

Abolition and Religion

by Robert Abzug

One verse of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” the unofficial anthem of the Northern cause, summarized the Civil War’s idealized meaning:

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.



Frontispiece of Phillis Wheatley's Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, 1773 (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

That the war to preserve the Union had become a godly crusade to end slavery—one in which soldiers would “die to make men free”—seemed logical and even providential by 1865. Yet it was an outcome that few in either the North or South would have predicted at the onset of hostilities. Before the war, the vast majority of white Christians in both sections opposed emancipation. A few years into hostilities, the improbable had become the inevitable: Abolition, a once-despised cause now justified the costliest of American wars.

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Lincoln’s move toward emancipation and the North’s assent to that policy must be viewed as an extraordinary transformation. Undoubtedly, Lincoln’s response had strategic aims. The President hoped that the Emancipation Proclamation, issued in 1863, would cajole the South back into the Union. And certainly Lincoln’s moral sense had deepened as he watched the mounting death and destruction. But these explanations of why Lincoln changed only raise a more profound and elusive question: How had emancipation itself become a policy option, albeit a controversial one, when just a few years before it had been unthinkable?

For this, we must thank the abolitionists. Lincoln said as much in April 1865, when he credited black freedom not only to the Union Army but to “the logic and moral power of William Lloyd Garrison, and the anti-slavery people of the country.” Always a minority who despaired at their lack of influence, abolitionists nonetheless managed over a thirty-year period to widen the terms of debate over slavery. At the core of their demand for immediate emancipation and citizenship for the freed slave lay a special religious vision, one built upon radical readings of Christianity but rendered in the mainstream vocabulary of American Protestantism and civil religion. Abolitionists deemed slavery a sin at odds with the Christian mission of saving souls and the progress of humanity promised by the Protestant Reformation and the American Revolution. To them, the redemption of America depended upon black freedom.

Most Americans rejected such doctrines as heresy and condemned their dangerous political and social implications. Those who opposed the abolitionist doctrine of immediate emancipation certainly had the Bible and historical Christianity on their side. As they pointed out, slavery had existed among the Hebrews without God’s condemnation, and Jesus had admonished servants to obey their masters “in singleness of heart, fearing God.” Christianity, following the tradition of Jewish law, did demand that masters treat slaves humanely and care for their souls. Yet never once did Jesus or the Apostles criticize

slavery as an institution. Instead, they promised the rewards of heaven and resurrection to the faithful, whatever their status in the world, since each human being possessed a soul potentially capable of salvation.

In the American colonies, even as nominally Christian masters rapaciously and sometimes murderously exploited African slaves, the churches sought not emancipation but conversion of slaves to Christianity and amelioration of their conditions. Missionaries taught slaves how to read the Bible and sought to save their souls (though masters came to worry about literate bondsmen). Ministers preached the law of love and campaigned for more humane treatment, encouraging a Christian ethic of paternalism for the master and protection for his chattel. These efforts helped to humanize the rough frontiers of North America and for a time seemed to fulfill Christian duty to those Africans wrested from their homes and transported to the New World.

Doubts about the wisdom and morality of owning slaves, however, emerged in Europe and North America in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sources as disparate as fear of labor competition, racial animosity, Enlightenment notions of liberty and labor, as well as radical Christian visions of spiritual freedom combined to inspire principled cases against slavery in general. George Fox and John Woolman, both Quakers, as well as the Puritan minister, Samuel Sewell, voiced some of the first religious objections to the institution. Yet only when such radical notions of spiritual equality fused with the American Revolution's radical republicanism did the dream of an American continent free of slavery begin to take shape in earnest.

The Revolutionary era witnessed major reforms, including gradual emancipation of slaves in the northern states and, in cooperation with Britain, a ban on the African slave trade in 1808. Major church bodies condemned slave keeping as, in the words of the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1818, a "gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of nature" and "utterly inconsistent with the law of God." Nonetheless, the Constitution structured slavery into the nation's political system through the three-fifths compromise, and slave labor fast became the backbone of a vigorous southern economy. Churchly criticism of the institution soon moderated. Southern clergymen and religious communities (as well as a great many of their northern counterparts) were moved enough by the excesses of the system to work out a compromise. They came to see slavery as "not a beautiful thing, a thing to be espoused and idolized, but the best attainable thing, in this country, for the negro." "We must leave it for God to remove, when his time comes," declared one writer in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. "It is ours to do the duties of intelligent, decided, fearless, conscientious Christian masters."

Yet the presence of slaves in America continued to bother a number of ministers and laypersons, and not only because of the anomaly of bondage in republican America. These Americans feared African Americans themselves, slave or free, as a troublesome and degraded presence. Whether blaming blacks or the whites who despised them, a variety of reformers offered the colonization of American blacks in Africa as a solution. The American Colonization Society, founded in 1816, appeared to offer something for everyone. Free blacks would receive land and a fresh start in the colony of Liberia, unhindered by white prejudice; evangelicals could open a new front in the campaign to Christianize Africa with black émigré missionaries in the lead; and white America, simply put, would be rid of what was widely regarded as a foreign and malignant population. On paper, colonization created a solution to the problem of racial tension that was both Christian and sensible. But in its compromises and self-delusion, the colonization movement, which had an almost total lack of success, also illustrated the degree to which most professing Christians had in reality accommodated themselves to slavery's enduring presence in American society.

The first third of the nineteenth century, however, was a significant time for anti-slavery. Haitian slaves had risen up and freed themselves from French rule in 1803. In England, decades of anti-slavery agitation led Parliament to abolish slavery in the British Empire by 1834. In the United States, sectional friction related to slavery began in earnest with the Missouri crisis of 1820. Nor were black voices silent. Free African American ministers sermonized against slavery's cruelties. Periodic fears of slave violence came to a head in 1822 with the discovery of Denmark Vesey's planned slave uprising. And in 1829, a free black man, David Walker of Boston, struck fear in the hearts of southerners by distributing his *Appeal*. With an urgent prophecy of divine punishment in the form of race war if America did not give up slavery and race prejudice, and with undisguised disgust at the hypocrisy of Americans who claimed to espouse doctrines of freedom, the *Appeal* called upon blacks to demand liberty.

All these factors caused a few whites to begin to renew the spiritual struggle against slavery. The Reverend George Bourne, an Englishman who headed a Presbyterian congregation in Virginia, refused communion to slaveholders and excoriated slaveholding ministers. In 1816 Bourne published a landmark tract, *The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable*. It called for "immediate emancipation" and labeled slavery as "manstealing." The Quaker tradition of anti-slavery continued in the work of Benjamin Lundy, whose periodical, *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, sought to allay white fears and misconceptions about African Americans. Lundy hoped that God would effect a "gradual spread of reason and the consequent elimination of racial prejudice" that would help end slavery.

It was in these circumstances of the late 1820s that William Lloyd Garrison applied the rhetoric of evangelical reform to slavery and put forth the vision of America at a crossroads, one in which it must free the slaves immediately or suffer God's wrath in the form of race war. Once a proponent of colonization, Garrison now rejected that program as a disastrous moral drug that numbed Christians to reality. He took the arguments of marginal figures like Walker, Bourne, and Lundy and gave them the authoritative voice of mainstream evangelical religion. He began publishing *The Liberator* on January 1, 1831, and pressed home the need for black freedom: "Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm—but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present." The cadences of the publication replicated the heightened rhetoric of the temperance and Sabbatarian movements but moved to radical ground merging apocalyptic visions with the familiar religious language of conversion and reform.

Reactions to Garrison varied. For whites in the South he became a hated enemy, while free blacks in the North applauded his efforts and became his most reliable subscribers. Most evangelicals rejected his tone as unchristian and his program as impractical and dangerous. However, Garrison galvanized a small minority in the religious community, especially those who had already begun to question the morality of slavery. He converted them to the cause and united them under the banner of a new organization, the American Anti-slavery Society. In his insistence on the need to choose between national millennial splendor through immediate emancipation and divine wrath brought about through inaction, Garrison's followers found a bracing clarity that was a form of religious experience. For a significant vocal minority, immediate emancipation became not simply an option but the ultimate standard of the Christian life.

These converts to the radical idea of emancipation demanded attention. They sought additional converts in local churches and agitated the issue in national ecclesiastical bodies. Meanwhile, across the North many abolitionists deemed their churches impure and left them in favor of new congregations or none at all. In the face of churchly inaction on slavery, Garrison and a good many others moved toward new, radical visions of the religious life, which bore little relationship to the evangelical or other traditions that had originally imbued these reformers with religious fervor. In this sense, even as abolitionism found its first burst of power in the forms of traditional Christianity, its disappointments with the religious

establishment hastened a splintering of the religious community that was to shape American church life in the century after the Civil War.

By the early 1840s, it is true, deep fissures had appeared in the abolitionist movement. The fault lines included the issue of participation in electoral politics, advocacy of a broader reform program, personality conflicts, and race itself. However, all could agree on—and help to make commonplace—the idea that the question of slavery involved the very survival of the American experiment and its place in millennial history. Abolitionism's disruption of the mainstream churches helped to legitimize immediate emancipation both as a policy to be debated and as a perspective that was seen as an extreme but recognized part of the Christian vision and political spectrum.

As other issues, such as slavery's expansion into the territories and the fear of a slaveholder conspiracy to rule the nation, sharpened the sectional divide, abolitionism and its vocabulary of freedom and race toleration gained basic legitimacy. Although most white Americans still saw abolition as a threat to the carefully balanced peace between northerners and southerners, and between blacks and whites, abolitionists had made emancipation a part of the nation's moral imagination. With the coming of war, no vision of Christian sacrifice better suited the time than a moral crusade to free the slave.

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