

An Exploration of the Relationship between Southern Christianity and Slaveholding as seen in the "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave Written by Himself"

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Course: ENGL 232

Instructor: Ms. Winborne Gautreaux

Essay Type: Literary Analysis

We can so easily deceive ourselves into believing that what is accepted by the general population as normal behavior is also justifiably correct. Rarely do we, as a society, question our customs as long as this behavior yields such commodities as convenience, profit or social benefit. If contested, our acts become well justified and defended. All components of our lifestyle are purposefully bent to fit around popular beliefs and anything, up to and including the Holy Bible, can be distorted to advance our position. A current example of this is today's Muslim terrorists who are using teachings in their Koran to justify their position saying that the Koran dictates that they must fight a holy war, killing as many Christians and Jews as possible, even going so far as to sacrifice their own lives in the process. This sort of religious distortion, used to justify man's self-serving will, is what writer and former slave, Frederick Douglass exposes in his story of his life which he wrote in 1845.

In his story, Douglass gives us a wealth of obvious incongruities of people professing Christianity while practicing slavery: "The man who robbed me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation.... He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me.... He who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of the sacred influence..." (1077). Douglass also portrays deeper psychological profiles of the characters who persecuted him, such as that of Edward Covey, who

was once his master. Covey, an extremely devout Christian and leader in the Methodist church who prayed morning, noon, and night daily, appeared to be more religious than anyone. Covey faced no apparent moral internal conflict at breaking several of the Ten Commandments with actions such as ordering his slave woman to breed with a hired man to produce more slave chattel for his own personal gain. Covey rationalized that any sin that such a devout Christian as he committed would be considered but little offense to God (1053).

Douglass observes how his persecutors covered and protected their sins with the cloth of Christianity and it is his examples of these self-justifying practices which reveal exactly how the manipulation of Christian doctrine was performed. For a time, Douglass was owned by a religious slaveholder and also lived in the Christian community of St. Michaels. Douglass' owner, Captain Auld, who was a Christian convert, easily found religious sanction in the Bible for acts of cruelty. Douglass reports having seen Auld tie up a lame young woman, whip her until blood ran down her naked body, and then quote Scripture to the girl to justify the beating: "He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes"(1050). It seems that the local Reformed Methodist ministers of the church and their followers were keenly adept at bending the scripture for self-justification. Furthermore, in Douglass' experience, the religious slaveholders were the meanest, basest and most cruel in their treatment of their slaves.

"I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me," (1060) Douglass reports of his ownership by Captain Auld, and Auld's subsequent loan of him to Edward Covey, known as the "nigger-breaker." While in St. Michaels, Douglass witnessed inhumane treatment of slaves by the clergy, such as the Rev. Rigby Hopkins and Rev. Daniel Weede of the Reformed Methodist Church-who themselves owned slaves. Besides withholding food from their slaves, the reverends were merciless and far crueler man than their

lay brothers in their slave beatings, justifying regular unprovoked beatings as necessary to whip "the devil" from the slaves' souls. At the same time, these ministers made the highest profession of faith publicly and were extremely devout and active in revivals, prayer and preaching (1060). In a clever poem, "A Parody" written by Douglass and appended to his autobiography, Douglass devoted two stanzas to Christian slave owning ministers:

Love not the world," the preacher said,
And winked his eye, and shook his head;
He seized on Tom, and Dick, and Ned,
Cut short their meat, and clothes, and bread,
Yet still loved heavenly union.
Another preacher whining spoke
Of one whose heart for sinners broke;
He tied old Nanny to an oak,
And drew the blood at every stroke,
And prayed for heavenly union. (1080)

Remarkably, Douglass was astute enough and emotionally healthy enough to be able to observe that he was witnessing a perverted version, or interpretation of Christianity: "I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity," he wrote in a thoughtful appendix to his autobiography (1077). As he put it, the "Christianity of this land"-or the brand of Christianity practiced in the Southern slaveholding United States, was not the Christianity of Christ, which was pure, good, and holy. Douglass was sane enough not to blame God, nor the entire Christian faith. If U.S. enemies today could be as fair as Douglass and realize that many of the ills coming from the Christian United States are not the fault of the Christian

religion itself, perhaps the present religious conflict could be resolved. We, too, have the obligation to remember that the strain of Islam that has come to fore in these days of terrorist attacks, is but an extremist fanatical derivation or a religion that also has a pure and good basis. We should all make sure that religion is not a "mere covering for the most horrid crimes-a justifying of the most appalling barbarity...in which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds...find the strongest protection" (1059) as it was in the days of slavery in the southern U. S. and in the life of Frederick Douglass.

Work Cited

Douglass, Frederick. "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave." *The Harper Single Volume American Literature*. Ed. Donald McQuade, et.al. 3rd edition. New York: Longman, 1999. 1020-1081.

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Mrs. Gautreaux's Comments: *What makes this paper memorable is the fact that Mr. Martinez is not a native speaker of English. He is also a minister. Both his command of the language and his insight as a minister gave this paper a unique view of the narrative.*