

Teaching Christianity in the face of adversity: African American religious leaders in the late antebellum South

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Abbreviations used

<i>Avery</i>	Avery Research Center, Charleston
<i>Caroliniana</i>	South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia
<i>Duke</i>	Duke University Special Collections, Durham
<i>ERO</i>	Essex Record Office, Chelmsford
<i>SHC</i>	Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
<i>VHS</i>	Virginia Historical Society, Richmond
<i>VSL</i>	Virginia State Library, Richmond

Abstract

Religious leaders were key figures within African American society in the late antebellum South. They undertook a vital religious function within both the plantation slave community and the institutionalised biracial and independent black church and many became a focal point for African American Christianity amongst slaves and free blacks. These religious leaders also took on a number of secular responsibilities, becoming counsellors, mediators, and advisors, individuals that blacks would frequently seek out for their opinion, advice and solace.

African American religious leaders held a position considered to be vital and prestigious. But such a position was also perilous. Black religious leaders had to reconcile the conflicting demands of two groups whose needs were almost diametrically opposed. Slaves and free blacks wanted to hear a message of hope, but the Southern elite wanted to hear a message of obedience to ensure that their authority remained unchallenged. Appeasing both groups was an almost impossible task. Failing to meet their demands, however, could be disastrous for black religious leaders. Slaves and free blacks who heard a message of obedience to the Southern white elite rejected the authority of the black preacher, who was then often unable to continue his ministrations. Conversely, those who were considered to be teaching a message that was undermining the planter's authority faced reprisals from white society. These reprisals could be violent. In order to survive, black religious leaders had to chart a difficult course between the two groups, giving a sense of hope to the enslaved but in a manner that did not appear to undermine white authority.

Within historical scholarship, it has been argued that African American religious leaders shared a common role. By the late antebellum period, however, a divide had emerged amongst black religious leaders. Although they continued to share many of the same goals, responsibilities, and challenges, the form of Christianity practiced by black preachers on the plantation was not the same as that practiced by licensed black ministers in the biracial and independent black church. Christianity within the plantation slave community continued to include African traditions and rituals that had survived the transatlantic crossing. Christianity within the biracial and independent black church, however, had begun to reject these African traditions as backward and outdated, and had moved instead towards a form of religion that, whilst still emotional and uplifting, was also more formal and hierarchical, resembling the Christianity of white Southern evangelicals.

Black preachers and licensed black ministers were preaching Christianity in the face of adversity and had the potential to become political leaders within the African American community. The realisation of this potential was hindered, not only by the constant supervision of these religious leaders by the white elite but also through the refusal of black preachers and ministers to use Christianity to justify acts of resistance. This research adds new insight to the role of African American religious leaders through a detailed understanding of their different approaches in delivering the Christian message.

Declaration

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Introduction

In the 1850s, Northern journalist Frederick Law Olmsted visited an African American church in New Orleans. Upon entering he encountered a black preacher about to begin his sermon. Olmsted recalled the rough nature of the preacher's discourse, noting that while the sermon was based on a Biblical text 'words were frequently misplaced, and their meaning evidently misapprehended, while the grammar and pronunciation were sometimes such as to make the idea intended to be conveyed by the speaker incomprehensible to me'. Yet despite the uneducated content of the sermon, the preacher's words still had a tremendous impact on the black congregants, as members let forth with 'shouts, and groans, terrific shrieks, and indescribable expressions of ecstasy [sic] – of pleasure or agony – and even stamping, jumping, and clapping of hands'. Even Olmsted commented that 'I was once surprised to find my own muscles all stretched, as if ready for a struggle, my face glowing, and my feet stamping – having been infected unconsciously, as men often are, with instinctive bodily sympathy with the excitement of the crowd'.¹

Olmsted's description demonstrates the power and authority that black preachers commanded in the late antebellum South, not only amongst the African American community but also amongst whites who listened to their sermons. Black religious leaders, in both the plantation slave community and in the biracial and independent black churches, provided African Americans with religious instruction as well as messages of hope and the promise of eventual salvation. These religious leaders were able to captivate and enthral congregations with their oratorical skill and religious enthusiasm.

What Olmsted did not state, however, was that he was listening to the sermon of a licensed black minister, not a black preacher. By the late antebellum period, differences had emerged between black preachers within the plantation slave community, and licensed black ministers within the biracial and independent black church. Both had similar goals and faced similar challenges. They sought to preach Christianity to their African American congregants and give them a sense of hope

¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1863), pp. 188-9.

and eventual salvation. They also faced opposition from Southern planters who were suspicious of the ability of these religious leaders to undermine their authority. Despite these similarities, however, the two differed in how they preached and taught Christianity. While black preachers on the plantation continued to incorporate African religious traditions and rituals in their worship, licensed black ministers began to reject these traditions and moved towards a style of Christianity that was more formal and hierarchical.

The idea that African American religious leadership incorporated a variety of individuals rather than just one specific figure has been neglected within historical study. Few studies of slavery or of religion in the slaveholding states have focused exclusively on the black preacher. While historians of slavery have long commented that black preachers were important individuals within slave and free black society, they have often not fully explained exactly what the role of these figures was and why they held such a privileged and prestigious position. As few studies have focused solely on African American religious leaders, those that have examined have often used them as examples when dealing with other aspects and issues of slave religion.² A similar problem emerges with wider studies on religion in the

² It was not until the revisionist movement in the 1970s that studies of slavery began to identify the black preacher as an important figure in the slave community. However most revisionist studies did not appraise these religious leaders in detail. When discussing slave religion Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, reprint 2004) remains one of the most important studies. Although Raboteau examines the efforts of black preachers in the evangelical churches in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and on the role of the black preacher in the plantation slave community, both discussions are rather brief. Raboteau's later publications also lack significant discussion on the black preacher. While *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) examines the sermon of the black preacher, there is little discussion of their wider role in slave and free black society. His most recent work *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) suffers from similar limitations. Lawrence Levine's study *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) notes that prior to the 1970s the black preacher was ignored by scholars but only provides a brief examination of their importance. Other revisionist studies have similar limitations. John Boles' *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1976) examines the fear the white elite had of black preachers, while George Rawick in *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972) comments on the intense relationship black preachers had with their congregations and of their sacred and secular role in the African American community. Gayraud Wilmore *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973, reprint 1986) and Milton Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism: White Protestants, Plantation Missions, and the Flowering of Negro Christianity* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975) have similar problems with a lack of detail on the black preacher. Of the revisionist studies of slavery, Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971) devotes a significant section of his examination of slave

slaveholding states, in that black preachers are discussed but not to the extent needed to understand the differences between the religious leaders and their complex relationship with Southern society.³

This thesis focuses on two distinct types of African American religious leaders: the black preacher within the plantation slave community, and the licensed black minister within the biracial and independent African American church. On the plantation, slaves sometimes felt the call to preach but were only able to do this with the acceptance of the community. Those preaching on the plantation practiced a form of Christianity that incorporated African traditions and rituals into their services and ceremonies. They were able to preach at nocturnal meetings that were held in locations hidden away from the eyes of the planter and from any slave patrols. During these meetings black preachers were able to provide messages of freedom and salvation that gave slaves a sense of solace, a message they would not have been able to promote in public services with white elites present.

religion to the black preacher, investigating their role within the plantation slave community and in wider Southern society, the sense of pride African Americans had for their religious leaders, and the threats facing black preachers. Thomas Webber's *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community 1831-1865* (New York: W W Norton and Company, Inc., 1978) and John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) also both provide some more in-depth discussion of these religious leaders.

Following revisionist studies of slavery, further examinations of slave religion have begun to provide more discussion of the black preacher. Works such as Janet Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), Erskine Clarke, *Wrestlin' Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in Antebellum Georgia and the Carolina Low Country* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2000) and Margaret Creel, *"A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1988) all enter into some analysis of African American religious leaders. However these works still tend to focus on one particular aspect of these religious leaders, rather than examining them to their full extent. The most recent works on slave religion have focused on the impact specific evangelical denominations had on African Americans, in particular Baptism and Methodism. Wilson Fallin Jr.'s *Uplifting the People: Three Centuries of Black Baptists in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), and J. Gordon Melton's *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African American Methodism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007) examine the interaction of slaves and free blacks in the respective churches and the role of the black preachers within both.

³ Works such as Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977), Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), and Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) all provide some discussion of the black preacher but this is often rather brief. Timothy Lockley's *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens, Georgia, and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2001) enters into a fuller analysis of these religious leaders. Charles Irons' recent study *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008) has also provided a more thorough analysis of the efforts made by white evangelicals to bring African Americans into their congregations and provide opportunities for them to preach.

In contrast with the preacher on the plantation, the licensed black minister in the biracial and independent black church was often chosen not by the African American community but either by white elites or evangelical ministers. As the nineteenth century progressed more African Americans were accepted into presbyteries. Due to this, the religious education of these black ministers developed along white, rather than black lines. By the late antebellum period, licensed black ministers were beginning to reject the African traditions incorporated into the Christian beliefs of slave plantation communities. A further difference between the licensed black minister and the slave preacher was that slave preachers on the plantation had the opportunity to preach in nocturnal meetings held away from Southern elites. Services held in the biracial and independent black churches, however, were public, and so black ministers had to be more careful in constructing a message that would be deemed acceptable both by their African American congregants but also by any white observers.

While the late antebellum period saw differences emerging between black preachers and licensed black ministers, some similarities remained. One example is the prestige this role carried. Slave preachers on the plantation and licensed black preachers in the church were often highly respected figures within the African American community. Some were even able to earn the admiration of Southern elites who attended the services, due to their oratorical skill and the religious enthusiasm they were able to inspire. Although the black preacher's position could be prestigious, however, it was also fragile and perilous. Southern white elites were wary of African American religious leaders, because the power and influence black preachers and licensed black ministers wielded posed a threat to their authority. Consequently restrictions were often imposed to limit the power of coloured religious leaders. White observers were sent to monitor their sermons, in order to ensure that no rhetoric was being used that could inspire slaves to rebel against their owners. Olmsted commented that when he entered the church and sat down, he was asked to move towards the front of the church, where two other whites were already

present. One of these ‘looked like a ship’s officer, and was probably a member of the police force in undress – what we call a spy when we detect it in Europe’.⁴

In analysing the role of the black preacher on the plantation and the licensed black minister in the biracial and independent black church, the thesis focuses mainly on the evangelical denominations in the slaveholding states. Such an emphasis is necessitated by the large proportion of people who belonged to these churches. In 1850s Virginia, for every individual who belonged to an Episcopal or Presbyterian congregation, four belonged to a Baptist or Methodist.⁵ Throughout the term ‘evangelical church’ will refer to Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. Although there are differences between the theology of the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian faiths, these are relatively insignificant for the purposes of understanding the relationship between black preachers and white society. The similarity between the different evangelical denominations is illustrated by the lack of distinction made by both African Americans and Southern whites between the churches. Writing about his application to join a Presbytery in 1855, John Ferguson commented that ‘if Presbytery should determine to cast me off... I will remain firm to the calling. But I mean simply this that I must look elsewhere for support. And if I cannot become a Presbyterian; you know, there is not much difference in a name, so the heart is right, although the Presbyterian doctrine I, of course, must ever believe’.⁶ Similarly former slave and Baptist minister Noah Davis wrote about the state of religion in Fredericksburg in the antebellum era, commenting that while there were Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Baptist churches, ‘I had no particular preference for any one of these denominations, more than another; but, went

⁴ Olmsted, *Journey*, pp. 187-8.

⁵ These statistics were taken from Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 14. Robert Baker illustrates that membership of the Baptist Church in Virginia grew at a faster rate (3.9 per cent) than the population of the state as a whole (0.88 per cent). (Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptists Convention and Its People, 1607-1972* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), pp. 105-26.) Roger Finke and Rodney Stark examine the growth of the evangelical churches in nineteenth century American in their work *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992) commenting that Methodists saw the most rapid growth from 2.5 per cent of total adherents in 1776 to 34.2 per cent in 1850. The Baptist church experienced some growth from 16.9 per cent of total adherents to 20.5 per cent. In the same period, however, the percentage of total adherents for the Congregationalist and Episcopalian churches fell from 20.4 per cent to 4 per cent and from 15.7 per cent to 3.5 per cent respectively (p. 55).

⁶ Letter from John Ferguson, Oglethorpe University to Mr McLees, May 4th 1855, in John McLees Papers. *Caroliniana*.

wherever my favorites went'.⁷ Despite the theological and organisational differences of the evangelical denominations, such variations were slight and often almost non-existent.

Differences between the evangelical denominations were also diminished because as plantations were often isolated, few slaves were able to choose between different churches. Often the nearest church took hours to reach, a fact noted by former slaves interviewed after emancipation. Hester Hunter recalled that 'I used to walk fourteen miles to church every Sunday en didn' think nothin bout it'.⁸ Many slaves considered attending an organised church service to be a great opportunity. It provided them with an occasion to meet with slaves from other plantations and not only worship together, but also exchange news and gossip. Because of the scarcity of organised churches and because services were social, as well as sacred, slaves cared little about the differences between the various evangelical denominations, and, even had they wanted to, had little or no option to find an alternative.

Other denominations in the late antebellum South did experience some African American participation but not to the same extent. Scholars have investigated the role slaves and free blacks played in other denominations in late antebellum Southern society, in particular in the Roman Catholic church. Despite this scholarship, however, the number of African Americans within Roman Catholic congregations was very much in the minority compared to those who joined the evangelical churches. The formality of Catholic services alienated slaves, who preferred the informal, exuberant, and emotional atmosphere found in the

⁷ Noah Davis, *A Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis, A Colored Man. Written by Himself, at the Age of Fifty-Four*, p. 18. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/davisn/davis.html> (accessed 28/08/2010).

⁸ Mom Hester Hunter in George P. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 2 – South Carolina Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed June 17, 2008). Similar examples can be found in the narratives of Julia Larken (Volume 13), Charles Smith (Volume 13), Westly Little (Supplement 1, Volume 8), and Lizzie Atkins (Supplement 2, Volume 2). Hunter was interviewed three times for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives but only mentioned walking to church in her second narrative. The varying information provided in these interviews create problems when comparing the number of slaves interviewed with the number of narratives. This issue is discussed in more detail later in the introduction and a full breakdown on the differences between the number of African Americans interviewed and the number of narratives is in Appendix 1.

evangelical churches.⁹ Therefore, although other churches will be used to illustrate some differences in the practice of religion and the role of black preachers, the focus will remain on the evangelical denominations.

Chapter one examines the history of the black preacher prior to the late antebellum period. African tribes had well established religious systems that dominated everyday life. The process of enslavement and the transatlantic crossing, altered these beliefs but were not able to eradicate them. Once in America, Africans were introduced and eventually converted to Christianity, but the slow process of conversion helped them retain their own religious beliefs and rituals before adapting and incorporating them into this new system. The alterations and incorporation of different traditions meant that African American Christianity differed from European Christianity. Towards the end of the eighteenth century black preachers began to emerge within this new form of Christianity and began to be recognised amongst the black community and Southern white society for their oratorical skill. As leaders within the slave community, however, white elites were naturally suspicious of them. The religious elements of several slave rebellions in the early nineteenth century convinced many that black preachers were dangerous. Reacting to these rebellions, Southern whites increased and intensified their scrutiny of black preachers, a development which made the task of preaching a message of hope to slaves and free blacks even more complicated.

Following the prehistory of African American religious leaders prior to the late antebellum period, chapter two focuses on the role of the black preacher on the plantation. Their sacred and secular roles within the slave community are analysed, together with their management of the conflicting demands of both slaves and planter. Satisfying the demands of slaves, in providing a message of hope and

⁹ See Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) and Randall M. Miller, *Catholics in the Old South: Some Speculations on Catholic Identities* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). Recent articles include Suzanne Krebsbach, 'Black Catholics in Antebellum Charleston', *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 108, No. 2 (2007) and articles contained in M. Shawn Copeland (ed.), *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2009). While the articles in Copeland's book deal with African American Catholicism in the nineteenth and twentieth century, articles by Diane Batts Morrow ('The Difficulty of Our Situation: The Obate Sisters of Providence in Antebellum Sorrow') and Cyprian Davis ('Henriette Delille: Servant of Slaves, Witness to the Poor') examines the role of the church in the antebellum South and its relation to slavery.

eventual salvation, was often interpreted by planters as a threat to their authority. Conversely, following the wishes of the planter by preaching a message of obedience was considered by slaves to be a betrayal. Black preachers who were able to reconcile the wants of both groups were regarded as key individuals within the plantation slave community. Their authority, however, was not unrivalled. Other figures, such as the slave conjurer, also commanded a certain amount of respect from the enslaved. Additionally, slave religion on the plantation was not dependent on the black preacher. Whilst religious authority was often sought in meetings and ceremonies, it was not essential. Slaves could be chosen to take charge of religious meetings even if they had no previous experience. The black preacher's role was important within the plantation slave community but the individual who took on that position was not.

In analysing the relationship between the black preacher and the slave community, this thesis focuses on slaves who resided on plantations. The plantation slave community was not the experience for all African American slaves but it was the experience of the majority. In the antebellum South, nearly three-quarters of slaves lived on plantations where the master owned at least ten slaves.¹⁰ It was on plantations of this size that a more coherent slave community was able to develop away from white society. This was partly due to the large number of slaves but also because on smaller plantations and farms, slaves worked alongside their owner, where a more informal master-slave relationship developed.

Chapter three looks at the licensed black minister in the biracial and the independent black church. By the late antebellum period, separate churches and congregations for slaves and free blacks became more commonplace as the white elite grew more

¹⁰ The precise percentage of slaves who lived on plantations of ten or more is 74.4 percent. In the Upper South this figure is 64.6 percent and in the Deep South 80.6 percent. Lewis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (2 vols., Washington, D.C., 1933), I, 530, cited in Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619-1877* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 243. Historians disagree over the number of slaves necessary for a master to become a planter, arguing that different regions of the South needed different numbers of slaves. For the debate on this subject see in particular Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), p. 200; and Michael Wayne, 'An Old South Morality Play: Reconsidering the Social Underpinnings of the Proslavery Ideology', *Journal of American History* Vol. 77, No. 3 (Dec., 1990), p. 848. Mark M. Smith also sums up this debate in his work *Debating slavery: Economy and society in the antebellum American South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 16. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the term 'planter' will be applied to slaveowners who owned more than ten slaves.

accustomed to and comfortable with the idea of segregated religious services. Although the licensed black ministers who led these services had the same underlying goals and responsibilities as black preachers on the plantation, they differed in how they carried out these tasks. Often educated by white evangelical ministers, the attitude of licensed black ministers towards the use of African traditions altered, beginning to see them as out-dated heathenish rituals. Licensed black ministers in the church also faced greater scrutiny than the slave preacher in the plantation slave community. Whereas religious meetings on the plantation could be held away from white elites, services in the organised church were public. Licensed black ministers therefore had to take greater care in their preaching, in both mode and delivery, in order to avoid being censured by the white elite.

The final chapter examines the relationship of African American religious leaders with evangelical white ministers and the relationship between white ministers, planters, and the institution of slavery. From the beginnings of slavery, white ministers attempted to convert slaves to Christianity. These attempts were often hindered by planters' reluctance to permit Christian instruction to their slaves, and by the differences in language between white ministers and Africans. In their efforts to convert slaves white ministers encouraged the development of black preachers, realising that hearing the Christian message from one of their own would be more appealing. At the same time, however, white ministers gradually became acclimatised to slavery. Many began to take their own slaves and softened their criticisms of the institution, viewing slavery as a necessary evil. Such a change, however, impacted on the relationship between white evangelical ministers and African American religious leaders. Although white ministers were still impressed by the oratorical abilities of these figures, they also became convinced of their innate intellectual and cultural inferiority. While white evangelical ministers continued to encourage African Americans to preach they did not consider their coloured counterparts to be their equals.

Analysing the WPA former slave narratives and other primary source collections

In analysing the role of African American religious leaders in the late antebellum South and the distinctions between them, one of the key sources of evidence are the Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews conducted with former slaves. Collected in the 1930s and compiled into forty volumes, it was not until the 1970s that these narratives were examined in detail by historians of slavery. After George Rawick edited and published the entire collection in 1972, these interviews have become one of, if not the most, important and invaluable collections of primary source material on slave life in the antebellum South.¹¹ These narratives are an essential source of information when examining African American religious leaders, especially black preachers on the plantation, as they provide not only information on the responsibilities of these leaders but also how slaves responded to them.

Despite their ubiquity in slave studies, a number of scholars have highlighted the difficulties and limitations of using these interviews. Issues of age, race prejudice, geography, and social situation at the time of interview have all been previously examined and analysed.¹² While this thesis does not enter into an in-depth discussion of all of these issues, one essential issue is the disparity between the interviewees' location at time of interview and during slavery. Any study that attempts to use the narratives in order to construct a state by state analysis of slave life in the late

¹¹ George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). Norman R. Yetman provides an extensive introduction online into how the narratives were collected and published, as well as an exploration of their limitations and problems. Slave Narratives: An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro00.html> (accessed 27/09/2010).

¹² Following the publication of the narratives, a few studies decided against using the narratives due to their limitations, such as Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1999). Blassingame has also cited the flaws in the slave narratives both in *The Slave Community*, and in his article 'Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems', *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (1975). Other works examined the limitations of the narratives. Norman R. Yetman, 'Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery', *American Quarterly* Vol. 36, No. 2 (1984); David Thomas Bailey, 'A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery', *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (1980); Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); Donna J. Spindel, 'Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Autumn, 1996); C. Vann Woodward, 'History from Slave Sources: A Review Article', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (Apr., 1974). More recently Stephanie Shaw's article has examined the WPA narratives to see how they impact on studies of the Great Depression, providing a new avenue of scholarly debate for these interviews. (Stephanie J. Shaw, 'Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression', *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (2003).)

antebellum South needs to consider the fact that many interviewees relocated. Examining approximately 4251 interviews with approximately 3756 former slaves illustrates that a relatively large proportion had moved from the state in which they were enslaved.¹³ Obviously some former slaves were interviewed in states where slavery did not exist; those interviewed in Indiana, Kansas, Ohio, Minnesota, and Oregon, had nearly all moved to the states after being freed, although some were free blacks and had been living in the states all their lives. Further interviews carried out in Oklahoma, Colorado, and Washington also create difficulties given that these territories were not formally recognised as states during the late antebellum period.

Of the remaining states in which former slaves were interviewed, not all experienced the same level of geographic relocation. States such as North and South Carolina experienced relatively little relocation. Out of 186 former slaves interviewed in North Carolina and 356 in South Carolina, few experienced slavery in a different state. Twenty interviewees in North Carolina and twelve in South Carolina moved from different states, with nine simply moving over the border. In comparison, however, other states experienced a far greater level of relocation. Out of 305 former slaves interviewed in Texas, 168 had experienced slavery in a different state. In Florida 45 out of 67 interviewees were born or experienced slavery elsewhere. Finally while 740 African Americans were interviewed in Arkansas, only 194 interviewees were slaves in the state. In contrast only 42 people were interviewed in Kentucky and 26 in Tennessee but during slavery 167 and 213 respectively lived in each state. Although these are extreme examples of slave states that experienced a great deal of relocation, each state contained former slaves that moved there after emancipation.¹⁴

One further issue with the idea of geographic relocation needs highlighting. In the WPA collection no interviews were carried out in the state of Louisiana. However,

¹³ The figures of the first thirty volumes of *The American Slave* were derived from the African American Experience website, <http://aae.greenwood.com>. Volumes 31-40 were derived from the ABC-CLIO eBooks website, <http://ebooks.abc-clio.com>. These figures are approximate as a number of interviews contained the experiences of more than one slave, making it almost impossible to distinguish how many were interviewed. During the thesis, the individual website for each narrative will not be listed, but the date accessed will be provided.

¹⁴ Table 1 in Appendix 1 provides a full breakdown of the number of slaves interviewed in each state and how many resided in each state during slavery.

159 individuals said that they had experienced slavery in the state. While other states experienced a large amount of relocation, each had individuals that were interviewed there, giving their state a presence within the WPA narratives. However, because no volume focuses on Louisiana, the voices of slaves here have been lost, making it more likely that scholars would ignore the state in their studies.¹⁵

In his analysis of the slave narratives, Paul Escott examined the issue of geographic relocation, providing a detailed breakdown of where slaves were interviewed compared with where they originally lived. Escott's study, however, fails to take one aspect into consideration, in that a number of interviews do not provide any information as to whether the former slaves were born or experienced slavery in another state. Although Escott assumes that these individuals grew up in the state in which they now resided, such an assumption cannot be justified, given the numbers of slaves who did not provide this information.

The issue of geographic relocation affects the study of black preachers when analysing their prevalence in the slaveholding states. Looking at the frequency with which black preachers appear within the WPA interviews, 97 out of 268 references were from narratives recorded in Texas, more than double that of any other state. Forty of those references, however, were from African Americans who had relocated to Texas after emancipation. Cross-referencing the interviewees that mentioned black preachers with their location during slavery shows that Texas still remains the state with the largest number of references to black preachers. Other states that had previously seemed insignificant, however, also emerge. All of the states in the Deep South, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, contain a number of references to black preachers, a link which would not have emerged if the narratives were analysed by looking at the location of where people were interviewed.¹⁶

Alongside the former slave narratives, other sources of primary evidence used throughout this thesis have their own problems and limitations that need to be

¹⁵ The issue of lack of interviews from Louisiana is discussed in Ronnie W. Clayton, *Mother Wit: The Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers' Project* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990).

¹⁶ See Table 2 in Appendix for the full breakdown.

recognised. In analysing attempts made by the Anglican church to convert Africans to Christianity during the early colonial period, the Papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), as well as the Fulham Papers provide invaluable collections of letters and reports sent from Anglican missionaries in America back to London. These letters and reports often contained details of success stories in converting African slaves to Christianity. However, as there was no way to check that the information provided was accurate, raising the possibility that these missionaries could exaggerate their achievements without risk of being discovered. In one letter sent back to London, Anglican missionary Francis Le Jau commented that the number of Africans baptised was ‘pretty many’ but that there were only two African communicants in the local church.¹⁷ Such a discrepancy makes Le Jau’s claim over baptising a large number of Africans suspicious but as there was no way of confirming whether his report was accurate it was not questioned.

In investigating the role of African American religious leaders in the antebellum period, the primary sources contained in the Documenting the American South website are an essential tool.¹⁸ With autobiographies of former slaves, records of independent black churches, memoirs of white Southern evangelicals, slaveholders and non-slaveholders, and travel accounts from visitors to the slaveholding states, this collection of narratives is vital. Although this collection does not have the same recurring problems that are present in the narratives of former slaves and Anglican missionaries, there are still issues to consider. Alongside the problem of bias within these narratives there is also the possibility that interpretations of these texts could be altered through mistakes made in the process of transcription. This is a minor concern compared to the problems raised in the other collections. However, it is still one that needs to be considered.

The former slave interviews, as well as collections of reports from Anglican missionaries and Southern narratives, remain invaluable collections of primary source material on African American religious history. In examining religion

¹⁷ Francis Le Jau to John Chamberlayne, Febr. the 18th 1709, Papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (Lambeth Palace Library, 1974), Volume XVI: Rhode Island 1708-undated, Sth. Carolina, 1702-1710.

¹⁸ <http://docsouth.unc.edu/>

amongst the slave community and analysing the role of black preachers, the WPA narratives provide a source of information unobtainable from any other collection. In using the interviews, it is important to be aware of the limitations of the collection and the possible effects on any analysis of the narratives. Similarly the reports from Anglican missionaries provide an important insight into the work done to convert African slaves to Christianity during the colonial period. However, it is important to consider the possibility that the successes raised in these reports were exaggerated.

Chapter 1

‘For what God had done to their souls’: the black preacher in the colonial and early antebellum South

This chapter examines how black religious leaders developed within colonial and early antebellum America and how they came to occupy one of the most important positions within African American society. While religious leaders were common in Africa, the diminution of African religious beliefs during and after the transatlantic crossing meant that the authority of these individuals waned. Efforts made by Anglicans to convert Africans to Christianity faltered but the rise of evangelicalism and the religious fervour that accompanied the first and second Great Awakenings inspired blacks to not just convert and worship this new religion but also to preach it. This chapter also examines the reaction of Southern society to black religious leaders, especially from the planter class. Concerns over slaves converting to Christianity, coupled with suspicions regarding the influence of religious leaders over the black community led to restrictions on their activities. Religious elements within the slave rebellions of the early nineteenth century heightened these fears. It was only when Southern white evangelicals, who had long struggled with the problem of equating Christianity with slavery, split from their Northern counterparts, that restrictions on black religious leaders began to ease.

Throughout African and African American history black religious leaders have been an almost constant presence. In Africa, priests held one of the highest positions in any tribal hierarchy. As spiritual intermediaries, they were believed to have the ability to commune with higher deities for the benefit of the group. Upon enslavement, Africans and their religious leaders were ripped from a society where their religion was unchallenged and part of everyday life, and plunged into a new world where their beliefs were regarded as heathen by their captors. Despite the difficulties, however, African religions continued to thrive in the New World and African religious leaders continued to hold some influence and authority.¹

¹ For key works on African religion see John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Press, 1969) and *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann Press, 1975) and

The strength of African religious beliefs diminished following the transatlantic crossing. While debate continues as to the extent and speed of this diminution, scholars generally agree that African religious beliefs did not survive intact and were altered and affected by the process of enslavement.² Slaves who believed they would be protected by their beliefs often lost some of their faith upon the discovery that their gods and ancestors could not save them from the planter's whip. The loss of faith gave Southern elites, as well as white evangelical ministers, an opportunity to remove African religions in their entirety by converting slaves to Christianity. But despite the opinion that African religion was heathen, few attempts were initially made to remove the last vestiges of these presumed uncivilised beliefs. Concerns regarding the consequences of conversion and baptism of slaves, the disorganisation of Anglican missionary efforts, and the dogmatic style of preaching that failed to appeal to Africans, rendered these attempts piecemeal and impotent. The rise of evangelical churches through movements such as the first and second Great Awakenings did boost the appeal of Christianity to the black population. The delay in conversion, however, provided African religious beliefs the opportunity to survive in the New World. Not only did these traditions and rituals fuse together with Christianity to create an African American interpretation of the white religion but they also survived within the slave community independent of Christianity. Although these traditions had been altered by the horrors of the transatlantic crossing and the merging together of Africans from different tribes, the presence of these rituals provided them with a link back to their African ancestors.³

Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (London: Englewood Cliffs, 1976)

² Historiographical debate over the retention of African traditions has been on-going since the 1940s. The initial debate focused on whether African traditions survived in the New World and centred on two historians: E. Franklin Frazier who argued that Africans lost their religious beliefs and rituals in the process of enslavement and Melville J. Herskovits who argued that these traditions not only survived the transatlantic crossing and thrived in America. This particular debate has seemingly been resolved as few historians now argue that these traditions did not survive. Other debates, however, have been raised over how and to what extent these rituals and traditions were incorporated into African, and later African American, society in the New World. In particular debate has emerged between creolisation, the idea that African traditions were merged with Christianity to create a new form of black religion, and revisionism, whose proponents argue that slaves created new cultures informed by the memories of their African traditions. These issues will be examined during the course of the chapter.

³ The idea of African American Christianity being neither a continuation of African religion disguised as Christianity, nor a dark version of Christianity preached by slaveholders is supported by Charles Joyner who argues that instead it was 'a complex amalgam drawing upon many traditions, African

The introduction of Christianity to the black community created new opportunities for religious leadership. Although the efforts of the Anglican church were limited, those who received religious instruction often repeated the lessons to other slaves and free blacks. The rise of evangelicalism only helped further the practice of black religious leadership. Establishing biracial camp meetings gave slaves and free blacks the opportunity to preach in front of large audiences. Additionally differences between Anglicanism and evangelicalism, with the latter promoting a less dogmatic and more informal approach to worship, presented a more appealing form of Christianity to the black community. By the end of the eighteenth century, when evangelical denominations such as Baptism and Methodism had superseded the Anglican church, black preachers had become a relatively common sight.

As Christianity began to gain prominence within the black community, white American society remained divided over the benefits and dangers of conversion. Following the American Revolution and the declining strength and reputation of the Anglican church, evangelical denominations were left in a dominant position, able to expand their mission of bringing Christianity to the poor and downtrodden. Such a mission was opposed by sections of white society. As well as objecting to slave conversion, the very nature of the evangelical churches, in terms of their lively preaching style and boisterous services, generated criticism from conservative white elites. Furthermore planters retained the belief that introducing Christianity to the slave population could promote the message that slaves were spiritually equal to their masters, undermining their authority. Thus by the beginning of the nineteenth century there was continued resistance to the idea of converting slaves to Christianity.

The slave rebellions of Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vesey in 1822, and Nat Turner in 1831 only served to increase the fear that religion was a potentially dangerous tool that could be used for acts of revolt and resistance. All three insurrections contained some religious element, whether in organising the plot, or

and European'. (Charles Joyner, *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 35.

inspiring other slaves to join.⁴ In the Vesey and Turner rebellions the presence of a black religious leader convinced many Southern whites that African American Christianity needed to be either eradicated or more heavily supervised. In the aftermath of these insurrections, black preachers were often heavily restricted as to where and what they could preach. Black congregations found themselves more heavily supervised or even disbanded, and planters limited and broke up slave religious meetings on plantations on a more regular basis.

Fears that black Christianity could promote slave rebellions and acts of resistance prompted Southern elites to impose restrictions on black preachers. Such a concern was also enhanced by the dilemma between slavery and Christian evangelicalism. From the moment evangelicalism took root in the slaveholding states in the eighteenth century, ministers found themselves under almost constant pressure to demonstrate their support of slavery. Those who used their sermons to attack the institution frequently found themselves forced out of the South. As a result, a system of negotiation and compromise began. Ministers preached a gospel of obedience and subservience, reminding slaves of their duties to the master. At the same time, however, ministers also reminded masters of their duties to slaves, attempting to make slavery a more benevolent institution.

Compromising over slavery and reminding both slaves and planters of their reciprocal duties towards each other was an acceptable solution for both planters and ministers until the early nineteenth century. The growth of abolitionism, however,

⁴ The rebellions of Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey were designed to attack and liberate the cities of Richmond, Virginia and Charleston, South Carolina respectively, but both plots were discovered and stopped before any violence could ensue. See Douglas R. Egerton's works, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1993) and *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Lanham, Maryland, and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Gerald P. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). In comparison Nat Turner's insurrection took place in Southampton County, Virginia. Turner, along with more than seventy slaves and free blacks, travelled through the county killing any whites and freeing any slaves they found. Approximately sixty whites were killed before the local militia defeated the insurgents. See Kenneth S. Greenberg (ed.), *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion: Together with the full text of the so-called 'confessions' of Nat Turner made in prison in 1831* (New York: Humanities Press, Inc., 1966). Historical debate continues to surround all three of these rebellions, which will be dealt with later in the chapter.

especially as a movement within Northern evangelical churches, only increased the suspicion of planters towards the church, and placed many Southern ministers in an impossible situation. Despite constantly arguing about the benefits of Christianity for the slave population and giving reassurances that conversion would not lead to insurrection, white elites viewed Southern evangelical churches with increasing suspicion. Ministers came under increasing pressure to prove their proslavery credentials, and distance themselves from their Northern counterparts. Although ministers were appeasing planters by preaching a message of obedience and subservience, as the nineteenth century progressed many came to view slavery less as a sin and more as an opportunity to remove the supposedly heathen traits of African Americans and civilise them along the lines of white society. When the dilemma between appeasing planters and Northern clergymen reached a climax in the 1840s, it was inevitable that Southern churches would side with slavery over abolitionism. By the mid 1840s, the Southern Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches had all split from their Northern counterparts in a series of denominational schisms.⁵

The increased suspicion of evangelicalism and African American Christianity in the early nineteenth century led to a number of new restrictions against black preachers. While laws had previously been enacted against slaves gathering away from whites or to prevent slaves from preaching, these were not always upheld, with many planters and non-slaveholding Southern whites willing to overlook the restrictions. From the 1830s, however African American Christianity and black preachers faced closer scrutiny from Southern whites. Services were monitored, churches shut down, and informal meetings disrupted. On both the plantation and in the biracial and independent black church, white observers were present to ensure that the teaching of these black religious leaders was not at all insurrectionary. Former slave George King commented that during slave services on the plantation ‘the overseer was there with guards to keep the Negroes from getting too much riles up’.⁶ In the aftermath of slave rebellions, many black religious leaders had their licenses to preach revoked,

⁵ For further information on the denominational schisms see C. C. Geon, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985).

⁶ George G. King, in George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 7 – Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed September 8, 2009).

meaning that they were unable to lawfully minister in public. As a result they were either forced underground or kept on at the sufferance of planters who were willing to defy these restrictions.

Black preachers were never able to recapture the authority they had at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The denominational schisms of the 1840s, however, did help ease the pressure on African American religious leaders and evangelical Christianity in general by removing the issue of abolitionism from the slaveholding states. Once the schisms had occurred, the Southern evangelical churches' ties to abolitionism were cut and ministers no longer found themselves under such close scrutiny. For black preachers, laws still prevented them from legally preaching but Southern elites were more willing to turn a blind eye and monitor, rather than restrict them. Whilst the split between Northern and Southern evangelical denominations solidified the Southern church's defence of slavery, it also gave black preachers more freedom to continue their teachings.

Keeping faith in the midst of adversity? African religion in the New World

Although European explorers described Africans as heathen, religion was present in every part of their everyday life.⁷ In his anthropological study of African religion from the colonial period to the twentieth century John Mbiti argues that in African society 'there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community'.⁸ Although there was no standardised form of religious belief amongst the African tribes, some beliefs were ever present. All African religions focused on the causes of evil, with rituals frequently carried out in order to neutralise malevolent effects. These same religions also believed in a central God, one who was the Supreme Being and held absolute power. The majority of prayers,

⁷ In examining the early exchanges between European explorers and Africans, Winthrop Jordan comments that the heathenism of Africans was considered just as important a distinction between the two groups as skin colour was. (Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 23.)

⁸ Mbiti, *African religions and philosophies*, pp. 2-16. Also see J. Gordon Melton, *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African American Methodism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), p. 2.

however, were directed not at this figure but at lesser gods and deceased ancestors. Deceased ancestors were revered as the founders of villages and kinship groups; Africans believed that through prayer they could provide protection to the living. Examining the religious beliefs of the Ga tribe, M. J. Fields wrote that ‘the living never forget that they are the trustees of the dead...the dead are always watching to see that the living preserve what their forefathers established. And since the dead have power to bestow either blessing or adversity...the welfare of the living is felt to be bound up with the faithful performance of ancient custom’.⁹

A further similarity between African tribal religions concerned religious leadership. Tasks of carrying out rituals to ward off evil spirits, or offering up prayers of protection to ancestors or lesser African gods were given to a series of sacred specialists. These specialists were not necessarily referred to as priests. In their work examining the influence of African religious traditions on black Christianity in colonial America, Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood argue that in Africa mediums, diviners, herbalists, and rainmakers all performed ‘priestly’ rituals to help heal the sick, prevent disease, protect individuals and communities from danger, make or prevent rain, and carry out numerous other duties that ordinary people could not perform.¹⁰ Not all of these individual specialist positions survived the transatlantic crossing, but their responsibilities often remained present in slave society under the encompassing figure of the slave conjurer. Whilst the function of the conjurer will be examined in the following chapter they embodied the remnants of African religion that survived the transatlantic crossing, and remained long after the end of slavery. Prior to their enslavement, therefore, Africans participated in fully established religious systems that contained an array of rituals, prayers, and responsibilities, all of which were led by a series of religious specialists. Although the horrors of the transatlantic crossing and geographic dislocation diminished the power of tribal religious beliefs, it was impossible to remove them completely.

⁹ M. J. Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 197, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 16.

Relatively little attention was paid to African religion by white travellers. With the emphasis on trade and exploration, trying to civilise the heathen with religious education was a low priority. The few attempts made to convert tribes to Christianity therefore were frequently short-lived and half-hearted.¹¹ Following transportation to North America, however, slaves' use of religion came under greater scrutiny. White ministers argued that enslaved Africans should be converted to Christianity in order to civilise them and eradicate any heathen traits. In 1660, Charles II instructed the Council for Foreign Plantations that 'you are to consider how...servants or slaves may be best invited to the Christian Faith, and be made capable of being baptized'.¹² The establishment of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) in 1701 also furthered organised efforts at promoting Christianity among the enslaved. Other individual attempts were also made at conversion. In 1742 the Reverend Alexander Garden established the first school for slaves in Charleston, which taught an average of between fifty and sixty children until it was closed in 1764.¹³

Numerous reasons motivated attempts at religious conversion. A number of missionaries were inspired by the desire to remove the heathen customs of slaves. One repeated complaint in the SPG reports was of 'the constant & promiscuous cohabiting of slaves of different sex and nations together when a man or a woman's fancy do alter about his party they throw up one another and take of hers which they also change when they please'.¹⁴ A further rationale for converting slaves to Christianity was that it would prevent them from using African religious beliefs to inspire acts of resistance and rebellion. During the transatlantic crossing and the colonial period a number of rebellions were instigated which contained a religious

¹¹ For attempts at converting Africans to Christianity see Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, especially p. 9. Also Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 43.

¹² *Documents relating to the Colonial History of New York*, III. 36. See also *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial, 1574-1660*, pp. 492-493, cited in Marcus W. Jernegan, 'Slavery and Conversion in the Christian Colonies', *American Historical Review* Vol. 21, No. 3 (Apr., 1916), p. 508. Jernegan also pointed out that governors of the colonies, such as Governor Dongan of New York in 1686 and Governor Culpeper of Virginia in 1682, were frequently sent instructions on how they should attempt to Christianise slaves.

¹³ Frey, *Water*, p. 20. Some efforts had previously been made to educate slaves but Garden constructed the first official school. Also see C. W. Birnie, 'Education of the Negro in Charleston, South Carolina, Prior to the Civil War', *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan., 1927), p. 14.

¹⁴ Francis Le Jau to John Chamberlayne, Sept. the 15th 1708, Papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (Lambeth Palace Library, 1974), Volume XVI: Rhode Island 1708-undated, Sth. Carolina 1702-1710.

element. In 1751 the crew of the slave ship *Duke of Argyll* became ‘alarmed with a report that some of the men slaves had found means to poison the water in the scuttle casks upon deck’ but were relieved and amused when they found out that the men concerned ‘had only conveyed some of their county fetishes...or talismans into one of them, which they had the credulity to suppose must inevitably kill all who drank it’.¹⁵ Although these rebellions were easily dealt with, concern remained that the persistence of African religious beliefs would inspire slaves to rebel and prevent slaveholders from having total dominance over their labourers.

Efforts at promoting Christianity amongst the slave population did produce some positive results. Reports from English missionaries frequently contained stories of slaves who had either been baptised or were regular attendees at church services. SPG missionary, Giles Rainsford, preaching in Prince George’s County, Maryland, reported that the local slaves ‘have free liberty from their Masters to attend divine service & other means of instruction and one of the slaves is a constant Communicant & at least forty are Baptis’d in a year infants & adults’.¹⁶ When SPG missionary Elias Neau established his school in New York in 1704 to provide religious education to blacks it was a huge success. On Neau’s death his successor commented that ‘swarms of negroes come about my door...asking if I would be pleased to teach them and build on Mr. Neau’s foundation’.¹⁷ Despite these successes, however, evangelical endeavours were limited, and the vast majority of slaves were either unaware of the efforts to convert them to Christianity or unable to participate in them.

¹⁵ Martin B., and M. Spurrell, eds., *Journal of a Slave Trader [John Newton]*. London: Epworth Press, 1962, 56, cited in Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, p. 37. The idea of African religious beliefs being used to inspire slave rebellions and insurrections is one that historians such as Orlando Patterson have examined. Patterson comments that Obeah, an amalgamation of African religions was instrumental in a number of insurrections, commenting that ‘in the plotting of these insurrections, the obeah-man was essential in administering oaths of secrecy, and in cases, distributing fetishes which were supposed to immunize the insurgents from the arms of the whites’. (Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development and Structure of the Negro slave society in Jamaica* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1967), p. 192.) Also see William C. Suttles, Jr., ‘African Religious Survivals as Factors in American Slave Revolts’, *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 56, No. 2 (Apr., 1971), pp. 97-104.

¹⁶ Giles Rainsford, St Pauls Parish, Prince George’s County. The Fulham Papers at Lambeth Library, 17th and 18th Centuries (1970, Lambeth Palace Library), Reel 2: General Correspondence – Maryland. Volumes Two (Items 46-267) and Three.

¹⁷ Sheldon S. Cohen, “Elias Neau, Instructor to New York’s Slaves,” *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, 55 (1971), 27, cited in Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 61.

Despite the efforts of missionaries ‘no massive movement of Africans to Christianity occurred before 1760 in the Southern colonies’.¹⁸ The process of converting slaves to Christianity was frequently slowed by the concerns of both planters and non-slaveholding whites. Betty Wood highlights four main issues that hindered missionaries. Indifference to religion, the loss of potential working hours, and fears of slaves either running away when attending religious meetings off the plantation, or ‘teaching each other mischief’ during the meetings were all reasons why planters refused to sanction religious instruction and conversion for their slaves.¹⁹ The most frequently cited concern was that conversion and baptism would lead to a demand for freedom. Enslaving heathen Africans was considered beneficial, as it gave them a chance to become civilised. Enslaving fellow Christians, however, was more difficult to justify, as both slave and master were considered equal in the eyes of God. This led to a suggestion that a slave’s conversion to Christianity, and subsequent baptism, would automatically lead to his manumission. Slaves realised the benefits of converting to Christianity; Annette Laing argues that the main concern for enslaved Africans was that this new religion ‘promised to enhance their spiritual power’.²⁰ Ministers recognised the fear planters had towards slave conversion and responded accordingly. Morgan Godwyn, ‘the first Anglican clergyman to address colonial slavery in print’, argued in 1680 that ‘I think it clear enough that Christianity doth not lessen any obligations of Servants to their lawful masters’, and called for the removal of any ‘positive Laws’ that suggested to the contrary.²¹ Due to the fear of manumission via conversion, acts were passed to prevent such an occurrence, and ministers made slaves swear that they would not seek freedom after their baptism. In a letter back to England, Anglican missionary Francis Le Jau commented that:

¹⁸ Jon Butler, ‘Enlarging the Bonds of Christ: Slavery, Evangelism, and the Christianization of the White South, 1690-1790’, in Sweet, L. I., (ed.), *The Evangelical Tradition in America* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984), p. 99.

¹⁹ Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730-1775* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 61.

²⁰ Annette Laing, ‘“Heathens and Infidels”? African Christianization and Anglicanism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1700-1750’, *Religion and American Culture* Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer, 2002), p. 198.

²¹ Morgan Godwyn, *The Negro’s and Indians Advocate...* (London, 1680), 143, cited in Travis Glasson, ‘“Baptism doth not bestow Freedom”: Missionary Anglicanism, Slavery, and the Yorke-Talbot Opinion, 1701-1730’, *William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 67, No. 2 (April 2010), p. 308.

to remove all pretence from the-Adult slaves I shall baptise, of their being free upon that Account, I have thought fit to require first their Consent to the following Declaration...you declare in the Presence of God and before this Congregation that you do not ask for the holy Baptism out of any design to free yourself from the duty and obedience you owe to your Master while you live, but merely for the Good of to your soul and to partake of the Graces and blessings Promised to the members of the church of Jesus Christ.²²

Even these declarations however, did not stop concerns that conversion would lead to spiritual equality and a subsequent demand for freedom. This fear also turned into anger against those teaching Christianity. Missionaries sent to report on the state of religion in America were often threatened by local whites if they attempted to convert slaves. Edward Marsden, an SPG missionary, wrote back to London that due to his missionary efforts to the slaves, local men had acted ‘forcibly to break open my parsonage House door; and then the parlour door; where my Wife and three small children were to their great errors and affrightments’.²³ In the face of such threats, missionaries received little support from the Anglican church in America.

²² Francis Le Jau to John Chamberlayne, Octob. 20 1709. Papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (Lambeth Palace Library, 1974), Volume XVI: Rhode Island 1708-undated, Sth. Carolina 1702-1710. Another act declaring that baptism did not exempt slaves from bondage can be found in Volume XVII: Sth Carolina 1711-Undated & Vermont, Virginia, West Indies. Travis Glasson has recently examined numerous legal opinions published in Great Britain in the eighteenth century, noting in particular the Yorke-Talbot opinion of 1729 which stated that ‘a Slave, by coming from the *West-Indies* to *Great Britain* or *Ireland*, either with or without his Master, doth not become free...And that Baptism doth not bestow Freedom on him, nor make any alteration in his temporal Condition in these Kingdoms’. (Glasson, ‘Missionary Anglicanism’, p. 279 [italics in original]) The publication of the decision in the *Boston Gazette* in 1730 illustrates the opinion’s wider significance. The opinion received a great deal of support among ecclesiastical circles, as evidenced by philosopher and Dean George Berkeley in his sermon before the SPG in 1731. According to Berkeley one of the main obstacles to slave conversion was the ‘erroneous Notion, that the being baptized, is inconsistent with a State of Slavery. To undeceive them...it seemed a proper Step, if the Opinion of his Majesty’s Attorney and Sollicitor-General could be procured. This opinion they charitably sent over, signed with their own Hands; which was accordingly printed in *Rhode-Island* and dispersed throughout the Plantations. I heartily wish it may produce the intended Effect’. (George Berkeley, *A Sermon Preached before the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts...On Friday the 18th of February, 1731* (London, 1732), 18-20, cited in Glasson, ‘Missionary Anglicanism’, p. 297 [italics in original]. Also see H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But...Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972) for the efforts made by missionaries to appease planters.

²³ Edward Marsden to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, 25 Feb., 1706. Papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (Lambeth Palace Library, 1974), Volume XVI: Rhode Island 1708-undated, Sth. Carolina 1702-1710.

Winthrop Jordan argues that the fear of conversion could have been overcome had the institutionalised churches in America been properly and firmly established. However, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Jordan argues that in the Southern colonies ‘the churches at best were in a weak position to dictate to slaveholders and in some times and places were virtually nonexistent’.²⁴ The Anglican church’s lack of institutional power in America gave missionaries little opportunity to rival the planter’s authority and little support to any who chose to defy them.

Planters also resented that conversion to Christianity could lose them a day’s labour from their slaves. SPG missionaries commented on the sinfulness of slaves working on the Sabbath but noted that it was the planter who enforced the decision. According to one report the decision of ‘the negroes taking the opportunity not to work on holy days greatly displeased the masters’.²⁵ Missionaries found themselves unable to sway the minds of planters, despite promoting the benefits of introducing Christianity to the enslaved, in that it would curb rebelliousness and promote obedience. Le Jau argued that converted slaves ‘do better for their Masters profit than formerly, for they are taught to serve out of Christian Love and Duty’.²⁶ Despite these protestations, the planter’s power in American society hindered attempts to introduce Christianity to the black population from the very beginning of slavery.

The reticence of the planters and the disorganised, limited nature of missionary efforts do not solely explain why most slaves remained unconverted to Christianity. Differences in culture and language between African slaves and white missionaries often impeded conversion efforts, much to the chagrin of missionaries. An observer wrote in 1698 that native Africans in colonial Virginia were not taught Christianity

²⁴ Jordan, *White over Black*, p. 206.

²⁵ Meeting of the Select Committee for the Affairs of Barbados, 31 December 1711. Papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (Lambeth Palace Library, 1974), Volume III: Minutes Jun 1711-Feb 1712 & 1736-1739. Another similar report can be found in the meeting dated 15 April 1737, Volume III and in the correspondences of individual ministers in Volume XVI, 21 April 1707 and Volume XVII, 9 February 1711. In addition in the Fulham Papers which contain letters of missionaries sent to America, Francis Le Jau wrote to the Bishop of London, stating that slaves are ‘forced to work upon Sundays, having no other means to submit’. Francis Le Jau to the Lord Bishop of London, May 27th 1712, The Fulham Papers at Lambeth Library 17th and 18th Centuries (1970, Lambeth Palace Library), Reel 5: General Correspondence – Rhode Island and South Carolina. Volume 9.

²⁶ Le Jau to the Sec., S.P.G., June 13, 1710, *Carolina Chronicle*, p. 76, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 103.

because the ‘rudeness of manners, variety and strangeness of the language and shallowness and weak of mind [*sic*] made it impossible to make progress in their conversion’.²⁷ Similarly Anglican missionary Joseph Ottolenghe commented in 1754 that ‘our Negroes are so ignorant of ye English language, and none can be found to talk in their own’ and so ‘how can a Proposition be believed, without first being understood? & how can it be understood if ye Person to whom it is offr’d has no Idea even of ye Sound of those Words which expresses ye Proposition’?²⁸ As well as problems with language SPG Missionaries frequently bemoaned the fact that Africans were unwilling to give up their heathen traditions for Christianity. Le Jau wrote that ‘the negroes are generally very bad men chiefly those who are scholars. I will baptise none but such as lead a christian life and of whom I have a good testimony’.²⁹ While some missionaries relished the opportunity of eradicating heathen behaviour, others saw the scale of the task, coupled with the hostility of planters, and abandoned such a persistent campaign of conversion, resolving simply to teach Christianity without advocating baptism.

The fact that slaves were unwilling to abandon their African beliefs, coupled with the emergence of figures such as the conjurer, illustrates that some African traditions survived the transatlantic crossing. This is an issue long debated by historians. In the 1940s, Melville J. Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier promoted almost diametrically opposing views about the retention of African traditions. Frazier argued that from the very beginning of the enslavement process, Africans were stripped of their social heritage, as ‘the capture of many of the slaves in intertribal wars and their selection for the slave markets tended to reduce to a minimum the possibility of the retention and the transmission of African culture’.³⁰ Frazier went on to argue that variations in African language meant that any form of social cohesion was prevented, and that it is difficult to establish any connection between African priests and black preachers within the plantation slave community. In contrast, Herskovits contends that the

²⁷ Mary F. Goodwin, “Christianizing and Educating the Negro in Colonial Virginia,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* I (1932):144, cited in Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 247.

²⁸ Cited in Wood, *Slavery*, p. 160.

²⁹ Francis Le Jau to the Rev. Mr Ph Stubbs, London Apr 15, 1707. Papers of the SPG, Volume XVI: Rhode Island 1708-undated, Sth. Carolina 1702-1710.

³⁰ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964), p. 9.

African religious traditions, that he terms magic, 'was almost by its very nature adapted to "going underground" and was the natural prop of revolt...Secret in its manipulation, it came to be feared almost as widely among the masters as among the slaves'.³¹

Since the initial debate between Frazier and Herskovits, a number of scholars have continued the argument that African religions in America quickly disappeared. Eugene Genovese argues that from 'the moment the Africans lost the social basis of their religious community, life, their religion itself had to disintegrate as a coherent system of belief'.³² Following Frazier and Genovese, Jon Butler argues that the dislocating and traumatising effects of slavery created a 'spiritual holocaust' that destroyed African religious systems. According to Butler 'the devastating "middle passage" from Old World to New, the prospect of early death in America, the humiliation and resulting anomie produced by the introduction to slavery, and the reality of limited population reproduction in male dominated slave quarters all took their toll on the early slaves' and lead to the destruction of 'collective African religious practices in colonial America'.³³ As well as the idea that the dislocating and devastating effects of slavery caused some Africans to lose faith in their native religious beliefs, Christianity also held beliefs and ideas that African religions did not and that were appealing to enslaved Africans. Donald Mathews comments that for Africans their past was more important than their future, and while the afterlife of African religions offered no change in status and no reward, Christianity altered this cosmology by offering blacks freedom after death.³⁴ The combination of the horrors of the transatlantic crossing and geographic separation, coupled with the benefits that Christianity could offer the enslaved, illustrates the possibility that slaves could have abandoned their African beliefs upon their enslavement.

In contrast to those who argued against the retention of African religious traditions, other historians insist that slaves kept their beliefs and rituals in the New World. The delay in converting slaves to Christianity provided the opportunity and time needed

³¹ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941 reprint 1958), p. 138.

³² Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 184.

³³ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 157-8.

³⁴ Mathews, *Religion*, pp. 194-5.

for African beliefs to reassert themselves. With the slow process of transition African religions and traditions were able to gain a foothold in colonial American society. George Rawick argues that because no efforts were made to convert slaves to Christianity for the first hundred years of slavery there was sufficient time and opportunity to establish generalised West African religious forms in America.³⁵ Margaret Creel argues that the presence of secret African societies continued to function after the transatlantic crossing and conduct rituals and rites, such as bush initiations, amongst slaves. These initiations ‘emphasized and reinforced traditional ways of life, a sense of camaraderie and societal bonds’, and provided ‘a shared memory instilling loyalty, bonds of attachment, and unity that neither Christianity nor Islam could destroy even today’.³⁶

Few historians now argue that African traditions and religious beliefs were completely lost following the transatlantic crossing. New debates, however, consider the shape and form these traditions took in the New World. In a recent discussion of the historiography of slave religion since the publication of Raboteau’s *Slave Religion*, Sylvia Frey highlights two further debates which have emerged: the issues of creolisation and revisionism. Creolisation, in particular, according to Frey ‘badly damaged, if it did not altogether destroy, the musty and until recently largely fruitless search for African ‘survivals’ by seeking to highlight the process by which African and European religious cultures were brought and ‘fit’ together.³⁷ The argument was developed by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, who argued that cultural differences between different African tribes as well as differences between African tribes and whites were adapted to create new dialects. Religious differences were similarly adapted to create a new form of black religion that incorporated both Christian and African beliefs and rituals. However, this new religion and culture was dominated by white beliefs and rituals rather than African.³⁸

³⁵ Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, p. 33.

³⁶ Creel, “*A Peculiar People*”, p. 51.

³⁷ Sylvia R. Frey ‘The Visible Church: Historiography of African American Religion since Raboteau’, *Slavery & Abolition* Vol. 29, No. 1 (2008), p. 87.

³⁸ Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1976). Other historians also developed the creolisation thesis, the most notable being Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979).

In contrast to the idea of creolisation, revisionist historians argue that slaves deliberately remembered their African traditions and created new cultures informed by these memories. John Thornton, one of the first proponents of this theory, argues many Africans had already been introduced and converted to Christianity, in particular Catholicism, before they were enslaved. These Christian traditions were upheld by slaves before, during, and after the transatlantic crossing, and provided the basis for African American Christianity.³⁹ Thornton's arguments were developed by Paul Lovejoy, who argues that both ideas of 'survival' and 'creolisation' were 'Eurocentric' or 'America-centric' and processes of cultural and religious change must be 'tracked from *specific* African ethnic homelands to slave communities in the Americas'.⁴⁰ Lovejoy offers the new idea of 'conscious and not-so-conscious decisions by people themselves in selecting from their collective experiences those cultural and historical antecedents that helped make sense of the cruelty of slavery in the Americas'.⁴¹ More recently, Jason Young has continued the revisionist school of thought for the retention of African traditions, arguing that 'African culture did not ride Atlantic waterways as vestigial survivals or retentions but as the product of cultural memory, mediation, and creation'.⁴²

Despite the strong arguments of some historians, few recent studies of colonial slavery have argued against the retention of African traditions and religious beliefs in America. The delay in promoting Christianity, coupled with the limited scope of the missionary efforts and appeal of Anglicanism, provided ample opportunity for the traditions and beliefs to thrive after the transatlantic crossing. Analysis of the WPA interviews illustrates the extent to which African rituals survived and flourished in the late antebellum period, through the power and authority vested in the slave conjurer and the continued faith slaves placed in charms and amulets that would protect them from harm, punish their enemies, and even act as love potions.⁴³ What

³⁹ See John K. Thornton, 'On the Trail of Voodoo: African Christianity in Africa and the Americas', *The Americas* Vol. 44, No. 3 (Jan., 1988), pp. 261-278.

⁴⁰ Frey, 'The Visible Church', p. 89.

⁴¹ Paul E. Lovejoy, 'The African Diaspora: Revisionist Interpretations of Ethnicity, Culture and Religion under Slavery', *Studies in the World History of Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* Vol. 2, No. 1 (1997), p. 6.

⁴² Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), p. 3.

⁴³ In addition to the presence of African religious traditions and rituals, scholarship on the presence of Muslim slaves in America demonstrates how the Islamic faith was able to survive the transatlantic

has been proposed instead is the idea that African religious traditions survived in America, but bore little resemblance to their original forms. Frey argues that the preservation of traditional spiritual values is crucial in reconstructing identity and that African Americans retained strong religious commitments which ‘continued to shape their values, the principal differentiating factor between the dominant white culture and emerging black culture’.⁴⁴

African, and later, African American religious leaders, especially those on the plantation, embodied the traditions and rituals that survived the transatlantic crossing. The slave conjurer took on the role of various different sacred specialists, becoming a figure that persisted within the black community throughout the history of slavery. These figures, however, differed from their African counterparts, both in the way they acted, and in the way slaves and free blacks responded to them.⁴⁵ Additionally, black preachers merged the African rituals with the European Christianity experienced in America creating a new form of religious leadership that demonstrated the combination of black and white traditions. These preachers did not immediately emerge within slave and free black society, however, mainly due to the limited appeal of Anglicanism. It was not until the mid-eighteenth century, with the emergence of a new religious movement, that Christianity began to broaden its appeal amongst the black population.

crossing and the horrors of enslavement. Recording his experiences in slavery, Charles Ball commented that he knew several slaves ‘who must have been, from what I have since learned, Mohamedans; though at that time, I had never heard of the religion of Mohamed’. (Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States. A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave Under Various Masters, and was One Year in the Navy with Commodore Barney, During the Late War*, p. 165. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/ballslavery/ball.html> (accessed 14/06/2010)). A number of scholars have written on the experience of Muslim slaves in America although debate persists over the extent to which the Islamic faith was able to survive in America. Sylviane Diouf argues that slaves were able to retain their Muslim beliefs and ‘were not absorbed into the cultural-religious Christian world. They chose to remain Muslims, and even enslaved, they succeeded in following most of the precepts of their religion’. (Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 4.) Michael Gomez comments, however, that although there is evidence of Muslim slaves praying together, the lack of access to Islamic texts and the relatively small number of followers amongst the enslaved meant that a gradual loss of Islamic knowledge was inevitable. (Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 79.) Despite the debate over the long-term survival of Muslim beliefs in America, both Diouf and Gomez agree that the Islamic faith survived the transatlantic crossing.

⁴⁴ Frey, *Water*, p. 36.

⁴⁵ The changes that occurred between religious leaders in Africa and the slave conjurer on the plantation will be examined during the course of the next chapter.

A new Christianity for the poor and downtrodden

The arrival of George Whitefield in America in 1739 drastically changed the nature of Christianity. In the period of religious fervour known as the first Great Awakening, the Anglican itinerant crafted ‘a national event before the existence of nation’ by propagating ‘the message of the new birth in every colony through the spoken and printed word’.⁴⁶ Whilst raising the profile of Christianity amongst the American colonists, the Great Awakening split churches in half, creating schisms between the ‘liberal, rationalizing prosperous religion of the town and the fundamentalism of the economically and intellectually backward countryside’.⁴⁷ Through this split, evangelical denominations such as Baptism and Methodism emerged, dominating religious belief among the lower classes of American society, whilst elites remained in the Anglican church. Changes introduced by these evangelical denominations, such as embracing a preaching style less formal and dogmatic, presented a more appealing form of Christianity for both poor whites and slaves. The denominations also focused much of their attention on the slave population, arguing that their conversion to Christianity would improve both their moral and spiritual well-being. Due to these changes, blacks began to participate in Christianity with greater enthusiasm.

Anglicans attempted, through both legal and mob action, to limit the activities of evangelicals. Examining the reaction of Virginians to the Separate Baptists in the 1760s and 1770s, Albert Raboteau comments that magistrates often sentenced Baptists to jail terms for preaching in public. At the same time ‘rowdy groups of Virginians kicked, clubbed, and dunked Baptist preachers; interrupted their sermons with insults; and disrupted their baptismal services by riding horses through the water’.⁴⁸ Despite these attempts, however, Anglicans were unable to prevent the rise

⁴⁶ Frank Lambert, ‘The Great Awakening as Artifact: George Whitefield and the Construction of Intercolonial Revival, 1739-1745’, *Church History* Vol. 60, No. 2 (June 1991), p. 223.

⁴⁷ Hugh Brogan, *The Penguin History of the USA* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1985 reprint 2001), p. 92.

⁴⁸ Albert J. Raboteau, ‘The Slave Church in the Era of the American Revolution’, in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman (eds.), *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), p. 195. Rhys Isaac provides an in-depth discussion of the social

of evangelical denominations primarily due to the appeal these churches had amongst poor whites, slaves, and free blacks. Allan Galloway argues that the first Great Awakening was such an emotionally charged, popular movement that it loosened the hold of elites' over the common people.⁴⁹ When writing his autobiography during the nineteenth century, Methodist bishop William Capers explained the appeal of evangelicalism, commenting that it was 'nothing but the Bible, and just as the Bible holds it, was its testimony of truth. It was all spiritual, experimental, practical, not speculative, abstracted, or metaphysical'.⁵⁰ Compared to the Anglican church, the evangelical informal style of preaching, coupled with more inclusive types of religious service, gave ordinary Americans more opportunities to participate. Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and other evangelical churches presented a form of Christianity more informal, simple, and emotional, devoid of the formality of the Anglican church, and more welcoming to the uneducated American masses.

Whilst evangelical denominations had a very positive effect on lower members of American society, white elites found themselves either unable or unwilling to participate within these churches. Ministering to the poor and downtrodden was a mission incompatible with the social status of planters and other white elites, a situation that led to clashes between sacred and secular authorities. Preaching in the early nineteenth century, evangelical minister John Early wrote in his diary about being accosted by 'a very rich woman' who 'gave me a lengthy lesson about being too strict with discipline and particularly for denying her the privileges of Society which had been granted her for years by the preachers. I gave her not much comfort'.⁵¹ In addition to being unable to identify with one of the central missions of evangelicalism, white elites also objected to the emotionalism displayed in the new denominations. The raucous nature of evangelical services was so far removed from the austere formality of the Anglican church that a number of elites were unable to

conflicts that developed between the established traditional religious denominations and the new evangelical movement in his work *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 161-177.

⁴⁹ Allan Galloway, 'Planters and Slaves in the Great Awakening', in John B. Boles (ed.), *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South 1740-1870* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), p. 20.

⁵⁰ William M. Wightman, *Life of William Capers, D.D., One of the Bishops of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Including an Autobiography* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1858), p. 206, cited in Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism*, p. 34.

⁵¹ Diary entry, Thursday 2nd November 1809, Early family papers, 1764-1956. VHS.

cope with the change, threatening violence to ministers who continued their exuberant style of preaching. In another diary entry John Early mentions the reaction of elites to his preaching, commenting that:

one of the old justices of the court house and an old backsliding Methodist had sent me word that if I did not alter my manner of preaching he would shut the court house doors against me...Persecution surely has got almost as high as possible against me without putting me in prison or whipping me. I can hear of their bloody threats and frequently see and hear of the contempt and insolence of sinners and half-hearted professors but none of these things move me for Jesus is with me to comfort me.⁵²

What set the evangelical denominations most apart from the Anglican church, however, was their approach to the enslaved. Whilst attempts of the Anglican church to convert slaves to Christianity had been piecemeal, Baptist and Methodist ministers made the spiritual well-being of the black community one of the central tenets of their mission. When Whitefield ended a preaching mission around Philadelphia in 1740, nearly fifty black converts followed him back to his lodgings to thank him ‘for what God had done to their souls’. Whitefield wrote in his journal that ‘masters and mistresses will shortly see that Christianity will not make their negroes worse slaves’.⁵³ Some similarities between the two interpretations of Christianity remained, however, as both Anglicans and evangelicals believed that conversion to Christianity would improve and civilise slaves and free blacks. Whereas the primary motivation of the Anglican church was to remove heathen African traits, evangelicals argued that slaves and free blacks needed Christianity due to their lowly social and moral status. According to Anne Loveland, evangelicals were concerned about the ‘moral degradation’ of blacks, and that sins such as lying, stealing, drunkenness, and profanity could all be dealt with through Christian instruction.⁵⁴

⁵² Diary entry, Friday 29th September, 1809, Early family papers, 1764-1956. VHS.

⁵³ *George Whitfield's Journals* (new ed., Guilford and London, 1960), 422, cited in Smith, *In His Image*, p. 12.

⁵⁴ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, p. 225.

Charles Irons argues that evangelical churches distanced themselves from the old Christianity, criticising the Anglican church for failing to provide religious instruction to the black population. As a result of these criticisms, evangelical denominations consolidated their claim to minister to the poor and downtrodden, and attracted large numbers of followers from among the black community.⁵⁵ According to Milton Sernett, in 1784 there were 13,381 Methodists, black and white, below the Mason-Dixon line. By 1810 there were 20,863 white and 11,063 black in the South Carolina Methodist conference alone.⁵⁶ Comparatively, Charles Colcock Jones estimates that Baptists experienced similar growth in numbers, increasing from about 18,000 black members in 1793 to around 40,000 in 1813.⁵⁷ The appeal of evangelicalism to slaves and free blacks was also due to its commitment to biracialism, creating services where blacks began to worship alongside whites in an informal and relatively convivial atmosphere. J. Gordon Melton argues that ‘blacks were integrated into the early classes, worked beside the White members on constructing the early chapels, contributed to building costs, and found themselves accepted into Sunday worship. As classes were created, they were allowed to form their own classes. While whites led the classes in some centers, very quickly some Africans were appointed as class leaders’.⁵⁸

Alongside biracial services and classes, sermons in the evangelical churches also reflected this new approach of ministering to the poor and downtrodden, both white and black. A frequent message was of spiritual equality between all races and classes under God. In a sermon published in 1749, a Maryland minister stated that ‘though you be Slaves, bound to serve Masters and Mistresses here upon Earth... you are, at the same Time, working for a just Master in Heaven, who will pay you good Wages for it, and will make no Difference between you, and the richest Freeman’.⁵⁹ The idea of spiritual equality was especially appealing to slaves not only because it elevated them, temporarily, from the horrors of the institution, but also because it gave them an opportunity to be part of a community away from the plantation.

⁵⁵ Irons, *Origins*, pp. 23 and 33.

⁵⁶ Sernett, *Black Religion*, p. 33

⁵⁷ Jones, *Religious Instruction*, pp. 40, 53, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 131.

⁵⁸ Melton, *A Will to Choose*, p. 45

⁵⁹ *Two Sermons, Preached to a Congregation of Black Slaves, at the Parish Church of S.P. in the Province of Maryland. By an American Pastor* (London: Printed by John Oliver, in Bartholomew Close, near West Smithfield, 1749), p. 11.

Given the extent to which the evangelical mission was aimed at slaves and free blacks, it was almost inevitable that blacks would eventually seek out leadership roles within this form of Christianity. Historians generally agree that black preachers began to emerge in the 1770s and 1780s, once the power of the Anglican church had begun to wane.⁶⁰ Although some black preachers had emerged under the auspices of the Anglican church, these efforts were relatively isolated and piecemeal. One goal of Garden's school in Charleston in the 1740s was to send out between thirty and forty individuals 'well instructed in religion and capable of reading their Bibles to carry home and diffuse the same knowledge to their fellow slaves'.⁶¹ Once the evangelical thrust of the first Great Awakening had begun, however, whites frequently reported hearing black preachers during the early camp meetings. Pompey, a Methodist slave in north Mississippi was popular with members of both races, and a white Methodist described his impact at a camp meeting saying that 'the earth seemed to tremble under the weight of that power...The whole audience seemed to sway to and fro...Cries for mercy, groans of agony and shouts of praise were so numerous and loud that, strong and loud as his voice was, one could scarcely hear him'.⁶²

Evangelical white ministers were relatively enthusiastic about the idea of a coloured ministry as soon as black preachers began to appear in the 1770s and 1780s. The presence of blacks in the pulpit illustrated that evangelicals had been successful in ministering to the poor and downtrodden. In 1785 Black Creek Baptist Church in Virginia expressed a vision of openness and oversight of preaching, commenting that any 'male member might Exercise their Gift in Preaching or exhortation under the

⁶⁰ Genovese, following Luther P. Jackson's argument that the history of black Christianity in Virginia divides into three periods of 1750-1790, 1790-1830, and 1830-1860, argues that the first black preachers emerged during the first period. However, according to Genovese it was during the 1770s that the first black preachers began to preach in front of white congregations. (Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 185, 257.) Raboteau points to the first report of a black preacher in 1766 when an S.P.G. minister reported that among Baptists 'the most illiterate among them are their Teachers even Negroes speak in their Meetings'. (Jernegan, p. 515, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 134.)

⁶¹ *An Account of the Endeavors Used by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts*, p. 15, cited in Birnie, 'Education of the Negro', p. 14. Shortly after the school was opened in 1743, two individuals named Harry and Andrew served as teachers for their fellow Africans. However they acted as teachers rather than preachers.

⁶² Gene Ramsey Miller, *A History of North Mississippi Methodism, 1820-1900* (Nashville, Tenn., 1966), 43-44, cited in Randy J. Sparks, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks: Evangelicalism in Mississippi, 1773-1876* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1994), p. 26.

watch of the Brethren' and that once a preacher's talents and doctrines were proved to be sound they would be granted 'a written Licence to exercise his Gift in Preaching wherever he may be call'd upon'.⁶³ But the enthusiasm of evangelical whites was not solely due to the prospect of biracial preaching and continued success of converting heathen Africans to Christianity. White ministers knew that their attempts at converting slaves and free blacks were often hindered by sharp differences in culture and language. Being preached to by one of their own might encourage more slaves and free blacks to convert. Irons argues that because of this view, black preachers were the primary vectors of evangelical knowledge among slaves in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁶⁴

As many black preachers were skilled orators they were frequently encouraged to convert more slaves and free blacks to Christianity. Commenting on the preaching of a slave named Uncle Robert in North Carolina, one white missionary noted that 'In his sermons there is often a clearness of statement, an earnestness of address, a sublimity and splendor of imagery, together with a deep pathos, which gives his public addresses great power', adding that 'many who affect to despise the negro, want to hear Uncle Robert when it is announced that he is to preach'.⁶⁵ Not all black preachers received this level of support from white society, but numerous examples exist of blacks preaching to appreciative biracial audiences. One slave named Lewis preached to a crowd of over four hundred in Westmoreland County, Virginia in the 1780s 'on the theme of the state man was in by nature, urging that his hearers must not remain in an unconverted state but come and accept Christ by faith'.⁶⁶ Whilst black preachers were encouraged due to the ability to connect with their fellow blacks, both white evangelical ministers and white society recognised the abilities of these religious leaders.

⁶³ Black Creek Baptist Church, Minute Book, 1776-1804, Feb. 25, 1785, Feb. 20, 1789, Library of Virginia, cited in Randolph Ferguson Scully, '“I Come Here Before You Did and I Shall Not Go Away”': Race, Gender, and Evangelical Community on the Eve of the Nat Turner Rebellion', *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Winter, 2007), p. 670.

⁶⁴ Irons, *Origins*, p. 110. Lockley argues a similar point suggesting that by the 1770s 'black preachers were carrying the message of Christianity to lowcountry plantations', although he also argues that black preachers were necessary because there was a lack of suitable white candidates for ordination. Lockley, *Lines*, p. 134.

⁶⁵ *American Missionary*, 8 (April 1864), 100, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 236.

⁶⁶ Luther P. Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia, From 1760 to 1860," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April 1931), p. 176, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 134.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a number of individual figures emerged whose role in American society was pivotal in helping establish an African American form of Christianity and helping to solidify the status of black preachers. George Liele, Andrew Bryan, David George, and Richard Allen were all instrumental in forming black churches, and inspiring the evangelical message amongst other blacks, but did so facing a mixture of white approval, opposition and hostility.

One of the earliest prominent black preachers, George Liele, a Virginian born slave, converted to Christianity in 1773. Following his conversion Liele's master, Henry Sharp, a white Baptist deacon, freed him, giving him the opportunity to become a Baptist preacher. Between 1773 and 1775 Liele established what was arguably the first independent African American church at Silver Bluff, near Aiken, South Carolina, and by the end of 1775 had founded the First African Church of Savannah.⁶⁷ Initially Liele experienced little opposition to his preaching from white society and was licensed as a probationary preacher by a white Baptist congregation. During the Revolutionary War, however, opposition grew and Liele was forced to flee Savannah as a refugee. Liele and his followers emigrated to Jamaica, where they formed the first Baptist church in Kingston in September 1784.⁶⁸ By 1791 this church had 225 full members and 350 adherents.⁶⁹

Following Liele's departure to Jamaica, one of his slave converts, Andrew Bryan, began to exhort blacks and whites. Bryan's efforts at preaching, however, were severely impeded by wartime restrictions. Services were interrupted and both Bryan and his brother Sampson were arrested for violating laws of assembly. Bryan, Sampson, and approximately fifty members of his congregation were 'severely whipped, particularly *Andrew, who was cut, and bled abundantly*'. Bryan reportedly 'told his persecutors that he rejoiced not only to be whipped, but *would suffer death*

⁶⁷ See Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Cambridge, 2004), pp. 57-8. Also see Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 140, Cornelius, "*When I Can Read My Title Clear*", p. 21, and Frey, *Water*, pp. 37-8.

⁶⁸ Being forced to emigrate due to wartime restrictions in religious worship was a common factor among a number of black preachers. Alongside Liele, Jesse Galphin (or Jesse Peter) also fled to the Caribbean, while David George emigrated to Nova Scotia.

⁶⁹ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, p. 131.

for the cause of Jesus Christ'.⁷⁰ Following the intervention of several sympathetic planters, the imprisoned black Baptists were released and Bryan was given permission to continue conducting religious services. Lockley argues that Bryan's preaching was appreciated not just by black and biracial congregations but by whites of all social classes.⁷¹

Another black preacher, David George, was inspired to preach having heard the ministrations of George Liele at Silver Bluff church, and was eventually baptised into the Baptist church by white itinerant preacher Joshua Palmer. When Palmer formed his own church, George began to exhort under Palmer's instruction. Towards the end of the War of Independence, George was evacuated from Charleston to Nova Scotia. His subsequent experiences epitomise the relationship of black preachers with white society, in that he was simultaneously celebrated and feared. Such was George's skill at preaching and attracting converts to the Baptist cause, that he was able to establish seven churches in Nova Scotia and train other black preachers to minister. At the same time, however, George also experienced repression and discrimination. When he attempted to baptise two white people, a group of disbanded soldiers pulled down his house and the houses of other black families, before beating him and driving him into a swamp.⁷²

By contrast in the Northern states the most prominent black preacher was Richard Allen. Although little is known about Allen's background he was a slave when he began to preach around 1780, was able to purchase his freedom due to his abilities, and was formally licensed as a preacher in 1784. Together with Absalom Jones he organised the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. After opening other African American churches and congregations in New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland, Allen united the four to create the independent African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination. In his recent biography of Allen, Richard Newman illustrates the sheer depth of enthusiasm and fervent praise fellow African Americans had for him. Two years before Allen's death, Boston activist David Walker wrote in 1829, 'Richard Allen! Oh my God!! The bare recollection of the

⁷⁰ Rippon, pp. 340-41; Benedict, p. 741, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 141. (italics in original)

⁷¹ Lockley, *Lines*, pp. 135-138. Also see Frey, *Water*, p. 38.

⁷² Frey, *Water from the Rock*, p. 200. Also see Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, pp. 139-40.

labours of this man...fills my soul with all those very high emotions which would take the pen of Addison to portray'.⁷³ Although Allen was preaching in the North, his influence was still felt among black preachers in the slave states. Erskine Clarke comments that when Morris Brown, Henry Drayton, Amos Cruickshank, and Marcus Brown, all free blacks from Charleston, sought to establish an independent African American church in the city, they travelled to Philadelphia seeking Allen's advice. Upon their return they established the AME church in Charleston.⁷⁴

Common themes can be found in the experiences of these black preachers. All experienced white persecution during their ministrations. Yet all also experienced white enthusiasm alongside this persecution. Such enthusiasm was also not limited to lower class members of white society who had been swept up by evangelicalism. Some planters were also impressed by black preachers and were willing to support them, even in the face of persecution. The support of planters is also illustrated by the fact that all of the preachers mentioned managed to purchase their freedom due to their preaching ability. One further similarity was that all of these black preachers were free blacks, who had either purchased their freedom, or had been freed by their masters because of their ability to preach. Although slaves could and did preach to congregations the majority of prominent black preachers had been freed before entering their ministerial careers or shortly after. A possible explanation for this is that white elites were more comfortable listening to the preaching of a free black rather than a slave. For planters the idea of being given religious instruction by a slave would have been extremely uncomfortable as it would have elevated the slave to a position of religious authority over them. The fact that many prominent black preachers were free prior to the late antebellum South, however, created the possibility of a division amongst African American religious leaders. The white elite had inadvertently created a divide between the free black preacher and the slave preacher, a rift that would become more prominent in the late antebellum period.

⁷³ Charles M. Wiltse (ed.), *David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 58. Also see Richard Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2008), p. 2.

⁷⁴ Clarke, *Wrestlin' Jacob*, p. 125.

Many of these prominent black preachers prior to the late antebellum period either established or led services in independent black churches, in addition to inspiring biracial audiences with their religious enthusiasm. There is some debate amongst historians as to which was the first fully independent African American church. The most commonly cited example was at Silver Bluff in South Carolina, which first met between 1773 and 1775.⁷⁵ Mechal Sobel and Henry Mitchell, however, dispute this, arguing that the first independent congregation was formed in Virginia, although they disagree on the date and location of the church. Sobel contends that the first African American church was formed in Lunenburg County in 1758, while Mitchell, argues that it was in Prince George County in 1756.⁷⁶

While the debates surrounding the timeline for the establishment of black churches continues, of much greater importance is determining the impact of these congregations on African American worship. The importance of independent black churches cannot be overstated. Alongside the sacred functions of providing Christian instruction, the churches also held a secular role, in that they were a source of community for African Americans, where slaves from various plantations could meet with free blacks and worship, talk, and gossip relatively freely from white intrusion. According to C. Eric Lincoln ‘the church building was the community forum, the public school, the conservatory of music; it was the place where the elocutionary arts, the graphic arts, the literary arts, and the domestic arts were ultimately put on prideful display. It was lyceum and gymnasium as well as sanctum sanctorum’.⁷⁷

Independent black churches were institutions tolerated in a society dominated by whites fearful of any expression of black solidarity and the Southern white elite ensured they remained involved. Black churches often grew out of biracial

⁷⁵ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya argue that although the church was founded between 1773 and 1775 ‘a field trip to the Silver Bluff Baptist Church by Lincoln and Mamiya found that the cornerstone of the church claims a founding date of 1750’. (C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 416, fn. 6.)

⁷⁶ Mitchell, *Black Church*, p. 54. Mitchell goes on to list 22 independent African American congregations that emerged between 1764 and 1800.

⁷⁷ C. Eric Lincoln, ‘The Black Church in the Context of American Religion’, in Samuel S. Hill (ed.), *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), p. 59.

congregations, and were supervised by whites, or had white onlookers to ensure that the preaching was not insurrectionary. Lockley argues that the supervision from white churches meant that any spiritual independence African Americans gained was not extended to temporal freedom, and that in disputes between white and black churches, it was rarely the white church that backed down. The general minutes of the Baptist Associations which included separate black churches, however, document that black representatives were accorded great respect.⁷⁸

Although conversion to Christianity did limit the influence of independent African religion, it did not prevent the integration of African beliefs into evangelical Christianity. By the mid-nineteenth century the form of Christianity practiced in the African American community was one of their own making, combining white evangelicalism and African rituals. The emotionalism of evangelicalism was highly compatible with African religious traditions, and biracial and independent black churches frequently contained exuberant singing and preaching. Through adopting and adapting Christianity, African Americans also began creating their own religious leaders and institutions, figures who could unite and inspire the slave community. But through the creation of black religious leaders, planters grew more suspicious of the negative effects religious instruction could have on their slaves.

Creating black Christianity: a dangerous proposition?

By the turn of the nineteenth century black preachers were a relatively common feature in both white and black Southern religious life. Slaves would often hear black preachers at church. Former slave Bud Dixon commented that ‘On Sunday’s us went with the white fo’ks to church, or sometimes we stayed to our arbor church on the plantation, where we heard a slave preacher and had prayers and songs’.⁷⁹ Whilst religious leaders continued to receive support from the slave community, as well as from their white religious brethren, the hostility and fears of Southern elites did not abate. Southern whites continued to be suspicious of independent black

⁷⁸ Lockley, *Lines*, p. 139.

⁷⁹ George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Supplement, Series 2 – Volume 4: Texas Narratives, Part 3* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979). *The African American Experience*, Greenwood Publishing Group. 7 Feb 2008.

congregations and of the power and influence that black preachers exerted over them. The major slave rebellions that occurred in the early nineteenth century, as well as the suspicions raised over attempted revolts and insurrections, dramatically heightened the fear shown towards these religious leaders.

The fear of Christian conversion inspiring slave rebellion was already present in Southern society at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the fear and suspicion was not limited to black preachers. Despite being hailed as the founder of evangelicalism in America, George Whitefield was accused of having ‘great countenance’ to the New York slave rebellion of 1741 by ‘his imprudence and indiscretion’ in a pamphlet urging slave conversion published the previous year.⁸⁰ Although the New York rebellion was organised and carried out by both slaves and poor whites, and although no religious element was involved, slave Christianity was attacked, partly because of its potentially revolutionary message, and partly because black preachers had a visible leadership role amongst the slave community, threatening the planter’s authority.

White elites were not entirely unfounded in their fears. For example, in the late eighteenth century some incidents demonstrated the power of black preachers and the influence they wielded over their congregation. When David Margrett, a black British preacher employed by the Countess of Huntingdon, spoke in front of a biracial audience in Georgia in 1775, he prophesied that ‘God would send deliverance to the Negroes, from the power of their masters, as he freed the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage’.⁸¹ Towards the end of the eighteenth century Gowan Pamphlet, the free black minister of the Williamsburg Baptist Church, was alleged to have been involved in slave unrest in Norfolk, Virginia. Pamphlet supposedly dropped a letter containing details about the guns and ammunition the

⁸⁰ Richard Charlton to the Secretary, N.Y., Oct. 30, 1741, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, MSS. (Transcripts) B9, no. 62, Lib. Cong., cited in Jordan, *White over Black*, p. 181.

⁸¹ Habersham to the Countess of Huntingdon, April 19, 1775, and Habersham to Robert Keen, May 11, 1775, all in Habersham, “Letters,” 95-96, 99-102, 102-109, 238-43, 243-44, cited in Lockley, *Lines*, p. 134. Many historians refer to David Margrett as David Margate. Recent research by J. William Harris refutes this, however, pointing to a letter signed by Margrett contained in the Huntingdon papers. See J. William Harris, *The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah: A Free Black Man’s Encounter with Liberty* (New Haven, Connecticut, and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 183, fn. 33.

rebels held.⁸² Although these were isolated incidents they left the white elite uneasy about the influence African American religious leaders could assert. Other black preachers found themselves swept up in the climate of fear and suspicion, and had their sermons monitored, their services interrupted, and their personal safety jeopardised.

Erskine Clarke argues that the fear of black preachers was because these figures ‘were leaders of a people who should have no leader, because they spoke with authority among a people who should have no authority, and because they worked allegiance among a people who should have no allegiance except to masters or mistresses’.⁸³ Fear of the ability of black preachers to inspire slaves to rebel led to the publication of articles condemning them. One article from the *Southern Christian Advocate* in 1846 dismissed black religion as superstition and regarded black preachers as ‘ignorant but cunning’ men who ‘taught...the most outrageous antinomian principles, subversive of all morals and ruinous to all correct notions of God and duty’.⁸⁴ To a number of Southern whites their fears proved to be well founded when the major slave rebellions of the early nineteenth century all contained some religious element.

The slave rebellions of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner dramatically increased the suspicion of black Christianity and black preachers. Each of the three major rebellions contained some religious element.⁸⁵ In the Gabriel Prosser rebellion of 1800, however, religion was more of an organisational tool, as the impetus for the rebellion took place during the funeral of a slave child. Yet historians have argued that one of the main failings of Gabriel’s rebellion was the fact that no black religious leader was involved. Commenting on the difference

⁸² James Sidbury, ‘Saint Domingue in Virginia: Ideology, Local Meanings, and Resistance to Slavery, 1790-1800’, *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 63, No. 3 (Aug., 1997), p. 540.

⁸³ Clarke, *Wrestlin’ Jacob*, pp. 124-5.

⁸⁴ *Southern Christian Advocate*, October 30, 1846, p. 82, cited in Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, p. 225.

⁸⁵ Although Herbert Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts* remains one of the seminal works on slave rebellion, the discussion surrounding the role of religion is rather limited. Subsequent works have given the issue more attention. Genovese notes that religion was a part of all three rebellions but there was a divergence in the use of religious ideology. (Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 593-4.) Raboteau examines how Christianity was used in the Vesey and Turner rebellions, arguing that both used their religious beliefs to attract more followers to their respective insurrections. (Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, pp. 163-4.) Also see Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

between Gabriel Prosser's and Nat Turner's rebellion, Gerald Mullin argues that 'unlike Nat Turner's magnificent Old Testament visions, which transfigured him and sustained his movement, Gabriel's Rebellion, lacking a sacred dimension was without a Moses, and thus without a following'.⁸⁶

In comparison to Gabriel's rebellion, religion was the most important factor in organising and inspiring slaves involved in the insurrections of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. As black preachers, both Vesey and Turner were able to construct a religious message of rebellion that inspired other slaves to join the cause. According to Genovese both rebellions 'projected an interpretation of Christianity that stressed the God-given right to freedom as the fundamental doctrine of obligation'.⁸⁷ In Vesey's rebellion, his supporters recalled that Vesey used scriptural texts in order to win supporters.⁸⁸ One conspirator confessed that Vesey 'read in the Bible where God commanded, that all should be cut off, both men, women and children and said...it was no sin for us to do so, for the Lord had commanded us to do it'.⁸⁹ Similarly Turner had an immense power over his followers due to his religious leadership. In

⁸⁶ Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*, p. 160. Despite the fact that religion was not instrumental to Gabriel's rebellion, some scholars have argued that it was present. James Sidbury examines one particular meeting where arguments for and against delaying the insurrection were backed up with passages from the Bible. Sidbury goes on to argue that 'this discussion makes sense only if Christianity played a central and active role in the insurrectionaries' view of the world, in their conception of resistance, and in the conspiracy'. (Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, pp. 76-9 (quote on p. 77)). Aptheker also notes that slaves in the Prosser rebellion planned to spare Methodists and Quakers from coming to harm, giving further evidence to the religious views of the conspirators. Aptheker, *Slave Revolts*, pp. 101-102.

⁸⁷ Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), p. 45.

⁸⁸ Despite the continuing debate over the Vesey rebellion, there is still a general consensus about the role African American religion played, either through the actions of the conspirators or the reaction of white society to the black church. In his controversial article claiming that the Vesey conspiracy was a fabrication of white society, Michael Johnson notes that the Charleston court had a strong antipathy to the African church and that the official report denounced the 'inflammatory and insurrectionary doctrines' preached by black religious leaders. (*Official Report*, 23, cited in Michael P. Johnson, 'Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators', *William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 58, No. 4 (Oct., 2001), p. 952, 970.) Responding to and heavily criticising the idea that the Vesey rebellion was fabricated by whites, Douglas Egerton does nevertheless agree with Johnson that the Charleston authorities sought to close the African Methodist Episcopal Church at which Vesey preached, saying that the magistrates 'correctly recognized it as a dangerous source of autonomy for the lowcountry's enslaved community'. (Douglas R. Egerton, 'Forgetting Denmark Vesey; Or, Oliver Stone Meets Richard Wade', *William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 59, No. 1 (Jan., 2002), p. 150. Also see Douglas R. Egerton, "'Why They Did Not Preach Up This Thing': Denmark Vesey and Revolutionary Theology', *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (Oct., 1999) for Egerton's own arguments on the Vesey's sermons inspiring slaves to rebel.)

⁸⁹ See 'A Narrative of the Conspiracy and Intended Insurrection, Amongst a Portion of the Negroes in the State of South Carolina in the Year 1822,' in *The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey*, edited by John Oliver Killens (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), pp. 11, 14, 46, 95-97, 159, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 163.

his confession to Thomas Gray, Turner spoke of becoming a preacher and the power this brought, saying ‘knowing the influence I had obtained over the minds of my fellow servants, (not by the means of conjuring and such like tricks – for to them I always spoke of such things with contempt) but by the communication of the Spirit whose revelations I often communicated to them, and they believed and said my wisdom came from God’.⁹⁰

The potential of black preachers to lead or inspire slaves to commit acts of insurrection had been noted by Southern whites. In 1825 John Holt Rice, founder of the Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, prophesied that if ever a slave rebellion occurred ‘some crisp haired prophet, some pretender to inspiration, will be the ringleader as well as the instigator of the plot. By feigning communication from heaven, he will rouse the fanaticism of his brethren, and they will be prepared for any work however desolating and murderous’.⁹¹ Such a statement was not entirely unjustified. As one of the most visible leaders amongst the slave community, black preachers were recognised as the likely leaders of a slave revolt. The insurrections of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner only increased the fear of black preachers.

In the aftermath of the slave rebellions of the early nineteenth century, legislation restricting the freedom of black preachers and quashing the growth of independent black churches emerged throughout the slaveholding states. The Mississippi code of 1822 stated that the penalty ‘for using language having a *tendency* to promote discontent among free colored people, or insubordination among slaves, imprisonment at *hard labor*, not less than three, nor more than twenty-one years, or DEATH at the discretion of the court’.⁹² In 1848, the Georgia code stated that the punishment for preaching or exhorting without license was ‘imprisonment at the discretion of the court, and to a penalty not exceeding five hundred dollars...if this is

⁹⁰ Thomas R. Gray, ‘The Confessions of Nat Turner’, in Henry Irving Tragle, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material Including the Full Text of the Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 308.

⁹¹ “The Injury Done to Religion by Ignorant Preachers. A Sermon Delivered Before an Education Society in Sept. 1825,” *Virginia Evangelical and Literary Magazine*, VIII (November, 1825), 604, cited in Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, pp. 225-6.

⁹² *Extracts from the American Slave Code* (Second edition of 10,000.) [No. 1] (The Anti-Slavery Bugle, : Salem, Columbia County, Ohio, c. 1830), p. 34

insufficient, he shall be sentenced to be whipped and imprisoned at the discretion of the court'.⁹³ The effectiveness of these laws is not known, especially as planters enforced discipline on the plantation, and often ignored laws that jarred with their outlook. Throughout the slaveholding states, however, activities of black preachers were restricted either by legal means or through increased white scrutiny and suspicion. Whereas before the major slave rebellions of the early nineteenth century Southern white elites were concerned about black preachers providing a potentially insurrectionary message to the enslaved that could undermine the planter's authority, in the aftermath of the insurrections concern increased that the very existence of these figures could inspire rebellion.

Despite the increased hostility to black preachers, and the introduction of legislation restricting their activities the fear shown towards African American religious leaders was never constant but ebbed and flowed. In the immediate aftermath of slave rebellions, restrictions on African American activities, including independent black worship were tightened. The tightening of these restrictions, however, was not permanent. As fears of slave rebellion subsided, so too did white supervision of black preachers and congregations. In the periods when restrictions were relaxed, black preachers were often left relatively unmolested and unlimited in what they could preach. One former slave stated that 'We had a colored preacher and deacons too in slavery time. The whites would come in for revival times sometimes. They would let you do anything you wanted to do'.⁹⁴ The white response to black preachers varied depending on the time and place in which interaction between the two occurred.

The varied reaction to African religious leaders is illustrated by the fact that not all preachers suffered the same recriminations during the early nineteenth century. Following Nat Turner's rebellion, the ensuing legislation forced white ministers to

⁹³ Slave Codes of the State of Georgia, 1848, <http://academic.udayton.edu/race/02rights/slavelaw.htm#17> (accessed 19 May 2010).

⁹⁴ "I Was Right There When They Broke John Brown's Neck", in George P. Rawick, (ed.) *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 18 – Unwritten History of Slavery* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*, Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed 14 Feb 2008). Although the location of this interviewee was not given, he resided in Virginia during slavery. Appendix 2 shows that while no formerslave interviewed in Virginia mentioned any coloured religious leaders, six African Americans who had since relocated to other states did recall the presence of black preachers or ministers.

defrock their coloured counterparts. Irons cites the example of free black John Chavis, a Presbyterian minister under the charge of North Carolina's Orange Presbytery. Following the Turner insurrection, the Presbytery 'recommend[ed] to their licentiate [Chavis] to acquiesce in the decision of the Legislature referred to, until God in his Providence shall open to him the path of duty, in regard to the exercise of his ministry'.⁹⁵ But even though Chavis was stripped of his right to preach, other documents illustrate that he remained a licensed minister after 1831. Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church show that Chavis was a licentiate of the Presbytery of Orange from 1831 to 1834 and the Presbytery of Roanoke from 1836 until his death in 1838.⁹⁶ During this period few proscriptions were made on where Chavis was allowed to travel. Instead he was given almost free rein to travel throughout North Carolina. Despite the one year hiatus referred to in Irons' study, Chavis remained active in his ministrations in the aftermath of the Turner rebellion.

In addition to Chavis, other black ministers were also able to continue preaching during the 1830s, despite the increased restrictions placed on African American Christianity. In Charleston, Richard Holloway was recognised as an exhorter in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1821, and had his license to preach renewed in 1831, 1833, 1834, and 1835.⁹⁷ While Holloway's motives may not have been scrutinised in as much detail by the white authorities, given that he was a slaveholder, he, like Chavis, was able to continue preaching despite the introduction of laws designed to prohibit him from doing so. The introduction of new legislation and increased supervision of black preachers may have prevented the majority from preaching to slave congregations but some were still able to minister due to the support they received from evangelical whites. The support that black preachers, such as Chavis

⁹⁵ "Presbytery of Orange," *Southern Religious Telegraph*, 18 Dec. 1835, cited in Irons, *Origins*, p. 158. The 'decision of the Legislature' referred to the law of the Virginia State Government that prohibited black men from preaching, exhorting, or even gathering for prayer meetings, except with their owners' permission.

⁹⁶ Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., in William Henry Ruffner papers 1848-1907, *VSL*. Chavis' denunciation of the Turner insurrection undoubtedly made the decision to allow him to continue preaching easier. Chavis referred to the event as 'that abominable insurrection in Southhampton'. (Chavis to Mangum, July 30, 1833, cited in Gossie Harold Hudson, 'John Chavis, 1763-1838: A Social-Psychological Study, *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 64, No. 2 (Spring, 1979), p. 145.

⁹⁷ Details of the renewal of Holloway's license to preach are found in the Holloway family scrapbook, 1806-1974, *Avery*.

and Holloway, received, however, provides another indication of a growing divide amongst African American religious leaders. Both indicated that they supported the institution of slavery; Chavis through his denunciation of the Turner insurrection and Holloway through his position as a slaveholder. The white elite were therefore willing to allow black preachers to continue their work if they were satisfied that they posed no threat, a distinction that continued to be applied to African American religious leaders throughout the late antebellum period.

Alongside the fear of slave rebellion, there was a growing concern within Southern society over the power of the abolitionism and the association the movement had with the evangelical church. When they were first established, evangelical denominations followed a stance that moved towards anti-slavery in order to attract more slaves to the congregation. Irons argues that African Americans joined the evangelical denomination with the strongest anti-slavery stance.⁹⁸ But while the decision of African Americans gave evangelicals a sense of empowerment and accomplishment, it brought a sense of concern for the white elite. In the North, the black church frequently became a focal point for abolitionist protest. Richard Newman argues that the three great elements of black abolitionism, antislavery, equality, and printed protest, ‘first took root (and then flourished) in free black churches’ in the Northern states.⁹⁹ Independent African American churches, such as Richard Allen’s Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Absalom Jones’ African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas became ‘the center for black meetings on the ending of the slave trade, protests against colonization, and speeches about black abolitionism itself’.¹⁰⁰ In 1810, Daniel Coker, an African American Methodist missionary published his pamphlet *A Dialogue between an African minister and a Virginian*, in which he called for the general and gradual emancipation of the slave population. For the Southern elite, concern grew that the arguments of abolitionism would seep into the slave consciousness and lead to further, perhaps violent demands for emancipation.

⁹⁸ Irons, *Origins*, p. 66.

⁹⁹ Richard S. Newman, “‘A Chosen Generation’: Black Founders and Early America”, in Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer (eds.), *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (New York and London: The New Press, 2006), p. 69.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

It is difficult to determine to what extent abolitionism affected the relationship between the black preacher and Southern elites, given that the movement began to emerge in the 1830s, when the slaveholding states were recovering from and reacting to a number of slave insurrections. Although the abolitionist movement remained in its infancy until the 1830s, throughout the nineteenth century white preachers in the South were constantly pressurised to profess their proslavery beliefs, whilst Northern African American churches were attacked because of their abolitionist stance. St Philip's, an African American church in New York, was the subject of one attack during anti-abolitionist riots in 1834. Craig Townsend notes that a mob broke into the church, shattered the stained glass windows, destroyed the organ, candlesticks, and curtains, and broke the altar into pieces.¹⁰¹ In the slaveholding states, however, actions taken to limit the growth of African American Christianity and the actions of black preachers were not specifically linked to abolitionism.

Keeping the peace and keeping the faith? The dilemma over slavery and Christianity in colonial and antebellum America

In examining the development of black preachers prior to the late antebellum period, it is also necessary to look at the relationship between Christianity and slavery through the colonial and early antebellum period, and how white ministers interacted with the institution. The authority that black preachers commanded over African Americans was a source of concern for Southern elites. But a further concern was over the nature of Christianity itself and how religious instruction could promote insurrection and disobedience from slaves and free blacks.

Initially the Anglican church placated planters by promising that slaves who were converted and baptised would not be freed. When the evangelical denominations emerged, during the first Great Awakening, however, they declared themselves opposed to slavery, as it went against their mission of ministering to the poor and downtrodden. The opposition of Southern elites, however, made any declarations against slavery difficult to uphold. Simultaneously, as evangelical ministers in the

¹⁰¹ Craig D. Townsend, *Faith in Their Own Color: Black Episcopalians in Antebellum New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 45.

Southern states began to grow accustomed to slavery, their opposition of the institution lessened, with some even purchasing their own slaves. This change of stance meant that by the mid-nineteenth century many Southern evangelicals were pro-slavery advocates, creating a rift between Northern and Southern branches of the evangelical denominations. The respective positions of Northern and Southern evangelicals proved irreconcilable, with the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches dividing in the 1830s and 40s. The change of stance also affected the relationship of Southern white evangelical ministers to the black preacher. As their criticisms of slavery lessened, Southern white evangelical ministers began to see African Americans and black preachers as naturally and innately inferior.

The initial attempts made by the Anglican church and missionary societies to convert slaves to Christianity was a cause of some concern to planters but the limited nature of the missionary efforts and compromises made by ministers were enough to allay their fears. If an Anglican minister did preach an insurrectionary message to the enslaved, the planter's superior authority was enough to remove him. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Anglican minister Morgan Godwyn charged slaveholders with neglecting the souls of their African slaves and his fellow Anglican ministers with being 'so awed by their Parishoners, that they dare not with that Courage, which they ought to reprove Vice, as Bold and Impudent in those Parts as it is: Much less acquaint their Charges with the Indispensable Necessity of Instructing and Baptizing, even those, *Negroes* or *Indians*, who understood *English*'.¹⁰² Godwin's criticisms were delivered from exile, however. His views had led to him being forced to leave the commonwealth in disgrace in 1670.

In contrast to the Anglican efforts, the arrival and establishment of the evangelical church, however, generated concern and suspicion amongst planters. The evangelical goal of preaching a message of spiritual equality and salvation in the afterlife, was viewed as a threat to the planter's authority. Due to this fear, in the aftermath of the Revolution, the rise of the evangelical church was accompanied by impromptu negotiations regarding the issue of slavery. Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian

¹⁰² Morgan Godwin, *Some Proposals Towards Promoting the Propagation of the Gospel in our American Plantations. Humbly Offered in a Letter to Mr Nelson. A Worthy Member of the Society for Propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts. To which is added a Postscript* (London: Printed for G. Sawbridge, at the Three-Golden-Flower-D'Luces, in Little-Brittain, 1708), p. 2.

churches all had to reconcile their antislavery stance within Southern society. John Boles argues that in Kentucky, the Presbyterian church made the fatal compromise which emasculated religious abolitionism in the South, by abdicating the responsibility to slavery to the civil government, the moral issue to individual conscience, and refused to make emancipation a matter of discipline.¹⁰³

Of all the responses of evangelical denominations towards the issue of slavery, however, it was the Methodist church that suffered the most due to their association with the antislavery movement.¹⁰⁴ In 1780 Methodists were the first evangelical denomination to denounce slavery. At a conference in Baltimore, the delegates declared that ‘slavery is contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature – hurtful to society; contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion’.¹⁰⁵ Similarly in 1784, a rule was adopted demanding that members of the Methodist church emancipate their slaves. But six months later the rule was suspended, with the church realising that the slave rules ‘were offensive to most of our southern friends’ and ‘were so much opposed by many of our private members, local preachers and some of the travelling preachers’.¹⁰⁶ Following the suspension of the 1784 rule, no subsequent attempt made to remove slavery from the Methodist church was successful. In 1800 the Methodist General Conference defeated a notion that proposed barring slaveholders from being admitted into the Methodist Episcopal Church, while the 1804 General Conference included in its rules the admonition ‘Let our preachers from time to time, as occasion serves, admonish and exhort all slaves to render due respect and obedience to the commands and interests of their respective masters’.¹⁰⁷ Planter opposition to the Methodist condemnation of slavery extended to ministers who spoke out against the institution. English Methodist cleric Thomas Coke travelled to Virginia exhorting ‘our Societies to emancipate their Slaves’ and to ‘bear a public testimony against slavery’. But because of the hostile reaction from white society and due to the alarm for his safety, Coke began to adopt a more pragmatic approach, opening his sermons by admonishing his servants ‘in a

¹⁰³ Boles, *Religion*, p. 106.

¹⁰⁴ Sernett, *Black Religion*, p. 37 and Lockley, *Lines*, pp. 142-3.

¹⁰⁵ “Methodist Rules Concerning Slavery,” in Mathews, pp. 293-99, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 143.

¹⁰⁶ Lee, *Short History*, 102, cited in Frey, *Water*, p. 246.

¹⁰⁷ *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, I, 63, cited in Smith, *In His Image*, p. 44.

very pathetic manner on the Duty of Servants to Masters'. According to Frey, Coke 'diluted his own moral principles to avoid personal injury'.¹⁰⁸ Evangelical ministers adapted their sermons in order to protect themselves but in doing so diluted their message, compromising their ideals in order to continue their mission and protect themselves.

Other denominations either compromised over the issue of slavery or incurred the full wrath of the planter class. While Roman Catholics were never a dominant force in colonial America and were predominantly concentrated in Maryland, they still found themselves having to negotiate with planters. Smith argues that while many American Catholics 'lamented the existence of Negro servitude and wished to see it ended', many Catholic priests and laymen owned slaves, while Catholic doctrine taught that slavery 'violated neither divine nor natural law'.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, the main antislavery charge led by the Quakers, however, illustrates the strength of planter opposition to slave Christianity. In the early eighteenth century Quaker clergymen Ralph Sandiford and Benjamin Lay were expelled from the Society of Friends for publishing antislavery tracts, while William Southeby barely escaped the same fate.¹¹⁰

Following the initial compromises on slavery, the evangelical churches in the early nineteenth century found themselves in a fairly comfortable position. By removing the discussion of slavery from the church, they were able to continue ministering to African Americans and encourage some blacks to start preaching to their own. Once the removal of the strongest antislavery tenets and antislavery ministers had occurred the evangelical denominations softened their stance towards the institution. This led to a slow shift from antislavery to proslavery belief. Randy Sparks argues that although evangelicals espoused a mild antislavery doctrine at the beginning of the nineteenth century, by the 1820s they had become vigorous defenders of the

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Coke, *Extracts of the Journals of the Reverend Dr. Thomas Coke's Five Visits to America* (London: G. Paramore, 1793), 33, 36-37, cited in Frey, *Water*, p. 245. During another religious service in Virginia where Coke preached on April 9, 1785, he recorded in his journal that 'A high-headed lady...told the rioters (as I afterward informed) that she would give fifty pounds, if they would give that little doctor one hundred lashes'. (*Extracts of the Journals of the Late Rev. Thomas Coke*, 64, cited in Smith, *In His Image*, p. 39.)

¹⁰⁹ Smith, *In His Image*, p. 7.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

institution.¹¹¹ Similarly, Irons argues that there was no single moment where evangelicals switched to a proslavery view, ‘no single moment of surrender, no crisp transition from authenticity to exploitation’.¹¹² The slow shift from antislavery to proslavery was due both to the intervention of planters and the compromises the churches made in order to continue their ministrations. Rawick argues that in the nineteenth century there was a strong attempt by whites to use religion as a form of social control, an argument repeated by other historians.¹¹³ In order to appease planters the sermons of white ministers frequently contained proscriptions against the sinfulness of stealing and of disobeying the master. Church discipline became a form of racial control.

The move from antislavery to proslavery was not forced upon evangelical ministers by planters. By the nineteenth century, fervently antislavery ministers who had moved to the South found themselves starting to believe in the innate inferiority of African Americans. Some evangelical ministers began to purchase their own slaves. According to William Warren Sweet, by 1844 at least 200 Methodist itinerants owned 1,600 slaves; 1,000 Methodist ministers owned 10,000; and at least 25,000 Methodist laymen held more than 200,000. In a letter to his son-in-law, Methodist minister John Ruff commented that ‘until I am convinced that slavery is sinfull & whilst it is sanctioned by the civil government under which I live no ecclesiastical tribunal shall deprive me of the use of them’.¹¹⁴ While there are no figures on the number of slaveholding Baptist and Presbyterian ministers Mary B. Putnam estimates that in 1837 Baptists held 115,000 slaves. Additionally James Smylie argues that in 1849 three-quarters of Southern Presbyterian church members were

¹¹¹ Randy J. Sparks, ‘Religion in Amite County, Mississippi, 1800-1861’, in John B. Boles (ed.), *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South 1740-1870* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), pp. 58-9.

¹¹² Irons, *Origins*, p. 13.

¹¹³ Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, p. 33. Also see Lockley, *Lines*, p. 145 and Irons, *Origins*, p. 93. While the move from viewing slavery as a necessary evil in the early nineteenth century towards a more belligerent defence of the institution was replicated in many parts of Southern society, especially in the lower South, other factors also participated in its development. Harold Tallant argues that Northern impatience over the idea that slavery would eventually die out due to economic inefficiency generated a hostile reaction from Southerners. (Harold D. Tallant, *Evil Necessity: Slavery and Political Culture in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), pp. 8-10, 81-89.) Also see Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), pp. 132-36.

¹¹⁴ Letter from John Ruff, Rockbridge County, Virginia, to John S. Martin, 25 March, 1840, John S. Martin Papers, 1840-1864, *SHC*.

slaveholders.¹¹⁵ The records of a number of ministers illustrates the shift in belief that took place. Presbyterian minister Amasa Converse wrote in 1839 that:

In my youth I thought that slaveholding was a sin, per se. Such was my view of it when a student of theology, and I endeavoured to maintain in debate the right of the slave to commit murder to regain his freedom. Some years later an examination of what the Scriptures teach on the subject, convinced me that this doctrine was false, and lascivious. I then learned that God commanded his people, by his servant Moses, to buy bondservants of the heathens, and authorised them to hold their servants forever.¹¹⁶

Other narratives written by former slaves also note the shift in attitude amongst evangelical ministers who travelled from the North to the South. One slave named Aaron who escaped slavery commented that ‘I am acquainted with a minister in Braintree who professed to be a warm advocate of antislavery and lectured in many of the neighboring towns on the subject. He went to the south and married a woman who owns 160 human beings. He comes back and apologises for it and says slavery is not so bad as he formerly thought. He has found out it is a money making business’.¹¹⁷

In addition to softening their stance on slavery, other white evangelical preachers began to emerge during the nineteenth century, who had been raised in the South and were sometimes already slaveholders before they entered the church. Frey argues that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the first generation of white evangelical ministers were passing from the scene and being replaced by local preachers. These second generation ministers had frequently been brought up in the slaveholding South. Individuals such as Methodist minister William Capers, and Baptist preacher Richard Furman, both of whom had been raised in South Carolina,

¹¹⁵ Sweet, *Methodism in American History*, 273; Mary Burnham Putnam, *The Baptists and Slavery, 1840-1845* (Ann Arbor, 1913), 13; Posey, *Presbyterian Church in the Old Southwest*, 76, all cited in Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, p. 188.

¹¹⁶ Charles Converse, Memorial of Amasa Converse, D. D., Autobiographical sketch 1795-1861, VHS.

¹¹⁷ Aaron, *The Light and Truth of Slavery. Aaron's History*, p. 35. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/aaron/menu.html> (accessed 24/11/09).

became part of a movement that saw the evangelical movement shift from a position of aggressive antislavery to supporting the institution.¹¹⁸

The adoption of a proslavery stance had relatively little impact upon African American Christianity. African American Christianity continued to thrive and black preachers continued to preach and minister in the slaveholding states throughout the nineteenth century. What shattered the peace, however, was the impact of the slave rebellions and the growth of abolitionism within the evangelical church. In the aftermath, white evangelicals tightened up restrictions on black Christianity, partly to appease slaveholders, partly to protect themselves, and partly to ensure that the teachings African Americans received were in no way revolutionary. Additionally, however, Southern ministers, whose stance on slavery had altered due to their proximity to the institution, began to refute the arguments of abolitionism. In doing so, ministers protected themselves from the wrath of Southern elites, but distanced themselves from their Northern counterparts.

Southern white ministers faced the threat of physical retaliation for stating abolitionist beliefs or even just for the suspicion that their presence in the South might spark anti-slavery fervour. In 1835, Amos Dresner, a white theological student from Cincinnati, travelled to Tennessee to sell Bibles to fund his studies. Accused of being an abolitionist, Dresner was arrested and whipped by a Vigilance Committee. Of the sixty people on the committee, twenty-seven were church members and one ‘the *Elder* who but a few days before in the Presbyterian church, handed Mr. Dresner the bread and wine at the communion of the Lord’s Supper’. The *Augusta Chronicle* editorialised that Dresner ‘should have been hung up, as high as Haman, to rot upon the gibbet, until the wind whistled through his bones’.¹¹⁹ Other, established Southern white ministers found themselves under increasing pressure due to the threat of abolitionism. In a letter to a New York minister, the Rev. N. Wood, an evangelical minister from Vicksburg, Mississippi, commented that ‘The Board of the Convention have reduced their appropriation to this church to one hundred dollars... This reduction by the Convention was partly for want of ability, and

¹¹⁸ Frey, *Water*, p. 264.

¹¹⁹ Cited in Edward Habich, *The American Churches: The Bulwarks of American Slavery. By An American* (Newburyport: Published by Charles Whipple, 1842), p. 8. (italics in original)

perhaps more especially to avert a storm gathering against the board from the elements of “Anti – ism””.¹²⁰ Because of the fears of Southern elites regarding abolitionism and inciting slave insurrection, evangelical ministers strengthened their pro-slavery credentials, making frequent and fervent professions of their belief in the institution. Boles argues that following Gabriel’s rebellion, white ministers became increasingly cautious, and their sermons to slave congregations minimised the themes of salvation, justification, and regeneration, and instead pronounced with ‘mechanical regularity’ the importance of obeying the master.¹²¹

The growth of abolitionism placed Southern white ministers in a dilemma. Refuting slavery would help heal the division that had developed between the Northern and Southern evangelical churches. Such a decision, however, would not only endanger the physical well being of Southern ministers, but also go against their own burgeoning proslavery beliefs. Instead, Southern ministers frequently refuted the arguments of their Northern counterparts, arguing that slavery was a benevolent institution. At a public meeting in South Carolina in the 1850s, the Reverend J. H. Thornwell supported the resolution that ‘That slavery as it exists in the South is no evil, and is consistent with the principles of revealed religion; and that all opposition to it arises from a misguided and fiendish fanaticism, which we are bound to resist in the very threshold’.¹²² Historian Anne Loveland argues that Southern ministers, condemning the Northern churches for interfering in a matter that was the exclusive concern of the South, turned to a scriptural defence of slavery, citing Bible passages that authorised the buying, selling, holding, and bequeathing of slaves as property.¹²³

The denominational schisms of the 1830s and 1840s were almost inevitable, given the respective antislavery and proslavery positions of the Northern and Southern evangelical churches. According to Sernett the role of African Americans in the church was the central divisive issue, although other issues such as Hopkinsian

¹²⁰ Letter from Rev. N. N. Wood, Vicksburg, Mississippi to the Rev. B. H. Hill, New York, August 26 1844, James B. Blackford Papers, *SHC*.

¹²¹ Boles, *Religion*, p. 88.

¹²² Cited in Habich, *The American Churches*, p. 17.

¹²³ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, pp. 199-200.

theology, the Plan of Union, the powers of church courts, and the orthodoxy of benevolent agencies were also present.¹²⁴

The Presbyterian church was the first to divide, in 1837. Irons argues that unlike the later Baptist and Methodist schisms, the Presbyterian split contained a theological component. Disagreements about revivalism and the governance of mission boards were cited as the divisive issues but ‘these doctrinal disagreements probably only resulted in schism because they coincided with differences of opinion on the abolition movement’.¹²⁵ The subsequent Methodist and Baptist schisms, in 1844 and 1845 respectively, were attributed to matters of organisation rather than theology. The Northern Baptist challenge over the qualifications of two slaveholding missionaries in Texas, and the Methodist dispute over the qualifications of slaveholding bishops may have been the final dispute to lead to schism but ultimately the irreconcilable differences over slavery ensured that such a split would eventually occur.

Following the denominational schisms Southern evangelical churches emerged as fervent defenders of slavery as an institution. Southern ministers began to highlight the Biblical justification of slavery; in his response to the Bishop of the Diocese of Vermont, on the question of the scriptural aspect of slavery, Daniel Goodwin argued that ‘The Slavery of the Negro Race as maintained in the Southern States appears to me fully authorized both in the Old and New Testament’. Goodwin went on to argue that ‘slavery, in my humble judgment, has raised the negro incomparably higher in the scale of humanity, and seems in fact to be the only instrumentality through which the heathen posterity of Ham have been raised at all’.¹²⁶ Other ministers provided Biblical justifications of slavery without considering themselves to be pro-slavery. Presbyterian minister James Henry Thornwell did not believe slavery was ‘an absolute good’ but ‘supported an acceptance of the institution of slavery as one part of the divine scheme incomprehensible to the human mind’.¹²⁷ Writing in the *Southern Presbyterian Review* in 1847, Thornwell argued that ‘the institution of

¹²⁴ Sernett, *Black Religion*, pp. 47-8.

¹²⁵ Irons, *Origins*, pp. 195-6.

¹²⁶ Daniel R. Goodwin, *Southern Slavery in its Present Aspects: Containing a Reply to a late Work of the Bishop of Vermont on Slavery* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1864), p. 9.

¹²⁷ Marilyn J. Westerkamp, ‘James Henley Thornwell, Pro-Slavery Spokesman within a Calvinist Faith’, *South Carolina Historical Magazine* Vol. 87, No. 1 (Jan., 1986), p. 55.

slavery is continually alluded to in the Scriptures, recognized as an existing condition of human society, and spoken of without the slightest mark of divine approbation', before citing examples of slaveholding 'patriarchs, prophets, and bishops' in both the Old and New Testaments.¹²⁸

The move towards pro-slavery following the denominational schisms was not immediate amongst Southern evangelical churches. Lewis Purifoy argues that the Southern Methodist church initially tried to keep political and ecclesiastical issues separate, thus removing the problem of defending slavery. The attempt failed however, and by the outbreak of Civil War, the church was entirely subjected to the state.¹²⁹ One impact of the schisms was that the gap between the different Southern denominations narrowed as the intra-denominational geographical split widened. The emerging consensus between the Southern evangelical denominations against their Northern counterparts was referred to almost accidentally by an article in the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* in 1844, refuting the suggestion that the Southern Methodist church had begun to defend the institution of slavery. In the article the author contended that the Southern Methodist church was no more a slavery church than the 'Presbyterian, Protestant Episcopalian, Baptist, Cumberland Presbyterian, and all other Southern churches are'.¹³⁰

The denominational schisms between Northern and Southern evangelical churches had a considerable impact on African American Christianity. While the split hardened the proslavery stance of Southern white evangelicals, it eased the pressures and restrictions on black preachers and supported the provision of religious education to slaves. Even after the schisms had occurred, Southern evangelicals continued to attack the anti-slavery views of their Northern counterparts, an act that greatly eased the fears of Southern society. While the laws and regulations preventing independent black worship were not repealed, the supervision of black

¹²⁸ James Henley Thornwell, "The Baptism of Servants," p. 64, cited in Westerkamp, 'James Henley Thornwell', p. 55.

¹²⁹ Lewis M. Purifoy, 'The Southern Methodist Church and the Proslavery Argument', *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 32, No. 3 (Aug., 1966), p. 325. Other historians have also argued that the church was not comfortable in its association with slavery. See Kenneth K. Bailey, 'Protestantism and Afro-Americans in the Old South: Another Look', *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 41, No. 4 (Nov., 1975).

¹³⁰ Nashville *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, December 6, 1844, cited in Purifoy, 'The Southern Methodist Church', p. 326.

preachers was relaxed, and planters were more willing to allow their slaves to attend church services and hold meetings on the plantation.

The shifting stance of Southern evangelicals towards a proslavery position during the early nineteenth century, together with the resulting denominational schisms in the 1830s and 1840s firmly established the Southern evangelical church as a proslavery institution, thus easing the fears of planters. Although these divisions severed any official link between the Southern and Northern evangelical churches, the changing attitude of Southern ministers had already rendered such a link virtually impotent before the divide took place. In the aftermath of the schisms, ministers had fewer worries that their sermons would be scrutinised by planters. The change in attitude towards defending slavery created a problem, however, when attempting to preach to coloured congregations. By the late antebellum period, slaves were taught a gospel of obedience and subservience by white ministers, a message that they detested and frequently refused to listen to. White ministers therefore had to turn to black preachers on a more regular basis to ensure that slaves received religious instruction.

* * * * *

Throughout the history of slavery, religious leaders were an integral part of black society. Due to the centrality of religion in Africa, priests and other sacred specialists were revered. In America, as slaves and free blacks began to convert to Christianity, some were inspired to teach this new religion to their coloured brethren, becoming black preachers. Their leadership of religious meetings, in the plantation slave community, and in the institutionalised biracial and black church, earned them the respect of both blacks and whites. Just as in Africa, black preachers in America became a focal point for African American religious worship, and also became firmly established leaders in a secular capacity as well. Both slaves and free blacks regularly sought out black preachers for advice, counsel, and comfort.

Black preachers taught a version of Christianity that incorporated both African and European traditions. Although the dislocating and traumatising effects of slavery altered these traditions and rituals the stagnated efforts of the Anglican church to

introduce Christianity to slaves once in the New World provided African religious beliefs an opportunity to survive the transatlantic crossing. The onset of evangelicalism witnessed a wave of slave conversion to Christianity but as denominations such as Baptism and Methodism bore some resemblances to African styles of worship, African Americans merged the two creeds and created a religious system they could claim ownership of.

The creation of African American Christianity gave black preachers an extra air of authority that white evangelical ministers were unable to command. Although some white ministers were able to preach successfully in front of an African American congregation they often struggled due to cultural differences between the races. Additionally both slaves and free blacks frequently demonstrated their preference to be preached to by one of their own. As evangelical denominations sought to demonstrate the success of their mission of ministering to the poor and downtrodden through the presence of African Americans in their congregation and so permitted and encouraged black preachers in order to ensure they achieved their goal.

Black preachers held a prestigious position in African American society but such a role also came with problems. Planters were suspicious of those able to assert authority over their slaves and the thought of black preachers using their religious influence to inspire rebellion and insurrection only served to heighten these fears. Throughout the colonial and early antebellum period, frequent efforts were made to restrict the activities of African American religious leaders, either through closer white supervision of black congregations or services, or through legislation designed to outlaw these figures altogether. By attempting to control the message that black preachers taught, however, the white elite created a new challenge for these religious leaders. In order to placate white authority and preach a gospel that posed no threat to them, black preachers faced the possibility of alienating their black congregants by failing to give them a sense of hope.

Despite the fact that all black religious leaders were preaching an African American interpretation of Christianity, divisions were appearing amongst them. Black preachers who were free, rather than enslaved were more likely to take on the duties of preaching in the institutionalised biracial and independent black evangelical

churches. Additionally black preachers who demonstrated that they would not attack the institution of slavery or deliver sermons that could undermine the authority of the white elite were more likely to be defended against or exempted from legislation that was designed to limit their activities. By the time of the evangelical denominational schisms this division had become more substantial. Black ministers in the institutionalised church did not condone slavery but as more were being educated by white ministers or presbyteries they were often exempted from restrictions introduced against their preaching. In contrast slave preachers within the plantation slave community operated outside of white influence, either from evangelical ministers or from the Southern elite and so faced almost continual attempts to limit their influence.

Chapter 2

Preacher, teacher, counsellor or rebel: The multiple functions of the black preacher on the plantation

This chapter analyses the role of the black preacher within the plantation slave community, examining the sacred and secular responsibilities of these religious leaders and how they were able to carry them out and to satisfy both the demands of slaves and planters. It also analyses difficulties and dangers black preachers faced and consequences of failing to satisfy the demands of both groups. Finally the chapter examines the importance of the black preacher, the extent to which they were an essential figure in elevating and furthering African American Christianity, and whether they had the same influence and prestige within the slave community as other leading individuals.

Within the plantation slave community in the antebellum South religion was a vital part of everyday life. The amalgamation of African religious traditions and Anglo-European Christianity created a system of belief that was developed from white society yet independent of it. By adopting and adapting Christianity, combining it with African rituals and beliefs, slaves could assert their humanity and community in a way that Southern whites found themselves unable to restrain. Through religion slaves could culturally resist some of the brutalising aspects of slavery, and avoid becoming dehumanised by the institution.

In both Anglo-European Christianity and African tribal religions, religious leaders were important figures and highly valued within their respective societies. In early modern Europe religion was a cornerstone of society, reflected by the idea of the divine appointment of a monarch, and the use of church services to celebrate important parts of everyday life. These European beliefs resonated with the role of religion in African tribal life, where importance was placed on ceremonies and those who conducted them to provide protection, health, and prosperity. Within the slave community, African Americans combined European and African religious structures, thereby creating a new religious system. This system, like African and Anglo-European religious structures, enveloped every part of everyday life. Black preachers

became one of the most important figures within the plantation slave community, not only through their role in conducting prayer meetings, slave weddings and funerals, but also through their secular roles as mediators, counsellors, and advisers.

By the late antebellum period black preachers were highly respected figures within the slave community. But despite the authority they could command, such a role was inherently perilous. Within Christianity, messages of hope and liberation, told through Biblical stories such as that of Moses leading the Jews out of slavery in Egypt, were problematic for planters. Stories of overcoming oppression and eventual salvation gave slaves a sense of hope, whilst the imagery of divine retribution against oppressors presented slaves with an authority figure far more powerful than the slaveholder, thereby undermining the planter's authority. In order to circumvent this problem, planters frequently tried to coerce black preachers into teaching messages of obedience and subservience to the master, threatening preachers with physical retribution if they failed to do so. The presence of white observers at some slave meetings meant that some preachers often found themselves forced to teach the planter's message in order to protect themselves. Slaves, however, were extremely adept at recognising such a message, and the loyalty they felt towards their black preachers quickly diminished if they believed they had become the mouthpiece of the master.

A further difficulty for the black preacher was that his authority was not absolute within the plantation slave community. Other figures, such as the conjurer, rivalled black preachers for respect among the enslaved. Despite Genovese's theory that black preachers and slave conjurers could be the same individual, the two figures operated within different spheres, had different beliefs, and carried out different rituals and ceremonies.¹ Black preachers operated within a sphere of love, giving hope and advice to the enslaved. Slave conjurers operated within a sense of fear. Slaves feared that conjurers could curse or harm them, but also went to them seeking protection from physical punishment or to physically hurt the planter. Parental and planter influence also affected the religious development of individual slaves. Thus,

¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 255.

even within the issue of Christian education the black preacher's authority was not absolute.

As well as the issue of rival authority figures within the slave community, problems arise with discussing the importance of the black preacher when examining the form and function of African American Christianity on the plantation. Whilst black preachers could and did conduct prayer meetings, religion for the enslaved was both an individual and a communal event. The powerful oratory of black preachers, combined with the emotional nature of the religious service converted some slaves to Christianity. Others, however, recorded experiences of suddenly "getting" religion, either alone in the woods or working in the field, and did not need any inspiration from a religious leader. Slave prayer meetings held at night on the plantation could also be held without black preachers, and the zeal and devotion of slaves to Christianity did not diminish due to any lack of religious leadership. Finally, ceremonies such as weddings and funerals still occurred on plantations where no black preacher was present.

Sacred and secular tasks of the black preacher within the plantation slave community

The most frequent task of black preachers was to conduct religious services and prayer meetings for the slaves. Whether held with or without the permission of planters, these events provided religious instruction to those enslaved, and occurred on a regular basis. Visiting a rice plantation near Savannah, George Lewis, a minister from the Free Church of Scotland was informed by the black overseer that 'there were prayers every night at the plantation, conducted by one of the slaves, who is called a leader'.² The content of these meetings is difficult to establish as there was no specific religious service. What can be determined, however, is that slaves used these occasions to pray for salvation and give themselves a sense of emotional release. Praying, singing, and rituals such as ring shouts all helped provide slaves

² Rev. George Lewis, *Impressions of America and the American Churches: From Journal of the Rev. G. Lewis, One of the Deputation of the Free Church of Scotland to the United States* (Edinburgh: W. P. Kennedy, 15 St Andrew's Street, 1845), p. 128.

with a temporary psychological escape from slavery and as such were often joyous and noisy occasions. Describing the ring shout, Addie Brunson recalled that:

In de shoutin' song de best singers git to gether an start de song, hit moves slow at fust den gits faster an louder, as dey sing dey jine hands an make a circle, den somebody git happy an jumps out in de middle of de circle an goes to dance to de time of de singing an de clappin' of hands and feet, others jine her as de spirit moves dem, till dey all make a ring dat circles roun' an roun', De folks in de congregashun jine de singin' an keepin' de time by pattin' de hands an feet an' hit makes a big noise an praise service.³

Nocturnal religious meetings were also an opportunity for slaves on nearby plantations to gather and exchange news. Former slave Anna Smith commented that 'In a grove not far from the plantation home, the slaves from the nearby estates meet on Sunday for worship...under the spreading branches they gathered for religious worship and to exchange news'.⁴ By leading these prayer meetings, which formed a vital part of the slave community, black preachers asserted their importance among enslaved African Americans from various plantations.

The format of these nocturnal meetings provided an opportunity for black preachers to demonstrate their skills. As well as prayers and singing, Bible readings would also take place, especially when the meetings were led by literate black preachers. In some cases being literate was a prerequisite for preaching; former slave Robert Anderson commented that 'some man who had a little education and had been

³ Vinnie Brunson, in George P. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Supplement 2: Vol. 3*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 1979) (accessed October 13, 2010). The ring shout was a ritual where the participants would stand in a ring and walk around in a shuffle, accompanied by upper body jerking motions. Participants would also sing or shout during these shouts, clap their hands and slap their knees. For further discussion and analysis of the ring shout, see Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., 'Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry', *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 11, No. 2 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 265-287. The earliest recorded ring shout dates from 1845 but the ritual was practiced prior to this date. (Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful tunes and spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 232.)

⁴ Anna Smith, in George P. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 16 – Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia, and Tennessee Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed March 12, 2010).

taught something about the Bible, would be our preachers'.⁵ Literacy as a prerequisite for preaching, however, was not universal amongst slaves in the antebellum South. Cato Carter commented that 'some nigger mens preached from the Bible but couldn't read a line no more than a sheep could'.⁶ Some black preachers were highly regarded by slaves despite being illiterate. Clara Young recalled that:

De preacher I laked de bes' was name Mathew Ewing. He was a comely nigger, black as night, an' he sho' could read out of his han'. He neber larned no real readin' an' writin' but he sho' knowed his Bible an' would hol' his han' out an' mek lak he was readin' an' preach de purtiest preachin' you ever heered.⁷

Other qualities were often considered more important than the ability to read. Thomas Webber argues that while religious leaders were often chosen for their ability to read, what was more important was the preacher's ability to identify with what W.E.B. DuBois called 'the longing and disappointment and resentment of a stolen people'.⁸ Former slave John Moore recalled that slaves 'enjoyed sermons preached by the negro preachers because they preached from experiences and not from the bible. The slaves loved to lift their voices in praise to God and worshiped God. They believed he would deliver them from bondage'.⁹ The primary religious

⁵ Robert Anderson, *From Slavery to Affluence: Memoirs of Robert Anderson, Ex-Slave* (Hemingford, Neb., 1927), pp. 22-23, cited in E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 343.

⁶ Cato Carter in George P. Rawick, (ed.), in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 4 – Texas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed June 23, 2008). Carter was one of a number of former slaves who had moved to Texas after emancipation. As a result, analysing the number of black religious leaders based on the location of the former slaves at the time of interview distorts the results and, as a result, the location of the interviewee during slavery needs to be considered. See Appendix 2 for the full breakdown.

⁷ Clara Young, in George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 7 – Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed September 9, 2009).

⁸ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Negro Church: A Social Study* (Atlanta, Georgia: Atlanta University Press, 1903), p. 5, cited in Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, p. 193.

⁹ John Moore, in George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Supplement, Series 1 – Volume 5: Indiana and Ohio Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed July 12, 2010). Although Moore was interviewed in Indiana, he lived in Tennessee during slavery. The vast majority of former slaves interviewed who experienced slavery in Tennessee relocated after emancipation. 26

function of black preachers then was not only to identify with the problems of the enslaved, but also to provide a sense of hope to help slaves temporarily escape, at least mentally if not physically, from the horrors of the institution.

As well as leading prayer meetings, black preachers occasionally presided over slave weddings and funerals. Both occasions were among the most important events in slave life. Susie Duncan Sides argues that slave weddings ‘were solemn events, all the more solemn because the pledge made, the scriptures read, and the futures dreamed of had a terrible poignancy’.¹⁰ Examining the role of family in the slave South, Brenda Stevenson argues that ‘the kinds of decisions about their intimate lives that slaves made, even given the many restrictions which encumbered them, were very important to their sense of individuality, control, and self-esteem’.¹¹ The importance of the wedding ceremony for slaves was noted by the white ministers who occasionally conducted them. John Hamilton Cornish, an Episcopal minister from South Carolina, noted in his diary of one instance of a multiple slave wedding, where he married six couples. According to Cornish:

there was no tripling or levity on the occasion but a decent reverence & solemnity was preserved through the whole ceremony – we then went to another building where a supper table was spread for the newly married & their near relatives, covered with Venison, wild ducks, ham & rice – rice pound cakes, custards & coffee. We saw them seated which was done very decently - & then we went to another part of the yard where was a large put [?] of rice & venison for a general feast. Mrs. J. staid by the table till she saw them seated & every thing in order. The wild ducks were I suppose mostly shot by their master...I looked in upon them before we returned to the house – they were conducting themselves with

African Americans were interviewed in Tennessee but 213 former slaves were interviewed in different states, having moved after emancipation. See Appendix 1.

¹⁰ Cited in Susie Duncan Sides, ‘Slave Weddings and Slave Religion’, *History Today* 24 (1970), p. 85.

¹¹ Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 232.

order, & as ceremoniously as any company of gentlemen & ladies.¹²

Cornish's diary entry demonstrates the importance of weddings to slaves and the reverence with which they conducted themselves during the ceremony and subsequent celebrations. Whilst this particular wedding was carried out by a white minister, however, slaves often sought to have a black preacher presiding. Former slave Molly Brown commented that she was married by a black preacher in a ceremony carried out in the woods.¹³

Just as the wedding ceremony was an important event, the funeral was also crucial within the slave community. Death heralded a slave being freed from bondage and reunited with family and friends in the afterlife, giving mourners a sense of hope and eventual salvation. Historians have long commented on the sense of joy that slaves associated with death. In the 1920s G. R. Wilson stated that 'although this world was a hell to the slave, still he could wait here with patience until the time of death, after which he would see the real home of his inner longing'.¹⁴ Following Wilson, historians have continually asserted the sense of freedom that slaves associated with death, linking the idea of escaping servitude with a return to Africa and being reunited with their ancestors.¹⁵

¹² Diary entry 23 Dec 1843, John Hamilton Cornish Papers. *SHC*.

¹³ Molly Brown in George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 8 – Arkansas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed September 15, 2009). Similar examples can be found in the narratives of George Woods, Volume 3, Clara Brim, Volume 4, Lewis Favor, Volume 12, Willis Bennefield, Volume 13, Uncle Willis, Volume 13, Tempie Herndon Durham, Volume 13, 'Now Supported by Children She "Raised"', Volume 18, Mariah Robinson, Supplement 2, Volume 8, and Ellen Rogers May, Supplement 2, Volume 8.

¹⁴ G. R. Wilson, 'The Religion of the American Negro Slave: His Attitude Toward Life and Death', *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 8, No. 1 (Jan, 1923), pp. 64-5.

¹⁵ The historiography on slave funerals is rather limited. While Genovese spends a section of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, on the subject one of the only articles that deals specifically with the slave funeral is David R. Roediger, 'And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death, & Heaven in the Slave Community, 1700-1865', *Massachusetts Review* Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring, 1981), pp. 163-183. Other studies that refer to slave funerals examine the ceremony in relation to other historiographical arguments, such as the retention of African traditions. Elliott Gorn's study of African American ghostlore examines the retention of African traditions through the presence of graveyard decorations. (Elliott J. Gorn, 'Black Spirits: The Ghostlore of Afro-American Slaves', *American Quarterly* Vol. 36, No. 4 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 549-565.) Similarly William Pierson's study of depression and suicide amongst slaves uses the funeral to highlight the way planters punished those who killed themselves. (William D. Pierson, 'White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide Among New Slaves', *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 62, No. 2 (April, 1977), pp. 147-159.)

As with weddings, black preachers would also sometimes lead slave funerals.¹⁶ One letter from Helen MacLeod, the daughter of a Virginia planter, to her brother reported that ‘it is with much regret I inform you of the death of your old servant Ferdinand...Father saw him decently interred...and after hearing an address and prayer by a respectable old black preacher waited till the remains of poor Ferdinand were conveyed to the vehicle that was to take him to his long home’.¹⁷ The WPA narratives provide a number of examples where black preachers officiated at slave funerals. Former Louisiana slave Orelia Alexie Franks commented that ‘Ol’ marster hab a grabeyard a purpose to bury de cullud folks in. Dey hab a cullud preacher to preach. Dey hab de fun’rel in de grabeyard. Sometime’ dey hab some kinder servis at de house too. Dat nigger preacher he was a Mef’dis’.¹⁸

Although leading prayer meetings and conducting slave weddings and funerals remained important religious duties of black preachers throughout the antebellum period, other secular tasks also fell under the purview of these religious leaders. According to Boles, ‘black preachers were clearly natural leaders, men of substantial ability, forceful personality, and possessors of what we might call today stage presence. They were figures of real importance to their black communities, the one-of-their-own whom slaves looked up to for guidance and leadership’.¹⁹ Adviser, counsellor, mediator, and judge were all roles which a number of black preachers found themselves undertaking within the slave community. Rawick argues that ‘such clergymen functioned as community leaders, political directors, healers and inspirers, physicians and lawyers’.²⁰ Often these roles mirrored their religious duties

¹⁶ Within the WPA interviews, 221 narratives mention the slave funeral, but only ten record that these events were led by a black preacher. However, of the 221, only 160 provided any details of the ceremony. The absence of the black preacher at the slave funeral within the WPA narratives can also be explained by the fact that, unlike the wedding ceremony, the funeral focused almost entirely on the deceased and their release from bondage. This argument will be explained in further detail later in the chapter.

¹⁷ Letter of Helen MacLeod to brother, Sept 4th 1826, Macleod family papers. *VHS*.

¹⁸ Orelia Alexie Franks in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave, Supplement: Series 2 – Volume 4: Texas Narratives, Part 3* (accessed February 7, 2008). Similar examples can be found in the narratives of Sam Mitchell, Volume 3, Bert Strong, Volume 5, George G. King, Volume 7, Martha Colquitt, Volume 12, Scot Glen, Supplement 2, Volume 5, and A. C. Pruitt, Supplement 2, Volume 8. Franks was enslaved in Louisiana but moved to Texas after emancipation. Her narrative is one of the 159 interviews with former slaves who had originally lived in Louisiana but had subsequently moved. As no former slaves were interviewed in Louisiana during the 1930s, however, the state is often overlooked in studies of slavery that make use of the WPA narratives. See Appendix 1.

¹⁹ Boles, *Religion*, p. 89.

²⁰ Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, p. 38.

as black preachers focused on improving the morale of the slaves and giving them hope. Retelling his time in slavery, Lewis Charlton recalled that in Frederick, Maryland, he ‘saw about one hundred and fifty slaves marched out of the jail yard, handcuffed and chained together, bound for the south. At the head of this band were two men who had used their gifts as preachers. I distinctly recall that they were singing the following words: Don’t talk about suffering here below, But talk about love like Jesus, My Saviour smiles and bids me come’.²¹ Even the secular tasks that frequently became the responsibility of the black preacher were often designed to help improve the morale of their fellow slaves and give them hope.

Donald Mathews argues that slaves made no distinction between the sacred and the secular and so it was inevitable that black preachers would adopt roles other than that of religious leader.²² Mathews overstates this a little, however. Whereas in Africa religion enveloped all aspects of everyday life and no distinction was made between the sacred and secular, slaves in the late antebellum South did not associate every activity with religion. The work slaves undertook, as well as some leisure activities such as wrestling and fishing were not regarded as religious endeavours. However it was also not uncommon for slaves to pray while working or during other secular pursuits. Slaves held some distinction between the sacred and the secular. But for many, religion was never far from their minds and could easily be called upon. The black preacher was both a sacred and secular leader whose role was to provide hope and give comfort to the enslaved. The importance ascribed to the role, however, meant that slaves had high expectations of those selected to lead religious meetings or those who felt called upon by God to preach, expectations that could not always be realised.

²¹ *The Life of Lewis Charlton a Poor Old Slave, Who, for Twenty-Eight Years, Suffered in American Bondage* (Frederickton, N.B.: Printed by Pitts & Crocket, date unknown), p. 21.

²² Mathews, *Religion*, p. 198.

Placating slaves and planters

In carrying out the sacred and secular tasks required of them, black preachers faced an almost impossible dilemma in satisfying the demands of both slaves and planters. As both groups exerted influence over these religious leaders, neither could be ignored, but the conflicting nature of their respective needs meant that satisfying one risked antagonising the other. To survive black preachers had to compromise, teaching a message that would provide slaves with a temporary release from enslavement, but would not threaten to undermine the planter's authority by advocating physical or spiritual resistance. Compromising between the demands of the two groups, however, left the possibility that both would be dissatisfied with the preacher's efforts. Slaves would disown black preachers whom they thought were becoming the mouthpiece of the planter, while planters would physically punish any they considered to be preaching a gospel of insurrection or spiritual equality.

Slaves demanded that black preachers teach a gospel of hope that would provide temporary relief from the horrors of slavery. Former slave John Moore remembered that slaves 'enjoyed sermons preached by the negro preachers because they preached from experiences [sic] and not from the bible', and that 'emancipation was the theme of their sermons'.²³ Similarly Robert Cheatham recalled that 'the negro preachers preached freedom into our ears and our old men and women prophecied [sic] about it'.²⁴ These messages of freedom and emancipation, even if that freedom could not yet be realised, formed part of what Dwight Hopkins terms a 'Theology of Pleasure', in that the pleasures and amusements of religion 'literally hoisted African Americans up into a novel spiritual current and sped them far away from the life-denying and time-controlling power of the plantation system'.²⁵ Through messages of hope and emancipation black preachers were able to provide support that consoled slaves, reconciled them to their situation, but provided them with the promise of a better future, either in this life or the next.

²³ John Moore, in Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Supplement, Series 1 – Volume 5: Indiana and Ohio Narratives* (accessed July 12, 2010).

²⁴ Robert J. Cheatham, in Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Supplement, Series 1 – Volume 5: Indiana and Ohio Narratives* (accessed June 14, 2010).

²⁵ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 116.

Black preachers who provided a gospel of hope and salvation were highly respected within the slave community. Former slave Pet Franks commented that ‘us had preachin’ an’ singin’. Dey was some mighty good meetin’s on de place. Old Daddy Young was ’bout de bes’ preacher us ever had. Dey was plenty o’ Niggers dere, ’cause it was a powerful big place. Old Daddy could sho’ make ‘em shout an roll. Us have to hol’ some of ‘em dey’d git so happy’.²⁶ Similarly Mose Hursey remembered that during slavery ‘Uncle Billy preached to us and he was right good at preachin’ and nat’rally a good man, anyways’.²⁷ In both these examples the black preacher is presented as having a familial connection with the slaves, being described either as ‘Daddy’ or ‘Uncle’. Black preachers were so respected within the slave community that individual slaves often felt they had a close personal bond with their religious teachers.

In contrast to the demands of the slave community, the demands of the planters on black preachers rested on obedience. Each planter decided the activities that black preachers could undertake and the limits of these activities on their plantation. Those who permitted black preachers did so mainly because they had a paternalistic belief in the need for slaves to receive religious instruction. Planters who refused to allow black preachers, however, found they still operated within the slave community. Despite the varying opinions as to whether black preachers should be allowed to preach, however, all planters sought to ensure that their slaves remained obedient, and that their authority was never challenged or threatened.

Planters who tried to restrict the activities of black preachers were often suspicious of the respect they could command within the slave community. Former slave Parker Pool commented that ‘no nigger wuz allowed ter preach. Dey wuz allowed ter pray and shout sometimes, but dey better not be ketched with a book’.²⁸ Even when purchasing slaves, some planters would warn those that could preach against exercising their skills. Visiting the Southern states, Northern evangelical minister

²⁶ Pet Franks in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 7 – Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives* (accessed September 9, 2009).

²⁷ Mose Hursey in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 4 – Texas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed June 24, 2008).

²⁸ Parker Pool in George P. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 15 – North Carolina Narratives, Part 2* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed March 8, 2010).

Philo Tower came across a slave auction in New Orleans. One slave being sold was advertised as ‘a famous preacher’ and the auctioneer commented that ‘he will make a famous field hand during the week, and a roaring chaplain on the Sabbath’. The slaveholder that bought him, however, commented that ‘he will make a good hand for the cotton fields, and I have no objections to his piety, if he has enough to make him honest; but if he undertakes to play parson on my plantation, he’ll soon repent it’.²⁹

Not all black preachers experienced such prohibitions. Some were allowed and even encouraged by slaveholders to lead religious meetings among the slaves, to the point where planters purchased black preachers specifically for such a purpose. Former slave Walter Calloway recalled that ‘same time Marse John buy wammy [sic] an’ us boys, he buy a black man name Joe. He a preacher an’ de marster let de slaves buil’ a bresh arbor in de pecan grove ober in de big pastur’, an’ when de wedder warn’t too cold all de slaves was ’lowed to meet dar on Sunday ‘fo’ preachin’.³⁰ Other black preachers were given permission by planters to travel around the South and preach; one black minister in Kentucky in 1856 was given a pass from his owner which stated that ‘Tom is my slave, and has permission to go to Louisville for two or three weeks and return after he has made his visit. Tom is a preacher of the reformed Baptist Church, and has always been a faithful servant’.³¹

Despite the varying opinions regarding black preachers, all planters were afraid of their authority being undermined by slave religious leaders. The linking of Christianity with the idea of spiritual equality between slave and master left many planters suspicious of black preachers or unwilling to allow slaves to receive religious instruction without white supervision. Genovese argues that no matter how subservient Christianity made slaves ‘it also drove deep into his soul an awareness of the moral limits of submission, for it placed a master above his own master and

²⁹ Rev. Philo Tower, *Slavery Unmasked: Being a Truthful Narrative of a Three Years’ Residence and Journeying in Eleven Southern States: to which is added the Invasion of Kansas, including the last Chapter of her Wrongs* (Rochester: Published by E. Darrow & Brother, 65 Main and 2 St. Paul Sts., 1856), p. 309.

³⁰ Walter Calloway in George P. Rawick (ed.), in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 6 – Alabama and Indiana Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed September 24, 2008). Calloway was interviewed in Alabama but was a slave in Virginia. See Appendices 1 and 2.

³¹ Cited in Boles, *Religion*, p. 90.

thereby dissolved the moral and ideological ground on which the very principle of absolute human lordship must rest'.³² The fear of a more powerful figure than the planter, combined with the fact that black preachers were able to inspire slaves to rebel, convinced many planters that these religious leaders were dangerous. Boles argues that the Southern white elite sought to avoid secret meetings of slaves due to the possibility of blacks developing strong leaders, organisational skills, and a possible rationale for rebellion.³³ This fear of rebellion was not limited to planters. In his diary, written while travelling to Western Virginia, Lyndon Swaim spoke with a woman on the topic of black religious services, and was told that 'the niggers has got in a great way of holdin meetins and preaching and prayin about here lately – but they're a goin to break that up – that's an unlawful assembly in Virginnny'.³⁴ These actions illustrate the genuine fear held by the Southern white elite of the secret nocturnal meetings of slaves and black preachers, and of the potential insurrectionary consequences.

Planters sought to ensure that their authority over their slaves was not challenged by black preachers, and used a variety of methods to ensure their dominance. Upon taking possession of his plantation of Silver Bluff, South Carolina, James Henry Hammond was advised to 'raise their [the slaves'] church to the ground – keep them from fanaticism for God's sake as well as your own'.³⁵ Hammond attempted to follow this advice, recording in his diary that he intended 'to break up negro preaching & negro churches'. Later he 'ordered night meetings on the plantation to be discontinued'.³⁶ Cracking down on slave literacy was also a way of ensuring the planter's dominance. Given that black preachers were sometimes chosen for their ability to read, this made them able to repeat passages of the Bible incongruous with slavery. While planters may have been more lenient towards illiterate black

³² Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 165.

³³ Boles, *Religion*, p. 93.

³⁴ Diary entry, 23 August 1852, Lyndon Swaim papers. *Duke*.

³⁵ James Clark to James Henry Hammond, December 19, 1831, James Henry Hammond Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., cited in Drew Gilpin Faust, 'Culture, Conflict, and Community: The Meaning of Power on an Ante-Bellum Plantation', *Journal of Social History* Vol. 14, No. 1 (1980), p. 84.

³⁶ Hammond, December 15 and 16, 1831, cited in Faust, 'Culture', p. 84. In his later book, Faust notes that Hammond visited his neighbouring planters shortly after taking ownership of Silver Bluff 'to request that they follow his example in eliminating the black church on their plantations'. (Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), p. 74.)

preachers, those that could read found themselves under increasing scrutiny. One group of slaves, held after being found sitting up with a slave who had recently died, were all pardoned apart from ‘one special transgressor, Joe Abrahams by name, who had a Bible in his pocket, an assumption, of course, not to be permitted, and who was sentenced to the full number of twenty-five’ lashes.³⁷ Even white preachers who occasionally preached on the plantation were careful not to show slaves the Bible. Former slave Adeline Cunningham commented that ‘iffen days a marriage de preacher has a book. He’s gotter keep it hid, ‘cause day's afraid iffen de slaves learns to read dey learns how to run away’.³⁸

Planters who permitted or encouraged black preachers did not do so unreservedly. Checks were frequently made on both the black preacher’s character and their conduct of religious meetings. Often this involved having either the overseer or some other white observer present to ensure that the message taught was not at all insurrectionary. Former slave Henry Warfield recalled that during the slaves’ religious meetings ‘an overseer passed by every now and then and looked in to see what was being done’.³⁹ Other precautions introduced to limit the power of black preachers bordered on the farcical; former slave Charlotte Beverly recalled that ‘one of the slaves was a sort-a preacher and sometimes marster ‘lowed him to preach to the niggers, but he have to preach with a tub over his head, ‘cause he git so happy he talk too loud’.⁴⁰

In order to control black preachers, planters demanded they preach a gospel of obedience and subservience, often watching or sending observers to slave religious meetings to ensure the message followed this line. Former slave William Ward recalled that during the slaves’ religious meetings, the black preacher’s sermon ‘was always built according to the master's instructions which were that slaves must always remember that they belonged to their masters and were intended to lead a life

³⁷ Hannah Ransome Geldart, *A Voice from Slave Land: A True Story* (London: Jarrold & Sons, 47, St. Paul’s Churchyard, 1858), p. 9.

³⁸ Adeline Cunningham in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 4 – Texas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed June 23, 2008).

³⁹ Henry Warfield in George P. Rawick (ed.), in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Supplement, Series 1 – Volume 10: Mississippi Narratives, Part 5* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed August 9, 2010).

⁴⁰ Charlotte Beverly in Rawick (ed.), in *The American Slave: Volume 4 – Texas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed June 23, 2008).

of loyal servitude. None of the slaves believed this, although they pretended to believe because of the presence of the white overseer'.⁴¹ Preaching the planter's gospel, however, meant following a message almost the direct opposite to what slaves wanted to hear. To successfully incorporate the demands of both planter and slave was an almost impossible task, leaving the black preacher charting an extremely difficult course between the two. Satisfying one group could result in being punished by the other.

Compromise or fail? The black preacher's response to conflicting demands

Whilst it was difficult to navigate between the conflicting demands of the planter and the slave community, a number of black preachers did so successfully. The respect afforded to these religious leaders by both groups illustrates their ability to compromise and preach a gospel that provided hope but was not considered insurrectionary. There were a number of methods by which black preachers could compromise between the two groups, not all of which necessitated navigating a course through the middle ground.

To meet with slaves' demands for a gospel of hope and eventual salvation, the practice of holding religious meetings at night in remote locations greatly eased the problem of avoiding any message that conflicted with planters' requirements. Former slave Lucretia Alexander remembered that:

My father would have church in dwelling houses and they had to whisper...Sometime they would have church at his house. That would be when they would want a real meetin' with some real preachin'...I never saw them turn no pots down neither; but I have heard of that. They used to sing their songs in a whisper and

⁴¹ William Ward in George P. Rawick (ed.), in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 13 – Georgia Narratives, Parts 3 and 4* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed February 24, 2010).

pray in a whisper. That was a prayer-meeting from house to house once or twice—once or twice a week.⁴²

Nocturnal preaching in remote locations, however, was not an option for all black preachers. Many found themselves preaching at slave meetings with white observers present, whether it was the planter, the overseer, or a white minister. On these occasions, black preachers had to compromise and avoid any hint of an insurrectionary message. One former slave narrative commented that the black preacher on the plantation ‘had to be careful what he said ‘cause the white folks were there and listening to him, so that he couldn’t have anything to say to cause uprising of his slaves’.⁴³ Similarly former slave George King commented that when the master finally allowed slaves to hold religious meetings on his plantation ‘the overseer was there with guards to keep the Negroes from getting too much riled up when old Peter started talking about Paul or some of the things in the Old Testament. That’s all he would talk about; nothing ‘bout Jesus, just Paul and the Old Testament’.⁴⁴ Some black preachers acknowledged that their gospel differed depending on whether white observers were present during their meetings. Anderson Edwards admitted that he ‘had to preach what massa told me and he say tell them niggers iffen they obeys the massa they goes to Heaven but I knowed there's something better for them, but daren't tell them ‘cept on the sly. That I done lots. I tells ‘em iffen they keppe prayin’ the Lord will set ‘em free’.⁴⁵

In the nocturnal meetings held away from Southern white society, black preachers had the opportunity to preach a message that planters would consider revolutionary. Even messages that inspired slaves to rebel against their masters could be taught relatively safe in the knowledge that planters were unlikely to hear them. Edwards’

⁴² Lucretia Alexander in Rawick (ed.), in *The American Slave: Volume 8 – Arkansas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed September 11, 2009). Turning over a pot was one of the most common techniques slaves used to try and keep their nocturnal meetings quiet. They believed that any sound they made would be trapped underneath the pot. Alexander’s location during slavery was not given in her interview. Although it is possible to argue that she did not move upon emancipation, many former slaves moved to Arkansas after being freed. 740 African Americans were interviewed in Arkansas but only 194 recalled living in the state during slavery. See Appendix 1.

⁴³ “Knew Lincoln’s Cousin” in Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 18 – Unwritten History of Slavery* (accessed February 14, 2008).

⁴⁴ George King in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 7 – Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives* (accessed September 8, 2009).

⁴⁵ Anderson Edwards in Rawick (ed.), in *The American Slave: Volume 4 – Texas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed June 24, 2008).

statement of preaching freedom behind the planter's back could therefore be seen as an attempt to undermine authority.⁴⁶ The continued preaching of freedom to the slaves in nocturnal meetings, despite knowing this was forbidden, could be interpreted as an act of resistance. Yet this message also served to console and provide hope to the enslaved. Preaching a gospel of salvation was an act inspired by love rather than hate and so the primary motivation of the preacher was to give hope rather than undermine the planter's authority. Preaching a gospel of resistance, however, was one that jarred with the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Genovese argues that black preachers 'could turn into revolutionaries if conditions changed', and that 'neither their temperament nor the quality of their religious faith prohibited a call to arms'.⁴⁷ Despite Genovese's assertion, however, there is a sense within Christianity that justice and retribution were ultimately God's prerogative. Passages in the Bible stating that 'vengeance *belongeth* unto me...saith the Lord' suggests that to take personal retribution against an oppressor would be sinful.⁴⁸ The idea of divine justice went against the idea of black preachers leading or inciting insurrections. Moreover many slaves accepted that planters who treated them cruelly would suffer in the afterlife. Former slave Charlie Moses commented that 'my Marster was mean an' cruel an' I hates him, hates him. The God Almighty has condemned him to eternal fiah', of that I is certain'.⁴⁹ Although black preachers had the opportunity to take on a political role and preach a message that could be considered revolutionary, few chose to do so because it would have contravened a central idea of Christianity.

As was seen in Gabriel Prosser's rebellion, religious meetings held away from Southern whites were often crucial in inciting rebellion, organising the insurrection, and encouraging more supporters to their cause. Despite this opportunity, however, many black preachers refused to use these meetings as the foundation for rebellious measures. Hiram R. Revels, a black preacher who later served as a United States senator from Mississippi wrote that 'I sedulously refrained from doing anything that

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 259.

⁴⁸ Hebrews 10:30 in *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 277. A similar argument is also given in Romans 12:19, p. 202. (italics in original.)

⁴⁹ George P. Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Biography*. Westport, Conn., 197, Supp. Ser. 1, vol. 9 pt. 4, pp. 1597, 1571 cited in Sparks, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks*, p. 144.

would incite the slaves to run away from their masters. It being understood that my object was to preach the gospel to them, and improve their moral and spiritual condition, even slave holders were tolerant toward me'.⁵⁰ Again part of the justification for this was that many black preachers regarded inciting rebellion as contravening the fundamental morality of Christianity.

Despite the methods used by black preachers to navigate a course between the demands of planters and slaves, however, not all of these religious leaders were able to maintain a positive relationship with both groups. The prestige with which black preachers were regarded within the slave community, coupled with their visible presence on the plantation meant that those who failed to placate both groups suffered publicly and harshly. Planters often punished preachers for teaching a message that could undermine their authority. Sarah Ford recalled a religious meeting of slaves where 'old Uncle Law preachin' and he say, 'De Lawd make everyone to come in unity and on de level, both white and black.' When Massa Charles hears 'bout it, he don't like it none, and de next mornin' old Uncle Jake git Uncle Lew [sic] and put him out in de field with de rest'.⁵¹ Although this message was not designed to encourage slaves to rebel, it promoted the idea that slaves were spiritually equal to the planter, thus undermining his authority. What was presented to the enslaved as a message of hope to slaves was a message of insurrection for the slaveholder.

Other planters refused to allow black preachers to teach and operate physically punished any who preached on their plantations. Salomon Oliver recalled that:

Father use to preach to the slaves when a crowd of them could slip off into the woods. I don't remember much about the religious things, only just what Daddy told me when I was older. He was caught several times slipping off to the woods and because he was

⁵⁰ Hiram R. Revels Autobiography, p. 5, in the Woodson Papers, in Genovese, *Roll, Jordon, Roll*, p. 263.

⁵¹ Sarah Ford in Rawick (ed.), in *The American Slave: Volume 4 – Texas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed June 24, 2008). Also see the narratives of Lizzie Fant Brown (Supplement 1, Volume 6) and Lizzie Norfleet (Supplement 1, Volume 9).

the preacher I guess they layed on the lash a little harder trying to make him give up preaching.⁵²

Some planters punished slaves merely for professing religion without even holding meetings that could be used to incite insurrection. In his account of life in slavery Thomas Anderson recalled that ‘my master who owned me at that time having no knowledge of God or godliness, supposed my religion was all a fancy, and said he could and would whip it out of me. He took me up and tie me, and scourged me until feeling of flesh was almost gone...My master cursed me, and said: “Will you preach to me”?’⁵³ Although efforts to stop slaves from professing Christianity usually failed some planters continued to punish those that did.

The realisation that black preachers could exert power over slaves resulted in numerous laws being enacted to prevent or limit their preaching. One law from Mississippi stated that the ‘penalty for any slave or free colored person exercising the functions of a minister of the gospel, thirty-nine lashes; but any master may permit his slave to preach in his premises, no slaves but his own being permitted to assemble’.⁵⁴ The Southern elite realised the power black preachers wielded and took steps to ensure that the authority of these religious leaders was limited not just on their plantations, but throughout the slaveholding South.

Sometimes black preachers had to avoid teaching about hope and salvation, messages that planters could have considered inflammatory, even when no Southern whites were present. Slaves who sought to gain favour with the master or had a personal grievance against a particular black preacher could improve their own situation and undermine religious leaders by informing against them. Former slave Betty Powers remembered that ‘De Missy knows ever’thing dat am gwine on. She have de spies ‘mong de cullud fo’ks. She tries to git me to report to her, but she

⁵² Salomon Oliver in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 7 – Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives* (accessed September 8, 2009).

⁵³ Thomas Anderson, *Interesting Account of Thomas Anderson, a Slave, Taken from His Own Lips*, p. 3. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/anderson/anderson.html> (accessed 25/11/09).

⁵⁴ *Extracts from the American Slave Code* (Second edition of 10,000.) [No. 1] (The Anti-Slavery Bugle, : Salem, Columbia County, Ohio, c. 1830), p. 34.

finds Ise not 'pendable fo' sich, den stops'.⁵⁵ Thus a number of black preachers were reluctant to teach a message that seemed in any way insurrectionary.

The strategy of avoiding messages of hope that could be seen as inflammatory helped protect black preachers from the wrath of planters. It simultaneously endangered, however, their relationship with the slave community. The charge of becoming the mouthpiece of the planter could permanently and irrevocably damage a preacher's reputation. Webber argues that black preachers had to demonstrate their loyalty to the community and that religious leaders who believed aspects of white Christianity and attempted to portray that message to the community were regarded by the enslaved with 'a moralistic vehemence that goes well beyond a sense of purely personal betrayal'.⁵⁶ Recalling his time in slavery, William Ward commented that 'There was one person who did the preaching. His sermon was always built according to the master's instructions which were that slaves must always remember that they belonged to their masters and were intended to lead a life of loyal servitude. None of the slaves believed this, although they pretended to believe because of the presence of the white overseer'.⁵⁷

In the late antebellum South, therefore, black preachers had one of the most public and one of the most precarious roles to fulfil. Those successful in navigating a

⁵⁵ Betty Powers in George P. Rawick, *American Slave – Texas Narratives: Part 2, Supp. Ser. 2, Vol. 8*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 1979. (accessed October 19, 2010). On divisions within the slave community see Larry E. Hudson Jr., "'All That Cash": Work and Status in the Slave Quarters, in Larry E. Hudson Jr. (ed.), *Working Toward Freedom: Slave Society and Domestic Economy in the American South* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 1994) and John Blassingame, 'Status and Social Structure in the Slave Community: Evidence from New Sources', in Harry P. Owens (ed.), *Perspectives and Irony in American Slavery* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1976). Dusiñberre similarly investigates divisions within the slave community, arguing that the line between privileged slaves and field hands was not distinct and that granting privileges did not 'provide the foundation for fixed divisions between different social classes among the enslaved'. (Dusiñberre, *Them Dark Days*, pp. 194-201.) However, he also notes that divisions emerged through different types of slave behaviour noting six main types of personality. (Dusiñberre, *Them Dark Days*, pp. 170-4). Dusiñberre's most recent work also investigates divisions that occurred within the slave community, arguing that although the most major source of division was the granting of special privileges to certain slaves, other quarrels that had nothing to do with the plantation's disciplinary structure, such as sexual rivalry, or everyday quarrels, could provide tension within the slave community. (William Dusiñberre, *Strategies for Survival: Recollections of Bondage in Antebellum Virginia* (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2009), pp. 180-3.)

⁵⁶ Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, p. 65.

⁵⁷ William Ward in George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 13 – Georgia Narratives, Parts 3 and 4* (accessed February 24, 2010). Similar experiences can be found in the narratives of Bolden Hall (Volume 17), 'Knows Nothing About Slavery But "Whipping Niggers"' (Volume 18), and Simp Campbell (Supplement 2, Volume 3).

course between the demands of the slaves and the planters were often highly respected by both groups. Those who failed quickly found themselves either ostracised by the slave community or physically punished by planters. The duties of black preachers on the plantation left them, as Genovese comments, on a tightrope.⁵⁸ Wilson Fallin Jr. argues that on the plantation the slave preacher was ‘an enigmatic figure who has been described in various ways, from a controller of blacks for the slave master to a flaming revolutionary, he was generally highly respected among slaves, who recognised the limitations under which he operated’.⁵⁹ Not all slaves, however, accepted the difficulties that accompanied the role and so keeping both groups on the plantation complacent was a constant and difficult battle. The role was even more complex, however, since religion within the slave community on the plantation was not dependent on black preachers. Additionally, their leadership could be challenged.

‘Sunday we just put an old Prince Albert coat on some good nigger’: Religion without the black preacher

Discussing religion on the plantation during her time in slavery, Jephtha Choice commented that ‘on Sunday we just put an old Prince Albert coat on some good nigger and made a preacher out of him’.⁶⁰ Religious leadership on the plantation was not necessarily solely ascribed to one individual. Instead such a position could be shared or rotated. While the black preacher was an important figure the individual who held the role was not. Despite the importance with which black preachers were held, African American Christianity continued to thrive within slave communities that had no religious leader. Slaves held religious meetings, prayed and sang together without the aid of a slave preacher. Weddings and funerals still occurred, while other slaves within the community were able to take on the secular duties of advisor and counsellor. Every event or ceremony that black preachers led, and every role that black preachers undertook could be carried out without their presence or by another individual.

⁵⁸ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 263.

⁵⁹ Fallin Jr., *Uplifting the People*, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Jephtha Choice, in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 4 – Texas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed June 23, 2008).

Autobiographies of former slaves recall that on plantations where there was no black preacher, slaves still experienced moments of religious epiphany. One such autobiography recalled that ‘I lived in a place where there was no preaching, and no religious instruction; but every day I went out amongst the hay-stacks, where the presence of the Lord overshadowed me, and I was filled with sweetness and joy, and was a vessel filled with holy oil’.⁶¹ While some slaves were converted to Christianity by the oratory of black preachers, others discovered religion by themselves without the influence of any religious leader.

The nature of religious belief suggests that black preachers were not essential for the survival of African American Christianity within the plantation slavery community. Religion was both a communal and individual activity, and this was reflected on plantations in the antebellum South. In the WPA interviews of former slaves, 281 narratives recall that there was a black preacher either on the plantation or in a nearby church. However, a further 896 narratives refer to slave religion and religious meetings on the plantation without mentioning that any black religious leader was present. O. W. Green remembered that ‘Masta wouldn’t let de cullud folks have meetin’, but dey would go out in de woods in secret to pray and preach and shout’.⁶² Communal meetings without religious leadership could still provide the consolation and solace slaves needed to temporarily disassociate themselves from the horrors they faced.

As well as group meetings being conducted without the aid of religious leadership, other religious experiences were individual and required no input from black preachers. In particular, while slaves were often converted to Christianity through camp meetings, especially during the second Great Awakening, others experienced conversion by themselves, often during times of great despair. One such individual commented that:

⁶¹ *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman* (Philadelphia: Collins, Printer, 705 Jayne Street, 1863), in *Six Women’s Slave Narratives, with an Introduction by William L. Andrews* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 7.

⁶² O. W. Green, in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 4 – Texas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed June 24, 2008). The 1177 narratives that refer either to black religious leaders or slave religion represent around 28 per cent of all the narratives. 3071 narratives make no mention of slave religion at all.

One evening...I thought I could not live over the night, so threw myself on a bench, expecting to die, and without being prepared to meet my Maker...I saw with my spiritual eye, an awful gulf of misery. As I thought I was about to plunge into it, I heard a voice saying, "rise up and pray," which strengthened me. I fell on my knees and prayed the best I could the Lord's prayer...Immediately there appeared a director, clothed in white raiment. I thought he took me by the hand and said, "come with me"...Then I thought I was permitted to look straight forward, and see the Saviour standing with His hand stretched out to receive me. An indescribably glorious light was in Him, and He said, "peace, peace, come unto me." At this moment I felt that my sins were forgiven me, and the time of my deliverance was at hand.⁶³

Bestowing the role of preacher was clearly important within the slave community. Mary Boykin Chesnut wrote in her diary about the reaction one slave had on being chosen, commenting that 'Jim Nelson, the driver...[a] full-blooded African...was asked to 'lead in prayer'. He became wildly excited. Though on his knees, facing us, with his eyes shut, he clapped his hands at the end of every sentence, and his voice rose to the pitch of a shrill shriek'.⁶⁴ Despite the role being prestigious, it was not essential to ensure that slaves received religious instruction. The black preacher could act as an enabler for other slaves, someone who could start the meetings but then allow the slaves to take over.

The reality for black preachers in the late antebellum South was that the slave community was more important than the individual. Within the slave community the

⁶³ *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, pp. 4-5. This conversion experience is very similar to that of the Biblical conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus. Yolanda Pierce's work *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005) argues this conversion experience was common amongst antebellum African American religious narratives.

⁶⁴ C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 213-14, cited in John White, 'Veiled Testimony: Negro Spirituals and the Slave Experience', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Aug., 1983), p. 252.

black preacher rarely appointed himself but was chosen by the slaves as a group. Investigating the state of Christianity among the enslaved, Charles Colcock Jones commented that ‘the Negroes on plantations sometimes appoint one of their number, commonly the old women who minds the children during the day to teach them to say their prayers, repeat a little catechism and a few hymns, every evening’.⁶⁵ The same community also had the power to remove black preachers from their position of authority by ignoring their teachings and thereby isolating them.

On plantations where black preachers resided they frequently played important roles within slave religious services, ceremonies such as weddings and funerals, and also held secular roles such as teacher and adviser.⁶⁶ But on plantations where they were not present, these events still occurred. Weddings and funerals, two of the most important religious ceremonies among the slave community continued to take place even if no black preachers were present. With slave weddings, planters and white ministers frequently officiated. One description of slave weddings in Mississippi stated that ‘the negroes are usually married by the planter, who reads the service from the gallery [of the Big House] – the couple with their attendants standing upon the steps or on the green in front...Clergymen are sometimes invited to officiate by those planters who feel that respect for the marriage covenant, which leads them to desire its strict observance’.⁶⁷

When black preachers did conduct slave weddings and funerals, planters ensured that they remained the central figure within the ceremony, rather than these religious leaders. In his recent discussion of the use of the broomstick ritual in slave weddings, Patrick O’Neil argues that it was often the master who introduced the ritual rather than the black preacher who conducted the ceremony. Former slave Tempie Herndon Durham recalled that at her ceremony ‘Uncle Edmond Kirby married us. He was de nigger preacher dat preached at de plantation church. After Uncle Edmond said de las’ words over me an’ Exter, Marse George got to have his little fun’; Tempie is able to jump over the broom but as Exter is drunk, ‘his feet was so big an’ clumsy dat dey got all tangled up in dat broom an’ he fell head long.

⁶⁵ Jones, *Religious Instruction*, p. 114, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 177.

⁶⁶ In the WPA narratives, 281 refer to a black preacher, 168 of these were on the plantation.

⁶⁷ Ingraham, *South-West*, II, 128-129, cited in Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 476.

Marse George he laugh an' laugh, an' tole Exter he gwine be bossed 'twell he skeered to speak less'n I tole him to speak'.⁶⁸ In his discussion of slave community, Blassingame argues that the broomstick ceremony was developed by both master and slave, citing Durham's narrative as an example.⁶⁹ Herbert Gutman also argues that the broomstick ritual was a slave-led ceremony, commenting that 'enough is known about the importance of slave witchcraft beliefs and practices to suggest that the broomstick ritual...was related closely to Afro-American magical and religious beliefs'.⁷⁰

Problems emerge, however, with Blassingame's and Gutman's assertions that the broomstick ritual was a slave-led ritual. Durham's narrative clearly illustrates that the broomstick ceremony was at the planter's behest, with the comment that after the ceremony 'Marse George got to have his little fun'. The narrative illustrates that planters used the broomstick to cement their authority on the occasion. Stevenson argues that, instead of being of African origin, "jumping the broom" was a popular practice in Anglo-Saxon villages and was a European pre-Christian tradition likely 'passed down to later generations as an amusing, perhaps quaint, relic of their "pagan" past'. Therefore 'by imposing this cultural albatross on slaves, southern whites suggested the lack of respect and honor that they held, for their blacks' attempts to create meaningful marital relationships'.⁷¹ O'Neil goes on to argue that 'slaveholders used the broomstick not merely to mark slave marriages as transitory and unimportant but also to assert authority over black households'.⁷² Although such an intervention may have been resented by the black participants, O'Neil's argument illustrates the extent to which planters were able to dominate events such as slave weddings and assert their authority over black preachers.

The WPA narratives support the thesis that the broomstick ritual was adopted by slaves but was originally introduced by planters to mock them. Josephine Anderson

⁶⁸ North Carolina Narratives, Vol. XI, Pt. 1, pp. 287-88, cited in Patrick W. O'Neil, 'Bosses and Broomsticks: Ritual and Authority in Antebellum Slave Weddings', *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 75, No. 1 (2009), p. 38.

⁶⁹ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, p. 167.

⁷⁰ Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), pp. 277-8.)

⁷¹ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, pp. 228-9.

⁷² O'Neil, 'Bosses and Broomsticks', p. 40.

illustrated the links between the broomstick ceremony and the slave belief in superstitious rituals, commenting that ‘brooms keeps hants away. When mean folks dies, de old dobbil sometimes doan want em down dere in de bad place, so he makes witches out of em, an sends em back... You put a broom acrosst your door at night an old witches gotta count ever straw in dat broom fore ah[illegible text] can come in’.⁷³ Other narratives show that the broomstick was the planter’s idea. Mattie Matthews commented that ‘de master ud hole de broomstick I ask grandmuthuh wat she ud a-done had she fall’n ober de broomstick. She say, ‘Well, I didn’t fall, but jump’d clear ober hit’’.⁷⁴ The origins of the broomstick ritual therefore appear to have been instigated by planters who used it as a way of ridiculing the slaves whilst asserting his authority on the ceremony. Slaves, however, took the broomstick ritual, and made it their own, attributing their own rationales for its use. But in both of these descriptions of the broomstick ritual, there is no sign of a black preacher. Out of 195 narratives that mention a slave wedding taking place, only eleven recall that a black preacher led the ceremony. This lack of a black preacher to preside at so many weddings illustrates that a religious leader was not considered an essential part of the slave community.

Weddings were an important ceremony amongst slave communities, with or without black religious leaders. But these events were not carried out free from white influence. Planters could often control slave weddings through their disregard and disparagement of the ceremony. Writing about slave marriage, former slave Henry Box Brown commented that ‘the slave’s wife is his, only at the will of her master, who may violate her chastity with impunity’.⁷⁵ As well as sexually assaulting African American women, slave marriages were frequently broke up as partners were sold, or marriages were forced by planters in order to promote breeding. The

⁷³ Josephine Anderson, in George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 17 – Florida Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group (accessed March 17, 2010). Lula Flannigan (Supplement 1, Volume 3) also ties the broomstick ritual into conjure.

⁷⁴ Mattie Matthews, in George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 11 – Arkansas Narratives, Part 7, and Missouri Narratives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. Josephine Ryles (Supplement 2, Volume 9)

⁷⁵ Charles Stearns, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery*, p. 23. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html> (accessed August 04, 2010).

issue of breeding in particular was one way that planters could undermine slave marriages. The breakup of marriages through sale was a devastating blow, and was often treated by slaves as a bereavement, especially as the sold slave was often not seen again. Such a development, however, was not entirely unexpected. Former slave Matthew Jarrett commented that ‘we slaves knowed that them words [in the slave ceremonies] wasn’t bindin’. Don’t mean nothin’ lessen [sic] you say ‘What God done jined, cain’t no man pull asunder’. But dey would never say date. Jus’ say, ‘Now your married’’.⁷⁶ Additionally, not all planters who broke up slave marriages through sale interfered in the slave wedding itself. Through the issue of breeding, however, planters undermined the slave wedding ceremony and violated one of the few vestiges of independence slaves had, by determining who their slaves would marry. Elige Davison recalled that ‘I been marry once ’fore freedom, with home weddin’. Massa, he bring some more women to see me. He wouldn’t let me have jus’ one woman. I have ’bout fifteen and I don’t know how many children. Some over a hundred, I’s sho’’.⁷⁷ Former slave Silvia King recalled that after her enslavement, ‘Marse Jones say to me, ‘Silvia, am [sic] you married?’ I tells him I got a man and three chillen back in de old country, but he don’t understand my talk and I has a man give to me’.⁷⁸ Although abolitionist claim over the existence of “stud farms” throughout the South has been called into doubt by scholars, planters, according to Michael Tadman ‘may very often have forced the pairing of individual slaves, have sexually abused female slaves, and have entertained an almost universal enthusiasm for vigorous natural increase (and hence capital growth) among their slaves’.⁷⁹ On the morning after her wedding, Mammy Harriet of the Burleigh estate in Georgia was greeted by her mistress singing, Good morning, Mrs. Bride. I wish you joy and

⁷⁶ *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, eds. Charles L. Purdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 158, cited in Dusenberre, *Strategies for Survival*, p. 81.

⁷⁷ Elige Davison, in Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 4 – Texas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed June 23, 2008). Similarly in his interview, Jephtha Choice (Volume 4) commented that he was in demand for breeding because of his physical attributes.

⁷⁸ Silvia King in George P. Rawick, *The American Slave – Texas Narratives: Parts 1 & 2, Vol. 4*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 1972. <http://ebooks.abc-clio.com/reader.aspx?isbn=9780313091896&id=RSP-3>. (accessed 14/06/2011). Also see the narrative of Sarah Ford (Volume 4).

⁷⁹ Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), p. 122.

every year a son or daughter'.⁸⁰ The interference of planters in slave wedding ceremonies, either through breeding or by the breaking up of marriages through sale, illustrates the planter's power over the enslaved, and the fragility of slave attempts to gain some element of control over their public life on the plantation.

In contrast to the wedding ceremony, although a black preacher occasionally presided at a slave funeral, the focus for the enslaved was on the deceased rather than the individual leading the service.⁸¹ In a letter to his brother in Boston, Charles Doe commented on a slave funeral that took place in Virginia, commenting that 'the blacks had a prayer meeting at the house before starting & again at the grave, conducting it wholly themselves. The ministers attend at their funerals when requested, but they are not generally requested. The whole ceremony was as solemn, silent, & impressive as I have witnessed any where'.⁸²

As with slave weddings, planters could also dominate the funeral ceremony. In her diaries Frances Anne Kemble spoke about a slave funeral which was led by a black Methodist preacher named London. During the ceremony 'London began a prayer, and all the people knelt down in the sand, as I did also. Mr. [Butler] alone remained standing in the presence of the dead man and of the living God to whom his slaves were now appealing'.⁸³ While the preacher leading the ceremony was black, planters remained the central figure of authority.

The reaction of the planters always determined the extent to which slaves were permitted a funeral. Some planters were upset at the death of a slave and arranged for an elaborate funeral ceremony. Arriving at a Georgian plantation, the preacher

⁸⁰ Susan Dabney Smedes, *Memorials of a Southern Planter*, Fletch M. Green, ed. (New York: Knopf, 1965), p. 42, cited in Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), p. 99.

⁸¹ Within the WPA narratives, incidents of black preachers leading slave funerals are rather scarce. Only ten narratives recall that these ceremonies were led by a black preacher. However, other reasons explain the lack of religious leadership at these ceremonies, in particular the fact that few slaves were allowed a separate funeral service where slaves were allowed to gather. Out of 180 narratives that provide some details about the slave funeral, only 24 commented that they were allowed an extended period of time for the funeral ceremony. 44 narratives recalled they were not allowed any time off, while 29 comment they were allowed time off for the burial only.

⁸² Charles Doe Letter, 22 February 1850, Danville[?] VA, from Charles Doe to Mr. E Ricker Doe (brother and sister to Charles), Boston, Mass, *VSL*.

⁸³ Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 147.

William White discovered the master in a state of melancholy following the death of one of his slaves. According to the master, this slave was ‘the truest and most reliable friend I had in the world, one whom I had been accustomed to honor and respect since my earliest recollection’.⁸⁴ White, who had traveled to Georgia from ‘a section in the Union where slavery does not exist’, expressed his surprise that the master’s reaction to a dead slave was ‘not the haughty planter, the lordly tyrant, talking of his dead slave as of his dead horse, but the kind-hearted gentleman, lamenting the loss and eulogizing the virtues of his good old *friend*’.⁸⁵ This reaction, however, was by no means universal in the antebellum South. Many planters refused to allow slaves to hold funeral ceremonies because, as property, their death was no more concerning to the planter than the death of a cow or horse. One former slave Texas echoed this sentiment, commenting that ‘dey didn’t have no funerals for de slaves, but jes’ bury dem like a cow or a hoss, jes’ dig a hole and roll ’em in it and cover ’em up’.⁸⁶

In addition to not being requested, black preachers were not required at all slave funerals because not all slaves were afforded such a ceremony. Some were denied a funeral because planters refused to sanction it.⁸⁷ Others were buried quickly with no accompanying ceremony due to time and health constraints.⁸⁸ On some occasions being denied a funeral was a form of punishment, especially for slaves who committed suicide. In Africa suicide was often considered an admirable act, as an honourable death for prisoners of war, a form of religious martyrdom, or a way of

⁸⁴ William S. White, ‘The Night Funeral of a Slave.’ *DeBow’s Review* Vol. 20, Issue 2 (Feb 1856): p. 218, <http://www.hti.umich.edu/t/text/gifcvtdir/acg1336.1-20.002/0242a218.tifs.gif> (accessed February 13, 2005).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 218. The article goes on to describe the funeral ceremony where ‘at least one hundred and fifty negroes, arranged four deep, and following a wagon in which was placed the coffin; down the entire length of the line, at intervals of a few feet, on each side were carried torches of the resinous pine, and here called lightwood’ (*Ibid.*, p. 218.)

⁸⁶ Cited in Roediger, ‘And Die in Dixie’, pp. 166-7.

⁸⁷ The idea that not all slaves were considered important enough by the planter to be accorded a funeral ceremony backs up Tadman’s theory of the difference between ‘rank-and-file slaves’ and ‘key slaves’, and that while key slaves were ‘those for whom masters were most likely to make claims of affection’, rank-and-file slaves would rarely be referred to or commented upon. Following this argument, the funeral William White witnessed would most likely have been that of a key slave. (Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, pp. xx-xxii.)

⁸⁸ In analysing the Gowrie plantation near Savannah, Georgia, Jeffrey Young notes that between 1833 and 1861 the average crude mortality rate was 97.6 per thousand. This rate was two and a half times greater than the average fertility rate of 37.4 per thousand and was three times greater than the crude mortality rate for North American slaves in the nineteenth century. (Jeffrey R. Young, ‘Ideology and Death on a Savannah River Rice Plantation, 1833-1867: Paternalism amidst “a Good Supply of Disease and Pain”’, *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 59, No. 4 (Nov., 1993), p. 682.)

escaping slavery.⁸⁹ Although the association of suicide with African ritual had diminished by the late antebellum period, slaves still saw suicide as the ultimate form of escape from the institution, and believed that death would reunite them with their ancestors and deceased loved ones. Planters, however, were aware of the association slaves had between suicide and escape, often mutilating the bodies of the deceased as an example to others. One planter decapitated the corpse of a slave who had committed suicide and afterwards:

caused all his Negroes to come forth, and march round about his head, and bid them look on it, whether this were not the head of such an one that hang'd himself. Which they acknowledging he then told them, that they were in a main error, in thinking they went into their own countries, after they were dead; for this man's head was here, as they were all witnesses of; and how was it possible, the body would go without a head. Being convinc'd by this sad, yet lively spectacle, they changed their opinions; and after that, no more hanged themselves.⁹⁰

Although this incident occurred in the Caribbean rather than the American South, the treatment of slaves who committed suicide was almost identical. Other planters, who did not mutilate the bodies of slaves who had committed suicide, still denied them a funeral ceremony in order to set an example. Upon finding a slave who had drowned himself, overseer William Capers forbade any slave from touching the body and the corpse was left floating down the river as an example.⁹¹ Terri Snyder has recently argued that slaves who committed suicide 'often reflected badly on their masters, some of whom worked to conceal evidence of slave self-destruction'.⁹²

⁸⁹ Piersen explains the rationale behind slave suicide in the colonial period in his article 'White Cannibals, Black Martyrs', pp. 147-159. Also see Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, p. 90.

⁹⁰ Richard Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes 1647-1650* (1650; reprint ed University College of the West Indies, 1951), 17 cited in Piersen, 'White Cannibals', p. 154.

⁹¹ William Dusinger, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 149.

⁹² Terri L. Snyder, 'Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America', *Journal of American History* Vol. 97, No. 1 (June 2010), p. 41.

Whilst it was preferable to have black preachers leading slave weddings and funerals, therefore, these leaders were not essential. Both ceremonies continued to take place without the presence of any black religious leadership. Black preachers were not essential figures within the plantation slave community. They were respected, but religious life within the slave community was not dependent on them. A further complication to the role of black preachers was the presence of other leaders within the slave community.

Rivalries with other slaves and Southern whites

Within the plantation slave community, black preachers had the potential to be a very powerful and influential figure. Slaves depended upon the promotion of a message of hope and salvation to help them cope with the brutalising aspects of slavery. Occasionally black preachers promoted themselves and emphasised their importance within the slave community. Former slave Amanda McCray recalled that the slave minister on her plantation went ‘about the plantation “all dressed up” in a frock coat and store bought shoes, and was held in awe by the other slaves’.⁹³ Despite the importance which some black preachers ascribed to themselves, however, they did not necessarily have a dominant role within the slave community. Other leadership roles rivalled their authority.

Slaves did not necessarily receive religious education from black preachers. Even on plantations that contained these religious leaders, other slaves, such as family members often played an equally prominent role. Both mother and father could participate in a slave’s religious education and have more influence over the child than the black preacher. One elderly black preacher, interviewed by the Fisk project after slavery, recalled that ‘as a boy I lived close to my mother and she taught me how to live and pray and how to take care of myself’, and that he could ‘never forget how my mother shouted and cried and wrung her hands for joy on the morning she was overcome by the Holy Spirit’.⁹⁴ Another former slave commented that ‘It was

⁹³ WPA Slave Narratives (Fla.), cited in Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, p. 47.

⁹⁴ Fisk Collection, *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Negro Ex-Slaves* (Nashville, Tennessee: Social Science Institute, Fisk University, 1945), p. 146, cited

my father's practice to read in the Bible aloud to his children every Sabbath morning'.⁹⁵ The influence of parents on a slave's religious education has been considered a factor when examining Nat Turner's character. According to William Wells Brown, 'being taught by his mother that he was born for a prophet, a preacher, and a deliverer of his race, it was not strange that the child should have imbibed the principles which were afterwards developed in his career'.⁹⁶ Although black preachers were leaders of religion, a slave's parents often had more influence over their child's religious development.

William Dusiaberre argues the strength of slaves families has been overstated, and that records of the Gowrie plantation illustrate that 'neither in creating favorable circumstances for marriage partners to cherish each other nor in making a stable environment for rearing children could the slaves' family institutions operate as effectively as some recent books have implied'.⁹⁷ Similarly Stevenson argues that the separation of families due to sale 'was expressed in a number of ways, both physically and emotionally, that often even a functional slave community or extended family could not alleviate'.⁹⁸ Certainly for some slaves the familial

in Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, p. 162. Historians of enslaved children agree that their slave parents were able to influence their religious education. Marie Jenkins Schwartz argues that slave parents encouraged their children to profess Christianity and that baptism, which offered the parents an opportunity to proclaim their willingness to raise children according to Christian precepts, pressure was put on their owners to respect slaves' parenting responsibilities. (Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 121.) Additionally Wilma King argues that slave parents took their responsibility of providing their children with religious education seriously because of the limited time they had with their offspring and also because of the ever-present possibility of slaveholders removing children at will. (Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 67.)

⁹⁵ *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman*, cited in *Six Women's Slave Narratives*, p. 3.

⁹⁶ William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, p. 59. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownww/brown.html> (accessed August 26, 2010).

⁹⁷ Dusiaberre, *Them Dark Days*, p. 121. The Gowrie rice plantation near Savannah, on the border between South Carolina and Georgia, is one of the most accessible plantations for academic study, due to the meticulous records kept by its owners. Charles Manigault and his son Louis. Dusiaberre comments that Charles Manigault 'accumulated a treasure-house of historical records' due to the fact that he 'saved letters from his overseers, put his own ideas on paper, kept annual lists of his slaves, and taught his child Louis to do the same' (Dusiaberre, *Them Dark Days*, p. 3). Many of the records were published in James Clifton (ed.), *Life and Labor on Argyle Island: Letters and Documents of a Savannah River Rice Plantation, 1833-1867* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978).

⁹⁸ Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, p. 225. Examining the narratives of Virginia ex-slaves, Stevenson contends that only eighteen percent lived in core nuclear households and only eleven percent in strictly nuclear households. Similarly Tadman argues that in the Upper South, forcible separations probably destroyed 'about one in three of all first marriages' between slaves. (Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, pp. 170-1.)

connection that helped slaves develop their religious education was not present, as many slaves were sold and taken away from their families when children. Despite the dislocating and devastating effects of familial separation, however, parental influence often remained. In the narrative of his life in slavery Thomas Lewis Johnson commented that after having been sold he would ‘often think of my mother’s parting blessing. She put her hand upon my head, and said, “Good-bye, my son; God bless you. Be a good boy, say your prayers, and try to seek religion”’.⁹⁹ Thus parental religious influence often stayed with slaves following separation and illustrates the power of the family bond. Additionally, other slaves within the community often provided comfort and support for slaves separated from loved ones. These relationships that developed, while not familial, were just as important. Steven Hahn argues that kinship ties ‘helped tie other slaves to consanguineous kin groups, while kinship titles came to devote social hierarchies among slaves of a given community, whether they were blood relations or not’.¹⁰⁰ Parental religious education therefore provided a continual presence for slaves in the antebellum South, even if they had been separated. Black preachers were therefore often not the most influential figure in the religious education of a slave.

Whilst recognising the limits of their leadership, black preachers also had to contend with other figures who commanded authority and respect within the slave community. Although religion was a major aspect of slave life, other skilled slaves were also highly valued. Webber asserts that on the plantation, ‘a quarter member became a community leader by the common assent of the other members of the community who recognized his or her special skills. Wisdom, and dedication to the needs, will, and solidarity of the quarter community’. Other roles within the slave community were considered to be prestigious. Singers, storytellers, doctors, conjurers, athletes, hunters, musicians, dancers, and even rebels, were also all respected for their skills.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Thomas Lewis Johnson, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave: or, The story of my life in three continents* (Bournemouth: W. Mate & Sons 1909), p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 18.

¹⁰¹ Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, p. 225.

Of these figures, the greatest rival to black preachers, especially in terms of religion, was the slave conjurer. Practising African traditions, conjurers commanded both respect and fear among blacks and whites in the antebellum South. Conjurers existed throughout the antebellum South. It is possible to argue that a greater proportion were found in the lower South, particularly Louisiana. Genovese comments that ‘at no time during the slave period did voodoo become a major force outside New Orleans’.¹⁰² But other forms of conjure thrived throughout the slaveholding states, making it difficult to ascertain to what extent these figures were more commonly found in particular areas. Despite these problems, however, all conjurers were able to command a position of power within the slave community as they appeared to be able to help slaves out of physical problems, such as protecting them from punishment, helping seek revenge on planters or other slaves, removing curses, or even concocting love potions. Former slave Henry Clay Bruce recorded that conjurers ‘claimed to be able to do almost anything in the line of impossibilities, even to taking life by the winking of their eye, to make a master be kind to a slave, to prevent him from selling one, even if he desired to do so, to make a girl love a man, whether she desired him or not, to make a man love and even marry a woman if she desired him’.¹⁰³ The ability to perform these tasks gave the conjurer authority which surpassed that of the preacher, as the latter’s focus on the spiritual provided hope, but no physical salvation. One conjurer led a revolt against a dreaded overseer, and ‘night after night he made the rounds of the cabins, chanting incantations against the overseer and passing on instructions for a meeting to be held soon’. When the overseer subsequently fell off his horse and died every slave on the plantation believed that ‘gran’ pap’s conjur was powerful indeed’.¹⁰⁴

The authority conjurers commanded within the slave community, however, was generally the result of fear of these figures rather than respect. A large proportion of slaves in the antebellum South were scared of the slave conjurer and of the

¹⁰² Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 220. In his study of slavery in Virginia, DusiBerre comments that although the belief in witchcraft was weaker among slaves in Virginia than it was in the Carolina Low Country, there were still occasional references to in the narratives of Virginia ex-slaves. (DusiBerre, *Strategies for Survival*, p. 131.)

¹⁰³ Henry Clay Bruce, *The New Man. Twenty-Nine Years a Slave. Twenty-Nine Years a Free Man*, p. 52. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/bruce/bruce.html> (accessed August 26, 2010).

¹⁰⁴ Orland Kay Armstrong, *Old Massa’s People: The Old Slaves Tell Their Story* (Indianapolis: Bobbs – Merrill, 1931), p. 250, cited in Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, p. 120.

possibility that they could be cursed. Throughout the WPA narratives a number of former slaves recall the sense of apprehension they had of these individuals, or incidents where conjure was used, either against them or other slaves. According to Sallie Keenan, ‘when my paw, ‘Obie’ wuz a courtin, a nigger put a spell on him kaise he was a wantin’ my maw too. De nigger got a conjure bag and drapped it in de spring what my paw drunk water from. He wuz laid up on a bed o’ rheumatiz fer six weeks. Dey all knowed dat he wuz conjured’.¹⁰⁵ The supposed power that slave conjurers had in being able to harm and undermine planters, as well as the ability to harm individual slaves, meant they were afforded a position of authority within the slave community.

Slave conjurers therefore commanded respect among slaves because they were believed to have the ability to curse others, making them almost equal in stature to black preachers. Black preachers had an advantage, however, as they focused on love rather than fear. Genovese argues that ‘however positive their role in the struggle of the slave quarters for psychological survival, they [conjurers] never could have matched the preachers as a force for cohesion, moral guidance, and cultural growth’.¹⁰⁶ Also, as conjurers relied on fear it gave the possibility that slaves could rise up against them, thus undermining their authority. Former slave Henry Pyles illustrates this fact when recalling an incident regarding a slave conjurer, saying that:

One day old Bab was hoeing in a field and got in a squabble about something with a young gal name Polly, same name as his wife. After while he git so mad he reach up with his fingers and wet them on his tongue and point straight up and say, “Now you got a trick on you! Dere's a heavy trick on you now! Iffen you don't change your mind you going pass on before de sun go down! All de young niggers looked like they want to giggle but afraid to, and the old ones start begging old Bab to take the trick off, but that Polly git her dander up and take in after him with a

¹⁰⁵ Sallie Keenan in George P. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 3 – South Carolina Narratives, Part 3* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed June 20, 2008). The narratives of Govan Littlejohn, Sam Rawls (both Volume 3) and Rosanha Frazier (Volume 4) all provide similar details on the conjuration used on slaves.

¹⁰⁶ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 224.

hoe! She knocked him down, and he jest laid there kicking his feet in the air and trying to keep her from hitting him in the head! Well, that kind of broke up Bab's charm, so he set out to be a preacher.¹⁰⁷

The persistence of conjuration within the slave community was assisted by the occult beliefs and practices in antebellum white society. Despite the growth of science and rational thought, as well as the dominance of evangelical Christianity, belief in magic, the occult, and the supernatural prevailed in white American society as a folk belief. Jon Butler argues that, just as in England in the eighteenth century, 'colonial magic and occultism did not so much disappear everywhere as they disappeared among certain social classes and became confined to the poorer, more marginal segments of early American society'.¹⁰⁸

Not all conjurers practiced African traditions and rituals in order to harm. Some conjurers were as well known for their ability to heal as well as curse. This process of linking together the magical and supernatural with the medicinal and natural is what Theophus Smith refers to as a 'pharmacopeic' process. According to Smith, 'conjure intentions can readily modulate from harming or toxic modes of operation to healing or curative modes, *without thereby ceasing to be conjurational*'.¹⁰⁹ Sharla Fett also notes that throughout the antebellum period 'slave healing practices continued to partake of the older African dualities of power alongside the newer practices of black Southern Christianity'.¹¹⁰ Some conjurers were so successful in the use of African remedies that they were sought out by white Southerners to cure ailments or injuries. Virginia planter John Walker noted in his diary that 'my servant Jack has become almost blind its thought from being poisoned he has been under Docr Moore G Fauntleroy for 4 or 5 weeks and has been growing worse till almost blind. I have this day sent him to an old negro man named Lewis belong to the Estate

¹⁰⁷ Henry Pyles, in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 7 – Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives* (accessed November 3, 2009).

¹⁰⁸ Butler, *Awash*, p. 83.

¹⁰⁹ Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pps. 5 and 145. (italics in original.)

¹¹⁰ Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 42. Also see Yvonne Chireau, 'Conjure and Christianity: Religious Elements in African American Magic', *Religion and American Culture* Vol. 7 (Summer, 1997), pp. 225-46.

of John White decsd living at Whites Hill in King Wm Cty who says he can cure him to see if he can make a cure'.¹¹¹ This particular slave was clearly well respected by Walker, who referred to him in a number of diary entries. For example, he recorded that 'cash paid old Doctr. Lewis for his attending my servant Jack last summer and cureing him of a blindness \$3.00 to day at my House when he was here to see my wooman Eliza who has been sick for 12 months or more'.¹¹²

According to Genovese, one difficulty in studying black preachers on the plantation is that so little is known about the relationship between these religious leaders, the black preachers who 'passed through', and the plantation conjurers, saying that 'it would not be surprising is some black preachers were all three at once'.¹¹³ But little evidence is provided to support this theory other than that black Baptist and Methodist leaders shared, with their congregations, the same African belief in ghosts and witches. Some narratives of former slaves did associate some beliefs of conjure with Christianity but often regarded conjure as an uneducated form of religious belief. Florence Ruffins commented that the only reason slaves believed in conjure was because they did not have access to the Bible and that 'In de ol' days befo' surrendah, an' fo' a long time aftah, de cullud fo'ks have no Bible an' dey warnt able to read if dey did have de Good Book. Deys ta'ks 'bout ghosts an' haunts, but since edumacation am fo' de cullud fo'ks, some ob dem larn to says spirit, 'stead ob ghost'.¹¹⁴ Elliot Gorn argues that slaves had no problem assimilating folk beliefs with Christianity and so many 'interpreted ghostly visitations as evidence of immortal souls' return from heaven or hell', while 'invoking the names of the Holy Trinity kept ghosts away just as well as the old folk custom of leaving sweetmilk on the porch'.¹¹⁵ Other slaves argued that conjure was the direct opposite of Christianity. According to Herndon Bogan 'iffen anybody wanted ter be a witch he would draw a circle on de groun' jist at de aidege o' dark an' git in de circle an' squat down. "Dar he had ter set an' talk ter de debil, an' he mus' say, 'I will have nothin'

¹¹¹ Diary entry 5 June 1833, John Walker Papers, 1824-1867. *UNC*.

¹¹² Diary entry 21 May 1834, John Walker Papers, 1824-1867. *UNC*.

¹¹³ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 255.

¹¹⁴ Florence Ruffins, in George P. Rawick, *The American Slave – Texas Narratives: Part 2, Supp. Ser. 2, Vol. 8*. (accessed October 19, 2010). In the WPA narratives 342 interviewees talk about their belief in conjure and spirits, while 160 argue that conjure was not true.

¹¹⁵ Gorn, 'Black Spirits', p. 553.

ter do wid 'ligion, an' I wants you ter make me a witch'.¹¹⁶ The fact that conversion to Christianity stopped some slaves from believing in conjure conflicts with Genovese's theory that the conjurer and preacher could be the same person.

As well as being influenced by black preachers, a slave's religious education could be influenced by the planter. While some planters feared the idea of slave Christianity and hampered the efforts of slaves to hold their own religious meetings, others saw it as their duty to provide Christian education. It was not uncommon for planters to lead religious meetings for slaves, either to demonstrate their paternal benevolence, or to ensure that they remained in control of what the slaves were taught. Writing of his time in slavery, the Rev. Richard Allen commented that 'we had family prayer in the kitchen, to which he [the planter] frequently would come out himself at time of prayer, and my mistress with him. At length he invited us from the kitchen to the parlour to hold family prayer, which we attended to'.¹¹⁷ Within the WPA narratives a large number of interviewees recall that either their master or their mistress used to read the Bible to them or lead them in prayer meetings and that these occasions were welcomed by slaves. Nillie Evans recalled that:

We had the bes' mistress an master in the worl' and they was Christian fo'ks an they, taught us to be Christianlike too. Ev'y Sunday mornin' ol' master would have all us niggers to the house while he would sing an pray an read de Bible to us all. Ol' master taught us not to be bad; he taught us to be good... He said: Yo' will reap what yo' sow, that you sow it single an' reap double. I learnt that when I was a little chile an I ain't fo'got it yet.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Herndon Bogan, in George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 14 – North Carolina Narratives, Part 1*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed March 1, 2010).

¹¹⁷ Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen. To Which is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord 1793: With an Address to the People of Colour in the United States*, p. 7. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/allen/menu.html> (accessed November 25, 09).

¹¹⁸ Nillie Evans, in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 8 – Arkansas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed September 16, 2009). Within the WPA narratives 41 mention that prayer meetings were lead by the master and 33 said the meetings were lead by the mistress.

For other planters, leading religious meetings could be a way of controlling those elements of Christianity taught to slaves, or as a way of repeating the message of obedience and subservience. In such a situation, religious meetings led by planters would be rejected by the slave community and the authority of the black preacher would not be severely challenged.

While an important figure within the slave community, the black preacher's authority was not entirely secure. Alongside the challenge of preaching a suitable gospel to the enslaved, preachers also had to contend with other figures who either provided religious education to the slaves, or sought the same authority and leadership. While the secular nature of many other revered figures within the slave community diminished their threat to black preachers, the conjurer rivalled as an alternative religious leader. Although the conjurer also faced problems in maintaining authority within the slave community, his presence, as well as other leadership figures, illustrates that other slaves within plantation communities were able to challenge black preachers for authority and influence.¹¹⁹

* * * * *

On the plantation, black preachers had the potential to be influential figures. In leading prayer meetings, and ceremonies such as slave weddings and funerals, their religious authority was almost unrivalled. The leadership they could show in religious meetings held away from the eyes of Southern whites, especially where the focus was on the idea of salvation and freedom, could be very powerful in helping the slaves temporarily escape from the monotony of their lives and the brutalising impact of slavery. Black preachers could also command secular authority within the slave community. They could act as counsellors, teachers, and judges, figures whom slaves would often turn to for advice as well as consolation. But although black preachers also had the ability to take on political roles within the slave community and inspire slaves to commit acts of resistance against planters, many refused to take

¹¹⁹ A further rival for black preachers in the plantation slave community was the white ministers called to preach to slaves by the planter. Their role, however, will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

on such a position. Black preachers were still able to preach a message of hope and eventual salvation through the idea of divine justice, giving slaves the belief that they would be rewarded in the afterlife and the planter punished. But they refrained from calling for slaves to commit acts of resistance against planters, and therefore avoided incorporating a political message into their teachings.

Due to both their spiritual and secular authority, black preachers were frequently considered to be one of the most important individuals within the plantation slave community. The authority and respect that black preachers could command within the slave community, however, made them visible leadership figures and a potential threat to planters. The idea of holding meetings away from white supervision and teaching elements of Christianity that went against the planter's authority was a concern, leading some to restrict and punish those who sought to preach. While all planters shared these concerns they reacted in different ways. Some realised the power these individuals had amongst the enslaved, and that the black preacher was a figure that could undermine their authority on the plantation and was therefore a threat. Others, however, saw black preachers in a different light, as individuals who could provide religious instruction to the slaves and help eradicate their heathenish behaviour. As a result some planters actively sought out and purchased black preachers. However, even planters who allowed black preachers to lead religious meetings on the plantation frequently interposed themselves within the slave ceremonies in order to assert their authority.

Within the slave community the authority of the black preacher was by no means absolute. Figures such as the mother and father frequently aided in a slave's religious education and other individuals, such as the slave conjurer, existed within plantation communities who could rival black preachers for dominance. When the black preacher was present on the plantation he was able to command a leadership role and a great deal of respect from the enslaved. However that role was granted to him by the slave community and could be rescinded if the preacher adopted a message that seemed to suggest a doctrine of obedience and subservience. The respect and trust of the enslaved had to be earned and this would only occur if black preachers taught a doctrine that appealed to them.

What black preachers had to deal with, therefore, was a dilemma between satisfying the demands of both planters and slaves. Slaves looked up to their religious leaders, seeking to hear that they would not be permanently enslaved and that there was hope for them. Preaching such a message, however, conflicted with the messages of obedience and subservience that planters wanted their slaves to hear. Preachers became stuck between the two groups, both of whom they needed to placate in order to continue their ministrations. Slaves rejected black preachers who they felt were espousing the message of the planter, preaching a gospel of obedience and subservience. Planters punished and expelled those who failed to preach a message of obedience and subservience, because they feared that any other message would inspire slaves to rebel, or convince them that they were on the same spiritual plane as their master. For black preachers to be successful and continue to minister to the slaves without incurring the wrath of the planter was an incredibly difficult task. Those who were often received the respect of both groups, becoming one of the most influential figures within the slave community and supported in their ministrations by planters.

Black preachers within the plantation slave community taught a version of Christianity that continued to incorporate a number of African religious rituals and traditions. Throughout the antebellum period little changed in the way Christianity was practiced or preached. In contrast, however, as the practice of Christianity in the biracial and independent black church began to move away from using African religious traditions, the division between the two increased. As will be seen later in the following chapter, throughout the antebellum period the religious traditions of the black preacher began to vary dramatically from the traditions of the licensed black minister.

Chapter 3

The licensed black minister in the biracial and independent black churches in the late antebellum South

Moving from the form of Christianity taught by black preachers within the plantation slave community, this chapter analyses the role of the licensed black minister in the biracial and independent black church. Both faced similar challenges in trying to provide religious education to slaves and free blacks and both undertook similar sacred and secular responsibilities. But by the 1840s the form of Christianity taught by licensed black ministers varied dramatically from that taught by black preachers. Through the religious education they received from white evangelicals black ministers became institutionalised, advocating a form of Christianity that rejected the use of African rituals. While they remained religious leaders amongst African Americans black ministers had separated from black preachers on the plantation, with clear distinctions emerging between them.

By the late antebellum period separate congregations and churches for African Americans were becoming more commonplace. Although independent black churches were first established at the end of the eighteenth century, they were rare. It was not until the 1840s and 1850s that these institutions began to flourish. As the denominational schisms removed the issue of abolitionism from the evangelical churches in the slaveholding states, the Southern elite became more comfortable with the idea of segregated religious services. Consequently laws against African American religion were relaxed or not upheld. Other, secular reasons, however, also prompted the development of separate congregations and churches for African Americans, such as the issue of overcrowding. Also, the behaviour of African Americans during church services, with their enthusiastic and emotional celebration of religion, was often disconcerting for white congregants, and embarrassing for planters who saw such behaviour as an inability to control their slaves. White observers were still present within the meetings and services, but a level of autonomy had begun to develop amongst African American churches.

With the establishment of separate congregations and churches, both slaves and free blacks wanted their own religious leaders to lead the services. Some black churches were set up with laws designed to prevent African Americans from leading the services. Others did not establish such a prohibition and allowed licensed black ministers to lead African American religious services, albeit with the presence of white observers. These ministers often became well respected members of the African American community and, just like black preachers on the plantation, were figures slaves and free blacks turned to for counsel, advice, and solace. As with black preachers, licensed black ministers adopted both sacred and secular tasks, acting as a role model for their congregants.

Despite sharing similar responsibilities and challenges, however, differences developed between licensed black ministers and black preachers. An immediate distinction was the way in which these religious leaders were chosen. Black preachers on the plantation were part of the community, often chosen by the slaves themselves. In contrast, licensed black ministers were chosen by white evangelical ministers and the Southern elite rather than the African American congregants. As a result these ministers were not automatically considered part of the community and had to work hard to become accepted. Many came to be highly regarded by slaves and free blacks, but this respect had to be earned.

Licensed black ministers and black preachers used different methods to preach to African Americans. These differences were partly due to the different environments in which they undertook their roles. Black preachers on the plantation had the opportunity to preach in secret nocturnal meetings and teach a message of hope and salvation without any white observation or supervision. Licensed black ministers in the biracial and independent African American churches did not have such an opportunity. Instead they preached in a public and therefore more visible environment, where they needed to satisfy the demands of slaves and free blacks, planters, and any other Southern elites who attended the services. What most distinguished the style of preaching between the plantation and the church, however, was differences in education between these religious leaders. While black preachers on the plantation continued to incorporate a number of African religious traditions into their worship, licensed black ministers moved away from these rituals,

practicing a form of Christianity that was becoming more hierarchical and formal. Due to the fact that many licensed black ministers were receiving religious education from white evangelicals, either from individual ministers or by attending presbyteries and seminaries, they began to reject the old African traditions as backward and instead embraced more the European style of Christianity. Through this shift in attitude black ministers had separated themselves from black preachers on the plantation.

The vast majority of licensed black ministers moved away from the use of African rituals in Christian worship in the late antebellum period. Differences emerged between them, however, over the extent to which such a change took place. In particular, distinctions arose between urban and rural institutionalised churches. As will be demonstrated, within major urban centres in the late antebellum South, African Americans, both slave and free, had greater opportunities to educate themselves, opportunities that thrived despite the presence of laws and regulations designed to prohibit them. As many African Americans in the cities became more literate and educated, licensed black ministers needed to improve their own education in order to continue preaching. It was through this education that many began to turn away and reject the seemingly backward African religious traditions. By comparison as fewer African Americans in rural areas had received such an education, there was no accompanying pressure on black ministers.

Although the Southern elite often allowed African Americans to worship in separate churches and congregations, they still had concerns over the potentially subversive effect that black religious leadership could have on the slave and free black population. Black churches were both sacred and secular institutions that gave African Americans an opportunity to meet with little white supervision, exchange information, console and comfort each other, and participate in their own separate community. Due to the trepidations of the Southern elite, independent black churches and congregations were frequently supervised, either by white ministers or other members of white Southern society.

Concerns over the potential autonomy of licensed black ministers and independent black churches and congregations meant that these figures were often supervised in

their preaching, black churches and congregations were frequently observed and scrutinised, and laws were introduced to limit the activities of both. But these methods of restricting independent black worship were not uniformly applied. There were times in the late antebellum South when independent black churches were banned and black ministers punished or exiled, there were other occasions when individual black preachers were lauded by Southern whites, and independent black churches allowed to flourish. In part such variations in the implementation of legislation against licensed black ministers and independent black churches and congregations is again related to the issue of education. Licensed black ministers who had received religious education from white evangelicals were often considered to be less likely to preach a version of Christianity that threatened to undermine the institution of slavery. As a result they were often protected against laws designed to prohibit them from preaching.

The variations that occurred in implementing legislation against some black ministers provides a further example of the ways in which these religious leaders were prevented from becoming political figures within the African American community. Through these laws and regulations, the efforts of black ministers who were likely to preach a message that could undermine the institution of slavery were hampered. Those who had received religious education from white evangelicals and were considered less likely to adopt a political role were exempted from and defended against these restrictions.

It is worth noting that one difference between the teaching of religion in the biracial and independent black church and that in the plantation slave community was the social background of the congregation. Congregations in the black churches included both slaves and free blacks. However, no distinction was made between the status of these African Americans in these congregations.¹ Both slaves and free blacks who

¹ One example of the lack of distinction between slaves and free blacks in biracial and independent black churches is in the rules regulating church relations amongst the coloured members of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, Charleston. The regulations make distinction between slaves and free blacks over the issue of marriage, citing that ‘when slaves apply to us to marry them, we will, in all cases...require a written Permit from their respective Owners. Throughout the other rules, however, both slaves and free blacks are simply referred to as ‘colored members’. (Rules Regulating Church Relations amongst the Colored Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, in the City of Charleston S.C., Trinity United Methodist Church records, *Avery*. (Underlining in original.)

were members of the same congregation or church were treated in exactly the same manner. Since slaves and free blacks were treated equally within biracial and independent black churches, this chapter will similarly treat both groups the same.

What this chapter aims to demonstrate is that, instead of regarding African American religious leaders as one group of individuals, differences had emerged in the late antebellum South, to the point where black preachers and black ministers were practising different forms of Christianity. These variations had been emerging throughout the nineteenth century but it was by the 1840s that they had become apparent. Through their participation in the institutionalised evangelical church black ministers had become immersed in white religious traditions and moved away from the form of Christianity that had developed amongst the slave community on the plantation. Black ministers were still important religious leaders amongst the African American community and had the opportunity to take on a political role as well as a sacred one. The implementation of laws and regulations against their activities, however, prevented this from occurring.

The Southern white rationale for black churches

Throughout the antebellum period, there was a perpetual fear of slave rebellion within Southern white society. Although suspicion abated somewhat after the denominational schisms, laws still existed preventing slaves from gathering together in groups away from white supervision. Despite the restrictions, however, Southern whites continued to allow slaves and free blacks to hold religious meetings. Through attending services in the planter's church, participating in biracial church meetings, or establishing independent black churches, African Americans maintained an institutionalised form of their version of Christianity. While the fear of insurrection remained, the religious drive to Christianise and civilise, coupled with exasperation over slave behaviour in biracial church services, attenuated these concerns. African Americans, whether slave or free, also sought to worship together away from white supervision. Midori Takagi argues that separate church services 'were important to black congregants as it gave them 'a physical and spiritual forum to express

themselves and to practice their brand of Christianity without inhibition'.² Black desire by itself, however, was not enough to create separate religious institutions. It was only through the sufferance of the Southern elite, the efforts of white ministers, and the agreement of white evangelical congregations that independent black churches were created and allowed to remain open.

Following the denominational schisms, Southern evangelical churches strongly defended the potential benevolence of slavery, arguing that the institution could be used to civilise and educate African Americans. Extending Christianity to slaves, however, made blacks spiritually equal to whites, and the issue of extending similar religious liberties to them needed resolving. In 1847, the Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston debated the idea of establishing a separate church for their African American congregants. The point was made that by extending Christian teaching to slaves 'they must have all the power and privileges incident to the members of a Church', adding that 'it would be the most cruel mockery that could be imposed, to lift the veil from the eye and yet not let them see'.³ Little reference was made to the issue of allowing blacks to gather with limited white supervision. Instead the impetus rested on the necessity of allowing blacks an opportunity to establish their own religious institution. A meeting house on Anson Street was eventually completed in 1850 for slaves to use. Although designed as a meeting places for African Americans, the building was still considered to be attached to the white Second Presbyterian Church and meetings were led by a white minister. While white evangelicals wanted African Americans to have the opportunity to worship together, they also wanted to ensure that they remained in control of any separate congregations or churches that were formed.

Secular reasons also prompted whites to push for separate black religious services. The sheer number of African Americans joining biracial churches, meant that overcrowding was becoming a serious problem in the late antebellum period. Fallin Jr.'s study on African American Baptists in Alabama notes that in some biracial churches in the 1840s blacks outnumbered whites by more than ten to one. The Elim

² Midori Takagi, *Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction: Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1865* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 61.

³ "Many Citizens" and the "Courier", Record of the Building Committee, Second Presbyterian Church for the Erection of Anson Street Edifice for "The Blacks" Charleston, S.C. 1847-1849. *Caroliniana*.

Baptist Church of Tuskegee had 22 white members but 390 black members.⁴ Mitchell notes the example of the First Baptist Church of Richmond. Founded in 1780, by the turn of the nineteenth century the church had 150 black members and 50 white. By 1838 membership had grown to 1,600 blacks and 350 whites. Due to the rapid rise in the number of black congregants, in 1841 ‘the 387 white members sold their building to the 1,708 black members’, creating the First African Baptist Church.⁵ Former slave Liza Mention recalled that at the church she attended in Georgia a separate building was constructed because the first was starting to become overcrowded, and that there were ‘so many colored members de white folks come out and built another house so de niggers could have de old one’.⁶ In urban areas, the separation of white and black congregations and churches illustrated ‘the societal aspirations of an increasingly prosperous white membership and the growing conviction among white leaders that churches should distinguish between the intellectual abilities of black and white churchgoers’.⁷ But in both rural and urban churches, racial separation illustrated the prosperity of the institution, and showed the extent to which the evangelical mission to African Americans was being achieved.

The general white reaction to African American behaviour in biracial churches was also an issue that prompted the development of separate black churches and congregations. A number of planters brought their slaves to their own churches, either to provide them with religious instruction, or highlight their own wealth. These slaves, however, were frequently schooled on how they were supposed to behave during these services. Within the WPA interviews, a number of former slaves recalled their planters demanded they be obedient and quiet. Anna Scott recalled that ‘Mrs. Abigail Dover her owner, permitted the slaves to attend revival and other services. The slaves were allowed to occupy the balcony of the church in Dove City, while the whites occupied the main floor. The slaves were forbidden to sing, talk, or

⁴ Fallin Jr., *Uplifting the People*, p. 16.

⁵ Sobel, *Trabelin’ On*, p. 208; Ryland, *History of the First African Baptist Church*, p. 247, cited in Mitchell, *Black Church*, p. 47.

⁶ Liza Mention, in Rawick, (ed.), in *The American Slave: Volume 13 – Georgia Narratives, Parts 3 and 4* (accessed February 22, 2010).

⁷ Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up*, p. 51.

make any other sound, however, under penalty of severe beatings'.⁸ While slaves were allowed to attend these services, planters tried to control and restrain their behaviour, preventing any emotional outburst that would have reflected poorly on them.

Despite the threat of punishment, however, planters found themselves unable to contain the exuberance of their slaves. Some resorted to bribery but were unsuccessful. Former slave Emoline Glasgow commented that 'once when Master Gilliam took one of his slaves to church at old Tranquil, he told him dat he mustn't shout dat day – said he would give him a pair of new boots if he didn't shout. About de middle of services, de old nigger couldn't stand it no longer. He jumped up and hollered: 'Boots or no boots, I gwine to shout today''.⁹ The issue of noise from black congregants was a frequent reason for the establishment of separate black churches or congregations. In his autobiography, former slave Robert Anderson recalled that when he was in Macon, Georgia, 'the colored people in those days had no church in which to worship God, so the white people of the Methodist Church allowed the colored people to meet with them...but it was not long before the colored people became so noisy, by their shouting, that the white members began to complain, and had them moved'.¹⁰ Separate congregations and churches provided an opportunity to remove the problem of black congregants interrupting the services with emotional outbursts.

Kenneth Bailey argues that 'black communicants occasionally raised wearisome questions, protested, and explicitly disallowed church authority in a decidedly unservile manner'.¹¹ The inability to contain their slaves' behaviour was embarrassing for planters, as it undermined their authority in front of not only their

⁸ Anna Scott, in Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 17 – Florida Narratives* (accessed March 19, 2010). Similar sentiments were expressed in a number of narratives: see Emma Virgel (Volume 13), John H. Jackson (Volume 15), and Jacob Manson (Volume 15).

⁹ Emoline Glasgow in George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 2 – South Carolina Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed June 17, 2008). Similar stories can be found in the narratives of Sarah Thomas (Supplement 1, Volume 10) and Lizzie Davis (Supplement 1, Volume 11).

¹⁰ Robert Anderson, *The Life of Rev. Robert Anderson. Born the 22d Day of February, in the Year of Our Lord 1819, and Joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1839. This Book Shall be Called the Young Men's Guide, Or, The Brother in White*, pp. 106-7. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/andersonr/andersonr.html> (accessed 25/11/09).

¹¹ Bailey, 'Protestantism', p. 456.

slaves and other whites, but typically their peers. Refusing to allow the slaves to attend these services would solve the problem, but undermine the idea of paternalism by failing to provide religious education. Holding separate services for the different races was a convenient solution. Slaves were provided with religious education but their emotional behaviour was not witnessed by Southern whites.

Although separate congregations and churches were established for African Americans, their meetings were still frequently supervised to ensure that the message taught was not at all insurrectionary. When Ebenezer Baptist Church was established in Richmond in 1858, article two of the church's constitution said that 'the Grace St. Baptist Church of Richmond shall annually appoint a committee of white members, to supervise & tend the religious instruction and discipline of the said African Baptist Church'. Article four stated that 'the Pastor of this church shall be a white Baptist minister of good standing in the denomination selected by the Superintending committee with the concurrence of a majority of the colored deacons'.¹² The narratives of former slaves also illustrate that when black churches or separate black congregations emerged, they were often led by white ministers. Berry Clay stated that 'the membership of the local church was composed of slaves from several plantations. It was an old colored church with a white minister who preached the usual doctrine of the duty of a slave to his master'.¹³ Even when black ministers had the opportunity to teach the gospel to a coloured congregation, the presence of white observers ensured that their teachings remained passive, devoid of inflammatory language. Addie Vinson recalled that 'when time come for de sermon to de Niggers, sometimes de white folkses would leave and den again dey would stay, but dat overseer, he was dar all de time'.¹⁴

The establishment of separate services, congregations, or churches for African Americans were condoned by most Southern whites, but not unreservedly. Concerns regarding restraining slave emotionalism to prevent embarrassment, overcrowding,

¹² Minute book 1858-1872, Ebenezer Baptist Church records. *VSL*. When formed Ebenezer Baptist Church was called First African Church. The name was changed to Third African Church on 17 July 1858, and finally to Ebenezer Baptist Church on 18 July 1858.

¹³ Berry Clay, in George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 12 – Georgia Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*. Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed February 16, 2010).

¹⁴ Addie Vinson, in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Volume 13 – Georgia Narratives, Parts 3 and 4* (accessed February 24, 2010).

and the need for religious education all helped mitigate some of the fears about slave rebellion. These fears remained, however, and although African Americans had the opportunity to worship separately, Southern whites were careful to ensure that licensed black ministers did not preach unsupervised. The need to prevent any possible development of an insurrectionary plot was paramount. Black ministers in the biracial and independent African American churches therefore had to preach a gospel that was suitable for both whites and blacks.

Struggling to teach an adequate gospel: Religious and secular duties of the black minister in the late antebellum South

The primary religious duty of the black minister was to preach the gospel to the enslaved. Historians, however, have struggled to analyse the sermons they delivered as the printed text loses the oral and emotional nature of their delivery. Cornel West highlights the problem, arguing that because scholars put ‘a premium on the written rather than the spoken text...there is an even greater ignorance of black sermonic practices, primarily owing to prevailing stereotypes of black religion as mere emotionalism and cathartic release’.¹⁵ Slaves who heard the sermons placed at least as much, if not more, importance on the delivery than the content, as they sought to be inspired and uplifted. Shane White and Graham White argue that the slave preacher was judged by different standards to those set by whites, and that ‘his audience would be concerned with the aesthetics of his performance, with his ability to fit metrically based and easily recalled expressions, whether spontaneously created, or drawn from the scriptures or everyday black speech, into his own rhythmic style’.¹⁶ The narratives of former slaves illustrate that while they wanted to hear a message of hope and eventual salvation in church sermons, they wanted to hear this message through an expression of religious emotionalism, rather than an intellectual discussion on a particular Biblical passage. Former slave Addie Vinson recalled that during church services held for slaves ‘Old man Isaac Vandiver, a

¹⁵ Cornel West, in the Introduction to the reprint edition of William H. Pipes, *Say Amen, Brother! Old-Time Negro Preaching: A Study in American Frustration* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992 [1951]), in Shane White and Graham White, ‘‘At intervals I was nearly stunned by the noise he made’’: Listening to African American Religious Sound in the Era of Slavery’, *American Nineteenth Century History* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2004), p. 34.

¹⁶ White, and White, ‘Listening’, p. 58.

Nigger preacher what couldn't read a word in de Bible, would git up in dat pulpit and talk from his heart. You know dere's heaps of folkses what's got dat sort of 'ligion - it's deep in deir hearts'.¹⁷

A further factor affecting any analysis of the sermons of licensed black ministers in biracial and independent black churches is that they were rarely recorded, partly due to the illiteracy of black ministers and partly due to the emotional delivery of their sermons. In a recent compilation of African American sermons from 1750 to the present day, only one of the sermons recorded between 1790 and 1865 were recorded in the slaveholding states.¹⁸ Some African Americans who were allowed to preach in church services were illiterate and as a result had to extemporise from his own religious beliefs, or repeat the message of the white minister. Ed McCree recalled that when a slave got up to preach in church 'Dat Nigger, he sho' couldn't read nary a word out of de Bible'.¹⁹ In both situations it becomes increasingly difficult to accurately assess the content of the black preacher's sermon. Following the same sermon as the white minister would not provide an accurate representation of the black preacher's opinions, while an emotional discourse was unlikely to be recorded.

What is found in the sermons of black ministers that survived, however, is the fine line they trod between appeasing both whites and blacks. Whereas black preachers on the plantation had the opportunity to preach at nocturnal meetings held away from planters, those within the institutionalised churches were denied unsupervised meetings. Instead licensed black ministers in the churches faced the possibility of preaching to slaves and planters of various plantations, and needed to avoid undermining the authority of numerous planters, each of whom could react unpredictably and dangerously to any perceived threat. Former slave Eugene Smith commented that 'there was an old Methodist preacher, a Negre named Ned Purdee, he had a school for boys and girls going on in his back yard. They caught him and

¹⁷ Addie Vinson, in Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 13 – Georgia Narratives, Parts 3 and 4* (accessed February 24, 2010). (underlining in original)

¹⁸ Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas (eds.), *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010). The one sermon from the slave states is that of Brother Carper, a Baptist preacher from Kentucky, who purchased his freedom and moved to Tennessee.

¹⁹ Ed McCree, in Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 13 – Georgia Narratives, Parts 3 and 4* (accessed February 22, 2010)

put him in jail. He was to be put in stocks and get so many lashes every day for a month'.²⁰ Blassingame argues that due to the fear of punishment 'black preachers in white pulpits compromised; they either ignored the evils of slavery, preached submission to their brothers in bonds, or defended the peculiar institution'.²¹ By compromising, and ignoring or defending the institution of slavery, however, black ministers damaged the relationship with their coloured congregants. Shane and Graham White argue that sermons were communal events, reasoning that 'if preachers were to inspire their hearers, to deeply stir their emotions, they needed to be encouraged by their congregations, borne up by their increasingly animated responses'.²² Preaching a gospel of obedience or ignoring the institution of slavery would leave the black minister isolated from the enslaved and unable to continue as religious leaders amongst African Americans.

A further complication for black ministers was the appeal of other, more secular attractions, that the institutionalised church service held for slaves. On the plantation, religious services could be held away from the eyes of the planter on a relatively regular basis. Attending a service at a biracial or independent church, however, was often a rarer occurrence. As well as an opportunity for religious education, these services provided an opportunity to meet with slaves from different plantations to gossip, socialise, exchange news, and court. Blassingame argues that slave services 'served as meeting places for friends and sweethearts, furnished avenues for exercising responsibility and leadership, and opportunities for socializing, releasing pent-up emotions, or simply getting drunk'.²³ Former Georgia slave Anderson Furr recalled that 'evvybody went to de meetin' house on Sunday, and dere's whar Niggers had a good time a-courtin'.²⁴

As well as the possibility of courting during these religious meetings, other secular activities prevented slaves from attending church services altogether. In his autobiography, Henry Bibb recalled that on the plantation:

²⁰ Eugene Wesley Smith, in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 13 – Georgia Narratives, Parts 3 and 4* (accessed February 24, 2010).

²¹ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, p. 92.

²² White and White, 'Listening', p. 41.

²³ Blassingame, *Slave Community*, p. 130.

²⁴ Anderson Furr, in Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 12 – Georgia Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed February 17, 2010).

Those who make no profession of religion, resort to the woods in large numbers on that day to gamble, fight, get drunk, and break the Sabbath. This is often encouraged by slaveholders. When they wish to have a little sport of that kind, they go among the slaves and give them whiskey, to see them dance, “pat juber,” sing and play on the banjo. Then get them to wrestling, fighting, jumping, running foot races, and butting each other like sheep. This is urged on by giving them whiskey; making bets on them; laying chips on one slave’s head, and daring another to tip it off with his hand; and if he tipped it off, it be called an insult, and cause a fight.²⁵

For other slaves Sundays were an opportunity to work for themselves, cultivating their own gardens. Examining slavery in Louisiana, Damian Pargas argues that the ‘frenzied work patterns’ slaves encountered meant the only opportunity they had to produce their own crops or take on other jobs was during the evenings and weekends. Slaves chopped wood, dug ditches, fished, trapped, or collected Spanish moss on Sundays in order to provide themselves with a source of revenue.²⁶ The secular leisure and economic pursuits of slaves and the opposition from planters, therefore, hampered the efforts of licensed black ministers. Compared to the religious leaders on the plantation, those in the churches had less access to the slaves, and more distractions to cope with.

²⁵ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave*. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html> (accessed June 16, 2010). Sergio Lussana’s recent article on enslaved wrestling contests argues that such events were frequently organised by planters and that wrestling was both a way for slaves to demonstrate their physical strength and provide them with a sense of liberation. (Sergio Lussana, ‘To See Who Was Best on the Plantation: Enslaved Fighting Contests and Masculinity in the Antebellum Plantation South’, *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Nov., 2010), pp. 902 and 911.

²⁶ Damian Alan Pargas, ‘“Various Means of Providing for Their Own Tables’: Comparing Slave Family Economies in the Antebellum South’, *American Nineteenth Century History* Vol. 7, No. 3 (September, 2006), pp. 373 and 376-7. Pargas also examines the efforts of slaves to work for themselves and their families in Virginia and South Carolina, commenting that the labour regimes in these states gave them more time to work in the evenings. Many slaves chose not to work on Sundays but did not necessarily attend church instead. Instead, as former slave George Jackson recalled, slaves ‘would sit around’ on Sundays and would rest and socialise. (George Jackson, in FWP, *Slave narratives* XII, 47, cited in Pargas, ‘Various Means’, p. 364.) Recent years have seen some increased scholarship on the efforts of slaves to earn money for themselves. See David E. Paterson, ‘Slavery, Slaves, and Cash in a Georgia Village, 1825-1865’, *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Nov., 2009).

Despite the distractions that licensed black ministers had to cope with, many were able to captivate their black congregants. By providing uplifting and positive sermons black ministers could retain slaves' interest. But these religious leaders were also able to retain their attention through the secular roles they undertook. Rawick comments that 'such clergymen functioned as community leaders, political directors, healers and inspirers, physicians, and lawyers'.²⁷ They were crucial figures within slave and free black society, a point not missed by Southern whites. One federal official commented about the influence one slave preacher in Alexandria had during the Civil War, saying that 'this old negro has more influence over the blacks, and does more good among them, than all the missionaries and chaplains who have been sent here'.²⁸

Many licensed black ministers became role models amongst the African American community and through their leadership were able to instil a sense of discipline into their black congregants. One visitor to the American South fell into conversation with Andrew Marshall, a coloured minister in Savannah, later commenting that 'A great change, he says, has taken place in his day in the character of the coloured population. A drunk coloured man is seldom to be seen now in the streets. If any member of his congregation were so found, he would be suspended or cut off from the church'.²⁹ These ministers also provided a sense of hope. According to Clarke, 'they were the leaders of their people, providing some relief from the cruel realities of slavery'.³⁰

Due to the fact that many black ministers became public role models within the African American community, they also had the opportunity to take on political positions and inspire slaves and free blacks to rebel and resist the institution of

²⁷ Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, p. 38.

²⁸ Spaulding, *Continental Monthly*, 4 (1863), 195-97, cited in Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, p. 47.

²⁹ Lewis, *Impressions of America*, p. 129. Issues over drunkenness were a frequent issue for African American congregants. On establishing the African Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the articles provided 'that no drunkard or disorderly person be admitted as a member, and if any should prove disorderly after having been received, the said disorderly person shall be disjointed from us if there be not an amendment'. (George F. Bragg, *Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, by the Rev. George F. Bragg, In honor of the Centennial of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Which Occurs in the Year 1916*, p. 4. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bragg1915/bragg1915.html> (accessed 02/08/2010).

³⁰ Clarke, *Wrestlin' Jacob*, p. 124.

slavery. This opportunity was hindered, however, by the close supervision black ministers received from the white elite. Licensed black ministers found themselves under increasing scrutiny from Southern white society and were careful of the message they taught as a result. Compromising to avoid inflammatory language, however, diluted the potency of the message and its ability to inspire and console slaves. The slave reaction to a message was to reject it and the authority of the minister delivering it, failing to take into account or ignoring the dilemma with which these religious leaders were faced. Stephen Angell comments that black ministers faced an almost impossible task, in that 'that they had to be defiant enough to ensure that their followers remained loyal enough but also needed to look innocuous so that the suspicious of the ruling powers would not be aroused'.³¹ Those who fell off this line were either considered to be mouthpieces for the planters or instigators of potential slave rebellion.

Licensed black ministers took on many of the same sacred and secular responsibilities in the biracial and independent black churches as black preachers did on the plantation. Additionally they also faced many of the same challenges when trying to carry out these religious and irreligious tasks. But while black preachers had the opportunity to preach in secret nocturnal meetings, black ministers conducted all of their services in public, often in the presence of at least one white observer. They, therefore, faced a much greater challenge to provide a message that was acceptable to both African Americans and the white elite.

Variations in the black preacher experience

Slave religion was not the same on every plantation. The influence of the planter, number of slaves, and proximity to other plantations, all affected the style and practice of slave Christianity. The diverse nature of the antebellum South also renders it impossible to argue that there was one generic experience for licensed black ministers in the biracial and independent churches. Some overall similarities can be determined, particularly when examining the various evangelical

³¹ Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), p. 21.

denominations in the slaveholding states. But investigating differences between the urban and rural areas of the American South also illustrates how the responsibilities for licensed black ministers, as well as their method of preaching, altered.

Of the evangelical denominations prominent in the late antebellum South, the vast majority of licensed black ministers belonged either to the Baptists or Methodists. Other denominations existed, such as the Presbyterians, but as the Scottish minister Rev. Lewis commented in his visit, ‘the Presbyterian Church is doing little for the coloured population, and that little without any system, dependent entirely upon individual zeal and favourable circumstances. The Methodists and Baptists seem to have done almost all that has been done’.³² In a study of the American Churches completed in 1842, Edward Habich reported that ‘there are, in the United States, about 2,487,113 slaves, and 386,069 *free people of colour*. Of the slaves, 80,000 are members of the Methodist church; 80,000 of the Baptist; and about 40,000 of the other churches’.³³ Despite these statistics, however, the vast majority of the African American population remain unaccounted for. Irons explains that few of those who attended church had their names placed on the church records and so it is highly likely that a much greater number than that mentioned by Habich attended church on a regular basis. It is also probable, however, that some slaves were either unwilling or unable to attend church regularly, relying instead on the invisible church on the plantation for their religious needs.

Both the Baptist and Methodist denominations followed the idea of ministering to the poor and downtrodden in society, and few differences existed between the two groups in terms of their beliefs and creed. The similarities end, however, when examining the organisation of the two churches. Melton’s recent study of African American Methodism shows that the denomination was carefully structured and the establishment of churches took time and effort. Initially classes of between five and ten people would have weekly meetings with one person serving as class leader. Once a set of classes had been established in close physical proximity these would be reorganised into a circuit. A Methodist preacher would travel round the circuit, visiting each class at regular intervals. These circuits would become more stable over

³² Lewis, *Impressions of America*, p. 131.

³³ Habich, *The American Churches*, p. 4. (italics in original.)

time, leading to the formation of churches and congregations. In the cities this process was slightly easier, as one or more preachers would be assigned to a single location in a station, and that station would become the source of multiple congregations.³⁴ By comparison the Baptist church was relatively unorganised. Churches existed independent of each other, there was no obligatory creed to follow, the lay ministry facilitated the growth of new churches rather than going through a more centrally organised unit, and the policy towards African American communicants was decided by each church.

Both denominations provided African Americans with opportunities for religious leadership despite the differences in structure and organisation. For some African Americans the flexible attitude of the Baptist denomination was more appealing. The rigid, hierarchical structure of Methodist churches meant they were less open to new ideas, such as incorporating African traditions or emotional styles of religion.³⁵ In comparison, Baptist churches were open to different ideas and traditions of religious worship, which encouraged African Americans to join these churches. Although not permitted to vote on church matters, slaves and free blacks participated fully within the institutions. In his study of religion in Amite County, Mississippi, Sparks argues that black members, whether slave or free, were referred to as “Brother” and “Sister” in the same way as white members. Additionally both races were held to the same disciplinary standard. Although unable to bring cases against their masters, Sparks notes of two cases where slaves ‘used church courts to arbitrate disputes originating in the slave community’.³⁶

Despite the advantages Baptists had due to their more informal hierarchical structure, Methodists continued to attract a similar of slaves and free blacks into their congregations. Partly this was due to the fact that many African Americans, particularly in rural areas, had little opportunity to choose between churches. But also, the fact that both denominations encouraged African Americans to minister and participate helped swell the numbers of black members. Whilst fewer official

³⁴ Melton, *A Will to Choose*, p. 41.

³⁵ Genovese argues that while some within the Methodist denomination warred against heathen superstitions, they were unable to undermine them enough to prevent the traditions from entering into the consciousness of the congregants. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 171.

³⁶ Sparks, ‘Religion’, p. 72.

independent black Methodist churches were founded, white Methodists realised the preference African Americans had for religious leaders of their own colour and tried to accommodate them through unofficial channels. Both denominations regarded themselves as being responsible for ministering to the needs of both slave and free blacks by any means possible, including using black ministers to put across their religious message.

Both Baptist and Methodist churches shared similar religious goals, wanting to attract African Americans into their congregations. The responsibilities of black ministers in both denominations were therefore often similar. What did affect their tasks and reception, however, was their geographic location, especially whether they operated within urban or rural areas. The greater rate of literacy amongst African Americans in urban areas meant that black ministers also needed to be able to read in order to preach the gospel successfully. In the late antebellum South one of the biggest differences that emerged between African American religion in urban and rural areas was over the issue of literacy. While a few slaves on plantations learnt to read, either by being taught by whites or blacks, or through their own efforts, most did not have such an opportunity.³⁷ In contrast to those in rural areas, African Americans in large urban areas often had greater opportunities to improve their education. By the late antebellum period more blacks, both slave and free were learning to read. Investigating African American literacy levels in Baltimore, Christopher Phillips that the percentage of free blacks able to read rose from 42.4 per cent in 1850 to 54.9 per cent in 1860.³⁸ As there was no legal proscription against slave literacy in Maryland there were fewer restrictions on efforts of African Americans to educate themselves. In other slaveholding states the restrictions against African American literacy were more stringent. Examining slavery in antebellum Richmond, Gregg Kimball commented that ‘while African Americans in Washington, D. C., Nashville, Savannah, and Charleston managed to operate schools

³⁷ Examining the WPA interviews Janet Cornelius argues that 179 former slaves mentioned that they learnt to read and write as slaves. However this was only just over five per cent of those interviewed. Janet Cornelius, “‘We Slipped and Learned to Read:’ Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830-1865”, *Phylon* Vol. 44, No. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1983), p. 172.

³⁸ Seventh U.S. Census, 1850, Population Schedule, Baltimore City, Ward 1, 2, and 10 and Eighth U.S. Census, 1860, Population Schedule, Baltimore City, Ward 1, 2, and 17, NA, cited in Christopher Phillips, *Freedom’s Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790-1860* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 167.

in the late antebellum era, Richmond's slaves and free blacks learned only through clandestine private instruction or laborious self-education'.³⁹ In a personal narrative of his life in slavery written in 1847 Fields Cook wrote that 'a colored person was not to be seen with a book in his hand...all the Books I had had been given to me by my owners and therefore I kept them though many a poor fellow burned his books for fear'.⁴⁰

Despite the fact that laws against slave literacy were enforced more rigorously in some states than others, opportunities to learn to read remained within all Southern cities. As Richard Wade argues 'newspapers abounded; signs lined streets and shops; books and pamphlets circulated freely'.⁴¹ Even Southern whites realised that any limitations they attempted to enforce were frequently rendered ineffectual.

Travelling through the Southern states, English writer James Stirling commented that 'no barrier, legal or social, can effectually shut out from them the subtle influence of intelligence and virtue' and that 'in the towns of the Slave States they [African Americans] have made great progress. Many slaves have learned to read in spite of all...[and] the very prohibition has stimulated exertion'.⁴²

By the mid nineteenth century a fair proportion of urban slaves and free blacks had learnt to read, either through public or clandestine means. This development put pressure on licensed black ministers. There was no pre-requisite for African American religious leaders to be literate in order to preach. Phillips argues that while literacy was an important skill 'in a black minister's repertoire', 'few if any white ministers could communicate their message to a black audience as effectively as could an exhorter of African descent because they had not shared their audiences'

³⁹ Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 69. Other Southern cities also increased their restrictions on African American literacy in the late antebellum South. Robert Reinders comments that in New Orleans the number of educated slaves declined in the 1850s as laws against teaching them to read were more rigidly enforced. (Robert C. Reinders, 'Slavery in New Orleans in the Decade before the Civil War', in Elinor Miller and Eugene D. Genovese (eds.), *Plantation, Town, and County: Essays on the Local History of American Slave Society* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 376.

⁴⁰ Mary J. Bratton, 'Field's Observations: The Slave Narrative of a Nineteenth-Century Virginian', *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* Vol. 88, No. 1 (Jan., 1980), p. 93.

⁴¹ Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South 1820-1860* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 173.

⁴² James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London: John W. Parker and Son, West Strand, 1857), p. 295.

experiences, their aspect, or, in many ways, even their language'.⁴³ But for many black ministers in the cities, being unable to read was a distinct disadvantage. When Noah Davis arrived in Baltimore in 1847 he commented that the African American population 'were advanced in education, quite beyond what I had conceived of', and that 'as I never had such advantages, I was far behind the people; and as this did not appear well in a preacher, I felt very small, when comparing my abilities with others of a superior stamp'.⁴⁴ To successfully minister to a literate African American congregation and to avoid having their authority challenged, black ministers needed to be able to read. According to Clarke by being able to read the Bible, as well as books and newspapers, black leaders 'could speak with authority in the black community. They could move through the printed word beyond the white control that sought to isolate the blacks' and 'could do so, however, prudently and cautiously, behind the white interpretations of the Scripture to the God who redeemed people out of the land of bondage'.⁴⁵ Those that could not were unable to provide in-depth examinations of Biblical texts that their literate counterparts could and as a result found it more difficult to connect with their African American congregants.

In the slaveholding states, African Americans who wanted to preach were frequently welcomed by white evangelical ministers, who used these religious leaders to attract more blacks into their congregations and also to demonstrate the benevolence of slavery. In the Northern states, however, black ministers were not considered as necessary to justify the evangelical mission of ministering to the poor and downtrodden. African Americans who wanted to preach in these states, therefore, often encountered just as much, if not more, discrimination from the white denominations. One of the most prominent examples is that of Alexander Crummell, an African American who applied to be ordained in New York but was rejected from entering the seminary numerous times before finally being accepted in the 1840s. Writing about Crummell, John Jay argued that the trustees of the seminary:

⁴³ Phillips, *Freedom's Port*, p. 147.

⁴⁴ Davis, *Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis*, p. 35. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/davisn/davis.html> (accessed August 28, 2010).

⁴⁵ Clarke, *Wrestlin' Jacob*, p. 121.

by that act, not only exceeded their powers and violated the trust reposed in them, but deliberately established a system of CASTE in the Church – not among its lower members only – not among the laity alone, but among the very same clergy who approach us as ambassadors of God, and minister at his altars – Caste as palpable as that which separates, in heathen India, the Brahmin from the Soodra.⁴⁶

Crummell was not the only Northern black minister to experience white discrimination. The hostility African Americans received in the North when trying to undertake religious instruction occasionally forced some to return South in order to preach. Rev. Lewis encountered one planter who commented that his slaves had recently improved in demeanour because ‘Jones, their coloured pastor, now in Philadelphia, had applied to him lately for permission to return to Charleston, feeling more degraded to [sic] Philadelphia than when in South Carolina, from the universal distrust of coloured freemen, and their low habits’.⁴⁷ Although the accuracy of this incident is difficult to ascertain it is true that African American churchmen in the North were often persecuted by white evangelical ministers. Given that evangelical denominations in the South needed black preachers in order to convey their message to those in bondage, it is highly likely that Southern white evangelicals held the black minister in higher regard than their Northern counterparts did.

Unlike black preachers on the plantation, some distinctions can be drawn between African Americans who ministered in the biracial and independent black churches in the late antebellum South. Although evangelical denominations in the slaveholding states differed in the way the churches were organised they shared the same underlying goals. As a result there were few differences between the experiences of licensed black ministers in the different evangelical denominations. What did affect the experiences of these religious leaders, however, was whether they were located in a rural or urban area. By the late antebellum period, a greater proportion of slaves and free blacks in urban areas had learnt to read, placing pressure on black ministers

⁴⁶ John Jay, *Caste and Slavery in the American Church. By a Churchman* (New York and London: Wiley and Putnam, 1843), p. 8.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *Impressions of America*, p. 118.

to be similarly educated, and creating a division with black preachers on the plantation who did not have to be literate in order to teach the gospel.

Hindering some yet helping others: The white response to the black minister

In the 1840s, laws were introduced in Virginia ensuring that black ministers were properly licensed and approved by white society, stating that ‘no slave or free person of color shall be allowed to preach, exhort or teach, in any meeting of slaves or free persons of color, for public worship or religious instruction in this city...without a license in writing from the Inferior Court of Richmond County, and Mayor of the City’. A further stipulation stated that ‘no coloured preacher residing’ out of the County of Richmond, shall preach, exhort, or teach, until he has produced his license granted under the Act aforesaid, and had the same countersigned by the Mayor of this City, or in his absence by two members of Council’.⁴⁸

Restrictions on African American religious leadership, such as those introduced in Virginia, were replicated throughout the late antebellum South. Licensed black ministers were frequently inspected and supervised by white evangelicals to ensure the message they taught was acceptable. Former slave Annie Price commented that ‘whenever the colored pastor preached there were several white persons present to see that no doctrine save that laid down by them should be preached’.⁴⁹ Licensed black ministers who failed to meet the expectations of white observers were often rebuked or punished. In one church meeting in Louisiana a black minister named Tom used the words ‘free indeed, free from death, free from hell, free from work, free from the white folks, free from everything’. After the service a white slaveholder ‘took Tom to task and threatened to have his license revoked if he ever used such language in public’.⁵⁰ Events such as these demonstrate that the white elite intervened quickly and severely if they thought that a black minister was beginning to preach a message that undermined their authority. Despite these restrictions,

⁴⁸ Religion, in Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 13 – Georgia Narratives Parts 3 and 4* (accessed February 14, 2008).

⁴⁹ Annie Price, in Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 13 – Georgia Narratives Parts 3 and 4* (accessed February 1, 2008)

⁵⁰ Bruce, *The New Man*, p. 72. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/bruce/bruce.html> (accessed August 26, 2010).

however, a number of black ministers were defended against the legislation that was introduced. On a number of occasions laws were ignored or not fully upheld, and at other points, black ministers were exempted from them by either the white elite or members of the local white community. These ministers that were exempted were frequently those who had either been well educated by white evangelicals or those the white elite considered to be trustworthy and unlikely to preach a message that could undermine their authority.

Laws and regulations designed to restrict the activities of black ministers were not always fully upheld. Black churches and congregations were supposed to be observed by at least one white figure to ensure that African Americans were not listening to a gospel that could be considered insurrectionary or subversive. But this supervision was not always conducted by noteworthy members of the white community. In one Methodist church in Atlanta ‘a white man named Rogers sat in the pulpit. ...If he could not be secured, then a white boy, a white baby, or a passing stranger was secured for a small fee to meet the requirements of the law’.⁵¹ The lackadaisical observance of these laws, however, was not because whites were unwilling to uphold them. On occasions where they were ignored the black minister involved was one who was considered to be institutionalised, one who posed little or no threat to the institution of slavery.

As well as the fact that regulations against African American religion were not fully upheld, black ministers were also defended against or exempted from laws restricting their activities. White evangelicals sometimes decried the extent to which their coloured brethren were being prohibited. In 1822 white evangelicals in Mississippi protested against laws that insisted black congregations should be either conducted by a white minister or have at least two white observers to ensure that no insurrectionary material was taught. In a petition to the state legislature, Mississippi Baptists asked for ‘the repeal of such parts of the late law... as deprive the African Churches under the patronage of the Association of their religious privileges’.⁵² Even when white evangelicals did not protest directly against laws put in place to prohibit

⁵¹ John T. Jenifer, *Centennial Retrospect History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. Nashville, 1915, 60, cited in Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, p. 18.

⁵² *Minutes of the Mississippi Baptist Association*, pp. 21, 41-42, 50, 57, 60, 70, 72, 87., cited in Sparks, ‘Religion in Amite County’, p. 65.

black ministers, they were still frequently willing to help African Americans who wanted to preach. Former slave Bill Thomas remembered that on every plantation ‘they always had a cullud man, and he would learn how to read some, and if that man, he got into the church and joined the church, he would baptize the slaves. Some of the white preachers would teach the cullud man how to preach’.⁵³

In other situations some black ministers were protected not just by white evangelicals but by the local white community. In a letter between two white clergymen, the writer commented that ‘in reference to the laws of South Carolina...most of them are virtually repealed by universal practice. The law, for example, forbidding slaves to assemble without the presence of so many white persons, is a dead letter, whenever the meeting is for religious purposes’.⁵⁴

Similarly, in talking to a black minister in New Orleans, Edward Abdy commented that the preacher:

had obtained his freedom, and had subsequently settled at this place, respected both by whites and blacks. One of the former, however, actuated by some malicious or malevolent motive had endeavoured to enforce the law, which prohibits free blacks from other States from settling in Kentucky. Much to the credit of the Lexington people, a petition, in behalf of the colored preacher, signed by many of the most respectable whites in the town, was sent to the legislature; and an express enactment was passed by them, empowering him to remain, and to enjoy all the privileges of a white man, except the elective franchise.⁵⁵

At times, black religious leaders were not only permitted to teach the gospel but were encouraged and respected by white society. Former slave Zenie Cauley recalled the respect her father, who was a Baptist preacher, received from Southern whites.

⁵³ Bill Thomas, in George P. Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Supplement, Series 2 – Volume 9: Texas Narratives Part 8* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*, Greenwood Publishing Group. (accessed February 7, 2008).

⁵⁴ Letter from Dr Fuller to Dr Wayland [two clergymen], cited in Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Perkins & Purves, Chestnut Street. Boston: B Perkins & Co., 1846), p. 11.

⁵⁵ Edward Strutt Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States of North America, From April, 1833, to October, 1834* (3 vols.) (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1835), Volume 2, p. 347.

Cauley commented that ‘everybody knowed *Jake Alsbrooks*. He preached all over that country of North Carolina. They’d be as many white folks as colored. They’d given him *money* and he never called for a collection in his life. Why on Sunday they give him sixty-five dollars to help buy a horse’.⁵⁶ The fact that laws put in place to limit the authority of black ministers were undermined by white society in their refusal to obey them illustrates that concerns over the way these religious leaders were able to influence and preach a gospel of resistance and insurrection to African Americans was not always paramount.

Some historians have argued that during the nineteenth century the white elite sought to prevent African Americans from forming their own religious institutions and leaders. John Boles in particular argues that Southern whites and white evangelicals did not favour the formation of any separate, independent black church, as ‘they feared the rebellious implications of such a development and earnestly felt that black ignorance, superstition, and romantic emotionalism would soon corrupt the tenets of white Christianity’.⁵⁷ The fact that restrictions against licensed black ministers and independent black churches and congregations were not always upheld, however, disputes this. While the Southern elite remained suspicious of independent forms of African American Christianity, separate black churches and congregations continued to convene and licensed black ministers continued to preach. What caused Southern elites to restrict the activities of these congregations or ministers was if they felt they could control them. Black ministers who preached a gospel deemed to be acceptable by Southern elites were protected against some of the harsher restrictions on their activities. It was the black ministers who were considered to be preaching a subversive message that were the target of the laws and regulations introduced against African American religion.

One way by which the white elite sought to gain control over African American Christianity was by ensuring that black ministers who preached were licensed. In 1845 the Baptist Sunbury Association in Georgia had four ordained black ministers

⁵⁶ Zenie Cauley, in Rawick, (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 8 – Arkansas Narratives Parts 1 and 2*. (accessed February 5, 2008).

⁵⁷ Boles, *Religion*, p. 86.

and one other black member who was licensed to preach.⁵⁸ Similarly one white minister reported in Charleston in the same year that ‘I am assisted in my ministerial labours...by two licensed coloured preachers in the town, and four others at various plantations’.⁵⁹ Despite licensing African Americans to preach, however, the character and life history of these figures was always carefully examined. The Southern white elite looked to display these ministers ‘as the model to which the young, especially were supposed to aspire. This was what-a-‘Negro’-could-be-if-he-worked-hard nineteenth century style’.⁶⁰ By ensuring that black ministers were licensed before they preached in black churches or before black congregations, Southern elites and white evangelicals retained some sense of control, and could assert their authority by stripping these religious leaders of their licenses. In 1828 the white committee of the First Baptist Church of Richmond inquired into the extent of the ‘evil arising from the exercise of public gifts by the coloured brethren not authorized by the church’. When the eighteen black members, who had previously preached and exhorted were re-examined, only six received licenses to continue their ministrations.⁶¹

Southern white elites wanted to gain control over any independent form of African American Christianity in the slaveholding states. Primarily this was due to the fact that the black church had the potential to be an autonomous institution that brought African Americans together into a community. Describing black religious practices in 1849, Martin Delany stated that ‘among our people generally, the church is their only source of information – their only acknowledged public body – their state legislature...their only acknowledged advisor’.⁶² Through their involvement in independent black churches, African Americans, both in the North and the South,

⁵⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 179.

⁵⁹ *Proceedings of the Meeting in Charleston, South Carolina, May 13-15, 1845 on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes* (Charleston, South Carolina, p. 341, cited in Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, p. 344.

⁶⁰ James Russell Johnson, ‘The Usefulness of Religious Training on the Southern Plantation as a Means of Inculcating Servility and a Deep Sense of Inferiority in Black Folks During the Thirty Years Preceding the American Civil War’, (Unpublished paper, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1970), p. 69, cited in Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, p. 55.

⁶¹ Minutes of the First Baptist Church of the City of Richmond (1825-1830), (typescript Virginia Baptist Historical Society, Richmond, Va.), March 13, 1828, cited in John T. O’Brien, ‘Factory, Church, and Community: Blacks in Antebellum Richmond’, *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 44, No. 4 (Nov., 1978), p. 522.

⁶² Delany, *The North Star*, 16 February 1849, 2; 23 March 1839, 2; and 13 April 1849, 2, cited in Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 19.

developed a sense of ‘racial pride and community activism’.⁶³ Through this sense of racial pride that African Americans developed the black church became the first step in the development of black nationalism.

Historians have long argued that the black church was the central focus of African American life. At the beginning of the twentieth century W. E. B. Du Bois argued that ‘as a social institution it [the black church] antedated by many decades the monogamic Negro home’.⁶⁴ It was in the 1960s, however, with the radicalisation of the African American freedom struggle, that the idea of the church as the beginning of black nationalism began to develop. James Cone, one of the main proponents of this view, argues that ‘the black church was the creation of a black people whose daily existence was an encounter with the overwhelming and brutalizing reality of white power’ and that because the church was born in protest, it represented the beginnings of Black Power.⁶⁵ While Cone overemphasises the extent to which the black church, especially in the Southern states, was born out of protest, the argument that African American Christianity provided slaves with an independent community has a long history. Genovese argues that the development of ‘Afro-American Christianity’ enabled slaves ‘to retain enough of Africa to help them create an appropriate form for the new content they were forging and to contribute to the mainstream of American national culture while shaping an autonomous identity’.⁶⁶ More recently Eddie Glaude Jr. has pushed Genovese’s argument further, commenting that instead of Christianity blocking the way towards the development of political consciousness, the use of ‘nation language’ and the religious underpinnings of that language illustrate that the African American Christianity led the way to the development of a ‘soul-craft politics’.⁶⁷ African American political consciousness instead emerged inside the culture of white society but created new ideas through interpretation and revision.

⁶³ Raboteau, *Canaan Land*, p. 25.

⁶⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), p. 119.

⁶⁵ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1969, reprint 2001), pps. 92 and 94.

⁶⁶ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 280. Following Genovese, other scholars have referred to the black church as an institution with both sacred and secular attributes that lead to the development of a community. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that black women confronted and influenced their social and political environment through ‘the mediating influence of the church’. (Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 8.

⁶⁷ Glaude, Jr., *Exodus!*, p. 7.

The establishment of independent churches gave African American Christianity a physical base and a sense of community. Slaves and free blacks who belonged to an independent African American church felt a great sense of pride in everything associated with that community. Touring the Southern states, Rev. H. Cowles Atwater commented on the coloured churches, saying that the congregation ‘support either a white or colored pastor, in a very comfortable, and creditable manner. From their hard earnings, giving a salary, that ought to make many a Free State congregation blush’. He provided one particular example, saying that ‘in 1853, five thousand slaves in Charleston, contributed fifteen thousand dollars for benevolent purposes. Where could the same number of white professors of religion be found whose contributions would average three dollars apiece’?⁶⁸ The sense of pride that existed within independent black churches was illustrated not only by the support of their ministers but in the other religious roles African Americans could adopt. Attending a biracial service, Mrs. Henry Schoolcraft commented on the demeanour of the African Americans responsible for the bread and wine at communion, saying that ‘the six black deacons handing round the elements to all their colored brethren [did so] with clerical dignity’.⁶⁹ Obviously this role was not as important as that of the minister, but those who had the job still treated it with reverence.

Black churches were more than just focal points for religious worship. They served as community centres, places where slaves could gather, exchange and discuss news and information, and provide support and consolation for each other. They also had the potential to be centres for an emerging political consciousness. This, however, was limited by the ways in which the white elite sought to intervene and control the black churches. For the Southern elite, such institutions were potential threats, as they operated outside of their influence, or at least not entirely within their control. This research demonstrates that black ministers were hindered from becoming political leaders through the actions of the white elite. By licensing black ministers who they considered to be trustworthy and unlikely to preach a gospel that could undermine the institution of slavery, white evangelical ministers and the white elite

⁶⁸ Rev. H Cowles Atwater, A. M., *Incidents of a Southern Tour: or The South, as seen with Northern Eyes* (Boston: J. P. Magee, No. 5, Cornhill, 1857), p. 98.

⁶⁹ Mrs. Henry R. Schoolcraft, *The Black Gauntlet: A Tale of Plantation Life in South Carolina* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1861), p. 85.

prevented those who could have been strong political leaders within the African American community from preaching within the biracial and independent black church. Not all black ministers who were licensed had been institutionalised by the religious education they had received from white evangelicals. The challenges they faced, however, in producing a message acceptable to African Americans and the white elite meant that few were willing to adopt a political message. Doing so would have inspired their black congregants but would have left them open to the possibility of planter retribution.

Preaching slave Christianity or African American Christianity?

One of the problems preventing historical understanding of black preachers is the assumption that they all operated within the same social environment. Some distinctions between the differing social environments in which African American religion was practiced have begun to emerge within historical scholarship. Irons comments that there is a problem in distinguishing between the visible and the invisible church within antebellum slave and free black society, and that it is difficult to use the term 'evangelical' to describe the invisible church. Despite the fact that members of both the visible and invisible church worshipped together and the fact that members of the invisible church learned the gospel from white evangelicals, men and women of the invisible church frequently denied the authority of these ministers. Therefore it became necessary to recruit black ministers into the evangelical denominations in order to convert more slaves and bring them into the churches. Similarly those in the invisible church accommodated African traditions into their worship, a practice seen by some African Americans in the visible church as backward and superstitious.⁷⁰ Even overriding terms that describe black Christianity in the antebellum South have come under recent scrutiny. According to Curtis Evans the term "the Negro church" 'groaned under the burden of a multiplicity of interpreters' demands ranging from uplift of the race to bringing an ambiguous quality of "spiritual softness" to a materialistic and racist white

⁷⁰ Irons, *Origins*, p. 9.

culture'.⁷¹ Despite making some distinctions between the invisible church on the plantation and the visible institutions of the biracial and independent black church, however, scholars continue to make little distinctions between black preachers and licensed black ministers. But while black preachers on the plantation and licensed black ministers in the biracial and independent black church shared similar roles and responsibilities, by the late antebellum period differences had emerged in the way that they taught Christianity.

A distinction has to be made between black preachers on the plantation and black ministers in the biracial and independent black churches in the antebellum South. Four key differences highlight this issue. The first is the participation of slaves within the evangelical churches and their reaction to black ministers who preached within these churches. Additionally differences existed between the ways in which black preachers and black ministers used African traditions in their religious services. The third variation is between the education that black preachers and ministers received and how it affected the reaction of the white elite to the gospel they preached. Finally the extent to which African American women were allowed to lead religious services differed on the plantation and in the biracial and independent black church.

For many slaves, attending services in the biracial or independent black church was a special occasion. But others were compelled by planters to attend institutionalised church services where the message of the sermon focused on obedience and subservience. African Americans frequently rejected the religious authority of institutions that promoted such a message and the ministers who delivered it. One black commentator on Northern religion argued that the prejudice of white churches drove blacks away and that 'I have often heard my brethren say they would have nothing to do with such a religion. They are driven away and go to infidelity'.⁷² By contrast in the South, the practice of rejecting churches that taught messages of obedience and docility is illustrated by the rapid rise of autonomous black churches after the Civil War. Irons argues that this phenomenon suggests that many blacks

⁷¹ Evans, *Burden*, p. 5.

⁷² *The "Negro Pew": Being an Inquiry Concerning the Propriety of Distinctions in the House of God, on Account of Color* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, No. 25, Cornhill, 1837), p. 87.

who were sympathetic to Christianity were not willing to join evangelical churches in the antebellum South, even those that allowed blacks to preach, as long as these branches were controlled by whites.⁷³ While some black ministers continued to preach in churches that promoted a message of obedience they lost their religious authority amongst the African American community.

Licensed black ministers did not always enjoy the same relationship with the slave community that the slave preacher on the plantation did. Because they were not chosen by the community and because it was the planter who often brought the black minister onto the plantation to preach, slaves did not automatically accept the authority of these religious leaders. Webber argues that the status as a licensed black minister within the white evangelical church did not guarantee leadership amongst the slave community.⁷⁴ Instead black ministers invited onto the plantation to preach were automatically regarded with some suspicion by the slave community, both for the fact that they had come from outside of the community, and because they were associated with the planter. This suspicion could quickly turn to outright rejection if the message taught focused on obedience rather than salvation. Former slave Molly Finley recalled that ‘some colored preachers would come on the place at times and preach under the trees down at the quarters. They said the white preacher would say, ‘You may get to the kitchen of heaben if you obey your master, if you don't steal, if you tell no stories, etc’.⁷⁵ Black preachers on the plantation were appointed to their position by the slave community because they were respected figures. Black ministers, however, were often appointed to their position by white evangelicals rather than the African American community and were not necessarily considered to be respected figures prior to their appointment. They were religious leaders amongst slaves and free blacks but earned their respect after their appointment, rather than before.

Historians have argued that in entering evangelical denominations, black ministers brought in African cultural forms and traditions, thus changing the way Christianity was taught. Fallin notes one evangelical black preacher who:

⁷³ Irons, *Origins*, p. 115.

⁷⁴ Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, p. 192.

⁷⁵ Molly Finley in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Volume 8 – Arkansas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed September 16, 2009).

preached in a rhythmical style reminiscent of Africa and in an African American dialect, with gestures that evoked the powerful emotional and physical responses characteristic of slaves' worship. He also preached with vivid imagery that elicited a dynamic pattern of call and response from the preacher and worshippers. Like their African counterparts, slave preachers mediated between the natural and the supernatural forces that controlled their lives and those of the slaves they preached to.⁷⁶

Not all evangelical denominations were open to new ideas and ways of practising their religion, however. As discussed above Methodism was a more formulaic denomination and frequently rejected new ideas that black ministers brought with them. But Methodist black ministers were still present throughout the antebellum South, raising the possibility that instead of bringing African traditions in, they abandoned the rituals in favour of those they were taught by white evangelicals. In this situation, it becomes difficult to argue that all black religious leaders were role models for slave religion and African American Christianity.

Not all white denominations reacted in such a way to the rituals and traditions originating from Africa. Miller argues that some examples of syncretism between African religions and Catholicism existed in lower Louisiana. Some white Catholic priests were elevated to the status of 'healers' by slaves, and one slave who attributed his girl's sickness to sorcery called in a white Catholic priest to counter the witch's arts.⁷⁷ However slaves had few opportunities to become preachers within the Catholic denomination due to the copious amount of training that was required. But by contrast the evangelical denominations in the antebellum South that did accept blacks as ministers practiced a style of Christianity compatible with many of the African religious beliefs that had survived the transatlantic crossing.

⁷⁶ Fallin, *Uplifting the People*, p. 9.

⁷⁷ Randall M. Miller, 'Slaves and Southern Catholicism', in John B. Boles (ed.), *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South 1740-1870* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), p. 142.

One of the most well-known examples of black Christian ministers rejecting African traditions is that of Daniel Alexander Payne, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. During his ministerial career, he regularly attempted to remove any African rituals within the religious services he oversaw, both in the Southern states and in the North. In 1850, while pastor of the AME church in Baltimore, Payne attempted to prohibit African Americans from singing spirituals, considering them to be ‘Corn-field Ditties’. In response however, two women rose from a pew and attacked Payne and his assistant pastor. Payne was subsequently expelled from the church by his congregation and refused to return to his ministrations of it.⁷⁸ Payne’s rejection was because he believed these traditions were disgraceful to the African American race, but he rejected rituals that helped slaves survive the impact of slavery. By adopting European rituals into the African American Christianity of the biracial and independent black churches, black ministers rejected the African traditions that constituted an influential part of slave Christianity on the plantation.

Slaves who continued to merge African traditions with Christianity did not look up to or respect black ministers who rebuked them for continuing such a symbiosis of religious rituals. Yet evangelical whites originally wanted to convert slaves to Christianity partly in order to remove any trace of their heathen rituals that had survived the transatlantic crossing. One American writing to a friend in London commented that ‘the FIRST, and principal Difficulty, which you alledged against attempting to instruct ADULT *Negroes* imported, was their strong Attachment to the idolatrous Rites and Practices of their own Country’, but since then ‘have not many Heathens, accustomed to Pagan Rites, and to such vicious and licentious Practices as Christianity forbids, been converted to our holy Religion from time to time, without any other Help than *the sincere* WORD OF GOD, and the good Example of those who recommended it?’⁷⁹

In trying to convert slaves and thereby remove heathen African traditions from them, some licensed black ministers rejected old rituals. But in doing so they distanced

⁷⁸ Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, pp. 92-4. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/payne70/payne.html> (accessed 10/04/2011).

⁷⁹ *A Letter to an American Planter from His Friend in London* (London: Printed by H. Reynell, No. 21, Piccadilly, 1781), p. 6.

themselves from the plantation community and undermined the idea that they were leaders of African Americans. Certainly in rejecting such enthusiastic forms of worship, black ministers found their style more suited to that of white evangelicals. Charles Colcock Jones remarked that ministers should discourage ‘demonstrations of approbation or disapprobation, or exclamations, or responses, or noises, or outcries of any kind during the progress of divine worship, nor boisterous singing immediately at its close’ and that ‘ignorant people may be easily excited, and they soon fall into the error of confounding things that differ essentially’.⁸⁰ White preachers, however, frequently found themselves unable to connect with a black congregation when they attempted to prohibit these enthusiastic styles of worship from their services. As a result, black ministers who followed the evangelical style of preaching practiced by white evangelicals frequently found themselves isolated from the African American religious community.

Differences in the education of black religious leaders not only affected their reaction to African religious traditions but also how white evangelical ministers reacted to them. Black ministers accepted by white evangelicals were those who had been educated and could enter into theological debates. One of the most celebrated of these was John Chavis, a free black Presbyterian minister, who entered into Lexington Presbytery in 1799. During his time at the Presbytery, Chavis was given a number of trials, recorded by the white ministers in the minutes. One such entry stated that ‘an exegesis in latin on the theme “tu quo conmistat salvatio ad peccato” and a homily on the decease of election, were appointed him [Chavis], as pieces of trial against our next meeting’.⁸¹ Upon completion of his education Chavis was allowed to travel relatively freely throughout the antebellum South; between 1819 and 1838, Chavis was simply mentioned as a Licentiate from the Presbyteries of Orange and Roanoke and allowed to choose his own route for preaching in the antebellum South, often with no white supervision.

By comparison black plantation preachers who were highly respected by Southern whites had little or no education. One of the most celebrated of these was John

⁸⁰ Charles Colcock Jones, D.D., *Suggestions of the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the Southern States. Together with an Appendix containing forms of Church Registers, form of a Constitution, and plans of Different Denominations of Christians* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), p. 15.

⁸¹ Notes from Vol. 3 Lexington Presbytery, William Henry Ruffner Papers, 1848-1907. VSL.

Jasper, a Virginia slave, who preached in Richmond for twenty-five years prior to emancipation. When remembering Jasper's life, the *Richmond Dispatch* newspaper focused primarily on Jasper's belief that sun moved around the earth, rather than on his ability to preach, commenting that 'some people have the impression that John Jasper was famous simply because he flew in the face of the scientists and declared that the sun moved'.⁸² Even statements that focused on his religious belief portrayed the view that Jasper was inferior to educated white ministers, stating that Jasper 'knew the literal Bible as well as Bible scholars did', implying that Jasper's illiteracy left him at a disadvantage.⁸³ Just like black ministers in the biracial and independent black church, Jasper and others like him were encouraged to preach by the Southern white elite. This encouragement, however, was due to different reasons than that given to licensed black ministers. Black ministers in the visible, institutionalised church were admired by the white elite because of their religious education. Black preachers within the slave community were celebrated by the white elite because they lacked it. Such a lack of education placated planters, believing that, because of their perceived intellectual inferiority, black preachers were unlikely to undermine the institution of slavery.

One further way in which evangelical Christianity altered the way in which African Americans worshipped was their treatment of women in roles of religious leadership. In Africa, women occupied roles of religious leadership just as often as men, and initially this did not change following the transatlantic crossing. An account from the British Caribbean illustrated the role of women in religious leadership, and the power to which these figures had over their fellow slaves, as 'whatever the prophetess orders to be done during this paroxysm, is most sacredly performed by the surrounding multitude; which renders these meetings extremely dangerous, as she frequently enjoins them to murder their masters, or desert to the woods'.⁸⁴

⁸² From *The Richmond Dispatch*, cited in William E. Hatcher, *John Jasper: The Unmatched Black Philosopher and Preacher* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1985), p. 12.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸⁴ Abrahams, Roger D., and John F. Szwed, ed. *After Africa: Extracts from British Travel Accounts and Journals of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries Concerning the Slaves, their Manners and Customs in the British West Indies*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983, 142, cited in Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, p. 59.

The transition from African religions to African American Christianity, however, altered this sense of equality among the genders in religious leadership. According to Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, while black women found it easier to enter positions of religious leadership than white women in the colonial era, even this was still an anomaly. By constructing different spiritual identities for men and women, evangelical denominations ‘created dichotomous gender images by asymmetrically valuing male and female as rational/irrational, orderly/disorderly, thus reinforcing gender values and gender structures of society and at the same time providing reinforcement for a male monopoly of the ministry’.⁸⁵

By the antebellum period, the situation for women had improved. According to Cornelius, by the mid-nineteenth century, more African American women were accepted as religious leaders. Recalling her time in slavery, Charlotte Brooks spoke of a slave from another plantation known as Aunt Jane who ‘could read right good in the Bible and hymn-book’, and ‘would hold prayer-meetings in my house whenever she would come to see me’. According to Brooks ‘Aunt Jane was the cause of so many on our plantation getting religion. We did not have any church to go to, but she would talk to us...She said people must give their hearts to God, to love him and keep his commandments; and we believed what she said’.⁸⁶

Following emancipation, Northerners who travelled South to educate the newly freed slaves encountered a number of black women who were literate and were willing to teach.⁸⁷ In religious leadership, however, black women were still discriminated against, even by African American preachers. Some African American women were respected for their ability to preach; in his diary William Cooper, a planter from Tuscumbia, Alabama, wrote about a black female preacher called Mrs. Frame, saying that after she left the church ‘a great crowd followed her to the Car & much Church singing was had in exaltation of her standing in this community & certainly she is accomplished and...intelligent and above preachers in the average by many

⁸⁵ Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, p. 127.

⁸⁶ Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage, or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves, Original and Life Like, As They Appeared in Their Old Plantation and City Slave Life; Together with Pen – Pictures of the Peculiar Institution, with Sights and Insights into Their New Relations as Freedmen, Freemen, and Citizens*, pp. 6-13. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/albert/menu.html> (accessed November 24, 2009).

⁸⁷ Cornelius, *Literacy, Slavery, and Rebellion*, p. 91.

degrees'.⁸⁸ Independent African American denominations, however, continued to reject the idea of women entering into the ministry, illustrating how African American Christianity was more intolerant towards female preachers than slave Christianity. In the 1880s Henry McNeal Turner, a bishop within the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, examined the propriety of allowing women to serve in the ministry. When Turner was appointed the presiding bishop over the North Carolina Annual Conference in 1885, he appointed Sarah Ann Hughes as a deacon. But such was the controversy over the issue that she was not given a pastorate and dropped by the General Conference three years later. Following this issue the General Conference of the AME Church resolved to forbid bishops from appointing women as deacons.⁸⁹

Turner's justification for allowing women to enter into the ministry was that 'there are too many drunkards, gamblers, liars, thieves, lynchers, mobs, Sabbath breakers, blasphemers, adulterers, slanderers, and sinners in the land to stop and quibble over women preachers'.⁹⁰ This issue then was one that dominated African American Christianity in the antebellum South and for the remainder of the nineteenth century. Within the slave community on the plantation, however, this issue was nowhere as controversial, with both genders being able to enter into roles of religious leadership.

While there were some African American female preachers in the nineteenth century South, they faced a greater uphill struggle to justify their position to both members of both white and black religious leadership. One former slave named Elizabeth felt it was her duty to become a preacher after she was freed but she felt 'that I was despised on account of this gracious calling, and was looked upon as a speckled bird by the ministers to whom I looked for instruction'.⁹¹ She persevered, however, and began to lead religious meetings. In doing so, one attendee:

a great scripturarian, fixed himself behind the door with pen and ink,
in order to take down the discourse in short-hand; but the Almighty

⁸⁸ William Cooper Diary, 28 August 1886. *UNC*.

⁸⁹ Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), pp. 181-2.

⁹⁰ *Voice of Missions*, May 1897, cited in Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, p. 184.

⁹¹ *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, in *Six Women's Slave Narratives*, p. 13.

Being anointed me with such a portion of his Spirit, that he cast away his paper and pen, and heard the discourse with patience, and was much affected, for the Lord wrought powerfully on his heart. After meeting, he came forward and offered me his hand with solemnity on his countenance, and handed me something to pay for my conveyance home.⁹²

Yet during the antebellum period, there were very few occasions where African American women were able to preach in the evangelical Christian denominations. This was therefore another way in which Baptist and Methodist churches tempered African religious traditions rather than immersing them. Some black female slaves were able to gain positions of religious leadership in the invisible church, by preaching and teaching on the plantation, away from the eyes of the established church and Southern white society in general, but the discrimination they faced when attempting to preach from the pulpit amplifies the split that took place between the visible and the invisible church.

African American ministers in the biracial and independent black church did not enter into these institutions intending to preach a different form of Christianity to that of the black preacher. But through their interactions with white evangelicals and through their religious education, many began to embrace more of the white Christian traditions and reject the seemingly backward African beliefs. Through differences such as the rejection of women in positions of religious leadership black ministers demonstrated the divergence that had taken place between slave Christianity on the plantation and African American Christianity in the biracial and independent black church.

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In conclusion, by the late antebellum period independent forms of organised African American Christianity, whether separate services and congregations, or the

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

formation of black churches, had become more commonplace. Licensed black ministers became religious leaders of the communities that developed within these congregations and churches, undertaking many of the same sacred and secular responsibilities that black preachers, as religious leaders within the plantation slave community, did. In addition to sharing many of the same responsibilities, licensed black ministers also encountered many of the challenges that black preachers faced, in that they needed to preach a gospel acceptable to both African Americans and the white elite in order to continue in their role.

Despite sharing similar responsibilities and challenges, however, licensed black ministers began to move away from their coloured brethren in terms of their respective forms of Christianity. While black preachers continued to incorporate African religious beliefs and rituals into their worship, licensed black ministers increasingly rejected these traditions as backward and heathenish. This rejection meant that by the late antebellum period the slave Christianity practiced on the plantation differed from the African American Christianity practiced in the institutionalised church.

Not all licensed black ministers rejected the use of African traditions to the same extent. In both urban and rural areas, these religious leaders often received religious education, either from individual white ministers or through attending presbyteries and seminaries. In large urban areas, however, the increasing proportion of literate African Americans meant that black ministers were constantly under pressure to continue their education. Through this education they increasingly embraced European religious traditions and disparaged the continued use of African rituals. Comparatively, black ministers in rural churches did not have to continually further their religious education and their condemnation of African traditions was not as strong.

Licensed black ministers were often heavily supervised by white evangelicals and were frequently observed during their religious services by members of the white elite. They also faced numerous laws and regulations introduced to limit their activities. Not all black ministers felt the impact of these restrictions to the same extent, however. Those who had been educated by white evangelicals were often

exempted from or defended against the laws introduced. But through the implementation of these regulations black ministers were unable to take on roles of political leadership within the African American community. Those whom the white elite considered likely to promote a political message that could undermine the authority of slavery were prevented from preaching in the institutionalised church. Black ministers who had received the religious education of white evangelicals, however, were considered to be unlikely to deliver such a potentially inflammatory message. It is clear that licensed black ministers were prevented from becoming political leaders in the late antebellum period.

The changes that occurred in the way Christianity was practiced in the institutionalised black church did not leave black ministers completely alienated from black preachers on the plantation. Despite utilising different methods to preach Christianity, both continued to share the same underlying goals, wanting to preach a gospel of hope to African Americans. Additionally while the differences between black preachers and black ministers began to develop, many white elites and evangelical white ministers continued to view both with benevolence and apprehension.

Chapter 4

The white evangelical reaction to African American religious leaders and slave Christianity

Having examined the differences that emerged in the way that black preachers and licensed black ministers taught Christianity, this chapter focuses on the relationship that evangelical white ministers had both with African American religious leaders and the institution of slavery as a whole. A comparison between black preachers and licensed black ministers would not be complete without a consideration of the interaction between African American religious leaders and white evangelical ministers. While white ministers were aware of the abuses inflicted on slaves they were able to soothe their consciences by reminding planters of their obligations and responsibilities towards those they held in bondage. Additionally, the presence of African Americans in positions of religious leadership, was considered by white evangelicals to be proof that Christianity had civilised Africans and removed any heathenish traits from them. White ministers developed a sense of benevolent paternalism towards their coloured counterparts, viewing them as having the potential to develop as fellow ministers in Christ. White ministers, however, did not distinguish between black preachers and ministers, despite the differences that emerged between the different styles of preaching. Instead they saw them both as inherently inferior, in terms of their Biblical knowledge and their use of rough, uncultured, and uneducated language.

The religious message of African American religious leaders was profoundly influenced and constrained by Southern white society. On the plantation, slave preachers had to adapt their sermons in order to avoid the planter's wrath. In the evangelical churches black ministers had to adapt their sermons to fit in with the demands of the Southern elite. In both locations, planters and evangelical white ministers who listened to the sermons, remained suspicious of language that could point towards inciting or justifying slave rebellion. Since white ministers trained blacks who sought to preach, the interaction between black and white religious leaders by the late antebellum period is crucial in understanding the development of black preachers and ministers, as well as African American Christianity, both on the

plantation and in the church. Whether black religious leaders were either accepted as equals, hindered from preaching, or whether white ministers considered themselves as benevolent teachers to their inferior coloured brethren, were all factors that affected the way black preachers and ministers taught and behaved, towards both slaves and Southern whites.

The interaction between white and black evangelicals was simultaneously one of equality and inferiority. On a spiritual level, most white ministers accepted that under God, all men were considered equal. Through this notion of spiritual equality, white evangelicals argued that African Americans should have the same opportunity to participate within religious services in the institutionalised church and should be given the same opportunity to preach as that afforded to Southern whites. In addition, the oratorical skill of some blacks inspired and impressed white ministers, who were willing to defy Southern laws in order to ensure that some black preachers and ministers were not impeded or persecuted.

Attempts made by white evangelicals to ensure that black religious leaders could continue their work were not undertaken solely out of a sense of duty to their coloured brethren, or out of respect for their abilities. The realisation that black preachers and ministers were more effective at providing slaves with religious education often inspired these efforts. White evangelicals often struggled to preach to a slave congregation, either because of the differences in language, or because their messages of obedience and subservience were received with hostility and frequently dismissed or ignored. Some white ministers did respond to such a reaction and adapted their sermons accordingly. But although some white ministers managed to develop a positive relationship with their black congregants, others struggled. Allowing black preachers and ministers to preach to slaves was a way of providing slaves with religious education.

White evangelicals realised that they needed black religious leaders to continue their evangelical mission to the slaves and believed their coloured counterparts were spiritually equal to them. At every other level, however, this sense of equality ended. Most white ministers firmly believed that black preachers were intellectually and culturally inferior, especially when they considered the differences between their

methods of worship. The rudeness of language, limited understanding of the Bible, and emotional reaction of the African American congregation, were all used to illustrate the inferiority of the superstitious and backward black Christianity compared to the educated white Christianity. White evangelicals maintained their superiority over black preachers and ministers by, for example, structuring the leadership of biracial and independent black churches to ensure that African American religious leaders were never on an equal secular footing with white ministers.

Ideas surrounding the spiritual equality and intellectual and moral inferiority of African American religious leaders were attributed to both black preachers on the plantation and licensed black ministers in the biracial and independent black church. Although white evangelicals had more interaction with black ministers they did not make a distinction between these religious leaders and those who operated within the plantation slave community. White evangelicals understood that the barriers they faced in preaching to African Americans could not always be overcome. In order to accomplish their spiritual goals of providing Christianity to the poor and downtrodden white ministers needed African American religious leaders, both on the plantation and in the church. But although they needed them, and although they considered blacks to be spiritually equal to whites, white evangelical ministers still regarded both black preachers and ministers as intellectually and morally inferior.

The prejudice shown towards black religious leaders cannot solely be attributed to white ministers. The relationship of planters with white ministers also influenced the situation, especially as ministers faced the continuing task of maintaining a positive relationship between the church and the institution of slavery. The denominational schisms of the 1840s eased the fears of the Southern white elite about the churches' attitude towards slavery, and the pro-slavery defences produced by white ministers firmly established the Southern evangelical church as a strong supporter of the institution. Some lingering suspicions remained, however. Although the nineteenth century had seen evangelicals slowly shift towards a proslavery view, they did not lose all their criticisms of the institution. White ministers frequently criticised planters over harsh treatment and punishment of their slaves, or suggested ways that the institution could be improved.

Criticisms of slavery expressed by white evangelicals never amounted to a call for emancipation or manumission of the slave population. They did, however, help to perpetuate the suspicions of planters regarding the provision of religious education to the enslaved, in that it would make them more recalcitrant and rebellious. The reaction of Southern society to ministers considered to be anti-slavery was often very hostile, with the accused frequently forced to flee the South. White ministers had to be seen still committed to slavery, in both their words and actions. Preventing black religious leaders from approaching anything like equality in the Southern churches was another way white ministers could show their belief and commitment to the institution.

In considering the interaction between white evangelical ministers and African American religious leaders, this chapter argues that black preachers and ministers were needed in order to achieve the goal of white denominations in providing slaves with Christian instruction. Although white ministers did preach to slaves and free blacks, many struggled to do so successfully. As well as differences in language, slaves were quick to reject any message of obedience promoted in the sermons of white evangelicals. Because they needed both black preachers and ministers in order to provide slaves with religious education white evangelicals made little distinction between the two and regarded both as being equally intellectually and morally inferior.

The relationship of the white minister with the planter

In order to understand the relationship of white evangelical ministers with African American religious leaders, an understanding of their interaction with the institution of slavery is needed. Different conditions in the slave states called for a variety of white ministers. According to Anne Loveland there were three distinct categories of white evangelical ministers: ministers whose church congregations included blacks as well as whites; ministers of separate black churches; and, missionaries to slaves

on the plantation.¹ The first group included men such as William Winans and Richard Fuller, who held separate services for black congregations and regarded blacks as an important part of their pastoral charge. Within the second category, men such as Robert Ryland and John L. Girardeau had to take care that the messages of their sermons were acceptable to their African American congregants. Although the black congregants could not remove the minister from his position, they could vote with their feet and move to a different church. Even in areas where independent black churches were scarce, congregants would not hesitate to leave if they felt the message being taught focused too heavily on the theme of obedience.

Both white ministers in biracial and independent black churches believed their efforts at providing religious education to their slave congregants were important and worthwhile. Out of the three categories of evangelical white ministers, it was the missionaries to the plantations, however, who were often the most dedicated in their task of providing religious instruction to the slaves. Men such as Charles Colcock Jones and William Capers received little pay, worked long hours, and travelled great distances in order to preach to as many slaves as possible. Travelling round in South Georgia and North Florida, the Reverend P. P. Smith described his travels in great detail in his diary, citing one day's work as:

Sunday, 23 August 1846 – drove 14 miles to Gen[?] Whitfield[']s plantation on the Leon Mission to the colored people. found Bro Choice the Preacher and Bro Dyke with him. tried to preach to the Colored people on John 12-26. I trust good was done...drove 3 miles to Beltons place took dinner, and preached here to the Blacks on prov[erbs] 29-1 had a solemn time, heavy rain drove 3 miles to Crooms place, preached again to the Blacks – on Isiah 55-6-7. good was done...The Lord bless this Mission and Save these Colored people.²

¹ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, p. 247.

² Rev. P. P. Smith Diary, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, cited in Blake Touchstone, 'Planters and Slave Religion in the Deep South, in John B. Boles (ed.), *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South 1740-1870* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), p. 113. Schweiger notes the example of Virginia preacher W. P. Harrison, whose first circuit 'consisted of twenty-one churches and seven schoolhouse

White preachers who worked as circuit riders, rather than in a specific church, endured a perilous existence. According to Lewis Jones, those who signed up to such a task ‘were hardy and they had to be. They went hundreds of miles in all sorts of weather, crossing all sorts of rivers -- all on horseback’. In addition to the perilous journeys missionaries faced, health hazards provided another danger. Itinerant preacher William Henry Milburn wrote in his autobiography of the dangers of preaching ‘from the sickly rice fields and deadly soil of the sea island cotton on the coast of the Carolinas and Georgias, to the swamps of the Red and Ouachita rivers, over which malaria hangs as a canopy’.³ Up until 1844 nearly one-third of circuit riders died before they reached the age of 33. At the beginning of Methodist Conference, the participants frequently sang Charles Wesley’s hymn which began ‘and are we yet alive, and see each other’s face’? In such a situation, these words were certainly not rhetorical.⁴ The physical exertions and perils demanded of these white ministers meant that literacy and education became secondary considerations for circuit riders. Strength and stamina were the most vital qualities. Those who desired to undertake such a dangerous role were usually driven by religious zeal. Circuit riders’ lack of Biblical education was more than compensated for by their evangelical vigour.

On occasions, planters were willing to employ white ministers to preach to their slaves. Planter Franklin A. Hudson revealed in his diary that he employed a white minister named Mr. Downing for at least six months in 1855, who preached on the plantation from April to September. On 24 September 1855, Hudson records that he ‘Paid Rev Mr. Downing \$30 for 6 Sunday Services pray to hands’, after which no further mention is made on the subject of religious instruction to his slaves. It is not clear whether Hudson failed to mention any further meetings or decided not to continue with them to save expense. Hudson, though, remained on good terms with

appointments; he traveled three hundred miles every month on a circuit with eighteen hundred members’. (*Richmond Christian Advocate*, 7 July 1881, p. 1, cited in Schweiger, *Gospel*, p. 26.)

³ William Henry Milburn, *Ten Years of Preacher-Life: Chapters from an Autobiography* (New York, 1859), 339, cited in William Courtland Johnson, “‘A Delusive Clothing’: Christian Conversion in the Antebellum Slave Community”, *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 82, No. 3 (Summer 1997), p. 297.

⁴ Lewis P. Jones, Ph.D., ‘What It Was Like to Be a Methodist in the 1820s’, (22 Jan. 1978). Address prepared in commemoration of the Sesquicentennial Celebration of St. John’s United Methodist Church, Anderson, S.C. *Caroliniana*.

the minister, recording on 9 March 1856 that ‘Mr. Randolph & Mr. Downing & Mr. Lyon dined with me’.⁵

White ministers often preached to slaves on plantations. John Hamilton Cornish, an Episcopal minister from South Carolina, recorded his experiences of ministering to slaves on a plantation for a period of two years in the 1840s. Throughout these two years, Cornish baptised slaves, conducted church and plantation services for them, and performed marriage services. Through his regular ministering to slaves on various plantations, Cornish was able to develop positive relationships with them. After one meeting he commented that ‘had service for the Blacks & was highly gratified to perceive that they had not only retained what of the Ch [sic] Catechism they learned last winter, but had made an encouraging progress’.⁶

Missionaries such as Jones and Capers, and ministers such as Cornish employed to preach on plantations, had the most interaction with slave congregations. They also enjoyed the least supervision from Southern whites. It was therefore this group of ministers of whom planters were the most suspicious. Thus they had to work the hardest to prove that their teachings would not cause recalcitrance from the slave population. For the most part these fears were eased through a process of appeasement from missionaries and ministers. Jones wrote extensively on the duties of missionaries, saying that teachers who went to the plantation, with the consent of the master, were to ‘confine themselves to the *religious instruction* of the Negroes wholly’ and were not to ‘intermeddle with the concerns of the plantation in any manner, nor repeat abroad what their ears hear, of their eyes see on them’.⁷ Focusing solely on providing religious education to the bondsmen simultaneously placated planters over the motives of the missionary, and shielded the missionary from dwelling on the more brutal aspects of the institution, aspects that could contravene his view of slavery as a benevolent institution. Jones’ arguments about confining oneself to the religious instruction of slaves and ignoring the political and social implications of slavery were echoed by the Southern evangelical church as a whole.

⁵ Diary entries, 22 April, 24 September 1855 and 9 March 1856, Franklin A. Hudson Diary, 1852-1859. *SHC*.

⁶ Diary entry 26 November 1843, John Hamilton Cornish Papers. *SHC*.

⁷ Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes, A Sermon Delivered before Associations of Planters in Liberty and McIntosh Counties, Georgia*, 4th ed. (Princeton: O’Hart and Connolly, 1832), pp. 18-19, cited in Clarke, *Wrestlin’ Jacob*, p. 25 (italics in original).

Shortly after the split from their Northern counterparts, the first General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, declared in 1846 that ‘the question of slavery in the United States is placed beyond the control of ecclesiastical bodies; that it is unsafe, unscriptural, and imprudent, to agitate the subject; and that the mere ownership of slave property, where the laws do not admit of emancipation and permit the liberated slave to enjoy freedom, constitutes no barrier to the election and ordination of ministers’.⁸

In addition to insisting that Christian instruction would not interfere with the system of slavery or inspire rebellion amongst the enslaved, white evangelicals argued that introducing slaves to Christianity and a Christian way of life would make them more docile and less likely to rebel. Creel argues that after the denominational schisms ‘arguments favoring Christian instruction of slaves as a social safety valve became the pillar of clergymen’s reasoning in attempting to awaken planters’.⁹ Although the split of the Southern churches from their Northern counterparts removed their link to abolitionism, white ministers in the slave states continued to argue that their religious teachings would not undermine planter’s authority. They also argued that their teachings would benefit the planters, arguments that, following the denominational schisms, convinced planters of the relative safety of slave religious instruction.

The actions of white ministers from the 1840s onwards were not solely designed to appease slaveholders, however. Before the denominational schisms, not all Southern white evangelicals were entirely opposed to slavery. But neither were they united in their defence of the institution. Instead, Southern ministers remained cautiously aware of the brutalities of the system. Whilst ministers assured planters that they would not call for the end of slavery, they frequently attempted to improve the conditions of those in bondage and to change the views of slaveholders, a process often referred to as amelioration. To justify this process white evangelicals often argued that by improving the spiritual and physical condition of their slaves, planters would be improving themselves. Charles Colcock Jones commented that ‘one grand

⁸ *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1846* (Nashville, 1846), 111, cited in Lewis M. Purifoy, ‘The Southern Methodist Church and the Proslavery Argument’, *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 32, No. 3 (Aug., 1966), pp. 327-8.

⁹ Creel, *A “Peculiar People”*, p. 217.

means of elevating his own moral and religious character will be an attempt to improve that of his servants'.¹⁰ As well as the moral improvement planters would receive from providing religious instruction for their slaves, white ministers also argued that conversion would benefit the plantation economy. One letter from the white minister John J. Watkins argued that the knowledge of Christianity 'cannot fail to make him in every respect a better servant – nay, to enhance his value a hundred fold!'¹¹

In contrast to the benefits of providing slaves with Christian instruction, Southern ministers argued that by failing to follow such a course of action, planters were putting their own souls at risk. In an open letter to the Protestant Episcopal Church in Virginia, the Reverend William Meade asked 'what will become of us when we shall stand charged with the guilt of neglecting the immortal souls of those who have been devoting their time and strength to our service? What must be our condition when we see them perishing through that ignorance which we sought not to remove'?'¹² Some white ministers went even further and criticised individual planters for brutal punishments inflicted on slaves. On one occasion the white Methodist itinerant William Winans became outraged with one master who was attempting to stop thieving on his plantation by punishing all his slaves for not identifying the culprit. Winans then 'remonstrated with him [the slaveholder] so warmly and...forcibly that I believe he abandoned his intention'.¹³ Schweiger argues that prior to the denominational schisms, few pastors in Virginia regarded slavery as a Christian institution, and instead 'predicated their support for slavery largely on its reform'.¹⁴ Rebuking planters for harsh treatment of their slaves was, therefore, a method by which pastors could ease their consciences.

¹⁰ Charles Colcock Jones, *A Catechism of Scripture, Doctrine and Practice, for Families and Sabbath Schools Designed Also for the Oral Instruction of Colored Persons*, 3d ed. (Savannah, 1837), pp 4-6, cited in Touchstone, 'Planters', p. 102.

¹¹ Letter from John J. Watkins to The Editor of the Farmville Journal, Oct. 16, 1856, in the Hubard Family Papers, *SHC*.

¹² William Meade, *Pastoral letter of the Right Rev. William Mead, Assistant Bishop of Virginia, to the Ministers, Members, and Friends, of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Virginia. On the Duty of Affording Religious Instruction to Those in Bondage. Delivered in the Year 1834* (New York: American Tract Society, 1858), p. 16.

¹³ Winans Autobiography 164-65. Winans, William Papers. J.B. Cain Archives, Millsaps College, Jackson, Mississippi, cited in Sparks, *On Jordan's Stormy Banks*, p. 69.

¹⁴ Schweiger, *Gospel*, p. 79.

One particular area in which white ministers rebuked planters was the sale of slaves. Arguing that sale lead to the breakup of marriages, ministers had previously censured or excommunicated planters they considered to be guilty of separating slave families. By the 1840s, some ministers began to suggest the passage of laws prohibiting such a breakup.¹⁵ In 1859, the Reverend William H. Milburn contended that the ‘first and most imperative demand which justice makes of the people of the southern States is the passage of laws, forbidding the separation of man and wife, of parents and children. Such rending asunder of the holiest bonds of our nature should not be allowed, cannot without incurring the dread anathema of a Christian civilization and the righteous indignation of God’.¹⁶ Calls for the protection of slave marriages came not just from individual ministers but also from the evangelical churches as a whole. In 1854 the Charleston Presbytery called upon their ministers and churches to protect slaves ‘by enforcing on *Masters* themselves, the obligation to adhere more rigidly to the Saviour’s command, and refrain from separating their married servants’.¹⁷ Despite political power resting almost solely in the hands of planters in the late antebellum South, evangelical white ministers continued to hold some influence over the slaveholding classes, reminding them of their spiritual duties towards their slaves and the perils facing them if they failed.

The success of white evangelicals’ ministrations, in that the majority of planters permitted or desired their slaves to receive religious education, was not solely due to the protests of white evangelicals, the development of paternalism, or the desire to prove the benevolence of the institution to abolitionists. The church’s role as a centre of social and moral justice was also a consideration. From the founding of the thirteen original colonies, the church served as a moral court. Although the criminal

¹⁵ Some historians have disputed the idea that ministers protested against the sale of slaves that broke up marriages. Kenneth Bailey has argued that white ministers did not generally administer marriage vows to slaves which would have removed the problem of such slave sales. Bailey, ‘Protestantism’, p. 452. However Blassingame, in his study of slave community, examined the journals of the annual proceedings of the Protestant Episcopal Church, South, in seven slave states and argued that between 1841 and 1860, fifty-two percent of all weddings conducted by white ministers were slave ceremonies. Blassingame, *Slave Community*, p. 169.

¹⁶ Milburn, *Ten Years*, 350, cited in Blassingame, *Slave Community*, p. 174. In an 1848 sermon Charles Colcock Jones argued that masters ‘should not separate, nor allow the separation of husband and wife’. (*Thirteenth Annual Report of the Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes, in Liberty County, Georgia* (Savannah, 1848), 16-17, cited in Blassingame, *Slave Community*, p. 174. (italics in original)

¹⁷ *Southern Presbyterian Review* VIII (1854), 17, cited in Blassingame, *Slave Community*, pp. 174-5. (italics in original)

justice system had developed by the late antebellum period, the church still remained as a deterrent against sinfulness. Travelling in the mid-1850s, Englishman Henry William Clifford reported from South Carolina that ‘in the Cathedral before High Mass [I] saw a most extraordinary object kneeling at the rails with something or other written upon his clothes which appeared to me to be made of sack-cloth – could he have been doing public penance?’¹⁸ Public acts of penance illustrated how the institutionalised church continued to act as moral centres. Laura Edwards comments that churches ‘routinely mediated domestic disputes, seeing intervention as part of their mission to promote harmony among their congregants’.¹⁹

Not all planters were swayed by the argument that removing the brutalities of the institution would make slaves easier to deal with; Irons argues that when paternalism emerged as a system of belief, it was an open question as to how much white evangelicals managed to change planters’ behaviour by preaching about their duties to slaves.²⁰ For every benevolent slaveholder, there were others who refused to accept the premise of paternalism. Through their efforts though, white evangelicals could console themselves that they were trying to improve conditions for the slaves. In addition, by attempting to improve slavery and remove some of the brutalities of the system, Southern evangelicals could demonstrate to their Northern counterparts the benevolence of the institution. The remonstrances of white evangelicals about the brutalities of slavery then were not designed solely to improve the lives of slaves but also to ease the consciences of ministers who wanted to illustrate both to themselves and their Northern counterparts that slavery was an institution, one that benefited both the enslaver and the enslaved.

While no uniform picture of the relationship between white evangelical ministers and planters can be determined, it is clear that, for various reasons, most white ministers simultaneously attempted to placate slaveholders and improve the physical and spiritual condition of slaves. To what extent this effort was successful is difficult to assess. Some white missionaries were still regarded with a lingering sense of

¹⁸ Diary entry, Sunday Dec 17, 1854, Travel journal of Hen. Wm. Clifford in America, 1854-1855. *ERO*.

¹⁹ Laura F. Edwards, ‘Law, Domestic Violence, and the Limits of Patriarchal Authority in the Antebellum South’, *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Nov., 1999), p. 747.

²⁰ Irons, *Origins*, p. 90.

suspicion in the 1840s and 1850s because planters viewed their teachings as encouraging slaves to rebel. For those planters who did adopt a more paternalistic line of thinking, however, the slaves on the plantation often received fewer brutal punishments, but instead were treated more as recalcitrant children, a distinction that came to be duplicated in the relationship between the white minister and black religious leaders.

The lingering suspicion of the Southern elite towards converting slaves to Christianity

After the denominational schisms, Southern elites still had lingering doubts and suspicions about the motives of white ministers, who found themselves under almost constant pressure to prove their pro-slavery credentials. Those that failed found themselves either drummed out of the South, or faced with the threat of physical punishment. Throughout the nineteenth century, white ministers had begun to see slavery as a more benevolent institution, and the pressure from the Southern elite only furthered this transition. As the attitudes of white ministers towards slavery began to change, so did their view towards black religious leaders. Ideas about their inferiority hardened, and white ministers fervently believed that their coloured counterparts would always remain subordinate.

The suspicion that white ministers could preach messages that might inspire slaves to rise up and rebel was ever present in the antebellum South. Even well established ministers discovered that the merest hint of inciting insurrection was enough to destroy their reputation. One minister from South Carolina named Van Rensselaer was relatively respected in the area. However one letter from Samuel Davis, a Presbyterian minister in Camden, South Carolina, argued that:

how far this Van Rensselaer merits this high compliment...may be judged by what we now have to state – we learn from a gentleman of Savannah of high respectability that this Van Rensselaer some time ago held secret meetings with the negroes in that city, & consulted with them on their

means of revolt – their strength – arms – conceivable [sic] & when they expected to be ready – of which notice was given to the city authorities and Van Rensselaer would have been arrested but when sought he had suddenly left the city.²¹

Although the validity of this statement was unproven Van Rensselaer had to leave the South on the basis of the rumours, having only ministered there for one year.

Van Rensselaer's example was by no means unique. Despite the fact that a number of ministers changed their views on slavery after becoming accustomed to the benefits of the institution, the dismissal of a white minister for holding anti-slavery views remained a fairly common occurrence. In a letter to Frances Hughes, Elizabeth Thorowgood, the daughter of Virginia businessman Charles Ellis, commented on the resignation of one minister, stating that it 'surprised me considerably though not the leading members of the church - - they having sent a committee to request him not to be so open in his comments on the subject of slavery – to this request he replied that he would not be handled and preferred resigning his care of the church to concealing sentiments'.²²

Being expelled from the South was not the only penalty white ministers experienced for failing to promote a pro-slavery viewpoint. Physical retribution was an ever present possibility. One white Methodist minister was punished for preaching to slaves, as they would disobey their masters and run off to attend his religious meetings. As a result 'two rich slaveholders waylaid the minister at night, and taking him off from his horse and beat him until they thought he was dead. But the Lord saved his life to preach his Word, and many were converted in the same town through his preaching'.²³ The threat of physical punishment for white ministers who preached to the coloured occasionally extended to one of their number being killed in the course of their ministry. In an event that occurred shortly after the Civil War,

²¹ Coutland Van Rensselaer Letter Fragment, 1835-1836. *SHC*.

²² Letter from Elizabeth Thowgood (Ellis) Munford, Richmond, Va. To Mrs. Frances J. Hughes, July 27th, 1846. Montague family papers 1808-1839, *VHS*.

²³ *A Narrative of the Life and Labors of the Rev. G. W. Offley, a Colored Man, and Local Preacher* (Hartford, Conn., 1860), cited in *Five Black Lives: The Autobiographies Venture Smith, James Mars, William Grimes, The Rev G. W. Offley, James L. Smith* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), p. 135.

William George Matton, presiding elder of the Methodist Episcopal Church in North Carolina, wrote that ‘while Bro Rawlings, was preaching in our own Church recently built, and paid for, a man, presented a pistol at him, through the open window, and released him to heaven. He was subsequently arrested, and committed for trial, but such was the Ku Klux influence and the sympathy of the people for that sort of thing; that the Grand jury decided that was not a breach of the peace, and misdemeanour, and threw out the bill’.²⁴ Although this incident occurred after emancipation, it demonstrates the volatile reaction of Southern whites to ministers who preached messages they disapproved of. White ministers in the late antebellum South faced similar threats if they began to preach ideas or messages perceived to be attacking slavery.

The denominational schisms eased the pressure on Southern churches. Whilst the pressures on Southern white ministers eased, Northern white ministers who travelled to the South seeking employment frequently found themselves accused of abolitionism and helping to bring about the splits within the evangelical churches. When trying to become acquainted with ministers in the Episcopal Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, William George Matton, the presiding elder of the Northern Methodist Episcopal Church in North Carolina, found himself assailed by a Southern clergyman who read out ‘a garbled statement, setting forth the gross wickedness of the Gen Confce of 1844, and the dishonest effort, of our “Apostate and depraved” Church, to robb the aged preachers of the hard earned pittance which they had worn themselves out by desire’. Matton however, ‘refused to notice [the attack] as being beneath the notice of a christian minister properly endorsed by his Church’ but commented that ‘Brother Wells then asked me to pray, which I did, and subsequently we often met as friends’.²⁵

It is possible that the Southern clergyman felt obliged to grill Matton over his beliefs on slavery, but did not really seek to force him out from the South, especially as Matton did not move to the South until 1859, fifteen years after the schisms. While it could be argued that Matton placated the Southern clergyman over these fears, the fact that he ignored the argument rather than disputed it starts to dispel this notion.

²⁴ William George Matton papers, 1859-1887. *Duke*.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

Instead what may have placated the clergyman is that Matton's ministry 'was designed to be directed to the white-people...the Conference having sent, Brother Miller, to work among the Colored people'.²⁶

Suspensions against white ministers stirring up anti-slavery sentiments in the South, however, were not entirely unjustified or brought about purely due to fear and paranoia. Some ministers genuinely tried to introduce anti-slavery sentiments into the South, often through various abolitionist pamphlets and tracts. In a letter to the Rev Amos, Daniel Worth wrote that:

when at the north I brought home with me fifty copies of "The Impending Crisis", a work on slavery written by a young man, H. R. Helper, a native of North Carolina a few miles from where I am now writing. This is an able work (perhaps you have seen it). These I have mainly sold and in the course of a month expect to send for more. I have done this and it is known all over the country, and I preach more direct & stronger against slavery than ever did Crooks or McBride, yet I remain untouched. McBride gave away a small pamphlet entitled "the ten commandments against slavery", and was sentenced to receive 20 lashes on his bare back; I have disposed of some seventy of the strongest books against slavery that are in existence, and I do not late by hear even a threat.²⁷

Although Worth was not punished by Southern society in this instance, he was eventually forced to leave North Carolina in 1860 after considerable trouble with the law in connection with his anti-slavery activities.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Letter to Rev Amos, Jan 23, 1859, Daniel Worth Papers. *SHC*. Hinton Rowan Helper's book, *The Impending Crisis of the South* caused tremendous controversy within the slaveholding states, provoking fierce and hostile attacks from Southern politicians and newspapers. See David Brown, 'Attacking Slavery from Within: The Making of *The Impending Crisis of the South*', *Journal of Southern History* Vol. 70, No. 3 (August, 2004), pp. 541-576. Worth was a prominent member of the American Missionary Association and was of the last missionaries sent into the slaveholding states before the Civil War. (See Fletcher M. Green, 'Northern Missionary Activities in the South, 1846-1861', *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (May., 1955), pp. 147-172).

Due to the lingering suspicions amongst the Southern elite in the late antebellum period, white evangelical churches, as well as their ministers, were constantly under pressure to prove their pro-slavery credentials. One discussion of the slavery issue in relation to the Methodist church in the South commented that ‘we have repeatedly had occasions to pass certain resolutions...on the vexed issue of slavery, in order to clear ourselves...of being abolitionists, not only in the eyes of our members, but of the state in which we live’. Later on the same discussion examines the onset of abolitionism in the church, asking ‘shall we suffer ourselves to become the dupes of men who, are bent on destroying slavery though its destruction could in this way heaving of the very foundations of the whole social system? Never! never’.²⁸ The suspicions white ministers faced when contemplating converting slaves to Christianity was therefore never far from their minds. Even experienced ministers still commented on the threat posed to them; one such minister who had been with the church twenty one years wrote that ‘I now devote the remnant of my days, to the amelioration of the religious condition of our colored population. In commencing this humble enterprise, it is really consoling to hope as I do, that the very lowliness of the path which I am to tread may alike shield me from the envy and malice of little minds and awaken on my behalf, the kind wishes and cordial encouragements of great ones’.²⁹

As well as the lingering suspicion and fear about the effects of converting slaves to Christianity leading to physical retribution and banishment, evangelical ministers also faced ridicule for undertaking such a mission. Southern whites often hinted that these individuals had ulterior motives. The most frequent suggestion was that white ministers entered into sexual relationships with their congregants. One bawdy poem written in the South prior to 1865 describes a white preacher having a sexual relationship with a slave. While this slave is presumed to be a woman, doubt is thrown on this early on the poem with the lines ‘right in between her thighs, a jet black cock quit[e] thickly had, which maid [sic] his peago [sic] rise’, thus ridiculing the preacher by leaving the slaves’ gender unclear. Once the act has been completed

²⁸ Simon D Taylor Account book 1852-1863 in Thornton Tayloe Perry, West Virginia miscellaneous papers, 1741-1863. Section 6, *VHS*.

²⁹ Letter from John J. Watkins [Matkins?] (unknown location) to The Editor of the Farmville Journal, Oct 16. 1856, Hubard Family Papers, 1741-1953. *SHC*.

another slave tries to enter the room, only to be rebuked by the preacher saying ‘you son of a [w]hore, you hell bred pup of sin’ before going on to say ‘disturb me not, for if you do my sole you will disturb, for I got the sister safely through, a work of righteousness’.³⁰ The work of white ministers was often ridiculed by others, claiming that instead of converting slaves to Christianity, white ministers were seducing those in bondage.

Despite attempts made to placate Southern whites and reassure them of their intentions, white ministers faced suspicion and ridicule in their attempts to convert blacks to Christianity. Physical attacks and expulsion from the South were an ever real possibility for white ministers, who constantly had to state their pro-slavery beliefs to defend themselves. Such a demand meant that white Southern ministers reacted with hostility when they met their Northern counterparts within the slave states, as associating with them could have led to acts of retribution. However, the fact that these evangelicals continued to preach to blacks in the face of opposition indicates their belief in the cause.

The preaching of white evangelicals compared with that of black preachers

For most licensed black ministers who preached within the biracial and independent African American churches in the late antebellum South, the messages of obedience and subservience they taught were forced upon them by white society. Whilst some genuinely believed in the messages, were seduced by the possibility of financial gain or manumission or coerced due to the threat of reprisal, most were extremely reluctant to teach a message they knew would be rejected by the African American community. Few white ministers needed to be enticed to preach such a message, however, frequently arguing that obedience and subservience were essential for slaves who wanted to lead a Christian life. Such a message, however, was not delivered blindly. White ministers, especially missionaries who preached to slaves on the plantations, faced opposition from blacks when promoting obedience and subservience. Whilst some continued regardless of any protest, others listened to the

³⁰ Poem contained in the Young Allen Papers, 1783-1927. *SHC*.

complaints of slaves and adapted their sermons so that their message was more palatable, thus illustrating their devotion to the cause.

Following the denominational schisms, white ministers, who had already come to see slavery as a potentially benevolent institution, focused strongly on the themes of obedience and subservience in their sermons to the enslaved. These sermons were heavily influenced by planters, either directly or indirectly, as white preachers sought to allay fears of religious instruction inciting insurrection. However, white ministers, due to their acclimatisation to the institution of slavery, had begun to accept more readily the idea that African Americans needed close supervision to prevent them falling back into idle and heathenish ways. In the interviews of former slaves, the issue of obedience occurs frequently when talking about white Christianity. One interviewee, John Young, recalled that ‘after de regular service, de preacher would always say somethin’ to us dat went like dis: ‘Niggahs and wenches, de only way to get to heaven is to serve your old master and mistress and your young master and mistress. Act towards them just as you did before you wuz free. Otherwise yo’ll goin’ to regret it all de days of your life after death’’.³¹ Even visitors to the antebellum South noted the frequency with which the gospel of obedience was espoused. English minister, Rev. J. Balme commented that:

I have been intimately acquainted with the religious opportunities of the slaves, and in the constant habit of hearing the sermons which are preached to them. And I solemnly affirm that during the forty years of my residence and observation in this line, I never heard a single one of these sermons, but what was taken up with the obligations and duties of slaves to their masters. Indeed, I never heard a sermon to slaves, but what made obedience to masters by the slaves the fundamental and supreme law of religion.³²

³¹ John I. Young, in Rawick., (ed.), *The American Slave: Supplement, Series 1 – Volume 5: Indiana and Ohio Narratives* (accessed 14 Feb 2008). In the narratives of former slaves 106 interviewees referred to the sermons they heard from white ministers. Fifty-nine of those interviewees recalled that the primary message of the sermon focused on obedience to the master.

³² Rev. J. R. Balme, *American States, Churches and Slavery* (Edinburgh: William P. Nimms, 1862), p. 40.

Sermons that focused on the duty of slave obedience to master and mistress were frequently backed with Biblical passages. Presbyterian minister John McLees kept records of the Biblical passages used in his sermons to slaves, a number of which referred to the danger of not confessing to your sins. A sin referred to in more detail was that of idleness; one sermon was based on Matthew 20:6 which stated that ‘and about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle?’.³³ The use of Biblical passages was a way white ministers could justify the doctrine of obedience, not only to their slave congregants but also to themselves, especially if the doctrine of obedience had been pressed onto them by planters.

As well as preaching about obedience in the abstract, white evangelicals also focused on specific ways slaves should obey their masters. One of the most common was in castigating slaves stealing from their planter. A number of former slaves recalled that ‘when the white preacher come he preach and pick up his Bible and claim he gittin the text right out from the good Book and he preach: ‘The Lord say, don’t you niggers steal chickens from your missus. Don’t you steal YOUR MASTER’S hawgs.’ That would be all he preach’.³⁴ White evangelicals would also remind slaves in the congregation why they had been enslaved, arguing that their inherently wicked nature left them unsuited for freedom. Writing after her escape from slavery, Harriet Jacobs commented that whenever she attended a white church the minister always began with ‘you [the slaves] are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil. ’Tis the devil who tempts you. God is angry with you, and will surely punish you, if you don’t forsake your wicked ways’.³⁵ Whilst Jacobs’ experiences could have been exaggerated to appeal to the abolitionist cause, other African Americans recalled similar experiences. Former slave Minnie Davis commented that when she attended a white church, the preacher constantly said that ‘Niggers were born to be slaves’.³⁶ The tone of these sermons focused on the

³³ John McLees papers. *Caroliana*. Matthew 20:6 in *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 28.

³⁴ Richard Carruthers, ‘Ex-Slave Stories’ in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave Volume 4: Texas Narratives, Parts 1 and 2* (accessed 31 Jan 2008) (capitals in original).

³⁵ Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (London: Hodson and Son, 22, Portugal Street, Lincoln’s Inn, 1862), p. 66.

³⁶ Minnie Davis, ‘Plantation Life as Viewed by an Ex-Slave’, in Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: Supplement, Series 1 – Volume 5: Indiana and Ohio Narratives* (accessed 31 Jan 2008).

childlike nature of slaves, giving credence to the fact that white ministers had internalised the ideas of the slave system.

White preachers remained reasonably content to constantly remind slaves of the values of obedience. The reaction of the slave population to these teachings, however, was often hostile. Slaves soon realised when the sermon of the white preacher turned into what they saw as the mouthpiece of the planter, and often refused to listen. Examining the response of slaves to white preachers, Genovese comments that ‘let the record show that good white men in good faith did good deeds. Let it also show that much of the time the slaves, ungrateful as usual, fell asleep’.³⁷ Some slaves ridiculed the sermons of white preachers. Harry Tonsler, a Virginian born slave recalled that as there was no room for slaves and free blacks in the neighbourhood church they sat outside. Every so often the white preacher would stick his head out of the window and yell but instead of straining to hear, the gathered blacks would mock him. According to Tonsler, ‘sometimes ole nigger would git up outside an’ start in to preachin’ right along wid preacher Woodson. Softlike, of course, wid a lot of handwavin’ an’ twistin’ of his mouth widdout makin’ no noise. We would sit up an’ listen to him an’ laugh when he say just what the white preacher say’.³⁸

Ignoring the ministrations of the white preacher was one way slaves could react to sermons of obedience. Some slaves, however, directly challenged the teachings of white ministers or questioned their motives. Writing to his master, one slave asked him why he ‘allways preach to the white folks and keep your back to us’, questioning as to whether God directed the master ‘to the white folks constantly or is it because these give you money’.³⁹ Other white ministers found themselves frequently challenged in their ministrations by slaves who sought answers to questions. Former slave Beverly Jones recalled during one church meeting a slave called Uncle Silas stood up during the white preacher’s sermon and asked:

³⁷ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 207.

³⁸ Interview with Horace Tonsler of Charlottesville, Virginia, in Perdue et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 286, cited in Schweiger, *Gospel*, p. 16.

³⁹ Addendum to letter written by John Fort Fr., Wayne County, to Hugh Brown, North Carolina Robeson County, 26th June, 1821, in Neill Brown Letters, 1792-1867. *Duke*.

Is us slaves gonna be free in Heaven?’ According to Jones ‘de preacher stopped an’ looked at Uncle Silas like he wanta kill him ’cause no one ain’t ’sposed to say nothin’ ’ceptin ‘Amen’ whilst he was preachin’’. When Silas repeated his question ‘Old white preacher pult out his handkerchief an’ wiped de sweat from his face. ‘Jesus says come to Me ye who are free fum sin an’ I will give you salvation,’ he replied. ‘Gonna give us freedom ’long wid salvation?’ demanded Silas. ‘De Lawd gives an’ de Lawd takes away, an’ he dat is widdout sin is gonna have life everlastin’, preached the preacher. Den he went ahead preachin’, fast-like, widdout payin’ no ’ten-tion to Uncle Silas...[but] Uncle Silas wouldn’t sit down; stood dere de res of de service.’⁴⁰

Associations or churches were occasionally petitioned by groups of slaves, asking for answers to questions unrelated to slavery. One group asked a Baptist association whether ‘is it scriptural, that members, worthy of excommunication, should receive that censure publicly? and if it be, what scripture authorizes that practice?’.⁴¹ Challenges could also be made by groups of slaves to decisions made by the white minister. When a white minister in Kentucky disciplined a black member the congregation he subsequently received ‘a paper...read from Alex Field of the colored portion of the church, stating that a portion of the colored branch of the church felt ag[g]rieved in relation to action of the committee’.⁴²

Even well respected white preachers received either no response or very hostile responses to their sermons from slave congregations. Charles Colcock Jones based one of his sermons at the Midway Congregational Church in Liberty County, Georgia, on Onesimus, the slave who ran away from Philemon in the Bible. According to Jones, ‘when I insisted on *fidelity and obedience* as Christian virtues in servants, and upon the authority of Paul, CONDEMNED THE PRACTICE OF RUNNING AWAY, *one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off*

⁴⁰ Beverly Jones (b. 1848), quoted in Perdue, et al., eds., *Weevils in the Wheat*, pp. 184-85, cited in Schweiger, *Gospel*, p. 28.

⁴¹ Savannah River (Ga. And S. C.) Baptist Association, *Minutes, 1813* (n.p., n.d.), 5, cited in Bailey, ‘Protestantism’, pp. 456-7.

⁴² Owensboro First Baptist Church, *Minutes*, October 6, 1849, cited in Bailey, ‘Protestantism’, p. 457.

with themselves; and those who remained looked anything but satisfied with the preacher or his doctrine'.⁴³ Yet instead of dismissing this act as another example of how unruly slaves were, Jones debated this issues with a number of them after the end of the service, with some complaining that Jones preached only 'to please the master'.⁴⁴

Incidents such as Jones' reaction to slaves walking out indicate that some white ministers were willing to listen to slaves and adapt their sermons. Although the overall message of obedience was unlikely to be changed, white ministers who listened to the feedback from slaves attempted to deliver their point in a way that was subtler and more likely to be palatable to the slave congregants. Webber argues that 'planters and missionaries should not be thought of as outright or self-conscious hypocrites. A reading of their diaries and letters leaves the firm impression that few plantation authorities were being devious when they taught slaves that God had ordained slavery. Rather they were only teaching blacks what they themselves believed'.⁴⁵ Since white evangelicals often believed what they were teaching, they did have a sense of limited respect for African American slaves. This limited sense of respect helped improve the position of blacks within the antebellum biracial churches, but stopped far short of anything approaching equality. In addition, by believing in what they preached to African Americans, ministers also developed relationships with slaves through responses to their preaching. Irons argues that white missionaries in Virginia could not be responsive to slaves without cultivating personal relationships with them. While these relationships were not free from white perceptions of racial superiority, they were nevertheless informal. White evangelicals felt they had to win the affections of enslaved men and women in order to accomplish their spiritual goals.⁴⁶

⁴³ Cited in Rev. Edwin H. Nevin, *The Religion of Christ at war with American Slavery; or, Reasons for Separating from the Presbyterian Church, (O.S.)* (Cleveland: Steam Press of Sanford & Hayward, 1849), p. 30 (Capitals and italics in original).

⁴⁴ Charles C. Jones, *Tenth Annual Report of the Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in Liberty County, Georgia* (Savannah: Office of P. G. Thomas, 1845), p. 24, cited in Clarke, *Wrestlin' Jacob*, p. 40.

⁴⁵ Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, p. 56.

⁴⁶ Irons, *Origins*, p. 38.

The reaction of Jones to slaves walking out during his preaching was not universal among white missionaries. Many white ministers who experienced the recalcitrance and reluctance of slaves listening to ideas of obedience regarded it merely as another example of the naturally sinful black state. These ministers reasoned that it was their duty to persist with messages of obedience rather than change to a less prosaic form of teaching. In doing so, however, the chances of ministers developing a gospel of spiritual equality with their enslaved congregants became even more unlikely. By responding with hostility to sermons that dictated how slaves should lead their lives, African Americans often lost the opportunity of entering into a more dynamic relationship with white ministers.

It is worth noting that the slave reaction to white missionaries was not always one of hostility. Sernett argues that slaves developed feelings of gratitude towards white missionaries who coped with the views of Southern society in order to preach to the enslaved. While Sernett fails to acknowledge that slaves had no problems rejecting any teaching they thought was either hypocritical or replicated the views of the master, he is correct in stating that some slaves did respect their white religious leaders.⁴⁷ Former slave Rosie McGillery commented that her master always made his slaves go to church every Sunday, but the white preacher ‘preached to the negro every time he could and I just loved that white man. Boss, that preacher he was always telling us about the little babe in the manger’.⁴⁸ Although the content of the white preacher’s sermon is not mentioned in detail, the lack of reference to messages of obedience and subservience suggests that such a message, if given, was presented in such a way that it was palatable to the slave congregants.

White ministers also recorded the positive reactions that their preachings had amongst the slave population. The Reverend William Hill, recorded in his diary that he:

heard remarks from different men relative to the destitution of
preaching particularly to the blacks in the bounds of the

⁴⁷ Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism*, p. 90.

⁴⁸ Rose McGillery in George P. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement 2 – Volume 7: Texas Narratives, Part 6* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972). *The African American Experience*, Greenwood Publishing Group (accessed 7 February, 2008).

association...Hearing from Bro L. Ayer that his servants had a house in which they met 3 nights in each week for worship. 3 of his men read the scriptures and exhort and pray with their fellow servants – I agreed to preach to them after tea a servant (the leader) met me at the door with a candle and conducted me to their house of worship, where I found all the servants collected, singing – I preached during the service – they were remarkable attentive after leaving the pulpit several came to me and expressed their thankfulness for the service rendered.⁴⁹

Despite the respect some white ministers managed to generate from amongst the enslaved, others were castigated for owning, punishing, and even raping African Americans. One biography of a slave who escaped the South told of white ministers who ‘live in open adultery with colored women’ and ‘tie colored men and women in cellars and whip them secretly until their backs were all dripping with blood’.⁵⁰

By the late antebellum South most white evangelical ministers believed that African Americans were intellectually and culturally inferior to them and that only reminders about the values of obedience would ensure that blacks did not fall back into idle ways. Many ministers were so confident of this idea that they refused to change the tone of their sermons, even when slaves reacted strongly to this message. But for ministers willing to listen to the complaints of slaves, there emerged a sense of respect between the two groups and some white preachers were well thought of among the slave community.

The respect of white ministers towards black religious leaders

Before the denominational splits of the 1840s, white ministers encouraged a number of slaves to preach or take on other roles within the evangelical churches. Part of the reason for this was that white ministers were genuinely impressed by the oratorical

⁴⁹ Diary entry 24 November, 1846, William P. Hill Diary 1846-1849. *SHC*.

⁵⁰ Aaron, *The Light and Truth of Slavery. Aaron's History*, p. 15. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/aaron/menu.html> (accessed 24 September, 2009).

skills of some blacks. White ministers also realised, however, that black preachers and ministers could be used to convert other slaves to Christianity. While differences in language and culture hindered white ministers from attracting slaves to church, blacks had no such difficulties and could easily identify with an African American congregation. Despite utilising black preachers and ministers in order to bring slaves into the evangelical fold, white ministers developed a genuine sense of respect towards these figures. Throughout the antebellum South, records exist of white ministers who noted their positive experiences with their coloured counterparts. Baptist pioneer Hosea Holcombe travelled and preached at camp meetings and revivals in Alabama with a black preacher called Job. Holcombe later recalled that ‘few better preachers were to be found in Alabama in those days of Job. He lived the Christian and died the saint. He was generally loved and respected by all who knew him’. In addition to Holcombe’s recollections, one of the leading white Methodist ministers in the state, Bayliss E. Grace, recalled that Job was pious, devout, and eloquent, and that ‘those who came to scoff, remained to pray’.⁵¹ Holcombe and Grace’s recollections illustrate that not only did Job impress his white counterparts but also white members of the congregation who turned up heavily sceptical about the idea of a slave preaching. The sense of enthusiasm black religious leaders could generate, both in their language and religious fervour, proved to be infectious for both blacks and whites.

One of the best case studies examining the benevolent relationship that could occur between white and black evangelical ministers is that of black Presbyterian minister John Chavis. Educated at Orange Presbytery in the early nineteenth century, Chavis ministered throughout North Carolina in the 1820s and 1830s. During this time Chavis reported on his experiences, commenting in one letter from 1832 ‘his difficulties & embarrassments in consequence of an act passed by the last session of the legislature of this State, forbidding free people of Color to preach’.⁵² Yet during this period Chavis continued to minister throughout the state. In the early years of his ministry Chavis’ route was proscribed by the Presbytery; between 1819 and 1838, however, Chavis was given permission to choose his own. Even after his death

⁵¹ Bayliss E. Grace, *My Autobiography*, Manuscript Division, Southern History Department, Birmingham Public Library, cited in Fallin Jr., *Uplifting the People*, p. 26.

⁵² Minutes of Orange Presbytery, Raleigh, N.C., April 21, 1832. William Henry Ruffner papers 1848-1907, VSL.

the Presbytery recorded that they would ‘cause to be paid to the widow of John Chavis \$40 a year during her natural life’.⁵³ Chavis was therefore protected and given reasonably free reign by white evangelicals even during the period of turmoil caused by Nat Turner’s rebellion, when the activities of black preachers were severely curtailed by white society. This, as well as the fact that the Presbytery offered to support Chavis’ widow after his death, illustrates that white evangelicals valued his skills.

The extent to which black preachers were respected is best illustrated by the fact that on occasions white ministers defended their coloured counterparts against laws introduced to restrict their activities. The most notable occasion of this was in 1822, the same year as the Vesey rebellion, when William Winans, a white minister in Mississippi, led an evangelical attack on a new law code designed to restrict black Christianity. The code, introduced by the popular governor of Mississippi George Poindexter, placed a number of prohibitions on black worship, such as restricting the rights of slaves to worship by themselves and demanding that slave services be conducted by a white minister. Winans wrote that ‘such a wanton curtailment of the religious privileges of the Slaves...aroused very general and strong feelings of opposition in all Christian Communities in the State; and it was deemed proper that this opposition should be as to bear in a manner most forcible with politicians’.⁵⁴ Due to his vigorous preaching at camp meetings denouncing the code the state legislature revised it along the lines Winans proposed. According to Sparks, when Poindexter lost his campaign to be elected to Congress in the same year, he placed the blame firmly at Winans and the other evangelicals who had thwarted his plans to restrict black worship.⁵⁵

Winans’ campaign was not the only one that sought to repeal restrictive laws against black religious leaders. In 1863, a group of white Baptists petitioned the Georgia legislature to repeal a section of new legal code which prohibited ‘any church, society or other body or any persons to grant any license or other authority to any

⁵³ Minutes of Orange Presbytery, Milton, N.C., April 16, 1840, William Henry Ruffner papers 1848-1907, *VSL*. In the minutes of a meetings from April 14, 1842 it was noted that Chavis’ widow ‘required no aid from the Presbytery’ and it was resolved that ‘no further collections be made for Mrs Chavis till she apply for aid’.

⁵⁴ Winans Autobiography, p. 155, cited in Sparks, ‘Religion’, p. 62.

⁵⁵ Sparks, *On Jordan’s Stormy Banks*, p. 70.

slave or free person of color, to preach, or exhort, of otherwise officiate in church matters'. According to the Baptist petitioners 'cases might arise in which we might feel it our duty as Baptists license a man of color to preach or otherwise officiate in church matters. To grant such license would then be a part of our religion. But the Code of Georgia forbids our acting according to the dictates of our own consciences'.⁵⁶ Although the disputed section of the new code was repealed, it is unclear as to what influence the Baptist petition had on the decision. The fact that some white ministers were willing to oppose authorities in the slave states by supporting black preachers and ministers illustrates the high regard with which some were held.

The respect black religious leaders earned from Southern white society was not just due to the realisation that they were more likely to convert slaves to Christianity, or a reflection of the genuine admiration some engendered because of their eloquence and skill at preaching. The vast majority of Southern white society, whether they were evangelical ministers, slaveholders, or non-slaveholders, genuinely believed that blacks were spiritually equal to whites. Although few in the antebellum South would argue that blacks were equal to whites in terms of their social, legal, and moral status, when it came to their religious status, everyone was considered equal in the eyes of the Lord.

One of the primary reasons behind the idea of spiritual equality was the belief in the common origins of humanity. Curtis Evans argues that this basic religious claim is rooted in Christian tradition and held significant sway over Southern discussions about the status of slaves and their treatment.⁵⁷ Southern white evangelicals were frequently willing to defend the idea of common origins; Thomas Smyth, a white minister from Charleston published his book *Unity of the Human Races* in 1851 to defend the Biblical account of creation after Louis Agassiz, a professor at Harvard, proposed his hypothesis of multiple origins for the races.⁵⁸ According to Smyth, the

⁵⁶ Reprinted in Lewis G. Jordan, *Negro Baptist History, U.S.A., 1750-1930* (Nashville, Tenn.: The Sunday School Publishing Board, National Baptist Convention, n.d.), pp.103-4, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 195.

⁵⁷ Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 17-18.

⁵⁸ For a discussion on Agassiz's hypothesis, see Edward Lurie, 'Louis Agassiz and the Races of Man', *Isis* Vol. 45, No. 3 (Sept., 1954), pp. 227-242. Lurie's discussion of the efforts of Samuel George

covert motive for this attack on the book of Genesis was due to a desire to degrade African Americans in order to justify barbaric treatment, whereas the Genesis account made ‘every man a brother’.⁵⁹

The promotion of spiritual equality in the late antebellum South was also supported by the idea that the European style of Christianity would eventually be replaced by the African Christian Church. In the eighteenth century Swedish philosopher Emmanuel Swedenborg theorised over the historical sequence of ‘true churches’, in that one type of church defined the evolution of religion within each historical era. While the European Christian Church was the most recent of these ‘true churches’, Swedenborgians argued that its dominance would soon end. During the nineteenth century, British and American Swedenborgians were influential in promoting a millenarian view of African destiny. According to these scholars, blacks were the race God had endowed with the greatest aptitude for Christianity. While whites were naturally too cerebral, self-seeking and aggressive to meet the standards set from the Sermon on the Mount, Africans had the believing, affectionate, and altruistic temperament that was perfect for the flowering of Christian faith and virtue.⁶⁰ Hence the prophecy made in the book of Psalms, that ‘Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God’, was interpreted by Swedenborgians that the redemption of Africa would lead to the Kingdom of God on earth.⁶¹ Although the Swedenborg church was not a dominant denomination in American society their belief that black Christianity would eventually dominate over white Christianity grew from the idea that both races were spiritually equal, an idea shared by churches and denominations in both the North and the South.

Morton and Josiah Clarke Nott shows the idea of the multiple origin of races was present in America from the early nineteenth century. While Nott, Morton’s student, was a Southerner raised in South Carolina, Morton was born and raised in Philadelphia, and subsequently studied medicine in Edinburgh and Paris before moving to Harvard.

⁵⁹ Smyth, *Works*, 8:26, 75, 136, 338, cited in E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture 1795-1860* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1978), p. 152. Christopher Luse’s recent article examines the way in which Southern clergymen attacked the emerging ideas of scientific racism. (Christopher A. Luse, ‘Slavery’s Champions Stood at Odds: Polygenesis and the Defense of Slavery’, *Civil War History*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Dec., 2007), pp. 379-412.)

⁶⁰ George M. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of the Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 62.

⁶¹ Psalms, 68:31, in *The Bible*, p. 675.

The growth of paternalism also helped promote the idea that blacks were equal to whites in the eyes of God. Lacy Ford argues that the system of racial control involved three main conventions, the first of which being that slaves must be recognised as fellow human beings, regardless of any assumed inferiority.⁶² Similarly Genovese contends that while paternalism ‘developed as a way of mediating irreconcilable class and racial conflicts’, it ‘recognized the slaves’ humanity...[and] their free will’.⁶³ Thus by the late antebellum period ideas about the equality of slaves to whites in terms of both their humanity and their spiritually were present not just in the minds of white ministers but also in the minds of slaveholders about how slaves should be treated.

The strength of belief in spiritual equality was such that customary racial etiquette was sometimes overlooked. When visiting New Orleans in the 1830s, Harriet Martineau commented that during the celebration of Mass in the Roman Catholic Cathedral, she saw communicants ‘of every shade of complexion’ worshipping side by side, ‘from the fair Scotchwoman or German to the jet-black pure African’.⁶⁴ Similarly in Episcopal and Methodist churches, Kenneth Bailey comments that ‘it was not uncommon for blacks and whites to receive the Lord’s Supper at the same altar at the same time’, and that during Protestant ceremonies ‘handshakes between black and white believers were fairly common’.⁶⁵

For Southern whites, however, the notion of spiritual equality created a number of social problems. Most pressing was the fear that spiritual equality could lead to a demand for full social equality and emancipation of the enslaved population. According to Irons, white evangelicals tolerated the attempts of black preachers to exercise spiritual leadership prior to the Nat Turner insurrection. The belief that the teachings of black preachers were helping prepare free blacks and slaves for eventual self-governance, but not the possibility of immediate resistance against the planter’s authority, helped allay fears about religious instruction. Following the rebellion, however, the subsequent crackdown on black independent religion, and

⁶² Lacy Ford, ‘Reconfiguring the Old South: “Solving” the Problem of Slavery, 1787-1838’, *Journal of American History* Vol. 95, No. 1 (2008), p. 110.

⁶³ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (3 vols., London, 1838), I, 259, cited in Bailey, ‘Protestantism’, p. 454.

⁶⁵ Bailey, ‘Protestantism’, p. 454.

the rise of paternalistic thought, led to a closer supervision of black religious meetings by white evangelicals. At the same time these changes introduced a question to which Southern whites had no answer. Would there come a time when enslaved men and women had learned the lessons of the master class well enough to deserve freedom?⁶⁶ Such a question did not worry white evangelicals enough to publicly debate the issue, but it remained a constant consideration. Loveland argues some white evangelicals believed that slavery would be abolished either when Christianity had prepared both slaves and their masters for the consequences of emancipation, or when the working of divine power intervened. They also believed, however, that such a process would not happen for at least fifty to one hundred years.⁶⁷ Thus the dilemma of eventual salvation for slaves through their religious education was one white evangelicals could comfortably ignore for the present.

The notion of spiritual equality, coupled with admiration for the oratorical ability of black religious leaders generated a sense of respect for them from white evangelical ministers. This respect was furthered by the cultural crossover that had developed between slaves and Southern whites which gave whites a greater appreciation of African religious rituals. Whilst slaves adapted white Christianity to fit in with their rituals, white evangelicals began to adopt some slave traditions and styles of worship into their own services. The process began in the eighteenth century; in the camp meetings of the first Great Awakening the mixed use of both chanted sermons and slave spirituals shows a blending of cultures between whites and blacks. Similarly in the early nineteenth century evangelicals broke with traditional church music and developed alternatives, having been influenced by the syncretism of sound in the revivalist atmosphere.

In addition to the cultural crossover that took place in the evangelical church, other examples of syncretism also developed between African religions and Christian denominations not known for their evangelical style, such as Catholicism. Randall Miller notes that in lower Louisiana, slaves regarded Catholic priests as healers who could counteract the curses African religious specialists placed on them. One slave who attributed his girl's sickness to sorcery called in a Catholic priest to counter the

⁶⁶ Irons, *Origins*, pp. 12 and 115.

⁶⁷ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, p. 207.

witch's arts, although the outcome of this procedure is not recorded.⁶⁸ The exchanges in culture illustrate that as well as the idea of spiritual equality, Southern whites appreciated the style of African worship to the extent of incorporating some of the methods into their own services.

Not all elements of African religion merged with white evangelicalism. Some elements were seized upon by whites as arguments for slaves' uncivilised behaviour, because of their exuberant nature. These elements, however, were also appreciated by whites because of their effectiveness in converting slaves to Christianity. Criticism was therefore rather muted and instead a begrudging appreciation developed. One of the most common objections to African American Christianity was its boisterous nature. Complaints about shouting, loud singing and other such activities were one reason why African Americans were permitted to hold their own services. This enabled whites to worship without interruption. Not all Southern whites objected to this emotionalism shown by slaves and free blacks. Planter William Valentine commented that:

we know all persons are not alike. People differ in temperament, feeling, sympathy, and tenderness; also in intelligence and refinement. The gaining [?] want to religious feeling will be in accordance with...these. The humble, illiterate, ignorant class should be allowed to enjoy religion in their own way lest check be put to their religion...The difference between the negroes and illiterate ignorant whites in their respect, is simply in the degrees of refinement and their respective natures and...manners. One hundred years ago in this country, the whites generally from what I can learn differed but little from the negro now in their religious fervor.⁶⁹

Mary Boykin Chesnut, the daughter of a planter and wife to a pro-slavery senator, displayed a similar reaction to the language and style of preaching from a black preacher, illustrating how whites were simultaneously amused by the language of black religious leaders but impressed by the reaction they had on the crowd. Writing

⁶⁸ Miller, 'Slaves and Southern Catholicism', p. 142.

⁶⁹ Diary entry Nov. Tues 4th, 1851, William D. Valentine Diary, 1837-1855, *SHC*.

in her diary when Jim Nelson, the slave driver on the plantation was asked to lead the prayers, Chesnut commented that ‘there was literally nothing in what he said. The words had no meaning at all...The negroes sobbed and shouted and swayed backward and forward...clapping their hands and responding in shrill tones, ‘Yes, my God!’ ‘Jesus!’ ‘Aeih!’ ‘Savior!’ ‘Bless de Lord, amen - &c.’ It was all a little too exciting for me. I would very much have like to shout too’.⁷⁰

Despite the many ways in which black preachers were shown respect by their white counterparts, such respect was not always sincere. Whilst white preachers publicly supported their coloured counterparts, especially in meetings where such individuals were present, privately they often resented their presence within the church hierarchy. Matton wrote regarding one Conference meeting where the participants had ‘an exciting time over a Colored preacher who was recommended and then vilified in his absence, by the brother who bought up the paper and of course he was not admitted. It appeared afterwards that the charges were unfounded, and the case was reconsidered but the brother determined to work and bring such testimonials as to put the mater beyond all question’.⁷¹ Whilst appreciated for being able to attract African Americans to their congregations, white ministers were still dismissive of black religious leaders, regarding them as inferior, in terms of their intellect, their style of preaching, their sense of morality, and their hierarchy within the biracial and independent black churches.

‘Where the blind leads the blind’: the perceived inferiority of the black preacher

Examining the moral and religious state of African Americans at the end of the Civil War, John Paris, a Methodist clergyman from North Carolina commented on the fact that a number of blacks became preachers without being able to read. Paris went on to comment that ‘where the blind leads the blind, we are apt to find both of them in the ditch’. Although able to attract ‘an anxious and giddy crowd’ of African

⁷⁰ Cited White, ‘Veiled Testimony’, p. 252.

⁷¹ William George Matton papers, 1859-1887. *Duke*.

American congregants, the ministers continued to maintain ‘as religious truths, some of the most glaring absurdities’.⁷²

Paris’ assertions were hardly unique. The most common ways in which white ministers attempted to show that their black counterparts were inferior was through alleged differences in intellect. Frequent comments were made about the illiteracy of black religious leaders, the rough language used in their sermons, and their insufficient knowledge of scripture. Although this supposed difference in intellect had not always been considered important, the development of the planter aristocracy in some areas in the slaveholding states pushed the issue of ministerial education to the forefront of society. Black preachers and ministers could still be used to convert slaves to Christianity and bring them into the churches, but an increasing division emerged between coloured religious leaders and their white counterparts.

In the early nineteenth century, evangelical denominations did not place a heavy emphasis on the education of either white or black preachers. Raboteau comments that during the first Great Awakening neither Baptists nor Methodists insisted on well educated clergy. If a converted slave showed a talent for exhorting, he exhorted and not only to black audiences. As far back as 1766, a missionary from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts reported that in Brunswick, Virginia, ‘new light Baptists are very numerous in the southern parts of this parish – The most illiterate among them are their Teachers even Negroes speak in their Meetings’.⁷³ To the congregants in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the oratorical skill of their preacher was more important than their literary or intellectual ability.

For a number of Baptist churches, who remained independent and untied to denominational conferences, unlike the Methodist churches, the practice of valuing preachers for their oratorical ability rather than their intellectual skills continued throughout the antebellum period. Former slave Eugenia Weatherall recalled the

⁷² Rev. John Paris, *The Moral and Religious Status of the African Race In The Southern States*, John Paris Papers, 1828-1871. *SHC*.

⁷³ Jernegan, p. 515, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 134.

experiences of Uncle Ned, saying that ‘he was a Baptist preacher and as good a one as you’ve ever heard. He couldn’t read or write but one of the women on the place would read him his text and parts of the Bible and he would remember it and would preach grand sermons, a whole lot better than they do now days’.⁷⁴ Some Methodist ministers tried to retain a similar framework to that of the Baptist churches but were often unable to do so, as their state or regional conferences frequently proscribed the prerequisite for black religious leaders before they were allowed to preach before a congregation. Nevertheless the belief was retained amongst some evangelical churches that literacy and intellect were not necessarily crucial skills for black preachers and ministers.

In contrast to the evangelical idea of valuing oration over intellect, other denominations in the South had far stricter rules regarding the required education for their preachers. Miller notes that Roman Catholics in the South required their preachers to be well trained and educated, which limited any opportunities for slaves to preach. To officiate at a Catholic mass required copious training in both the liturgy and Latin, meaning that no one, black or white, could become a Catholic priest by sheer belief or oratorical ability. When some masters encouraged black slaves to preach it ‘naturally excluded the Catholic priest from control or direction of the slaves’ religious concerns. As a result Southern bishops bitterly opposed such practices, fearing the slave preachers would corrupt Catholic teachings’.⁷⁵

No universal agreement, therefore, existed between denominations in the South as to the necessary education required for black preachers. As well as the denominational differences regarding the level of intelligence and education required to preach, variations occurred both between and within the states. The distinction arises when comparing the older seaboard slave states, such as Virginia and South Carolina, with those more towards the frontier, such as Kentucky. Blassingame argues that among the Baptist and Methodist denominations black preachers who were noted for their ‘piety, conservatism, obsequiousness, and preaching skill’ were respected and allowed to preach to biracial congregations. He goes on to note that ‘the rough

⁷⁴ Eugenia Weatherall, in Rawick., (ed.), *The American Slave: Supplement, Series 1 – Volume 5: Indiana and Ohio Narratives* (accessed 19 February 2008).

⁷⁵ Miller, ‘Southern Catholicism’, pp. 133 and 143.

egalitarianism of the Southern frontier, the ecumenicalism growing out of the paucity of ministers, the sincerely held belief in the brotherhood of all in Christ, and the drama inherent in a unique show, all contributed to the acceptance of black preachers by whites'.⁷⁶ The problem with Blassingame's argument, however, is that he generalises over the entire South. For the more recent slave states the skills of the white preacher focused on the ability to survive. In comparison, the older, more well established slave states had developed a social system of planter aristocracy that began to demand more from their ministers, in terms of their education and intelligence. As a result the 'rough egalitarianism' fell by the wayside. Instead a gap emerged between white ministers who devoted their time to studying and writing, relying on their education to survive within an aristocratic slave society, and black preachers who continued to focus on the rhetoric of their sermons and their oratorical skills.

Where Blassingame's argument is germane is in the recently established states. In Kentucky, where slavery had developed later than it had done in the eastern seaboard states, different demands were made of their religious leaders compared with the older, more established states. White preachers did not have to prove their intellect and instead were chosen due to other skills. According to Boles white preachers in Kentucky were common men who 'could not parse Greek, but they could ride horseback, shoot, chew and spit tobacco, fight with the best of their parishoners, and if rowdies dared to disrupt a service, these ministers could apply a muscular Christianity to secure order'.⁷⁷ Travelling to Lexington, Kentucky, in the 1840s, the Virginia Baptist preacher William Broaddus noted the stark differences between the two states, commenting that in his new location 'my salary was too high, my sermons too pointed, my language too lofty, my hair too long, my visits too seldom, my reproofs too severe, my discipline too rigid, my wife's cap too fine, my daughter's dress too costly, my sons too high minded, my horse too fat, & a thousand other things had been conjured up to show that I was not the man for

⁷⁶ Blassingame, *Slave Community*, p. 92. Blassingame's further claim that within the slave states the 'low population density and low rate of urbanization...placed limits on the number of church buildings and clergymen in the region' (*Slave Community*, p. 92) fails to differentiate between the older slave states where such a situation was not so common and the ones into which slavery was a relatively recent development.

⁷⁷ Boles, *Religion*, p. 14.

Lexington'.⁷⁸ With less demand for education and literary ability in the newer slave states, the gap between white and black preachers was relatively small. Black preachers remained respected for their oratorical skill but their standing was not diminished by any presumed intellectual shortcomings.

By comparison, in long established states, the notion of slave ownership had developed into a highly complex code of honour, with planters comparing themselves to members of the aristocracy and arranging the hierarchy of Southern society along these lines. In this situation white ministers often found themselves under close scrutiny, especially if their academic credentials were in doubt. According to E. Brooks Holifield, the growing concern that the ministry might be unable to live up to expectations of Southern society led to a concerted call for "clerical improvement" during the 1840s, especially among Baptists and Methodists, denominations which had previously not worried about the academic qualifications of their ministers. One letter written by a planter in Virginia commented that the time was rapidly coming 'when our congregations will not sit under an uninformed and uneducated ministry'.⁷⁹

White preachers realised the importance of planter criticism regarding their intellectual capacities and responded. The editor of the *Southern Methodist Pulpit* commented in 1851 that 'we must do something towards the improvement of our preachers...or else our people will stray to other pastures. The ministry must be in advance of the people, leaders intellectually and socially as well as spiritually'.⁸⁰ By the 1830s, the establishment of Baptist and Methodist colleges in Virginia illustrates the realisation of the necessity for educated preachers. In the 1850s, over half of those ordained in the Baptist and Methodist churches of Virginia had received some college training.⁸¹ For white ministers, one of the best ways to prove their intellect was to publish their sermons, a process that became increasingly common during the

⁷⁸ William F. Broaddus, (1801-1876), quoted in Moore, ed., "A Nineteenth Century Minister's Problems", cited in Schweiger, *Gospel*, p. 24.

⁷⁹ J. W. M. Williams to Bail Manly, Jr., 10 April 1846, Manly Jr., Papers, U.N.C., Chapel Hill, cited in Holifield, *Gentlemen Theologians*, p. 39.

⁸⁰ C. F. Deems (ed.), *The Southern Methodist Pulpit* 4 (1851): 52, cited in Holifield, *Gentlemen Theologians*, p. 39.

⁸¹ Schweiger, *Gospel*, p. 6. Statistics compiled by Schweiger illustrate that of the generation of preachers ordained between 1850 and 1879, 63 percent of pastors had received some college education, in comparison to 31 percent of preachers ordained between 1830 and 1849. (p. 201.)

late antebellum period. From the 1830s onward, Southern churches sponsored an array of journals that published these sermons. Examples include *The Protestant Episcopal Pulpit* in 1835, *The Southern Preacher* in 1837, *The Southern Baptist Preacher* in 1839, *The Baptist Preacher* in 1842, *The Southern Methodist Pulpit* in 1848, *The Southern Pulpit* in 1853, and *The Methodist Pulpit South* 1853.⁸²

According to Schweiger ‘pastors in late antebellum Virginia could hardly distinguish between schools and prayer meetings. Church leaders endowed education and literary culture with an importance that at times rivaled that of Christian conversion itself’.⁸³ Questions about the intellect of white preachers meant that less license was given to their coloured counterparts who were gifted oratorically but struggled academically. As a result black religious leaders had fewer opportunities to preach.

Even within states that had developed an aristocratic hierarchy the idea that white ministers needed to be intellectually superior was not universally adopted and was generally weaker in more rural areas. In a similar respect to the idea that licensed black ministers in urban areas needed to be able to read in order to preach successfully, white ministers in Southern cities had to be highly educated and behave in a fashion befitting their station in order to meet the expectations of the white elite. According to Holifield, town clergy became openly sensitive to the values and expectations within the urban social hierarchy, and some openly fretted about their position.⁸⁴ When Jeremiah Jeter became the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Richmond, his position in society led him to criticise his wife for her plain dress style, saying that it hurt his pride for her to appear in public in dress ‘out of keeping with her position’.⁸⁵ In rural areas, however where the social hierarchy was not so rigidly enforced, such qualifications were not so necessary. As a result two conflicting images emerged among Southern clergy in the antebellum South. One was the image of a preacher as man embodying the religious sentiments of common folk, distinguished by fervour and commitment. The second was the image of the

⁸² Holifield, *Gentlemen Theologians*, p. 44.

⁸³ Schweiger, *Gospel*, p. 65.

⁸⁴ Holifield, *Gentlemen Theologians*, p. 15. Schweiger also comments that urban ministers became sensitive to the expectations made of them because of the proximity of other churches. Given that in 1850s Richmond it was possible to attend any one of seven Baptist churches without walking too great a distance, ministers who failed to live up to their expectations could soon face a rapidly dwindling congregation. (Schweiger, *Gospel*, p. 35.)

⁸⁵ Jeter, *Recollections of a Long Life*, cited in Schweiger, *Gospel*, p. 37.

minister as a gentleman, exalted and elevated through character, erudition, and professional status.⁸⁶

On some occasions there were fears concerning the quality of preaching of the white ministers in the South. William Hill noted that

‘the more I become acquainted with the preaching of this part of the states, the more [I] am persuaded of the importance of sending them men of intelligence, for it does appear that the most ignorant are those who appear most anxious to be called preachers – it may surely be said of them i.e. the Churches in this section, they are destroyed for lack of knowledge’.⁸⁷

Given Hill’s statement, white preachers who had received more education and were more literate were often less likely to remain in the antebellum South. Despite the denominational schisms, fears lingered over the conversion of slaves to Christianity, and every mission undertaken was scrutinised. White ministers who were less educated or intellectual were more likely to repeat messages of obedience and subservience, as their understanding of the Bible and other, potentially abolitionist tracts and pamphlets, was not as extensive. In contrast those who were better educated and more widely read would be more likely to move away from ideas considered acceptable by Southern society.

White ministers faced problems in justifying their intellectual skill to slaveholding Southern whites. For slaves the task of becoming ordained as a minister was made even more difficult, especially due to the numerous laws enacted throughout the slaveholding states stopping blacks from learning to read. Despite these restrictions, some did learn to read and were on occasions taught by white ministers. Former slave Bill Thomas recalled that ‘somehow or other they always had a cullud man, and he would learn how to read some, and if that man, he got into the church and joined the church, he would baptize the slaves. Some of the white preachers would

⁸⁶ Holifield, *Gentlemen Theologians*, p. 24.

⁸⁷ Diary entry 26 July, 1847, William P. Hill Diary 1846-1849. *SHC*.

teach the cullud man how to preach'.⁸⁸ As has been established in the previous chapter, African Americans in urban areas of the South had greater opportunities to learn to read and laws introduced against black literacy were not effective deterrents. Despite the fact that many slaves and free blacks had the opportunity to learn to read, however, the assumption that African Americans were naturally intellectually inferior was so deeply engrained within practically every aspect of American society few people were willing to believe otherwise.

Throughout the slave states, white evangelicals criticised black religious leaders over the language they used in their sermons. A frequent criticism made by Southern white ministers of their black counterparts was that their orations lacked finesse. White minister Charles Raymond spoke about attending an African American funeral in rural South Carolina where the sermon given was 'like the sermons of all other negro preachers in the county. Exposition was not attempted. Description, exhortation, appeal formed the warp and woof'.⁸⁹ Comments were made by white preachers on the coarseness of the black preacher's sermons. On one occasion Presbyterian minister, Samuel A. Agnew wandered into a black prayer meeting in Mississippi, but reported that 'I tried to keep my mind in the proper frame for such services but the "King's English" was so mercilessly cut up that often I could scarce restrain a smile. "Dis" "dat" "Warship" "source" "retentions" are given as specimens. I became tired of the moans etc and mounted my mule and sped on my way home'.⁹⁰

Criticisms regarding the uneducated language of black preachers, however, became a hindrance for white ministers when attempting to teach Christianity to the ordinary slave population. One young minister began his sermon to slaves saying 'primarily, we must postulate the existence of a deity'. After a short pause one black man responded 'yes, Lord, dat's so. Bless de Lord'.⁹¹ Understanding that slaves would

⁸⁸ Bill Thomas, in Rawick., (ed.), *The American Slave: Supplement, Series 1 – Volume 5: Indiana and Ohio Narratives* (accessed 7 Feb 2008).

⁸⁹ Charles A. Raymond, 'The Religious Life of the Negro Slave,' *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 27/160, Sept. 1863, pp. 481, 483, cited in White and White, "At intervals I was nearly stunned by the noise he made", p. 44.

⁹⁰ Agnew Diary, Sept. 1854 (I, 146), cited in Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, p. 205.

⁹¹ Bertram Wilbur Doyle, *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South: a Study in Social Control* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1937), p. 46.

not appreciate the finer theological points and doctrines of their sermons, white evangelicals instructed planters that the best way to indoctrinate the slaves was ‘to make the instructions given both pleasant and profitable to the instructed. The whole carcass of modern technical theology – its metaphysics – its subtle distinctions – its mystical dogmas – its sectarian polemics – its technical phrases, &c. &c. – should be cast away by him who goes to this simple and ignorant people as a Christian teacher’.⁹² But despite removing the theological nuances of their sermons, white ministers continued to experience difficulties when preaching to African Americans. The language they used was still not that to which slaves and free blacks would respond. In his letter to John McLees, Henry Drayton, an evangelical minister from Danielsville, Georgia commented that ‘I have a school for the blacks in one of the churches to which I preach, but I find that they are so fond of excitement that they will rather go ten miles to hear a negro preach, than one mile to listen to catechetical instruction. The masters ought to require them to attend’.⁹³

By the late 1840s the idea of converting slaves to Christianity did not seem as objectionable as it had done earlier in the nineteenth century. White Southerners, however, still maintained that African American Christianity was inferior to white Anglo-Saxon Christianity, due to the slaves’ lack of education. In his diary, Mississippi planter Everard Baker noted that:

the savages who had never read or heard of God, & all his works as revealed to us by the Bible, would never the less, if he conformed to the moral laws which every nation has in kind, for the promotion of good & suppression of evil, go to that Heaven which the saints & good people in Civilized countries, find their abode. But do not suppose that his benighted, untutored mind, possessed the capacity of enjoying the fullest extent the religion that enlightened, pious minds could & illustrated the capacity of each for spiritual enjoyment.⁹⁴

⁹² Plumer, *Thoughts*, 25, cited in Blassingame, *Slave Community*, p. 89.

⁹³ Letter from Henry Newton, Danielsville, Ga, to Rev John Mclees, Calhouns Mills, Abbeville Dis, So. Car, June 3rd 1846, John McLees Papers. *Caroliniana*.

⁹⁴ July 15th, 1849, Everard Green Baker Diary, 1848-1876, *SHC*.

The idea of African Americans possessing an inferior intellect was demonstrated not just through the uneducated language used in the sermons of black religious leaders but also through the responses of the congregation. Writing about the state of African American religion before the Civil War, Charles Alexander stated that ‘in their ignorance and superstition, the Negroes in slavery expressed their emotions in their religious services by moaning and groaning’.⁹⁵ Religious services, therefore, were one of the main ways by which whites could demonstrate the intellectual inferiority of African Americans, pointing to both the rough language used by black preachers or ministers, and the coarse and vulgar reaction of the congregants.

In addition to demonstrating African American intellectual inferiority through cultural aspects of American life, scientific definitions of supposed intellectual inferiority were also hardening during the late antebellum period. The development of ethnology, the study of racial theory, in the late 1840s, led to a ranking of different races amongst Americans, both North and South, and inevitable comparisons between the Anglo-Saxon and African races. The common notion that emerged was that while Anglo-Saxons were masculine and bellicose, blacks had more feminine qualities.⁹⁶ Whilst Africans were regarded as being receptive to religion, they were also considered to be unable to question the validity of what they were taught. Whilst ethnology failed to counter the influence Christian theory had in nineteenth century America, it still furthered the idea that African Americans, both slave and free, were intellectually inferior.

Arguments about the intellectual inferiority of blacks were long standing within American society. In his *Notes on the States of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson had argued that blacks were inferior to whites. In 1848 British abolitionist Wilson Armistead, writing about the intellectual and religious capabilities of African Americans commented that ‘their present actual inferiority in many respects... is too evident to be disputed’, but this is partly due to ‘the circumstances amidst which Negroes have lived, both in their own countries, and when they have been transplanted into a foreign land’. Despite these considerations, however, Armistead

⁹⁵ Charles Alexander, *Battles and Victories of Allen Allensworth, A. M. Ph. D., Lieutenant-Colonel, Retired, U. S. Army*, p. 155. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/alexander/alexander.html> (accessed 24 November, 2009).

⁹⁶ Evans, *Burden*, pp. 27-8.

still concluded that ‘there is no incompatibility between Negro organization and high intellectual power’.⁹⁷

The view that African Americans were intellectually inferior was maintained throughout American society and was bequeathed not only to planters, but also to abolitionists and antislavery advocates. Defenders of slavery did not have to justify their view that blacks were intellectually inferior as their opponents already shared that belief. Even prominent Northern abolitionists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe put forward the idea that African Americans were not as intelligent as whites. In her work *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a comparison is made between the Roman statesman Cicero and Uncle Tom; whilst Cicero could not accept the simple truths of the Bible if they had been presented to him, Tom was so unconcerned with historical and critical questions about the Bible, that for him religious belief was so ‘evidently true and divine that the possibility of a question never entered his simple head’.⁹⁸

This sense that African Americans were intellectual inferiority to Northerners even extended to white Northern ministers, and on occasions prevented blacks from entering the ministry in the free states. Alexander Crummell, was repeatedly refused entry into the General Theological Seminary in New York, and had to preach his application sermon six times before the evangelical authorities deemed it to be acceptable. Other techniques were also employed to prevent Crummell from entering the seminary. When Crummell applied to become a candidate for holy orders, the Bishop of the diocese told him that ‘unless you belong to the General Theological Seminary, as it is my wish that all the candidates of this diocese should when not prevented by unavoidable circumstances, you will be governed’. The statutes of the seminary regarding the admission of new candidates stated, however, that ‘every person producing to the *faculty* satisfactory evidence of his *having been admitted* a candidate for hold orders... shall be received as a student of the seminary’.⁹⁹ When Crummell appealed against his rejection he was summoned by

⁹⁷ Wilson Armistead, *A Tribute for the Negro: Being a Vindication of the Moral, Intellectual, and Religious Capabilities of the Coloured Portion of Mankind; with Particular Reference to the African Race*, p. 4. Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/armistead/armistead.html> (accessed 25/11/09).

⁹⁸ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, iv, 1-5, 161, cited in Evans, *Burden*, p. 38.

⁹⁹ Cited in Habich, *The American Churches*, p. 42.

the Bishop of New York, who proceeded to verbally attack him ‘with a violence and grossness that I have never encountered save in one instance in Africa’.¹⁰⁰

When discussing the qualities needed of a minister, a friend of black minister Jeremiah Asher, Pastor of the Shiloh (Coloured) Baptist Church in Philadelphia commented ‘that the preaching of the gospel did not depend upon the amount of scholastic knowledge one might have, though when it could be obtained it was desirable; yet what would it all amount to, without being called of God to the work’.¹⁰¹ Yet many black religious leaders were unable to gain this knowledge, either due to the laws in place in the South, that prevented blacks from learning to read, or from Northern prejudice, that tried to prevent blacks from entering the ministry. Even those who managed to learn to read or managed to become ordained still faced the constant belief from whites, both Northerners and Southerners, that their intellectual ability was far inferior to that of white ministers. Had this argument been the only way in which white ministers claimed they were superior to their coloured brethren, it is possible that over time, such a claim could have been refuted. Other methods were also used, however, that reaffirmed that the white preacher was in charge, not the black.

While many Northern antislavery advocates were convinced about the intellectual inferiority of blacks, they remained confident that African Americans were not morally inferior. According to Evans, many Northern whites believed that ‘blacks would prosper in a future when moral sentiment or religious affection was valued as highly as intellect’.¹⁰² Southerners, however, remained unconvinced about the moral equality of blacks, arguing that it was only Christian instruction that prevented them from falling back into heathenish ways. Southern clergyman James Fugitt commented that the religious condition of the slave ‘has been ELEVATED from the degradation of the savage in his African home to the comforts of civilization and the

¹⁰⁰ Crummell, *Shades and Lights*, 7-8, in Moses, *Alexander Crummell*, 27-28, cited in Townsend, *Faith in Their Own Color*, p. 69.

¹⁰¹ Jeremiah Asher, *Incidents in the Life of the Rev. J. Asher, Pastor of Shiloh (Coloured) Baptist Church, Philadelphia, U.S. and A Concluding Chapter of Facts Illustrating the Unrighteous Prejudice Existing in the Minds of American Citizens Toward their Coloured Brethren. With an Introduction by Wilson Armistead, ESQ.* (London: Charles Gilpin, 5, Bishopgate Street Without, 1850), p. 40.

¹⁰² Evans, *Burden*, p. 18.

blessings of our Holy Religion in a Christian land'.¹⁰³ Also, since sermons of the Southern white preacher to the slaves were frequently filled with the idea that blacks were lazy and idle, it is possible that black religious leaders were held with suspicion as to whether they had retained these characteristics after having been given permission to preach. Thus white preachers continued to hold the view that black preachers and ministers were potentially morally inferior, due to their background and their proximity to heathenism and superstitious rituals.

Due to the perceived intellectual and moral inferiority of black religious leaders, those who preached within biracial churches were often held in a lower position in the institution's hierarchy than the white minister was. However, the lowly position of black preachers in the biracial church was also used by white ministers to illustrate and justify the inferiority of their coloured brethren. In biracial churches and even some independent black churches in the antebellum South, black preachers rarely held positions equal to that of the white minister and were more often used as assistants, deacons, or attendants. Even when they were allowed to preach to black or biracial congregations, they remained subservient to white ministers within the church's hierarchy. According to Boles, there was a substantial degree of black participation in the biracial churches. But although there were black ministers in these churches who often preached effectively to mixed congregations, their role was usually as a deacon, an elder, or an association delegate.¹⁰⁴ Charles Colcock Jones commented on the issue, when considering the question of whether African Americans had their own preachers, arguing that 'they have. But who supposes that they exist in sufficient numbers, and are possessed of sufficient ability to furnish the bread of life to the multitudes around them? They are *helpers*, and the Lord uses their instrumentality in the conversion of sinners: but the teachers need to be taught – and frequently they are blind leaders of the blind'.¹⁰⁵

The hierarchical inferiority with which black religious leaders were held is also demonstrated by the fact that white ministers refused to accept them as delegates to

¹⁰³ Rev. James Preston Fugitt (Southern clergyman), *Our Country and Slavery. A Friendly Word to the Rev Francis L. Hawks, D. D., LL. D., and other Northern Clergymen* (Baltimore: Printed by Joseph Robinson, 1861), p. 24 (capitals in original).

¹⁰⁴ Boles, *Religion*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, D.D., *Suggestions of the Religious Instruction of the Negroes*, pp.8-9 (italics in original).

the general assemblies and conferences of the Southern evangelical churches. According to Bailey, no Southern black served before the Civil War as a delegate ‘to a Presbyterian general assembly or synod, to a Lutheran synod, to an Episcopal diocesan convention, to a Methodist general conference or annual conference, or to a Southern Baptist convention or a statewide Baptist association or convention’.¹⁰⁶ This decision, however, does not seem to have been unanimously accepted by all white evangelicals. During the Southern Methodist General Conference of 1858, a delegate enquired whether church rules did not mandate licensed black exhorters being accepted as members of the quarterly conferences. Although the enquiry was quashed by the presiding bishop, the existence of such a question indicates that the matter was not settled to everyone’s satisfaction.¹⁰⁷

The sense of inequality for African American religious leaders in the hierarchy of the evangelical churches was repeated in the Northern free states. One of the best examples is the case of Peter Williams, Jr., in New York, who was ordained as a deacon in 1820, only the second African American to receive this honour. Although he was regarded to be extremely capable at preaching to both white and black congregations, it took a further six years for him to be ordained as a priest. Commenting on the delay in Williams’ ordination, American reformer William Jay commented that ‘had he been white he would in a few weeks, or at least months, have been admitted into Priest’s orders – but six years elapsed before the pride of cast could submit to his admission into the higher order of ministry’.¹⁰⁸ Similarly when the first African American Episcopal church in New York, St. Philip’s, sought admission to the Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of New York in 1846, sufficient objection was made that a motion was made stating that ‘the subject of the admission of St. Philip’s Church, New York, and of other congregations of colored people into representation in the Convention of this Diocese, be referred to a special committee to consider, and to report upon, at the present Convention’.¹⁰⁹ The special

¹⁰⁶ Bailey, ‘Protestantism’, p. 459.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 459. Bailey also cites a number of incidents where black churches were prevented from joining associations due to the concerns of whites.

¹⁰⁸ William Jay to Anna Jay Balch, November 4, 1840, The Papers of John Jay, Rare Book and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University, cited in Townsend, *Faith*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁹ *Journal of the 62nd Convention* (1846), 1-18; *Morning Courier*, October 2, 1846, 2, cited in Townsend, *Faith*, p. 126.

committee that was formed recommended that neither St. Philip's, nor any other coloured congregation be admitted to the convention.

By the late antebellum period, prominent divisions had emerged in the way Christianity was taught by black preachers on the plantation and the licensed black minister in the biracial and independent black church. Such a division, however, was not considered by white evangelical ministers, who viewed their coloured counterparts in both locations as being inferior to them. Yet despite the fact that all African American religious leaders were considered to be inferior to white evangelical ministers, this issue was not considered by slaves and free blacks to be particularly serious and was certainly a situation that could be endured. The vast majority of slaves and free blacks were still able to hear either a black preacher or minister and benefit from their teachings. For African Americans in the late antebellum South, black religious leaders were still regarded as highly influential figures within their community, despite the fact that white evangelical ministers regarded them as inferior.

* * * * *

From the analysis undertaken in this chapter it is shown that although white evangelical ministers differed in the late antebellum South in terms of their location, their responsibilities, and the challenges they faced, the majority shared similar views towards the idea of providing religious education to African Americans, both slaves and free blacks. White ministers believed that African Americans were spiritually equal to them and therefore deserved the same opportunities that Southern whites had to hear the gospel being taught and to preach it themselves. In spite of these ideas of equality, however, the belief that slaves and free blacks were culturally and intellectually inferior meant that they needed to be schooled not only in Christianity, but also in ideas of obedience in order to instil a sense of discipline and ensure that blacks did not fall into heathenish and uncivilised patterns of behaviour.

Throughout their interactions with African Americans, both slave and free, the actions of white evangelical ministers were partly influenced by Southern elites. In the late antebellum South, white ministers still found themselves scrutinised by

planters, both in their ministrations towards slaves and in their participation within the social hierarchy. As a result many ministers remained cautious about the message they gave to those in bondage. The influence of the planter class, however, was not absolute. Numerous instances occurred in the late antebellum period where white ministers rebuked or chastised planters over the treatment of their slaves. While white evangelical ministers believed that African Americans were intellectually inferior they still regarded them as their spiritual equals. The relationship of white evangelicals with African Americans was not solely influenced by the planter class, however. The idea that slaves and free blacks needed to be taught the values of obedience was one that the white ministry had developed themselves, due to the experiences of preaching to unappreciative black congregations and their growing acclimatisation to the institution of slavery.

Despite the differences that were emerging between black preachers on the plantation and licensed black ministers in the biracial and independent black church in the late antebellum period, white evangelical ministers continued to make no distinction between them. Both were considered necessary in order to convert slaves and free blacks to Christianity and provide them with religious education, and both were considered to be intellectually and morally inferior to white ministers. During the nineteenth century some licensed black ministers, especially those in urban areas began to receive a greater religious education, either from individual white ministers, or from presbyteries and seminaries. But even these black ministers continued to find themselves discriminated against by their white counterparts and placed in a lower position within the hierarchy of the church.

Evangelical white ministers appointed African Americans to preach in order to convert other slaves and free blacks and a positive relationship did develop between these religious leaders. Some black religious leaders engendered a certain amount of respect from white ministers due to their religious fervour as well as their oratorical skill in preaching to black and white congregations. The sense of respect between African American religious leaders and evangelical white ministers was not one based on equality, however. African American religious leaders were seen as necessary figures to help provide religious education to slaves and free blacks. Beyond that, however, they were considered to be inferior individuals who lacked

the necessary intellectual, moral, and cultural capacities to rival the authority of the white evangelical minister.

Conclusions

After the end of the end of the Civil War, following the period of research in this thesis, African Americans in Richmond, Virginia, conducted an official inquiry in response to the ‘the brutal enforcement by the police and army of pass and curfew laws which were designed to expel thousands of blacks from the city’. At a mass meeting at the First African Baptist Church on June 10, more than three thousand blacks approved the establishment of a protest memorial. Seven representatives were selected to present this memorial to the President of the United States. Of this delegation, five were representatives from each of the African churches in the city.¹

The establishment of this memorial demonstrates that, following the Civil War, the black church became an increasingly important focal point for African Americans in organising protest movements, and black ministers became both political figures as well as religious leaders. This political role was not present amongst African American religious leaders in the antebellum period. In the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War, black ministers were sought after as figureheads who could voice the disaffection blacks felt towards restrictions placed on their new found liberties. Eric Foner argues that in this period 237 black ministers, ‘mostly Methodists and Baptists, with a handful of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians’, were appointed to federal, state, and local government positions.² Not all of those appointed to positions began their ministerial careers within the slaveholding states. African Methodist Episcopal minister Charles H. Pearce, came to Florida as a religious missionary after the Civil War and was appointed to the constitutional convention and state Senate. He commented that ‘a man cannot do his whole duty as a minister except he looks out for the political interests of his people. They are like ships out at sea, and they must have somebody to guide them; and it is natural that they should get their best informed men to lead them’.³

¹ O’Brien, ‘Factory, Church, and Community’, p. 509.

² Eric Foner, “‘The Tocsin of Freedom’: The Black Leadership of Radical Reconstruction”, in Gabor Boritt and Scott Hancock (eds.), *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 128. For a specific breakdown of the number of African Americans who held official positions, see Eric Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³ Joe M. Richardson, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Florida, 1867-1877* (Tallahassee, 1965), 177-98, cited in William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-*

The movement of black ministers into political positions was a necessary move but also one that was perhaps inevitable. Leon Litwack argues that ‘for black churchmen to have drawn a line between political and religious concerns in the years immediately following emancipation would have been ideologically and tactically impossible’.⁴ Additionally, the lack of established organisations through which African Americans could vote for and elect delegates to state conventions meant that it was often through the churches that such elections took place. William Montgomery argues that ‘in the absence of any other effective grass-roots political organizations, the churches were the only means by which political leaders could organize and mobilize the constituencies that elected delegates to the conventions. Not surprisingly, church congregations often elected their own ministers to represent them’.⁵

Despite the fact that many African American ministers were elected to political positions because few alternatives were available, they were often the most suitable figures to take on the role. Black ministers were already highly respected and popular figures before emancipation, were skilled orators, and often amongst the most educated and literate individuals within the black community. African Americans regularly sought out the opinions and advice of black ministers regarding political matters after emancipation. Thomas Allen, a black Baptist minister from Georgia, commented that most freedmen were too ignorant to act alone in politics and frequently sought his advice and opinion, commenting that ‘the colored people came to me for instructions, and I gave them the best instructions I could. I took the New York Tribune and other papers, and in that way I found out a great deal, and I told them whatever I thought was right’.⁶

The political role undertaken by African American religious leaders after the Civil War was one unavailable to those preaching in the antebellum period as has been

American Church in the South, 1865-1900 (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), p. 178.

⁴ Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (London: The Athlone Press, 1979), p. 470.

⁵ Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine*, p. 157.

⁶ Robinson, “Plans Dat Comed from God,” 71-102, cited in Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine*, p. 157.

demonstrated in chapters two and three of the thesis. Due to the supervision of the white elite, black preachers and licensed black ministers had little or no opportunity to teach a political message that could inspire slaves to rebel. Preaching such a gospel would have resulted in violent acts of retribution from planters, who would have also prevented these religious leaders from continuing in their ministrations to slaves and free blacks. Additionally, many black preachers and ministers who had the opportunity to preach without white supervision were unwilling to use Christianity to promote rebellion and insurrection. Instead of endorsing ideas of earthly resistance, African American religious leaders argued that planters would suffer divine retribution in the afterlife for acts of violence committed against their slaves. By seeking to revenge themselves on planters through committing acts of resistance, therefore, slaves would be taking justice into their own hands and obstructing God's prerogative. Black preachers and ministers deliberately did not deliver a political message in order to continue preaching to the African American community. But many did not want to undertake a political role in the first place as they felt that any message of resistance that they preached would have challenged God's authority to judge and punish.

Instead of regarding African American religious leaders as sharing identical methods of delivering the Christian message, the research contained in this thesis illustrates that by the start of the Civil War, these individuals had separated into two distinct groups. Although black preachers and licensed black ministers both preached Christianity in the face of adversity they had adopted different methods of teaching the gospel. Black preachers within the slave community on the plantation continued to incorporate African religious traditions into their worship. In the biracial and independent black church, however, black ministers began to alter their methods, as they adopted more of the practices used by white evangelical ministers. This research offers new insight into the role of African American religious leaders in the late antebellum South.

In analysing the different approaches amongst African American religious leaders the biggest comparison can be drawn between the plantation and the biracial and independent black church. The practice of Christianity within the slave community on the plantation continued to be influenced by African religious beliefs and rituals

throughout the colonial and antebellum period. Despite the devastating effects of the transatlantic crossing, delays in converting Africans to Christianity provided an opportunity for these traditions to survive. These beliefs were incorporated into the slaves' method of Christian worship, creating an interpretation of the religion similar to white evangelicalism, but also retaining important differences unique to African Americans. Religious services on the plantation incorporated traditions such as ring shouts, spontaneous and improvised slave spirituals, and the practice of burying the deceased with personal items, all of which had links to rituals practised in Africa. Black preachers epitomised the bond between African religious traditions and European Christianity within the plantation slave community. Through their preaching during religious meetings and ceremonies that combined the improvisational spontaneity of African religion with the emotionalism of Christian evangelicalism, these leaders demonstrated the syncretic process that took place between the two styles of worship.

In contrast to the practice of Christianity on the plantation, the growth of independent black churches and congregations led to African Americans in these institutions adopting traditions and rituals used in Southern white evangelical worship. While black church services continued to be emotional celebrations of Christianity, elements such as the ring shout, which had thrived in the services on the plantations, began to disappear. Black ministers in the churches started to receive the tutelage of white evangelicals, either from specific ministers, or from white presbyteries and seminaries. As a result of this religious education their sermons began to change. Although they continued to place greater importance on rhetoric and method of delivery rather than content, black ministers started to include more in-depth and intellectual discussions of specific Biblical passages in their teaching.

The incorporation of theological discussion and Biblical analysis into their preaching was not carried out to the same extent by all black ministers. In rural areas black ministers continued to preach sermons that focused primarily on the delivery rather than the content. In urban areas, however, black ministers were increasingly utilising elements of theological discussion and scriptural analysis. During the late antebellum period white evangelical ministers in urban areas found themselves under increasing pressure to produce sermons that were more intellectually and educationally

stimulating. Although such pressure was not simultaneously levied on black ministers, many began to alter their sermons to reflect this more intellectual approach. Such a move was prompted not only by the changes white evangelical ministers were making to their sermons, but also by the increasing literacy rates of African Americans in urban areas. As more blacks in Southern cities learned to read, illiterate black ministers found themselves at a disadvantage.

White evangelical ministers did not widely recognise the emerging differences between black preachers on the plantation and licensed black ministers in the biracial and independent church. Despite believing in ideas of spiritual equality, and despite encouraging African Americans to preach in order to attract more slaves and free blacks into the evangelical fold, white ministers viewed their coloured counterparts as intellectually and morally inferior. The one distinction that white ministers made was between African American religious leaders whom they considered to be safe and those more likely to undermine the authority of the white elite. As more licensed black ministers received the guidance of white evangelicals, it was consequently considered that these ministers would be more likely to deliver messages of obedience. They were thus frequently defended against laws and restrictions designed to limit their activities.

The differences between the Christianity practiced on the plantation and in the biracial and independent black churches did not hamper the religious education of slaves and free blacks and did not alienate black preachers in the slave community from black ministers in the pulpit. All African Americans, whether slave or free, were united against slavery as an institution. Black Christianity, whether practiced on the plantation or in the church, provided a means by which slaves and free blacks could group together, shelter themselves temporarily from the brutalities of the institution, and provide comfort and solace to each other in the understanding that they would eventually be free.

Both black preachers and licensed black ministers in the late antebellum South held positions of both religious and secular leadership within their respective communities. They were able to lead religious meetings where slaves and free blacks could gather and worship with little or no white supervision. They also presided over

ceremonies such as weddings and funerals, both of which were important events for African Americans. Black preachers and ministers also provided secular leadership; slaves and free blacks regularly sought advice, counsel, and guidance from them. Additionally, the religious meetings and ceremonies led by black preachers and ministers were social occasions where blacks could gather and exchange news and gossip. Through both their religious and secular responsibilities, black preachers and ministers had the same underlying goal, preaching a message of hope to slaves and free blacks and providing these congregants with the belief that their sufferings would eventually end.

As well as sharing similar religious and secular duties, black preachers on the plantation and black ministers in the biracial and independent black church encountered similar difficulties in carrying out their responsibilities. With the planter often present at religious meetings and with the Southern elite attending or supervising services in the biracial and independent black church, preaching a gospel suitable for both African Americans and the Southern white elite was a constant and demanding challenge. The two groups had almost contradictory demands. Whilst slaves and free blacks wanted to hear messages that would give them a sense of hope, the white elite wanted black preachers and ministers to teach messages of subservience and obedience. Since black preachers and ministers were often revered by African Americans, their position as sacred and secular leaders was a cause of concern for planters, who feared that their own authority could be undermined. Suspicions also remained that black religious leaders could inspire slaves and free blacks to rebel and that African American religious meetings might be used to organise insurrectionary efforts. The Southern white elite therefore sought to control the messages taught by black preachers and ministers.

Negotiating a successful path through the conflicting demands of the African Americans and the white elite was a required skill for the successful black preacher or minister. Failure to appease either group could result in them losing their religious and secular authority. Black religious leaders were often physically punished and removed from their position if they were considered to be preaching messages that could undermine the planter's authority or the institution of slavery. Equally, slaves and free blacks quickly rejected the authority of those they felt had been too heavily

influenced by the Southern elite. Despite sharing similar goals, responsibilities, and challenges, however, it was the variations in method that defined the differences between African American religious leaders. It has been argued that African American religious leaders shared a common role. As this research has demonstrated, however, during the nineteenth century a divide had emerged between their methods of delivering the Christian message.

One of the key differences that emerged in the methods of practising Christianity between black preachers and licensed black ministers was the continued use of African traditions within religious services on the plantation and the rejection of these rituals in the biracial and independent black church. This distinction grew throughout the antebellum period and strengthened even further after the Civil War. After the period of my research there is evidence that many African Americans, in both clergy and laity, sought to distance themselves from the religious traditions practiced on the plantation, viewing them as backward and outdated. In 1878 Daniel Payne attended a “bush meeting” in Philadelphia, where he saw the African American worshippers perform a ring shout, a custom whereby slaves would gather in a circle, sing, clap, stamp their feet and go through other enthusiastic expressions of their faith. Payne regarded this ritual as ‘ridiculous and heathenish’ and tried to stop it, writing in his autobiography that ‘I then went, and taking their leader by the arm requested him to desist and to set down and sing in a rational manner. I told him also that it was a heathenish way to worship and disgraceful to themselves, the race, and the Christian name. In that instance they broke up their ring; but would not sit down, and walked sullenly away’.⁷ Although Payne’s rejection of religious traditions practiced within the slave community began before the Civil War and emancipation, during the post-war Reconstruction period more African Americans began to adopt a similar view. When Robert Russa Morton attended Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in 1885, the first Sunday night he heard spirituals sung by white singers. Morton’s response was one of disappointment, commenting that ‘they were Negro songs and...we had come to Hampton to learn something better’.⁸ After emancipation African Americans began to distance themselves from religious rituals

⁷ Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, 1st publ. 1886 (New York: Arno Press and the New York Time, 1969), pp. 253-55, cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 68.

⁸ Robert Russa Morton, *Finding a Way Out: An Autobiography* (1920; reprint ed., New York, 1969), 56-61, cited in Levine, *Black Culture*, p. 162.

that thrived on the plantations, moving towards a form of Christianity that was more organised and hierarchical and less spontaneous.

Following the Civil War and emancipation, black ministers continued as religious leaders amongst the African American community but also increasingly took on roles of political leadership as well. For black preachers on the plantation, however, the end of slavery brought a complete change to their situation and position. Many were unable to become ministers within the institutionalised black church because of their lack of education. They subsequently found themselves ousted as religious leaders. Similarly the form of Christianity practised on the plantation struggled following emancipation and was replaced by the method of Christian worship practised within the black church as the dominant religion amongst African Americans. As the black church became institutionalised following the Civil War, the change in structure prompted a move away from the spontaneity of African religious traditions and towards the formalised practices of white evangelicalism. African American religious leadership similarly changed, moving from the almost prophetic preacher on the plantation to the educated, literate minister in the pulpit.

Appendix 1

Table 1: Statistics on WPA interviewee relocation

State	Number of Narratives	No. of Interviewees	Interviewees who resided in the state during slavery	Difference
Alabama	271	256	321	+65
Arizona	2	2	0	-2
Arkansas	794	740	194	-546
California	0	0	1	+1
Colorado	24	24	2	-22
Connecticut	0	0	1	+1
District of Columbia	2	2	0	-2
Georgia	307	299	311	+12
Florida	68	68	23	-45
Illinois	0	0	5	+5
Indiana	165	158	2	-156
Kansas	3	3	4	+1
Kentucky	42	42	167	+125
Louisiana	0	0	159	+159
Maryland	24	24	23	-1
Minnesota	7	7	1	-6
Mississippi	575	543	505	-38
Missouri	121	109	90	-19
Nebraska	19	18	0	-18
New York	1	1	2	+1
North Carolina	190	187	241	+54
Ohio	76	73	5	-68
Oklahoma	148	143	23	-120
Oregon	2	2	1	-1
Pennsylvania	0	0	2	+2
Rhode Island	1	1	0	-1
South Carolina	420	360	313	-47
Tennessee	26	26	213	+187
Texas	942	647	373	-274
Virginia	15	15	137	+122
Washington	8	8	0	-8
Wisconsin	0	0	1	+1
West Virginia	0	0	7	+7
Unknown	-	-	819	-

Table 2: Statistics on the location of black preachers in the WPA narratives

State	Number of black preachers mentioned	Original location of black preachers	Difference
Alabama	13	27	+14
Arkansas	16	6	-16
District of Columbia	1	0	-1
Georgia	41	43	+2
Florida	6	2	-4
Indiana	4	0	-4
Kansas	0	1	+1
Kentucky	2	9	+7
Louisiana	0	21	+21
Maryland	4	3	-1
Minnesota	2	0	-2
Mississippi	37	25	-12
Missouri	1	10	+9
Nebraska	1	0	-1
North Carolina	4	10	+6
Ohio	8	0	-8
Oklahoma	13	1	-12
South Carolina	18	23	+5
Tennessee	0	11	+11
Texas	97	57	-40
Virginia	0	6	+6
West Virginia	0	1	+1
Unknown	0	39	-

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