

Conjure, Hoodoo, and the Cross: African Spirituality and the Slave Experience in Pre-Antebellum America

African Spirituality Had More of an Influence on the Slave Experience in America Than Christianity

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines African spirituality and its influence on the lives of enslaved Africans in America. Earlier historiography suggested that Christian beliefs had a profound impact on the cultural attitudes of the enslaved black populations. My thesis dislodges this theory and ultimately offers a compelling appraisal to the contrary. Indeed, African spirituality was embedded in the cultural, political, social, and religious lives of Africans prior to the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, insomuch that during the Middle Passage it was their spiritual connectedness which they held onto.

My paper begins with the insurrection of Nat Turner and analyzes the fear that white planters had of African spirituality. Relaying that conversion to Christianity by enslaved Africans was minimal for the first century and a half of the slave experience, I present African spirituality as the paramount influence. Further, my thesis analyzes slave narratives showing how ritual worship was vital to the lives of enslaved Africans. Finally, I investigate the practice of conjuring and the religion of Hoodoo to display the processes through which enslaved Africans both protected themselves and developed a religious counter to Christianity.

My findings show that there is a greater need to investigate the impacts of African spirituality on both sides of the Atlantic to deepen our understanding of the connection between African religions and Christianity both during the era of American slavery and modern times.



"[Slavery] was recognized accordingly by Christ and his apostles. They condemned all intermeddlers with it."

— Reverend Nathan Lord,
President, Dartmouth College

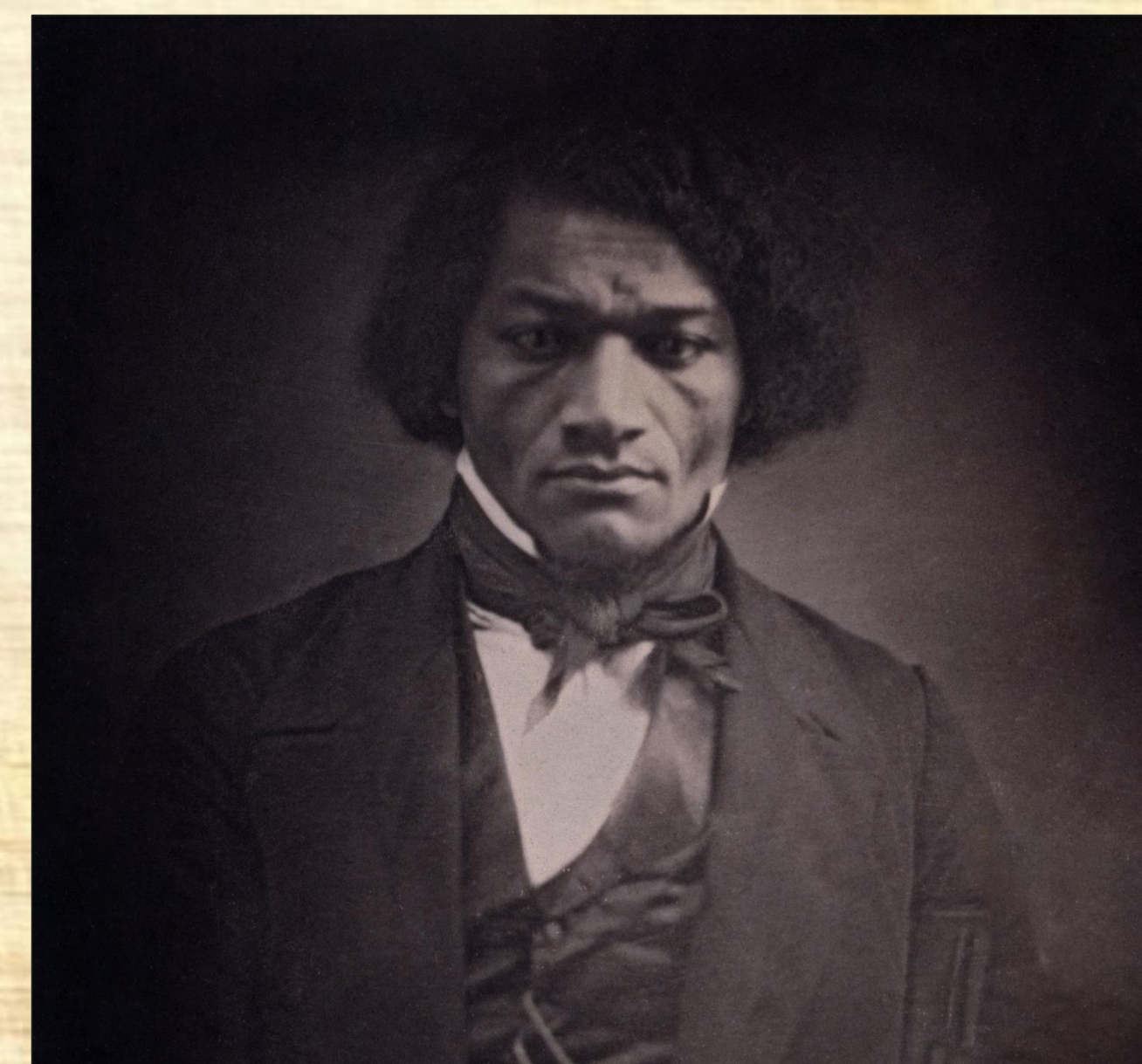
REV. NATHAN LORD

QUESTIONS

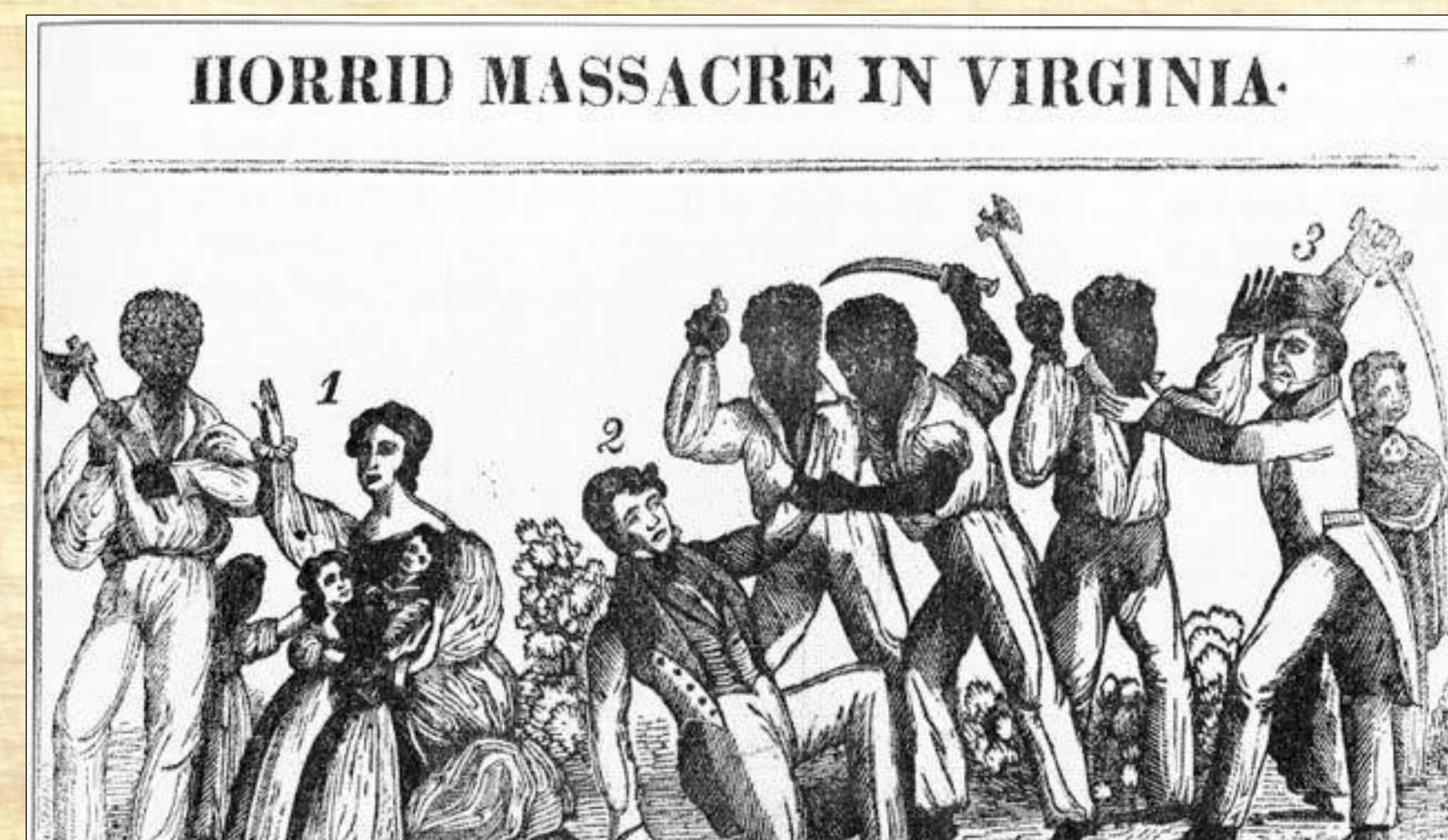
- Why was Christianity viewed as the predominate religious influence to the enslaved African?
- To what degree was African Spirituality central to the slave experience in America?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In congruence with historical analysis and writing, this study focuses on the influence of African Spirituality on the slave experience in America. The sources for my work included slave, planter, and traveler narratives, key resources on the subject of Christianity and African Spirituality, and documentation which supports the theory that it was African Spirituality more so than Christianity which held the central position in the lives of enslaved Africans. The influence of African Spirituality will be examined through the lenses of first-hand accounts and scholarly writings.



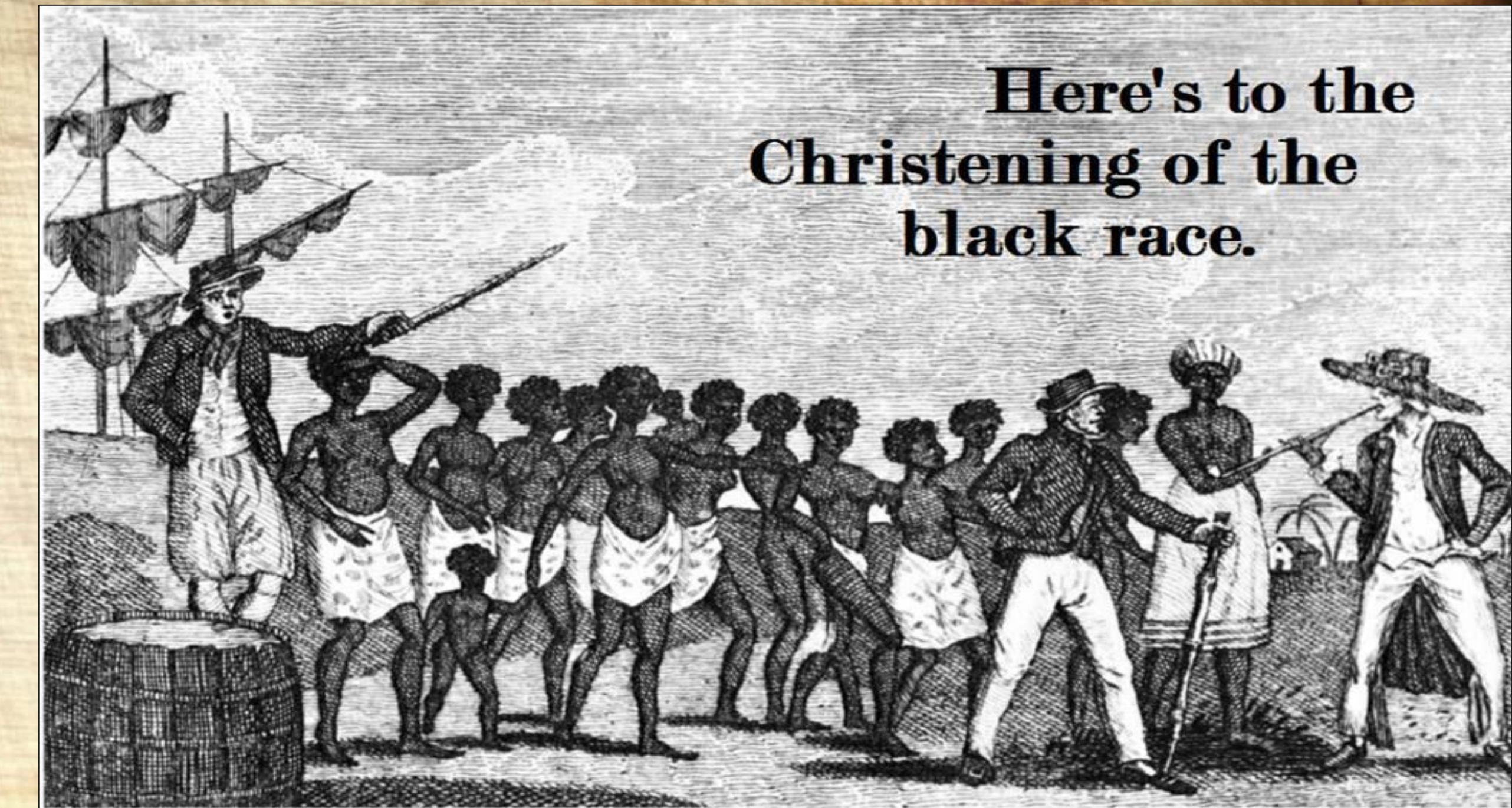
"The man who wields the blood-clotted cow skin during thon Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus"
---Frederick Douglass



"Having soon discovered to be great, I must appear so, and therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped myself in mystery, devoting my time to fasting and prayer."
---Nat Turner

CONCLUSIONS/RESULTS

- Conversion to Christianity was minimum for the first century and a half of the slave experience in America
- Exposure to Christianity depended upon the pious nature of the planter and was reliant upon the cooperation of missionaries
- Enslaved Africans by-and-large retained their spiritual identifications and connectedness which was used to facilitate their connection to the Supreme Being, manufacture worship, foster a sense of hope, and plot rebellions and insurrections
- Many enslaved Africans rejected the tenants of Christianity in part due to the reality that their conditions stood in contrast to the religion of Christ



FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This research will continue with the study of the various African cultures and spiritual religions both prior to and after the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The purpose of this future research is to understand African spiritual religions, their ideas, beliefs and practices, and the overall influence on the lives of Africans on the continent. My findings show that there is a greater need to investigate African spirituality on both sides of the Atlantic. Through this there will be a better understanding of the connection between African religions and Christianity.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dr. Ousman Kobo, Ph.D., Department of History, The Ohio State University
Melvin Barnes, Department of History, The Ohio State University
Dr. Paul Cook, Ph.D., Department of African-American and African Studies, The Ohio State University
Leta Hendricks, Africana Studies Librarian and Human Sciences Librarian, The Ohio State University