

# *The Meaning of Faith in the Black Mind in Slavery*

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## I

In *L'Être et le néant*, Jean Paul Sartre discussed the existentialist limits of man's freedom and the ability of a human being to define and create the essence of another person. In the oppressive society, "the Other holds a secret—the secret of what I am." In the American experience, Blacks continually found themselves in the position of being characterized, their African culture negated, and their spirituality redefined. During slavery, the Black man sought continually to "lay claim," as Sartre suggests, "to this being which I am . . . or, more exactly, I am the project of the recovery of my being."<sup>1</sup> The slave's religion was often the only link between the individual Black slave and that person whom he sought to be. The Black man's spirituality created a collective pride and racial solidarity which defied the indoctrination of the slave masters.

Marxist historian Eugene D. Genovese has attempted to define the essence of that unique spirit of Black people who struggled to maintain their humanity in an inhumane environment. His *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974) is a masterpiece of American historiography, a work which will undoubtedly replace Kenneth M. Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* as

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *L'etre et le neant*, or, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), *passim*.

the most influential and authoritative source on African-American slave societies and Southern culture. Genovese has transcended the sterile, surplus-value theoretical concepts of his first major work, *The Political Economy of Slavery*. He weaves a sensitive retelling of the life of the mind of an oppressed class and caste of Americans. Genovese's analysis of Black antebellum Christianity receives extended treatment and provides the basis for his entire cultural critique of servile society. The notions of faith and belief in a spiritual salvation created an ethos among Blacks of self-integrity and collective worth during bondage. Genovese reviews the social institutions of the slave community and their interaction with Southern White culture as he attempts to explain the meaning of faith within the Black experience. Genovese fails to unite the meaning of slave consciousness in the framework that he constructs within his general explanation of Southern society. Yet within his failure lie the seeds for a more complete understanding of the nature of Black faith and the meaning of Black existence.

Genovese provides a comprehensive cultural evaluation of the totality of slave life. His approach to Southern history has always mirrored the work of Ulrich B. Phillips, the first historian who viewed slavery as a complex way of life. Employing a wide range of source materials with scholarly precision, Genovese succeeds in destroying the long-held belief that excessive profits were at the heart of the peculiar institution's *raison d'être*. The complex, ambiguous relationships between the Black driver in the cotton fields and the White planter, the tenderness and bittersweet hatred of a Black mammy for her enslaver's children, wove a complicated caste and class system pattern which perpetuated itself even under the worst of financial conditions. Discarding Phillips' crude racism, Genovese argues that Blacks understood their oppressed conditions from a variety of perspectives. They fashioned for themselves an autonomous family structure, lifestyle, and general sense of well-being which defied the day-to-day brutality of the enslavement process. Discriminating Blacks recognized that a master could be oppressively exploitative or "de bestes' massa in de worl'," and was usually both at once. Even in the expansive frontier slave economies of Mississippi and Texas, Genovese notes, one finds substantial evidence

of numerous Blacks who served in leadership positions which involved the maintenance of plantations.

Genovese's major contribution to slave theory in the American South, the concept of "paternalism," finds its origins in the writings of Georg W. F. Hegel and Antonio Gramsci. In *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel suggested that the existence of the master was inextricably related to the being of the slave. Ideally, the slave was the mindless force lumbering through the material world, whereas the master was the intellect, the mind of the slave. Yet to be a master, Hegel noted, one must obtain the recognition and consent of the slave. Thus, a spirit of reciprocity and recognition of humanity must exist between the owner and his human chattle. For Genovese, this ethos of reciprocity, "paternalism," existed in Georgia's cotton fields and Louisiana's rice swamps between Blacks and Whites. Masters assumed their right to control and exploit the labor power of Blacks without feelings of excessive guilt but accepted the responsibilities of supplying food and clothing for Black infants, provided medical care for the elderly, and gave limited freedom to adult slaves to control most aspects of their social institutions. Slaves acknowledged the legitimacy of their masters' rule over their existence with great reservations, Genovese states. A conflicting sense of love and hatred between the enslaved and the master created a beautiful and often violent society. Thus plantation paternalism "afforded a fragile bridge across the intolerable contradictions inherent in a society based on racism, slavery, and class exploitation. . . ."

Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci directs Genovese through a maze of antebellum documents which express both the planter's and slave's points of view toward a comprehensive explanation of Black consciousness and culture in the South. Gramsci was the first Marxist to argue that cultural hegemony, the domination of the thought of leading intellectuals, such as educators and clergymen, over rival ideologies of oppressive classes, was a vital component of bourgeois class rule. Gramsci's insistence that upper class ideological control over civil society brought about bourgeois economic hegemony parallels Genovese's thesis that the planter ideology dominated the poor White and slave Black

consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Genovese has long insisted that the planter dominated the intellectual contours of Southern life and thereby, in Gramscian fashion, turned all dissent away from a general political or economic review of the legitimacy of slavery as the basic mode of production within society.

This hegemonic domination of the planter over all Southerners, and especially over Black slaves, could have led to the creation of a conservative, brain-washed, agrarian proletariat. Sociologist Orlando Patterson argues with Genovese that such was the case in the American South. Paternalism, he declares, "succeeded astonishingly well in welding together all the elements of the system, especially masters and slaves."<sup>3</sup> Such criticism is not too far from Stanley Elkins' controversial judgment that a unique "Sambo" type probably emerged from the American plantation:

Is it possible to deal with "Sambo" as a type? The characteristics that have been claimed for the type came principally from Southern lore. Sambo, the typical plantation slave, was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter depen-

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<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci was the Italian Communist Party's leading theoretician during the period immediately after the First World War and during Benito Mussolini's regime. A Sicilian, Gramsci was acutely aware of the dimensions of culture and caste within the political economy of his bourgeois society. Although Gramsci has been ignored among Western Marxists, his writings are perhaps the most valuable of *any* historical materialist on the nature of cultural institutions within societies, on working class consciousness, and on the political dimensions of education and religion. Hegelian in spirit, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* are a monumental piece of social criticism.

Genovese has been profoundly influenced by Gramsci for at least ten years; Genovese's early writings do not show Gramsci's cultural formulations and suffer as a result. Stanley Elkins has observed that "Gramsci's thought provides Genovese with a way of bringing the slave fully into the equation without repudiating his earlier convictions either about the planter class's hegemony over Southern society at large or about the master's patriarchal role vis-a-vis his black dependents."

For Genovese's assessment of Gramsci, see "On Antonio Gramsci," *Red and Black* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Orlando Patterson, "The Peculiar Institution Again," review of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, in *New Republic*, November 9, 1974, pp. 37-38.

dence and childlike attachment: it was indeed the very key to his being.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike Elkins, Gramsci's and Genovese's sympathies remained with the oppressed. Genovese insists that there was room within the dialectic of paternalism for slave culture to survive and even prosper. The independence and semi-autonomy of the slave quarters gave birth to a new American consciousness, a sense of being which was in many ways "pre-political" and "nationalistic." This Black consciousness was profoundly conservative, partially rooted in the accommodationist tactics of "house niggers" and "Uncle Toms," but it provided the enslaved with the ideology of a separate "black nation" — a political concept which Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and Malcolm X subsequently built upon.<sup>5</sup> Two opposing modes of consciousness were created within the servile society, the will to resist and the tendency

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery* (Chicago and London: 1968, Second Edition) 82; Elkins, "The Two Arguments on Slavery," paper presented at seminar, University of Kansas in Lawrence, November, 1975.

Elkins' thesis represents the logical conclusions of the arguments established in the sociology of E. Franklin Frazier and Charles S. Johnson and the historiography of John Hope Franklin, Benjamin Quarles, and especially Kenneth Stampp. Negro and White liberals had long insisted that the African-American had no separate culture or racial essence apart from that which they adopted within the slave quarters. This school of social scientists portrays slave life as a barren, matriarchal existence.

Psychological damage—that is, cultural dislocation and psychic alienation of an individual(s)—must exist within the context of social relations within any biracial society. This cultural alienation or sense of self-denial seems especially predominant in an integrated society, within a culture that allows for social interaction between the races or castes. In the American context, questions of psychological damage would seem to have more meaning with the emergence of a bourgeois society than on the plantation, for Whites have been far more successful in controlling the cultural ethos of Blacks in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth.

<sup>5</sup> Genovese was one of the first historians to suggest that Booker Washington was a representative of a conservative, Black nationalist consciousness. Slavery and the underground Black political institutions on a slave plantation gave birth to the tactics of political accommodation and conciliatory phraseology which Washington and his Tuskegee Machine almost developed into an art form. On the political consciousness of conservative Black nationalism, see Genovese, *Red and Black*; Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1968); Manning Marable and Johnella Butler, "The New Negro and the Ideological Origins of the Integrationist Movement," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, (Winter 1975) pp. 47-55.

toward passivity and acculturation. Paternalism did not create a "Sambo"; rather, it allowed intelligent, resourceful Black human beings either to work within the limits of the plantation or struggle to destroy the inequities of the system, depending upon the social conditions of the time.

The literature on American slavery which has appeared in recent years reflects Genovese's concern for demonstrating that a viable servile culture existed. John Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South* argues that the folklore, family structures, and religion of the Blacks served to create a culture of resistance. Blassingame's inability to escape a fruitless historiographic feud with Stanley Elkins' "Sambo model" unfortunately subverts his central cultural aims, as does his narrow choice of sources from existing slave narratives.<sup>6</sup> Herbert Gutman succeeds in illustrating the African cultural origins of slave society and the existence of complex Black kinship structures in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925*. As well researched as Genovese's study, it insists passionately that the Black family emerged from the slave quarters as a highly organized, moral and stable social group. There is little room for "paternalism" as a force toward social conformity here; the mind of the slave was independent of the white man's demands for cultural legitimacy and filial piety.<sup>7</sup>

Within the "culture" arguments of slave historiography is a central tenet: Black religion was a crucial determining factor in creating the independent life for the African-American slave. The essence of that faith can be questioned, however, since the origins of Black nationalism as a political force within contemporary American culture are grounded within this tradition of gospels, prayers, and hymns. The symbolic uses of Christ as a deliverer within the secular world, the moral implications of Black demands for civil rights and freedom, and the political role of the Black ministry shed light upon the current assessments of

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<sup>6</sup> John Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925*, (New York: Pantheon Press, 1976).

Black faith within the peculiar institution and beyond it, into our own violent bourgeois world.

## II

Genovese is quite correct in his assertion that the struggle over the consciousness of the Blacks was the most important issue which separated masters and slaves. As Gramsci observed, no class is worthy of the name unless it is conscious of itself. The slave's faith was the key to his very being, to his will to protest for larger ideological goals. It is not surprising that, as the slave's religion became more defined and in harmony with his independent African spirit, the master's evangelists developed detailed "positive good" theories to buttress the slave regime. James Henry Thornwell, a Professor in the Presbyterian Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina, argued in 1851 that the Scriptures stated that the peculiar institution was "not inconsistent with the will of God—it is *not* sinful." Thornwell reported to God-fearing Carolinian Whites that in the Bible "the master is nowhere rebuked as a monster of cruelty and tyranny, the slave nowhere exhibited as the object of peculiar compassion and sympathy."<sup>8</sup> Genovese writes that the Episcopal Bishop of Virginia, the Right Reverend William Meade, sermoned slaves on the subject of whipping, piously explaining, "whether you deserve it or not it is your duty, and Almighty God requires, that you bear it patiently." To Genovese, the South's racism and brutality rested upon "class pretensions that had proceeded fearlessly through the ages without regard to race, color, creed, or previous condition of servitude." The struggle to determine faith coincided with the hegemonic war to perpetuate a cruel, anachronistic regime.

The antebellum slave narratives, more than one hundred separately published books or pamphlets written by Blacks, occasionally support Genovese's paternalism thesis, but also often contradict it.<sup>9</sup> The masters

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<sup>8</sup> Robert T. Handy, ed., *Religion in the American Experience: The Pluralistic Style* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 106-7.

<sup>9</sup> Secondary works on the slave narratives include: Marion Sterling, "The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American Literary History," Diss. New York University, 1946; Charles Nichols,

were usually unsuccessful in their attempt to control the Hegelian master-slave relationship which was a part of all cultures based on unfree labor. Along the religious ideological front, the plantation owner was hopelessly outmatched by his unwilling field hands.

Some masters were not concerned with bringing the Word of Jehovah to their slaves, but many masters unsuccessfully attempted to encourage their slaves' belief in pro-slavery faith. The slave narratives of Richard Allen and Austin Steward relate that their masters did not attend church or discuss religion;<sup>10</sup> other churchgoing masters had so alienated their slaves that some Blacks were of the opinion that "Negroes have nothing to do with God."<sup>11</sup> However, the majority of slaves understood that their masters' hypocritical gospel of universal brotherhood and deliverance had little to do with their own faith in salvation. Blacks did not believe that their enslavement was preordained, nor did they accept the Ole Massa's notion that a godly slave was obedient, loyal and hardworking—the perfect Uncle Tom. Genovese relates one incident when a slave responded to the quasi-Calvinist idea that Blacks were created to serve White masters: "Dat's so. Dat's so. But if dat's so, then God's no fair man!"

Genovese suggests that Black religion's Arminian free will doctrine drew from the dual images of Moses and Jesus as the active, personal deliverers of all Black people of faith. Even the few Muslim Blacks along the Georgia coast identified Muhammed with the Christ figure. Many slaves were convinced that the abolitionists and Union troops were the agents of Moses. Moses, the worldly redeemer of an oppressed nation, represented in Black gospels the belief that the race's suffering was both political and spiritual:

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*Many Thousands Gone* (Indiana University Press, 1969); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community*.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (1833; rpt. New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 16; Austin Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman* (Rochester: William Alling, 1857), p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Feet Wide* (Boston: Brown and Stearns, 1849), p. 28.



“Go Down, Moses,  
Way down in Egypt land,  
Tell ole Pharaoh,  
To let my people go.”

Blacks had anguished as Christ had; their common suffering helped to make Christ a very personal God. Slaves quite literally viewed Christ's crucifixion as His personal gift to them. Peter Randolph wrote with emotion that, as a slave, “With my mind's eye, I could see my Redeemer hanging upon the cross for me.”<sup>12</sup> The figure of Christ did for the slave what the master could never do: He recognized their humanity; He comforted them when their children were sold from them or when they were lashed; He gave them the ability to love themselves and even to forgive the sins of their oppressors. “When the black slaves of the New World made [Christianity] their own,” Genovese writes, “they transformed it into a religion of resistance—not often of revolutionary defiance, but of a spiritual resistance that accepted the limits of the politically possible.”

Stanley Elkins has observed that Genovese's paternalism thesis leaves precious little room for the psychological damage sustained by Blacks within slavery. Surely the Blacks were forced to accept the Other's roles, or at least, Elkins insists, their Africanity was negated in a whirlwind of capricious regulations, whippings, sales, and rapes.<sup>13</sup> Elkins' point is a valid one, but of course it works both ways. When he points to the acculturation of the proverbial yellow nigger wench of the big house, or isolates the shuffling, ragged simpletons in blackface, or the demented Harks and Wills of William Styron's imagination, he illustrates real tendencies of behavior which existed in any biracial colonial society. Frantz Fanon best isolated the frustration and hopelessness of a brutalized, exploited caste in *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>14</sup> Yet in the American South, for a variety of

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life: or, Illustrations of the Peculiar Institution* (Boston: Published for the Author, 1855), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Elkins, *Slavery*, Chapter II.

<sup>14</sup> Frantz Fanon characterized the dependent existence of the colonial being as an inability to define one's own humanity. Using the model of dependence found in Sartre's writings, Fanon

cultural reasons, the planter was never able to dominate the mind of the majority of slaves. Indeed, the master himself was hopelessly compromised in his contradictory quest for bourgeois profits accompanied with a cavalier lifestyle and manners.

Slavery brutalized the Southern White elite, twisted their morals to support the prostitution of one group of human beings by others. Solomon Northrup, a former slave, wrote that the system of slavery forced the master to punish his human property, and the owner, "like a fool, whipped and scourged away the very strength upon which depended" his "amount of gain."<sup>15</sup> In 1846 Lewis Clarke wrote that there was nothing paternalistic about his former owners. He asked, "How is it that masters kill their slaves, when they are worth so much money?" Slavery was essentially a passionate confrontation between members of two antagonistic cultures. "A slaveholder must be master on the plantation, or he knows the EXAMPLE would destroy all authority."<sup>16</sup> Black Presbyterian minister J. W. C. Pennington spoke for other former slaves when he wrote that the planters "are not masters of the system. The system is master of them."<sup>17</sup>

Faith in God's love provided Blacks with a rationale to reject White authority over their spiritual and secular lives. A personal God was in harmony with the spirit of oppressed Africans. When the will of the Divine Providence was diametrically opposed to the will of the earthly masters in the slave's perspective, it was the owner who would have to yield. William Green rejected the paternal control of the owner, who "stands there the supreme being, who seems to the slave many times, to have more power than the Almighty himself. But thanks be to his

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argued that the "white mask" worn by the nonwhite forced him into roles that subdued his rebelliousness and social tendencies toward liberation. At the heart of Fanon's early works is the dialectic of recognition as expressed in Hegelian philosophy. For so long as the Other holds the ability to define the human spirit in degraded, exploitative terms, the nonwhite revolution will not take place. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northrup* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1853), p. 184.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis Clarke, *Narratives and the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1846), p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> J.W.C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith* (London: C. Gilpin, 1849), p. vii.

Great Name,” Green wrote, “he is able to help the poor and the needy and the distressed, when they cry for help.”<sup>18</sup> The God of the Old Testament communicated with slaves on a regular basis to tell them the methods they could use to deliver themselves. God Himself explained to Henry Brown that he could escape from bondage by hiding in a box, and the Lord patiently gave detailed instructions in its construction.<sup>19</sup> God told runaway slaves where they could find safe shelter, confused the White patrols and their bloodhounds, and taught the slaves not only to accept suffering, but to actively oppose injustice.

A very personal God commanded my own great-grandfather to leave the central Alabama Blackbelt plantation he worked on to migrate to the primitive hill country of the upper Tallapoosa River in 1865. God’s decision was at the same time my great-grandfather’s rejection of sharecropping economics and White terrorism and the acceptance of Black self-sufficiency and collective action.

*Roll, Jordan, Roll* states that the enslaved African community brought forth few rebels and religious figures who could reject the all-pervasive paternal control of Whites and demand freedom: “Class oppression, whether or not reinforced and modified by racism, induces servility and feelings of inferiority in the oppressed.” Yet this question of religious and social control can be posed a different way: Did the existence of the idea of the Black God provide the intellectual alternative to acculturation, conformity, and self-hatred? The slave narratives indicate that the White South’s God did not recognize, in the Hegelian sense, the humanity of society’s most wretched class. Black faith provided the spiritual vehicle to overcome the racist images of the Other.

Peter Randolph noted that on his plantation “the slaves assemble in the swamps,” risking floggings and mutilations, to worship in their own way. “If discovered, they escape, if possible; but those who are caught often get whipped.” Randolph added, “Some are willing to be punished thus for Jesus’ sake.”<sup>20</sup> Faith in Providence and love for their

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<sup>18</sup> William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green (Formerly a Slave)* (Springfield: L.M. Guernsey, 1853), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*, p. 59.

<sup>20</sup> Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life*, pp. 68-69.

Black brethren created an image of a new Black man who had to reject the image that whites attempted to force upon him. To be faithful to the Spirit, one must assert one's humanity by being free. This revolutionary image can be found in the person of Denmark Vessey, the South Carolina Black who organized an unsuccessful slave revolt by appealing to the traditional African religious beliefs and the newer Black folk Christian concepts among the Black community.<sup>21</sup> When White journalist Thomas R. Gray asked Nat Turner whether he would admit to having violated the laws of God and man by organizing a servile rebellion, Turner responded, "Was not Christ crucified?" Black historian Vincent Harding writes that Turner's rebelliousness was born in a "biblical world" dominated by "divinely obsessed spokesman, including one Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>22</sup>

The Christian residents of Richmond did not respond paternalistically upon learning of the Turner uprising. Henry Box Brown wrote that the city was a chaotic madhouse. Whites were amazed at first and then angered at the prospect of being murdered by those whom they held in utter contempt. Blacks were severely flogged and several were "half hung," as it was termed—"suspended from some tree with a rope

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<sup>21</sup> Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia Press, 1942) provides an economic determinist's critique of Black servile rebellions. Also see Marion D. de B. Kilson, "Towards Freedom: An Analysis of Slave Revolts in the United States," *Phylon* 25 (1964), 175-87; Blassingame, *The Slave Community* Chapter IV; Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), Chapter III; and Eugene D. Genovese, "Rebelliousness and Docility in the Negro Slave: A Critique of the Elkins Thesis," in *Red and Black* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969).

<sup>22</sup> In the past decade there has been considerable controversy concerning the Nat Turner slave rebellion in 1831. William Styron's historical novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Random House, 1967) attempts to analyze the psychological and societal rationale of a Black rebel. John Henrik Clarke, editor of William Styron's *Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968) and Eugene Genovese in defense of Styron ("William Styron Before the People's Court" in *In Red and Black*) debated the relative merits and shortcomings of the novel. Other examinations of the Turner rebellion include: Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966); Nicholas Halasz, *The Rattling Chains: Slave Unrest and Revolt in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: David McKay, 1966); Richard Gilman, "Nat Turner Revisited," *New Republic*, 158 (April 27, 1968); Seymour L. Gross and Eileen Bender, "History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner," *American Quarterly*, 23 (October 1971); and Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

about their necks, so adjusted as not quite to strangle them. . . .”<sup>23</sup> Jamie Parker observed that local Whites debated whether to continue to trust their slaves or to give them privileges after the brutal murders.<sup>24</sup> One Virginia legislator at the time noted anxiously that the universal terror among Whites was caused by “the suspicion eternally attached to the slave himself, the suspicion that a Nat Turner might be in every family, that the same bloody deed could be acted over at any time and in any place. . . .”<sup>25</sup> Genovese is undoubtedly correct in assuming that the planters and slaveowners were less racist than were these city dwellers or most Northern Whites, yet their response to their Nat Turners and even ordinary runaway slaves was brutal, unforgiving, and lacking in a basic recognition of the Black man’s humanity.

### III

In a colonial setting, the most unsettling dilemmas which face the oppressed must be the questions of “Who are we?” and “Why have we suffered this fate?” St. Clair Drake suggests that this is “the twin problem of uncertainty and powerlessness.” Drake observes:

They knew they were Africans and “of African descent,” but white men invested the name of Africa with attributes that brought on feelings of shame. Compensatory beliefs backed up by convincing authority—great *myths*, the source of every people’s deepest strengths—were needed to bolster their self-esteem.

Black slaves, a people from diverse cultures which expressed a common philosophy of being, turned to their oppressor’s spiritual foundations, the Bible, to prove their humanity to themselves. Their “invisible institutions,” the Black congregations on plantations which met illegally, presided over by a proud clergy of semi-literate slaves, were a “protest church” which rejected the theology of their masters.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Vincent Harding, “You’ve Taken My Nat and Gone,” in Clarke, ed., *William Styron’s Nat Turner*, p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*, p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Jamie Parker, *Jamie Parker, the Fugitive. Related to Mrs. Emily Pierson* (Hartford: Brockett, Fuller & Co., 1851), pp. 16-17.

<sup>26</sup> St. Clair Drake, *The Redemptions of Africa and Black Religion* (Chicago: 1975), pp. 10-11, 26.

Such rejections of faith, the simple denunciations of the inhumanity of the Other, usually did not take a violent form. Despite Herbert Aptheker's influential early study of American servile rebellions, most contemporary slavery historians agree that the African-American slave did not mount many impressive, well-organized revolts. The Turner rebellion was dwarfed in comparison to the periodic, bloody wars by Brazilian slaves in Bahia during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Neither the Stono, South Carolina revolt nor Gabriel Prossers' plan for rebellion matched the fierce struggles in Haiti, in Jamaica's maroons, or the quilombos of Palmares. Genovese suggests that this lack of a tradition of revolutionary violence and nihilist anarchism in America was the product of unfriendly terrain, a densely settled, vigilant White population, and a conservative sense of well-being on the part of the oppressed. To struggle against one's owner was an automatic invitation to the gallows; the slaves commonly understood that successful protest would have to take covert forms.

Here again, faith provided the activist alternative to disillusionment and the Sambo personality. A. J. Muste has written that "the committed Christian has presumably been engaged in . . . a way of life which he believes to be in accord with the will of God." Many Black Christians could turn their backs to violence and bloodshed and righteously proclaim a higher morality and sense of being. Slavery's cultural dialectics demanded helplessness and dependence, a mode of existence in which "the aim of the 'system' is to convince (the person) that he is helpless as an individual and that the only way to meet regimentation is by regimentation. . . ." The Christian slave said *no* to acculturation, *no* to degradation and debasement, *no* to hatred and self pity, *no* to the images of the Other. The slave proclaimed that "the human being, the child of God, must assert his humanity and his sonship again." Muste wrote of the moral need for the conscientious objector to commit "holy disobedience" within the modern "abnormal state of society" by protesting wars and violence.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the Black slave resisted by asserting his right to be a moral, human being. Black religion in the antebellum

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<sup>27</sup> A. J. Muste, *Of Holy Disobedience* (Pendle Hill, Pennsylvania: 1968), pp. 9, 34-35.

South provided the ethos of Martin Luther King's sense of *agape*, and liberated the enslaved from feelings of inferiority and the crippling hatred of all whites.

This faith in a righteous messiah, a loving God whose holy principles one day will bear heavenly fruits for those who believe in Him, is at once a profoundly conservative ideal. The conservatism at the heart of Black religion reflects the traditional spiritual values of African philosophy, but it also says a great deal about the masters' ever-increasing ability to manipulate the ideas of all social classes. Genovese recognizes that Blacks could escape hating their masters and themselves by believing in God's all-embracing love, yet no one could get away from the brutal realities of an orderly and stable slave society which increasingly came into being after the Jacksonian era. "Unable to challenge the system as such . . . they accepted what could not be avoided." Black religion encouraged many slaves toward "the belief that a harsh and unjust social order is preferable to the insecurities of no order at all."

My grandmother has often told me that the slaves believed that the Lord created suffering within the world to test our humanity toward each other. Her God demands the acceptance of certain social conditions, yet He also requires the good Christian to act according to a specific moral code. The conservative God demanded among the slaves (and of my grandmother) the preservation of morality, the maintenance of optimism, the quest for truth. Thus, a religion which found its origins in the slavemaster's parlors and bedrooms told the slaves to conform to oppression, in certain instances, and to actively resist it whenever possible.

The activist tendencies within the idea of God allowed for the development of positive Black political and cultural self-assertion. As slave society slowly developed during the decades after the first arrivals at Jamestown were forced into terms of indenture for life, Blacks reproduced variations of their basic kinship units from West Africa. "Public religious rituals and functionaries in the African idiom disappeared," Drake observes, "but the diviner-healer as well as the sorcerer became important personalities on the plantations and in the cities." The

“‘Hoodoo man’ performed the [function] of allaying anxiety, assuring good luck, and of confounding enemies.” The religious enthusiasm and spirit of African people found its plantation expression in the Baptist camp meetings and in the chants and pious dances of Black congregations. The great majority of slaves were not Christians prior to the Revolutionary War, and it was very likely that “the belief in Divine Providence,” as Drake states, “was grafted onto” the more fundamental “philosophical basis of West African religious beliefs. . . .”<sup>28</sup>

Peter Wood demonstrates that during the first 150 years of Black slavery, African languages, work habits, and cultural institutions were distinctly autonomous in most respects from White influences. In cattle raising, rice production, and in various modes of production, the economic aspects of slave society bore the stamp of the Gold Coast and the Guinea forests more than the imprint of London or Bristol markets.<sup>29</sup> Gramsci himself stated that consciousness stems from material realities, yet consciousness can transcend its material bases for being and can, in turn, create new material institutions. The African-American sense of being which was generated from the conservative material realities of frontier slave labor and social existence transcended the rapidly changing economic conditions of the immediate pre-war South. Black consciousness was a product of African spirituality and the long period of time (prior roughly to 1830) in which slaves determined the hegemonic limits of the masters’ rule. The vehicle of the expression of Black spirituality, the Black church, was necessarily African in its character and scope. The Black minister built upon the image of the “Hoodoo man” and spirit exhorter within the popular consciousness. Within this faith was an unconscious expression of an alternative national consciousness, a need to express in political terms an entirely different cultural perspective.

Vincent Harding believes that “there can be no common history until we have first fleshed out the lineaments of our own, for no one else

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<sup>28</sup> Drake, *The Redemption of Africa and Black Religion*, pp. 20, 22.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: 1974).



can speak out of the bittersweet bowels of our blackness.”<sup>30</sup> Not surprisingly, Harding and other Black historians have found the origins of the Black experience within the idea of God and within the expression of that idea in the spirituality of the slave community. The Black church gave Blacks faith in themselves as human beings and the courage to resist White oppression. In the words of slave Lundsford Lane, “to me, God also granted temporal freedom, which MAN without God’s consent, had stolen away.”<sup>31</sup> Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* is an excellent survey of the unique way of life and labor that slavery created, but it fails to document the “bittersweet” origins of Black nationalist thought and Black spirituality. Southern paternalism attempted but could not mold the slaves’ religion nor concept of self. Rather, through their rejection of White images and through the glorification of Providence, slaves won the ultimate victory over tyranny—the triumph of proclaiming one’s Black humanity to the world. As Black human beings, the true believers in Christ found within themselves the great ability to love and to protest. Black minister Henry Highland Garnet, in a Buffalo, New York, Black political convention in 1843, expressed this activist creed:

. . . go to your lordly enslavers and tell them plainly that you *are determined to be free*. Tell them in language they cannot misunderstand, of the exceeding sinfulness of slavery, and of a future judgement, and of the righteous retributions of an indignant God. Inform them that all you desire is FREEDOM, and that nothing else will suffice. You had better all die—*die immediately*—than live slaves and entail your wretchedness upon your posterity. If you would be free in this generation, here is your only hope. However much you and all of us may desire it, there is not much hope of redemption without the shedding of blood. If you must bleed, let it all come at once—rather *die freemen, than live to be slaves*.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Harding, “You’ve Taken My Nat and Gone,” p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> Lundsford Lane, *Narrative of Lundsford Lane* (Boston: Hewes and Watson, 1842). Reprinted in Wm. Katz, ed., *Five Slave Narratives* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Henry Highland Garnet, “An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America,” in Thomas R. Frazier, ed., *Afro-American History: Primary Sources* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1971), p. 68.