

Differences in Religion During the Era of Slavery

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass writes about his experiences being a slave. Intermixed in these experiences are two distinct factions: the religion of the master, and the religion of the slave. The slave masters and their families were often seen at church on Sunday, and then seen beating and mistreating their slaves on Monday. The slaves often professed to be Christians, but that did not stop them from stealing, lying, and scheming against their owners. Religion played a mighty part in the struggles between the slave and his owner, and this paper hopes to show the extent of those struggles through Douglass' eyes.

Most of the slaves brought from Africa had pagan beliefs that they kept alive despite the fact they were no longer in their own country. While some slaves were taught of Christianity by their owners and owners' wives, many still held to the beliefs that they had learned as children. Douglass was from one of the group that was taught Christianity, but that did not always stop him from leaning on some of the old pagan practices that the other slaves followed. For example, a fellow slave, Sandy Jenkins, had a root that he swore would keep a slave from being whipped by their master (Douglass, 53). The root had to be carried only on the right side of the body, and it would give protection to the person who carried it for as long as it was carried (Douglass, 53). Douglass had a need for a trinket like this when he ran away from his master, Mr. Covey. Covey had severely beaten Douglass, and Douglass had managed to get to an old master's house in hopes of help (Douglass, 52). When he did not receive any, he hid in the woods for a while (Douglass, 53). He was facing either a beating from Covey or starvation in the woods when Jenkins came upon him (Douglass, 53). Jenkins' free wife had a home of her own, so he took Douglass there and gave him the root (Douglass, 53). Sure enough, when Douglass went home, Mr. Covey did not offer to beat him (Douglass, 53). In fact, the next day Douglass had an altercation with Covey and Hughes, his helper (Douglass, 54). Douglass beat both of them so badly that they "never wanted to lay hold of him again" (Douglass, 54). They never did, either. Douglass relates that he spent four more years as a slave, and he was never beaten

again (Douglass, 54).

Now, the question might be, did the root really have any effect on Douglass's safety? If it did, how could Douglass profess to be a Christian, and still believe that a root of some kind was going to keep him safe? There are two answers to those questions, both provided by Douglass. Douglass expressed his doubts to Jenkins about the root from the very mention of it (Douglass, 53). The only reason that he took it was because Jenkins convinced him that while it might not help matters, it certainly could not hurt them (Douglass, 53). It appears as though Jenkins was right, but one has to think about the day that Douglass came home, Sunday (Douglass, 53). Mr. Covey also professed to be a Christian, and while beating a slave for everyone to see might be acceptable on other days, it was simply not done on Sunday (Douglass, 53). Proof of this fact can be derived by Covey's actions on Monday. He came to Douglass and attempted to tie him up for a beating, but Douglass bested him (Douglass, 53). Although the root seemed to help on Sunday, it was not going to help on Monday, except for one thing. The root evidently gave Douglass the courage that he needed to be able to fight Covey and Hughes. One could argue that the root did have some saving power, but it seems much more likely that having that talisman made Douglass believe that he could fight. There really was no reason why he could not. He was more than capable of fighting a middle aged man. If nothing else, the root made him brave.

What Douglass truly thought about the root came out a few years later when Douglass found himself working for the same slave owner as Sandy Jenkins (Douglass, 59). While not in the dialogue itself, Douglass made a footnote that expressed his real feelings. He noted that while Jenkins was totally convinced that Douglass overcame Covey with the help of the root, Douglass held that idea up as a simple superstition common to "ignorant" slaves (Douglass, 59). So, perhaps there never really was an issue between Douglass choosing to be a Christian while carrying a pagan object. We know, though, the root must have helped at least a little bit. Did Douglass believe in it the moment he stood up to Covey? We will never know. However, this whole episode is representative

of what a lot of slaves encountered. They became Christian by choice or by force, but there were always the old pagan beliefs in the back of their mind, the beliefs that they had carried from their home. No wonder, then, that black Christianity was so markedly different than white Christianity.

In Douglass's life story, he made it clearly known that he advocated slaves doing what they had to do to survive on the plantations and farms of their owners (Douglass, 81). However, some of these things went against the most basic teachings of Christianity. Slaves were often forced to steal, lie, and carry out all types of schemes to stay alive, fed, and unbeaten. Certainly, no one would claim that all slaves were Christians. The story of the root, as explained above, should be clear proof of that. Not all slave owners were Christians, so there would be no need to expect that they would teach, or force, their slaves to believe what they did not. However, this question is more about Douglass himself than any other slave. How could he condone the unscrupulous actions of any slave, and still be a Christian himself?

The answer is fairly simple. Douglass made a distinction in types of Christianity. He saw the Christianity practiced in the "slaveholding" portion of the United States as a corruption of the "Christianity of Christ" (Douglass, 81). He went so far as to say that "to be a friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other" (Douglass, 81). From this comment, we can see that Douglass did not have problems with what slaves had to do to stay alive or escape because he could not in good faith recognize the Christianity of his captors as true Christianity. In truth, why would he have any reason to do so? Douglass related many experiences in his life that had been touched by the slave holders brand of Christianity. He endeavored to start a Sunday School for his fellow slaves, and it was broken up by the "Christian" slave owners because the slaves were learning to read and write (Douglass, 59). His grandmother was sent off to live and die by herself when she was old and of no use to her owner, and all because her former owner, a "Christian," had not bothered to release her upon his death (Douglass, 39-41). He saw women beaten unmercifully, and felt the scars and sores left by the repeated abuse (Douglass, 33). He was separated from his own mother as a small child,

and allowed to see her only four or five times in his life, and then only at night because her owner would not give her a pass to be late to the fields (Douglass, 13-14). After everything he went through, how could he not consider the Christianity of most of the white men he encountered to be a false, ugly thing? Simply put, Douglass could advocate the non-Christian behavior of the slaves because they were working against a great evil, in his opinion. The battle was not between two groups that believed the same way. It was between two groups that were at desperate odds with each other. Neither one had any respect or kind thoughts for each other, so it might as well have been two completely different religions instead of one. Douglass could see that difference, so he could not be bothered to chide his fellow man for disobeying their masters. In his mind, it was the right thing to do.

Douglass mentions in his narrative that he considered being a slave to a religious owner one of the worst things that could ever happen to him (Douglass, 57). It has been fully discussed why Douglass did not see slave owners as having the same type of Christianity he did, but in some instances, such as when he left Mr. Covey and went to work for Mr. Freeland, he claimed that slave owners who were not religious were far and above the best kind to work for (Douglass, 57). We may ask the question, why were religious slave owners so much worse than non-religious ones? To help us understand this situation, Douglass gives several examples of the atrocities committed by “religious” owners, and the reasons given for their abhorrent behavior. A Reverend Daniel Weedon and Reverend Rigby Hopkins, both Methodist preachers, lived near Douglass while he worked for Mr. Freeland (Douglass, 57). Rev. Weedon beat his slaves unmercifully. Douglass recalled seeing a woman who was beaten so badly and so often that her back was raw for weeks on end (Douglass, 57). Weedon’s motto was “behave well or behave ill, it is the duty of a master to occasionally whip a slave, to remind him of his master’s authority” (Douglass, 57). Douglass deemed people of this type to be “cruel and cowardly” (Douglass, 57). Perhaps they were cruel by nature and cowards because they hid behind their religion and used it to excuse what they did to innocent people. The Rev.

Hopkins would “whip slaves in advance of deserving it” (Douglass, 58). The smallest things, such as “a look of dissatisfaction,” would mean that a slave “had the Devil in him, and it must be whipped out” (Douglass, 58). Beatings were given for equipment malfunctions, such as a plow breaking, not taking off a hat in the presence of a white person, and even suggesting an easier way of doing a task (Douglass, 58). All this was supposed to mean that the slave was getting “high minded” and deserved punishment (Douglass, 58). Despite the cruel actions of this man, Douglass noted that there was no one “who made higher professions of religion, or was more active in revivals...or prayed earlier, faster, and longer than this reverend slave driver, Rigby Hopkins” (Douglass, 58).

On the other hand, Mr. Freeland did not consider himself to be religious (Douglass, 57). He gave his slaves and hired men plenty to eat, plenty of time in which to eat it, good tools to work with, and made sure that there were enough people to work his land (Douglass, 58). It is not mentioned one time that he beat his slaves. What could all this mean? One would naturally think that Christian people would be kinder to their slaves than non-Christians, but this was evidently not the case. One reason this could be is that the Christian slave owners were trying, as said before, to “beat the Devil” out of their slaves (Douglass, 58). As per the discussion of the “root” earlier, it is no surprise that most slaves were members of some pagan, tribal religion. Some denominations felt that it was better to expose their slaves to God instead of removing their suffering in this world (Thevarajah,1). Some owners thought that Christian slaves might be better than pagan slaves, presumably because they would be more obedient and better behaved (Thevarajah, 1). As we know from Douglass, this was not often the case.

We can know for certain that the cruelty exuded by Christians on their slaves was not unique to Douglass’s situation. In fact, it was quite common. Looking at another recollection of servitude, this time from a female perspective, *Our Nig; Or Sketches From the Life of a Free Black*, by Harriet Wilson, expresses the same ideas of suffering under the hand of a Christian family. In Chapter Eight of this touching book, the main character, known mostly as “Nig,” gets a chance to go out to church

meetings and embraces Christianity. However, all the woman she works for can worry about is that “Nig” will wish to go to church and to meetings on Sunday, making her unavailable for work (Wilson, Chapter 8). When the woman is questioned about her attitude, since she is a Christian herself and goes to church, she states, “Who ever thought of having a nigger go, except to drive others there?” (Wilson, Chapter 8). Here, perhaps, we find the truth of the matter. Some Christians believed that it was acceptable to make their slaves into Christians, but these Christians would always be inferior, and perhaps more prone to punishment because of the high standards their owners held them up to. Perhaps it is not so much a question of cruelty, but one of ignorance. In a sickeningly perverted way, perhaps some of the brutal slave owners felt that they were doing the right thing by beating their slaves “straight.”

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass is a book that really opens ones eyes to the warping of religious ideas in the light of the era of slavery. There were pagan rituals going on side by side with church services, and Christians who thought it best to be cruel in order to transfer their belief system to the people that they owned. As Douglass noted, there were two kinds of Christianity in the world at that time, the Christianity of slavery and the “Christianity of Christ.” Hopefully some of those who suffered under cruel masters in the name of salvation were later able to find the true way for themselves. Unfortunately, there are many who never survived to make their own decisions. This is the shame of the slavery era, especially for those who died in the process of their “salvation.”

Bibliography

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