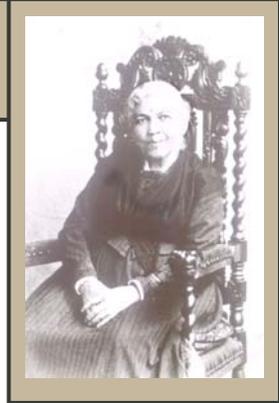
So persisted the honest old slave, and rather puzzled the wise head of the reverend adviser.

—William J. Anderson, *Life of William J. Anderson, Twenty-Four Years a Slave*, 1857

Harriet Jacobs

“There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south.”

■ A clergyman who goes to the south for the first time has usually some feeling, however vague, that slavery is wrong. The slaveholder suspects this and plays his game accordingly. He makes himself as agreeable as possible, talks on theology and other kindred topics. The reverend gentleman is asked to invoke a blessing on a table loaded with luxuries. After dinner he walks round the premises and sees the beautiful groves and flowering vines and the comfortable huts of favored household slaves. The southerner invites him to talk with these slaves. He asks them if they want to be free, and they say, “O, no, massa.” This is sufficient to satisfy him. He comes home to publish a “South-Side View of Slavery” and to complain of the exaggerations of abolitionists. He assures people that he has been to the south and seen slavery for himself; that it is a beautiful “patriarchal institution,” that the slaves don’t want their freedom, that they have hallelujah meetings and other religious privileges.



What does *he* know of the half-starved wretches toiling from dawn till dark on the plantations? of mothers shrieking for their children, torn from their arms by slave traders? of young girls dragged down into moral filth? of pools of blood around the whipping post? of hounds trained to tear human flesh? of men screwed into cotton gins to die? The slaveholder showed him none of these things, and the slaves dared not tell of them if he had asked them.

There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south. If a man goes to the communion table and pays money into the treasury of the church, no matter if it be the price of blood, he is called religious. If a pastor has offspring by a woman not his wife, the church dismiss him if she is a white woman; but if she is colored, it does not hinder his continuing to be their good shepherd. . . .

No wonder the slaves sing —

“Ole Satan’s church is here below;
Up to God’s free church I hope to go.”

—Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861