"We Believed it to be honorable before God": Religion in Enslaved Communities, 1840-1860

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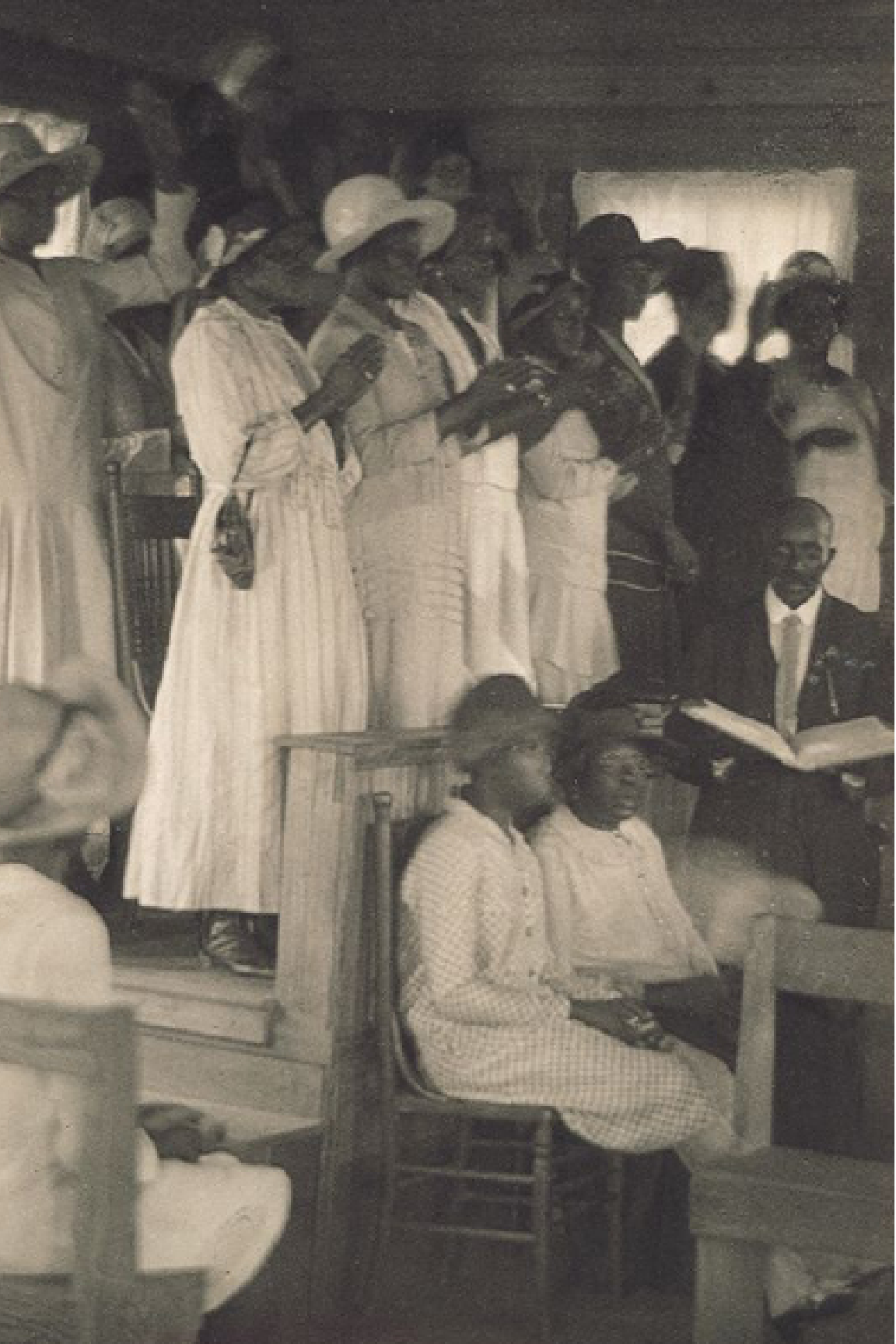
"O, gracious Lord! when shall it be,
That we poor souls shall all be free?
Lord, break them slavery powers --
Will you go along with me?
Lord, break them slavery powers,
Go sound the jubilee!"

—Verse composed and sung by enslaved, as reported by William W. Brown [1].

The dehumanization of African people in the United States began with their capture and the exploitation of their labor and bodies, which white people justified through the conviction of their inherent superiority. Even certain abolitionists, such as Southern unionist John Henning Woods, considered black people inferior and made the mistaken assumption that they "were contented with their

[1] William W. Brown, a prominent abolitionist, poet, and former slave from Kentucky, recalled hearing enslaved people sing this song when a slaveholder sold them to the Deep South. He believed that a slave composed the song. William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, an American Slave* (Dublin: American Stereotype Plates, 1853), 51.



condition."[2] However, as an Alabama slaveholder admitted in 1863, at the height of the Civil War, the idea of "the faithful slave [was] about played out."[3]

Christian beliefs influenced many slave rebellions in the Antebellum South. Christianity permeated slave communities in the Deep South by the 1840s through widespread Protestant Evangelism, which emphasized individual freedom and direct communication with God. Nat Turner, an enslaved man in Virginia, believed that God had called upon him to lead a rebellion in 1831, in which enslaved and free African Americans killed sixty white people.[4] As a consequence of the revolt, southern legislatures met to further restrict the education and freedoms of African Americans through forbidding them to read, write, and hold meetings. Southern slaveholders feared the power of religion and education, which could inspire enslaved people to resist their enslavers.

Georges Blandier, a French sociologist and anthropologist at the Sorbonne, argues in *L'Anthropologie Politique* that people cannot help attaching political significance to religion.[5] Slaveholders and ministers used the bible to justify slavery and control enslaved people in the period between 1840 and emancipation. Despite slaveholders' efforts, African Americans used Christianity to create distinct cultural practices, beliefs, and social institutions that escaped an enslaver's control. Religious life in the enslaved community served as a defense against slavery and a source of collective strength. It is important to recognize that enslaved people nevertheless had to meet during their own time and faced severe punishment if caught. Collective religious passion was an effective defensive measure, but it did not prevent slaveholders from exploiting black labor. This paper will use testimonies and narratives to argue that religion in the South from 1840 – 1865 offered a social sphere within enslaved communities that relieved experiences of dehumanization under slavery. Although enslaved people did not always intend to challenge the institution of slavery, their actions demonstrated resistance to the objectives of slavery, especially their own dehumanization.

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[2] John Henning Woods, a white man conscripted into the Confederate army, strongly opposed slavery and the Confederacy's decision to secede. John Henning Woods Papers, Ms2017-030, Special Collections, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA, vol 1b, 92.

[3] David Williams, "'The 'Faithful Slave' is About Played Out': Civil War Slave Resistance in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley," *Alabama Review* 52, no. 2 (1999): 83.

[4] Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1969), 196 – 198.

[5] Georges Balandier, *Anthropologie Politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 100-101.

Following the Civil War, historians interpreted the history of slavery in ways that justified or criticized the exclusions of Jim Crow. They developed interpretations of the enslaved person as either loyal to his master and happy with his condition, or fighting against his enslaver and for the Union.[6] Their questions focused on whether slavery was good-natured or abusive. Ulrich B. Phillips' *American Negro Slavery* (1929) and *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929) emphasized the benevolent characteristics of slavery, which was an argument influenced by his pro-slavery apologist ideology.[7] His writings are part of what is known as the "Lost Cause" historiography, in which slavery is understood as a positive good and the South represented as a victim of Northern aggression. Historian Kenneth Stampp focused on the same question as Phillips in his 1956 book *The Peculiar Institution*, but his argument stresses slavery's overwhelming brutality.[8]

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and a greater interest in social history and African and African American history among historians generated a more nuanced image of enslaved people and their culture. Historians relied on previously underused sources such as the WPA Federal Writers' Project interviews. During the Great Depression, the government employed writers who recorded the lives of over 2,300 former enslaved people from seventeen states. Historians of the 1960s and 1970s used these interviews as valuable sources that shed light on slave culture and way of life. For example, in 1974, Eugene Genovese discussed religious influences on slave communities in *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, in which he described the complex and autonomous nature of slave religious life that served as a source of community cohesion.[9] Albert Raboteau and Lawrence Levine added to Genovese's argument with respect to the use of religion in slave communities. Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977) and Raboteau's *Slave Religion* (1978) described religious practices including spirituals and dances, which served as a source of strength and community proving significant in defending against

[6] John E. Cairnes blames planters and their political leaders in the South for causing the war: "A system of society more formidable for evil, more menacing to the best interests of the human race, it is difficult to conceive." John E. Cairnes, *The Slave Power: Its Character, Career and Probable Designs* (New York: Carleton, 1862), 63. George Fitzhugh, the first sociologist in the United States, argued that slavery is a universal human condition that ensures economic security. George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South or the failure of Free Society* (Richmond: A. Morris, 1854).

[7] Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton, 1929); Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Grosset and Dunlap, 1929).

[8] Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956).

[9] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

enslavers' attempts to disintegrate and demoralize African American communities.[10]

In 1977, John Blassingame wrote *Slave Testimony,* a collection of personal documents describing the life of enslaved people, in which he expressed concern over the truthfulness and accuracy of the WPA collection of slave narratives. Blassingame pioneered analysis of these interviews by bringing attention to the context in which they were written. He also warned against relying too heavily on the WPA interviews because of their limitations in representation and potential for interviewers to misreport the interview. The former enslaved people interviewed in the 1930s all experienced slavery as children or adolescents and were interviewed in their old age. As a result, they could have misremembered events because of their advanced ages, added more significance to the role of religion in their communities because older people tend to be more religious, or deliberately left out information that could have upset people in the racist atmosphere that clung to the strong "Lost Cause" ideology prevalent in the 1930s.[11]

Historians in the last thirty years have shifted their focus from the autonomous nature of enslaved culture to the elite's methods of using enslaved people to contribute to the economic growth of the United States. Edward Baptist argues in *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* that slavery was essential to the growth of American capitalism and to funding the American Industrial Revolution.[12] Even though enslaved people valued religion, these historians emphasize that slave traders and masters ultimately controlled the enslaved person's labor and body.

I will adhere to Blassingame's warning by not only using WPA interviews to analyze enslaved peoples' religious preferences, but also examining independent interviews, antebellum narratives published in newspapers, and autobiographies to illustrate the defiant nature of religion in enslaved communities in the antebellum South. I will rely most heavily on slave testimonies from 1840 – 1865, which allow for consideration of how religion affected enslaved behavior and consciousness leading up to and during the Civil War.

The visible religious experiences of enslaved people in the South

[10] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977).

[11] John W. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

[12] Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

differed according to what their enslavers allowed and the laws of their states.[13] Although some black institutional and visible churches existed, many enslavers required African Americans to attend church with white people and preachers so that they could control their access to religion.[14] Slaveholders would also hire black preachers to convey specific messages of obedience and docility. A former slave from Alabama, Charlie Van Dyke, remembered that "All that preacher talked about was for us slaves to obey our masters and not lie and steal.... The overseer stood there to see the preacher talked as he wanted him to talk."[15] In order to experience more authentic preaching, African Americans formed their own "invisible institution" in the slave quarters.[16]

While white people were not watching them, enslaved people preached and discussed their own interpretations of the Bible during secret services and meetings. According to Marry Gladdy, a former enslaved person in Georgia, "it was customary among slaves during the Civil War period to secretly gather in their cabins two or three nights each week and hold prayer and experience meetings."[17] During these meetings, Gladdy explained how they talked with each other about their experiences, shook hands, and chanted canticles together. Through these acts, the people on Gladdy's plantation fostered a community. A former enslaved preacher from South Carolina also recalled groups of people meeting in "the fields and in the thickets and there, with heads together around a kettle to deaden the sound, they called on God out of heavy hearts."[18] Wash Wilson, an enslaved person from Texas, described how the enslaved people on his plantation would sing "Steal Away to Jesus" during the day to indicate that a religious meeting would occur that night. He explained that enslavers did not approve of religious meetings and that the enslaved people on his plantation would "slips off at night, down in de bottoms or somewhere. Sometimes us sing and pray all night."[19] Religion

[13] By 1860, North Carolina and virtually all other slaveholding states did not allow enslaved people to read or write or assemble without written permission. Ernet J. Clark, "Aspects of the North Carolina Slave Code, 1715 – 1860," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 39, no. 2 (1962): 163.

[14] Four black Methodist churches had been founded in New Orleans before 1860. Raboteau, *Slave Religion,* 205.

[15] George P. Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography,* vol. 6, *Alabama,* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972), 398.

[16] Raboteau, *Slave Religion,* 212.

[17] Library of Congress, "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," vol. 4, *Georgia*, pt. 2, 17, https://www.loc.gov/resource/mesn.042/?sp=20.

[18] Enslaved preacher's story in Rawick, ed., *The American Slave*, vol. 19, 156.

[19] Library of Congress, "Born in Slavery" vol. 16, *Texas*, pt. 4, 198, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn164/.

offered an identity that was not based on the condition of their slavery.

On plantations where enslavers forbade all forms of religion, including the white interpretation of the Bible, acts of religious expression were especially dangerous. Through individual prayer, enslaved people opposed the enslavers' religious restrictions. Celestia Avery evoked in a narrative in *American Slave* the story of her grandmother who liked to pray on a plantation run by an enslaver who forbid prayer. He beat her every day, yet she continued to practice her religion despite the consequences of terror and violence.[20] James Smith, formerly enslaved on a plantation in Georgia, insisted on praying and preaching to other enslaved people. His enslaver in Virginia had sold him to Georgia because he continued to pray and tried to convert other enslaved people. He ran away from Georgia because his enslaver believed in the same principles as his Virginia enslaver.[21] Although these acts of religious expression were personal, they influenced other enslaved people who surely witnessed the abuse of their family members and friends. According to Genovese in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Christianity helped an enslaved person realize his or her individual worth and laid the foundation for black collectivity.[22] Religion provided an outlet for emotional expression for individuals, which added to the collective identity of religious zeal.

The power of education threatened enslavers who feared that enslaved people would write passes that would free them or allow them to travel. Their anxiety prompted laws that prohibited the education of enslaved people in Mississippi and North Carolina and punished educators through fines in Alabama. However, enslaved people continued to teach each other how to read the Bible. W.E.B Du Bois estimated that despite prohibitions, about five percent of slaves had learned how to read by 1860.[23] Sella Martin, a prominent abolitionist and preacher in Boston and formally enslaved in Alabama and Georgia, knew how to read. Martin continued to educate other enslaved people even after his enslaver threatened to sell him or get the City Marshal to whip him if he read the bible.[24] A black preacher from Georgia believed he caused the death of many enslaved people after he taught them how to read and write.[25] The enslaved

[20] Rawick, *American Slave*, vol. 13, pt. 3, 187.

[21] Henry Bibb originally published the story of James Smith in *Voice of the Fugitive* in 1852. His story is also found in Blassingame, *Slave testimony, 712.*

[22] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll,* 283.

[23] William Edward Burghardt DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935), 638.

[24] Autobiography of Sella Martin found in Blassingame, *Slave Testimony, 712.*

[25] Library of Congress, "Born in Slavery" vol. 4 *Georgia*, pt. 4, 214, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn044/.

people participating in the transfer of knowledge became more than slaves by creating identities based on teaching and learning. They became teachers and students. Teaching each other how to read the bible encouraged individual interpretation of Christianity that strengthened their collective Christian identity.

This collective Christian identity also developed in church services or meetings, where enslaved people socialized and performed similar religious activities together. When enslavers allowed enslaved people from neighboring plantations to hold these meetings, these services provided an open space for socialization. Sarah Fitzpatrick, a former enslaved person in Alabama, recalled that people often "use'ta court by tell'in riddles at church services."[26] Julia Francis Daniels, enslaved on a Georgia plantation, would invite other enslaved people from neighboring plantations to the prayer meetings on her plantation and remembered that "I like meetin' jus' as good as I like a party."[27] The social atmosphere of religious meetings was just as important as the religious teachings that occurred there. The church services and meetings offered an emotional outlet and an opportunity for socialization.

According to Genovese, enslaved people preferred the Baptist and Methodist churches because these two interpretations of Christianity had a fiery style and uninhibited emotionalism.[28] African Americans developed their own patterns of religious expression within these churches in order to circumnavigate rules and include West African traditions. Methodists did not allow dancing because they believed it to be sinful behavior. Instead of dancing, enslaved people began "shouting." Two or three people would clap their hands and tap their feet to a rhythm while other participants would walk single file around in a ring while singing spirituals, ensuring that they did not cross their feet.[29] If they did not cross their feet, they were not dancing. They shuffled around the circle in a slightly stooped position and combined movements that incorporated the entire body. This style of dancing reflected the West African belief that bended joints were indicative of energy and life.[30] Sarah Fitzpatrick remembered that enslaved people "lack'ta shout a whole lot an' wid de white fo'ks al'round'em, dey couldn't shout jes lack dey want to. My a'nt use'ta tare loose in

[26] Blassingame, *Slave testimony*, 643.

[27] Rawick, vol. 13, *Georgia Narratives*, pt. 3, 252.

[28] Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 233.

[29] Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 233 – 235; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 68 – 71.

[30] Peter H. Wood, "'Gimme de Kneebone Bent': African Body Language and the Evolution of American Dance Forms," in *The Black Tradition in American Dance*, ed. Myers (Durham, N.C., 1988), 7 – 9.

dat white church an' shout, my! She sho' could shout."[31] Fitzpatrick indicates that black services offered a refuge from the judgements of white Christian society. They shouted together in gatherings, encouraged each other, and celebrated to proclaim their humanity.

Spirituals combined African traditions and Western Christianity, which intensified emotional and transcendent outlets. Enslaved people not only sang spirituals, but also performed them in the ring shout where a leader called out a verse while the shouters responded by walking around the circle. James L. Smith, a former enslaved preacher in Virginia, described spirituals: "The singing was accompanied by a certain ecstasy of motion, clapping of hands, tossing of heads, which would continue without cessation about half an hour; one would lead off in a kind of recitative style, others joining in the chorus."[32] Participating in these spirituals allowed for enslaved people to relieve stress and manage their grief by sharing experiences that inspired intrapersonal and interpersonal hope. Enslaved people reflected the hardships of slavery through spirituals that they not only performed, but also spontaneously created. A former enslaved person described the process:

> I'll tell you; it's dis way. My master call me up and order me a short peck of corn and a hundred lash. My friends see it and is sorry for me. When dey come to de praise meetin' dat night dey sing about it. Some's very good singers and know how; and dey work it in you know; till dey git it right; and dat's de way.[33]

This style of composition offered emotional support to members of the group and fostered empathy between people who shared common experiences.

As leaders in the emotional and spiritual support of their enslaved communities, slave preachers (with or without permission) held prayer meetings where they would promote a community and collective identity by creating a space where people could socialize and learn about Christianity. Enslaved people preferred black preachers who often preached a message of spiritual equality between white people and people of color. Anthony Dawson, enslaved in North Carolina, recalled the difference between black and white preachers by emphasizing that "mostly we had white preachers, but when we had a black preacher, that was Heaven."[34] Dawson, like many other enslaved

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[31] When slaveholders allowed enslaved people to have their own visible church services, they would use the white churches at different times of the day instead of building enslaved people their own churches. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 643.

[32] James Lindsay Smith, *Autobiography of James L. Smith* (Norwich, CT: The Bulletin, 1881), 162 – 63.

[33] J[ames Miller] McKim, "Negro Songs," *Dwight's Journal of Music* 19 (1862): 148-49.

[34] Library of Congress, "Born in Slavery," vol. 13, *Oklahoma*, 69, https://www.loc.gov/resource/mesn.130/?sp=69.

Christians, preferred black preachers because they believed that they had more authentic messages. Litt Young, enslaved in Mississippi, explained that her enslaver told the preacher to tell the other enslaved people to "obey our master and missy if we want to go to Heaven, but when she wasn't there, he come out with straight preachin' from the Bible."[35] Young believed that the more pious sermons were the ones not influenced by white people. She believed those services were corrupted and insinuated that one did not have to obey an enslaver in order to obtain salvation.

Even though slave marriages were never recognized by law, many enslaved people regarded marriage as a permanent commitment valued through their religious beliefs. Sometimes enslavers would arrange and force marriages. However, for many enslaved people, marriage offered an opportunity to make decisions that their enslavers could not make for them. Henry Bibb married a woman named Melinda from a neighboring plantation, and recalled that "notwithstanding our marriage was without license or sanction of law, we Believed it to be honorable before God."[36] They believed in their partnership and did not need white society to dictate their identity to them. An important part of the Christian wedding ceremony was the concept that only death could break the promise between two people. However, marriages between enslaved people that white people conducted omitted the phrase "Till death do you part." As Matthew Jarrett, formerly enslaved in Virginia, recalled, "We slaves knowed that them words wasn't bindin'. Don't mean nothin' lessen you say 'What God has jined, caint no man pull asunder.' But dey never would say dat. Jus' say, 'Now you married.'"[37] Jarett, the Bibbs, and other antebellum enslaved people regarded marriage as established by God, not by the enslavers and white society. Marriage offered another identity not based on an enslaved person's status.

African American women created unique identities within their religious communities. The testimonies of enslaved women suggest that women created a religious identity based on values of trustworthiness, generosity, piety, and selflessness.[38] This "religious womanhood" is revealed through stories of mothers who taught their children how to escape dehumanization. A former enslaved

[35] Library of Congress, "Born in Slavery," vol. 16, *Texas*, pt. 4, 227, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn164/.

[36] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: 1849), 40 – 41.

[37] Workers of the Writers' Program (VA) of the Works Progress Administration, *The Negro in Virginia* (New York: Hastings House, 1940), 80.

[38] Brenda E. Stevenson, "'Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca down': Enslaved Women, Religion, and Social Power in the Antebellum South," *Journal of African American History* 90, no. 4 (2005): 347.

woman described the happiness and freedom of spirit experienced by her mother. In order to experience these feelings that her mother appreciated under slavery, "I went to church and tried to get a religion because I wanted to shout like Mama."[39] By converting to Christianity, an enslaved woman embraced her moral worth and believed in her moral superiority, which combatted harmful stereotypes of sexual deviancy and intellectual inferiority propagated by white people. Charlotte Brooks, formally enslaved in Louisiana, compared her enslaver's religious practices to her own by observing that her enslaver's "religion did not make her happy like my religion did... for it was Jesus with me everywhere I went. I could never hear her talk about that heavenly journey."[40] Brooks believed her religion to be stronger and truer than her enslaver's. By converting to Christianity, a woman found one way to fight negative stereotypes by adopting the identity of a religious woman.

Enslaved women could sometimes find more potential for social power in religion than in other areas of life. Charlotte Brooks, an enslaved woman sold from Richmond, Virginia, to Louisiana when she was a teenager, admired a woman in her Louisiana community named Aunt Jane Lee because she led secret prayer meetings. Aunt Jane Lee read religious texts to her community and converted many enslaved people on Brooks' plantation. When she moved with her enslaver to Texas, Brooks recalled that the enslaved Protestant community "felt lost, because we had nobody to lead us in our little meetings. After a while I begun to lead."[41] Caroline Harris, an enslaved woman from Virginia, also remembered a woman on her plantation who was respected for her spiritual leadership. When Harris and her prospective husband wanted to marry, they "didn't have to ask Marsa or nothin.' Just go to Ant Sue an' tell her you want to git married. She tell us to think 'bout it hard fo' two days, 'cause marryin' was sacred in de eyes of Jesus."[42] Ant Sue sanctified the marriages on her plantation by officiating the couples' ceremonies. Though a slave, she helped create this important social institution.

Enslaved people used religion as a vessel for socialization that presented them with opportunities for emotional release and for creation of alternative identities. For the average enslaved person,

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[39] Rawick, *The American Slave*, vol. 19 *God Struck Me Dead*, 60.

[40] Octavia B. 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* (New York, 1890), 34.

[41] Albert, *The House of Bondage*, 19.

[42] Perdue, et al., *Weevils in the Wheats* 129; *Negro in Virginia*, compiled by the Virginia Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia (New York, 1940), 81.

religion offered comforts that the institution of slavery denied them. Slavery attempted to strip people of their humanity, as they were only valued for their labor. People who lived in fear of abuse and death typically focused more on survival than resistance to the institution of slavery as a whole. Their decisions to convert to Christianity were not determined acts of rebellion with the goal of undermining enslavers and their institution. Religion provided comfort and gave people a semblance of autonomy. Even though enslaved people did not intend to revolt, their religious practices, including the preference for black preachers, development of identities, socialization, and emotional releases opposed the objectives of slavery.

These human experiences and decisions challenged an enslaver's goal of dehumanizing African Americans. Enslaved people developed identities that did not depend on their enslavement. As Christians, Baptists, and Methodists, they chose to listen to black preachers who emphasized their spiritual value and equality. Religious women created identities that contested their stereotypes. Hidden schools allowed enslaved people to become teachers and students, participating in the exchange of knowledge. As husbands and wives, they recognized marriage as an institution ordained by God, not by the slaveholder. They created religious communities that sustained their humanity through emotional and social support. Enslaved people may have made decisions with the purpose of surviving a system that valued them as tools and machinery, but the consequences of their actions inherentyly challenged the objectives of the institution to which they were confined.

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Courtney Ebersohl will graduate from Virginia Tech in the Spring of 2019 with a history and French double major and a minor in art history. She has been the treasurer of Phi Alpha Theta History Honors Society for the past two years and studied French language and culture in Caen, France in the Spring of 2017. She intends to achieve an advanced degree in history or archaeology and will focus on the socio-cultural history of underrepresented groups and how their material cultures reveal values and routines.