The Religion of American Slaves

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Lori Thull, a graduate student, composed this essay for her Nineteenth Century Social and Cultural History class. She searched the slave narratives collected for the Works Project Administration program for evidence regarding the role religion may have played in the slaves' effort to preserve a separate identity.

The peculiar institution of slavery continues to provoke debate among American historians. One argument concerns the degree to which slaves maintained a separate identity apart from that of the whites. In 1959, Stanley M. Elkins wrote in his book *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, that through the concentration camp environment of the antebellum South, slaves adjusted to their fate and became obedient, humble servants, never considering revolution from the system.[1] However, other historians argue against Elkin's thesis, saying that slaves did not submerse themselves into the white culture; instead, blacks succeeded in preserving a separate identity through various institutions within their own culture.

In *The Slave Community*, John Blassingame describes the religion of slaves as being one of the institutions which slaves used to maintain their separate identity from that of the whites in the antebellum South. Blassingame points out that blacks did learn the fundamentals of Christianity from white missionaries and that the slaves' religion helped them to escape the bondage of their daily lives.[2] As the slaves experienced the religion taught by their masters, they formulated their own religious beliefs and practices, marking a distinct separation from the white culture.[3] However, did every slave enjoy the opportunity to find his or her own religion? How did various masters handle the issue of religion in relation to their slaves? Slaves owners differed greatly in their treatment of the religion of the slaves, from forcing the slaves to attend the white

1 Stanley M. Elkins, Slavery: *A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 131.
2 John Blassingame, *The Slave Community - Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 103.
3 Ibid., 131.

churches to prohibiting any practice of religion whatsoever. However, studying narratives of former slaves leads one to conclude that the slaves did use religion as a way of maintaining their own identity, as Blassingame argued.

George Rawick edited and compiled slave narratives which were taken from interviews of blacks who had been slaves prior to the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. Because workers for the WPA project administered these interviews in the mid-1930's, most of those interviewed had been young children at the time of slavery. Therefore, some critics may discredit this oral history. Despite this criticism, the narratives are still of value as a source for looking at slavery through the eyes of actual slaves or through their memories of stories told by other slaves.

In regard to the religion of the slaves, a significant majority of the interviewees were asked about, and sometimes voluntarily included, their religious experiences in their narratives, demonstrating the importance of religion for the slaves. While one slave said she "can't membuh nuthin' 'bout no churches in slavery," others reported going to church with their white masters.[4] Sina Banks, a slave from Missouri, reported, "Our old master made all his slaves go to church."[5] Apparently, these masters strongly felt that it was their duty as civilized white men to Christianize the slaves. A slave in Alabama said that after going to the whites' church and standing outside the door, listening to the preacher, the slaves would go home and have to tell the master what the preacher said. "He wanted us to know about religion."[6]

Other slaves spoke about the same practice of attending the white church with their masters but having to stand outside or sit in the back of the church. On one Arkansas plantation, a slave remembered, "We went right along by [the whites'] side till we got to church and we set down in the back seat."[7] Another slave from a Cherokee plantation said that she and the other slaves would wait until the white folks came out of the church until they could go into it.[8]

Holding separate religious services for the blacks, though, occurred more often than allowing them to attend church with the whites. Sam Anderson, an ex-slave, reported, "Me Master didn't allow church on plantation, but there were

4 George P. rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Oklahoma Narratives*, Vol. 12. Supplement, Series 1, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 2.
5 Ibid., 13.
6 Ibid., 183
7 Ibid., 297.
8 Ibid., 350.

two preachers who he would allow to preach under a tree on Sundays and even white people would visit their churches."[9] Other masters allowed church in the quarters and even the slaves' own preachers. Lewis Bonner from Texas claimed, "On Saturday and Sunday the slaves would have church in the quarters. There were three or four preachers among them."[10] Another slave from Arkansas said that his master let them have church meetings, but they could not sing songs about Yankees.[11]

While some masters allowed blacks to hold their own services in the quarters or build their own churches, other masters vehemently prohibited any religious services. Demonstrating their strong determination to retain religion, some slaves simply held their services in secret places, such as in the woods under brush arbors or "in the basement of some old buildin'."[12] Robert Williams said that on his plantation in Mississippi, they could have meetings but the master did not like it. "He want us all to sleep instead of listening to preaching. Said we could work better with the rest, so when the meeting nights was set everybody slip away quiet so the old master wouldn't know about it."[13] Other slaves talked about praying under a pot or turning all the pots over so that the praying would not be heard by an angry master.

Even though whites sometimes warned them not to hold religious services, many slaves obviously found religion to be a necessary part of their daily lives. Blassingame wrote that the slaves used this outlet to escape from their lack of liberty in reality, and from the narratives, he seems to be correct. The songs and prayers they used in their services reflect liberty and freedom that could be found in heaven. One slave sang a song about "going home to die no more," while others cited such meaningful spirituals as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "I Am Bound for the Promised Land," and "On Jordan's Stormy Banks."[14] The ex-slaves discussed how important prayer and music were to them, especially since the greatest number of them could not read the Bible. One man reported, "The slaves loved to pray," while another maintained, "Prayer and faith can overcome anything."[15] The difference between the whites' calm, quiet services and the blacks energetic, louder, praising services mirrors the separate identity the slaves

9 Ibid., 6.
10 Ibid., 70.
11 Ibid., 170.
12 Ibid., 100
13 Ibid., 395.
14 Ibid., 13.
15 Ibid., 267, 292.

were able to find in their interpretation of Christianity.

Many masters used the slaves' love of religion to manipulate them into obedience and loyalty. Robert Burns, an ex-slave from Tennessee, said, "Dem white preachers who would call dem selves preaching to de slaves would only preach to de niggers about being good, obedient and work good and hard for dare master."[16] Another slave from Tennessee claimed that her mistress would tell her to be a "good, obedient slave" so that she could go to heaven.[17] Easter Jones of Georgia also reported that the preachers could only talk about obeying the Master and Mistress, as did Cora Shepherd of Columbia County, South Carolina.[18]

Regardless of how some of the whites manipulated religion, the slaves succeeded in creating their own form of religion, separate from that of the whites. Religion became an inherent part of the slaves' identities, a concept especially apparent in the narratives. At the end of almost every interview, the ex-slave reported to which religion he or she currently belonged, be it Baptist, Methodist, or any other religion. Many of them also included a statement about living a good life and going to heaven. For example, Mollie Barber ended her interview with, "De colored Methodist church is where I go, and I try to live right. I know if I live for Jesus he will show me de way."[19] Another ex-slave said, "I belonged to the colored Baptist church because I want a good resting place when I go."[20] Yet another interviewee proclaimed, "I am a Baptist from head to foot, yes sir, yes sir."[21]

An emphasis on religion and its importance to their personal identity surfaced almost universally throughout the ex-slave narratives. Because the ex-slaves represented a variety of slave states in the Confederacy, the narratives provided an expansive impression of slavery throughout different regions of the South. The interviews show that religion and religious services did not differ greatly according to specific regions; rather, religion became an identifying and unifying factor among slaves throughout the whole South. Instead, what differed was how each master regarded the religion of the slaves: if he required

16 Ibid., 80.
17 Ibid., 97.
18 George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Georgia Narratives*, Vol. 4, Supplement, Series 1, Part 2, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 350, 355.
19 Rawick, *Oklahoma Narratives*, 31.
20 Ibid., 51.
21 Ibid., 70.

services, tolerated them, or prohibited them. In any case, no master, according to the narratives, succeeded in preventing the slaves from maintaining a separate identity from the whites through the institution of religion.

The Effect of Personal Bias on Woodrow Wilson's Politics of Neutrality

Michael D. Kruger

The Historical Research Methods course at Eastern requires students to analyze a section of a college textbook for historical accuracy. What follows is Michael Kruger's assessment of one interpretation of Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter the First World War.

> A second factor pulling the United State into [World War I] was the deep-seated feelings of President Wilson himself.... Wilson had long admired the British people and their form of government. Although technically neutral, the president strongly, although privately, favored the Allies and viewed a German victory as unthinkable... . Hence, although Wilson asked Americans to be neutral in thought as well as in deed, in fact he... [was] neither.[1]

In the above passage there are many contentions which may be disputed. This essay will examine the evidence that history provides us and, thus, verify or refute the passage's main points. I will primarily address Woodrow Wilson's views of Great Britain and Germany, the causes and effects of his neutral stance, and the question of whether the United States' eventual entry in to the first world war was influenced by any biases President Wilson may have had. In the end, it will be apparent that while Wilson was indeed personally biased towards the British, he did not let this bias affect his actions as president.

The United States has long been considered a melting pot, composed of immigrants and their descendants from a multitude of nations around the world. Because the largest number of these peoples came from Europe, it should come as no surprise that World War I had the potential to cause tremendous divisiveness across the country; declaring war on any of the numerous belligerent powers threatened to "rend the unity of America."[2] Thus, it was in the best

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1 Susan D. Becker and William Bruce Wheeler, *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence*, vol. 2, *Since 1865*, 2d ed., (Geneva, IL: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990), 121.
2 Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters*, vol. 5, *Neutrality, 1914-1915* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., Inc., 1935), 17.