

JONATHAN REAVIS

To See the Negro Saved: The Religious Pragmatism of Booker T. Washington

The practice of morality being necessary for the well-being of society, [God] has taken care to impress its precepts so indelibly on our hearts that they shall not be effaced by the subtleties of our brain. We all agree in the obligation of the moral precepts of Jesus, and nowhere will they be found delivered in greater purity than in his discourses.

-Thomas Jefferson,

The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 315

My observation has taught me that the people who stand for the most in the educational and commercial world and in the uplifting of the people are in some way connected with the religious life of the people among whom they reside.

-Booker T. Washington,

Putting the Most Into Life, 24-25

It might seem strange to group the words of Thomas Jefferson and Booker T. Washington together in the same context. Nearly a century separated the two men and they came from vastly different social and racial backgrounds. In fact, the greatest contrast between these two historical figures can be drawn from the fact that Booker T. Washington was born a slave and Thomas Jefferson *owned* slaves, even fathering children by one of them. For all the differences that these men had from one another, however, their views on religion were strikingly similar. Indeed, Booker T. Washington had much in common with the civil religion of nearly all the Founding Fathers. George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin all understood that religion played a crucial role in the social and moral health of

a people and that some conception of God acted as a legitimizing force for political leaders (Bellah 225-245). As one of the most prominent black leaders during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Booker T. Washington was very much an heir to the religious legacy of the Founding Fathers, sharing with them what sociologist Max Weber famously called “the Protestant ethic,” a set of cultural values that blended Christian piety and capitalist productivity. Washington’s religion was intensely pragmatic and he stressed practical aspects of the Christian faith. Although he did not literally edit the Christian scriptures with scissors as did Thomas Jefferson, Booker T. Washington selectively amplified aspects of the faith that best suited his particular social philosophy. With his emphasis on the benefits of industrial education for working class African Americans, most notably associated with his founding of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Washington preached a religion that envisioned a God powerful enough to save black souls and black society.

Little scholarship exists on Booker T. Washington’s religious life despite the fact that he regularly spoke before religious audiences and commented on religious matters in publications like *The Christian Union*. This lack of scholarship is perhaps due to the perception that Washington was an exclusively pragmatic public figure and had little time for the lofty trivialities of theology. Washington dropped out of seminary at the age of twenty-four, disillusioned by religion and higher education (Harlan 63). His preference for practical, rather than religious, solutions to human problems was apparent in an address to Tuskegee students: “A man cannot have moral character unless he has something to wear, and something to eat three hundred and sixty-five days in a year. He cannot have any religion either” (*Character Building* 130). All this did not mean that Washington was uninterested in religion, however. On the contrary, it was precisely his pragmatism that prompted him to leverage Christianity’s authority to support his approach to black American social uplift at the turn of the twentieth century.

Like many former slaves during his lifetime, religion played a pivotal role in Booker T. Washington's upbringing. From his earliest memories, Washington recalled the central role that religious practice held for the slave communities in the American South and how slave Christianity was often associated with emancipation. In *The Story of the Negro*, his history of African Americans published in 1885, Washington told a story from his childhood when he awoke to his mother kneeling over him, "pray[ing] that Abraham Lincoln and his soldiers might be successful and that she and I might some day be free" (2:5). This image engendered in Washington an understanding of religion tied to social reform. He began to comprehend the great influence religion had over communities. He wrote, "the African slave accepted the teachings of the Christian religion more eagerly than he did anything else his master had to teach him." The slave not only accepted Christianity but expounded upon it. Washington observed, "in the songs [the slave] composed under [Christianity's] influence, he has given some wonderfully graphic and vivid pictures of the persons and places of which the Bible speaks, as he understood them" (*The Story of the Negro* 2:261). Religion provided slaves with what appeared to most white slave owners a benign form of cultural autonomy. The unique African American expression of Christianity, however, interpreted God's story of salvation in a way unintended by their white masters.

Slave interpretations of Christian religion, especially in song, were imbedded with serious social implications. In his autobiography, Washington wrote of how the meaning of slave songs transformed after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Prior to President Abraham Lincoln's order, he wrote that slaves "had been careful to explain that the 'freedom' in these songs referred to the next world, and had no connection with life in this world." He continued, "now they gradually threw off the mask, and were not afraid to let it be known that the 'freedom' in their songs meant freedom of the body in this world" (*Up From Slavery* 10). For example, African American slaves were not simply retelling the ancient Hebrew story of the Exodus from Egypt when they sang the slave spiritual, *Go Down Moses*. They saw in

the Israelites an image of themselves and interpreted the line “Let my people go” as God’s indictment of institutional slavery (Raboteau 249).

Slave religion, in short, fostered a sense of hope for salvation and liberation in this world. Washington spoke highly of a religion that served a purpose for the living, not just the dead. In fact, he criticized any escapist form of faith, saying, “no less repulsive to me than the negative Christian is the one who is always using his religion to escape something, from hell fire or brimstone or some less remote punishment” (*Putting the Most Into Life* 27). For Washington, religion was good inasmuch as it was useful for everyday living. Addressing a group of black students, he said, “[religion] is something which you can take with you into your class-rooms, into your shops, on to the farm, into your very sleeping rooms.” He insisted, “you do not have to wait until tomorrow before you can find out about the power and helpfulness of Christ’s religion” (*Character Building* 228). Washington rejected a form of religion that was only useful in the world to come. His criteria for true religion included the ability to transform the individual and society. Here, echoes of Jefferson’s words about the “necessity” of religion for a functioning society can be plainly heard in Washington’s insistence on the “helpfulness” of Christ’s religion. When Washington became the head administrator of the Tuskegee Institute in 1881, he integrated this “helpful religion” into the school’s curriculum.

Religion and education had always been two parts of the same whole in Washington’s mind. Even as a child, he elevated education to a level of divine importance. He described seeing a classroom full of students for the first time, saying, “I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise” (*Up from Slavery* 4). Later, after being accepted into the Hampton Institute, a trade school for African Americans in Virginia, he stated that he “had reached the promised land” (*Up from Slavery* 24). Washington inherited the symbiosis between religion and education from Reconstruction programs. After the Civil War, the American Missionary Association (AMA)

aimed to Christianize African Americans and supplemented the government sponsored Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands—better known as the Freedmen’s Bureau—in their effort to educate freed slaves. These two organizations worked in tandem to build both schools and churches (Richardson 121, 133-36, 139). Washington recalled that Sunday schools were the first place that slaves had an opportunity to receive an education and that they were often given the Bible as their first textbook (*The Story of the Negro* 2:120-121; *Up from Slavery* p 15). The religion brought to the South by the AMA, however, was laden with white middle-class values and Weber’s Protestant ethic. A subtle form of racism accompanied missionary efforts, with white AMA representatives exhibiting an opinion of southern blacks that was not wholly unlike the worldview of other historical colonial regimes (Sehat 327). The AMA’s gospel was comprehensive, seeking to save souls and “civilize” a population it viewed as backward.

The AMA’s impact on Booker T. Washington began with his mentor, General Samuel C. Armstrong. The AMA commissioned Armstrong and Hampton Institute as a bastion of its civilizing mission to a region characterized by rural “primitivism” (Sehat 333). Through General Armstrong’s work, the school successfully catechized Booker T. Washington in the doctrines of the Protestant ethic. Historian John P. Flynn summarized the Protestant ethic as “asceticism (i.e., the practice of religion *in the world*) and its secularization, and the practice of rational (efficient) economic behavior” (Flynn 264). Hard work, hygiene, thrift, and self-denial were moralized social traits under the Protestant ethic. These tenants shaped the values of the Hampton Institute as a vocational school, and consequently, Booker T. Washington’s values.

Washington fully embraced values like the bourgeois standard of “cleanliness next to godliness.” He said, “I sometimes feel that almost the most valuable lesson I got at the Hampton Institute was in the use and value of the bath” (*Up from Slavery* 28). Washington took the lessons he learned at Hampton and retaught them to his students at Tuskegee. In one

address to his students, he expounded upon the moral importance of oral hygiene. He went so far as to imply that God monitored how frequently the students brushed their teeth and cleaned their rooms (*Character Building* 46-47). Washington's hygienic pontifications may sound absurd to contemporary ears, but when he endowed cleanliness with divine importance, Washington entwined religion and education with the middle-class values inherited from white northerners. Cleanliness was not simply a matter of aesthetic preference. Washington believed cleanliness had a direct relationship to productivity, another characteristic of the Protestant ethic. He told his students, "[a] person who does not get into the habit of keeping the body clean, cannot do the highest work and the greatest amount of work in the world" (*Character Building* 174). He repeatedly emphasized the importance of hard work in all areas of life. Washington believed that diligent workers exhibited virtue that was impossible to ignore, and that such virtue would be rewarded, both temporally by employers and eternally by God (*Up from Slavery* 137). He imbued industriousness with religious value, thereby fortifying the black work force with laborers committed to working "as unto the Lord" (*The Bible, American Standard Version*, Col. 3:23).

While presenting at a religious conference, Washington proclaimed, "Nothing pays so well in the producing efficient labor as Christianity. Religion increases the wants of the laborer." He continued, "The Negro workman with the spirit of Christ in his head and heart wants land, wants a good house, wants another house, wants decent furniture, wants a newspaper or magazine" ("Extracts from Address Delivered Before the A.M.E. Zion Conference Charlotte" 211-212). The Christian religion appeared useful to Washington because it created both an efficient labor force and a market to consume goods. The spirit of Christ that Washington preached about differed significantly from the instructions found in the Gospel: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth" (Matt. 6:19). Rather, Washington's consumerist religion had much more in common with the Protestant ethic.

While he embraced the religion of the white majority, Washington was aware of its marginalizing effects. He wrote in his autobiography *Up from Slavery* that “no white American ever thinks that any other race is wholly civilized until he wears the white man’s clothes, eats the white man’s food, speaks the white man’s language, and professes the white man’s religion” (47). Considering the fact that, by all accounts, Washington embraced white middle-class values, this quotation seems paradoxical. He was no doubt critiquing the white standards in American culture, yet a decade later in a speech before a white audience, he boasted that black Americans had met those standards. He asserted, “we speak the tongue that you speak, wear the same clothes, eat the same food, profess the same religion, and love the Stars and Stripes as dearly as you do” (“Extracts of an Address before the Men and Religion Forward Movement” 529). These two statements illustrate the complex relationship that Booker T. Washington maintained with white society. Although he deplored the idea of white superiority, Washington was determined to prove that he could meet its demands.

Despite his validation of middle-class hegemony, Washington understood the tyranny of racism among the white elite. With regard to the “white man’s religion,” he experienced firsthand how Anglo-Christianity manipulated his own self-understanding. He said, “I cannot now remember where I first got the idea that a man who was dark in colour [sic] was necessarily more ignorant and in a lower stage of civilisation [sic] than one who was lighter.” He continued, “I recall that in the matter of religion, although, it may never have been directly referred to, we, always understood that God was white and the Devil was black” (*The Story of the Negro* 1:23). With a white man at the helm of black religion, such theological distortions and abuses were common.

Historian of slave religion Albert Raboteau writes that many Christian slave owners justified slavery by appealing to the “missionary” nature of enslavement, citing the fact that slaves often adopted the faith of their masters (Raboteau 145). Strangely enough, Washington appealed to this line of thinking in the same speech containing the statement about black

acculturation into white standards. He stated, “I count it a rare privilege to belong to a race whose ancestors were brought here only a few years ago as savages.” He went on to encourage his audience, “You of the white race should count it a glorious thing to have had a part in transforming twenty slaves into ten millions of aspiring, hopeful Christian citizens” (“Extracts of an Address before the Men and Religion Forward Movement” 529). Elsewhere, Washington also suggested that slavery had been used by “Providence,” a term reminiscent of the Unitarianism of the Founding Fathers, as a “school” to bring Africans out of ignorance (*Up from Slavery* 8). The latter articulation of slavery’s “redemptive” abilities imagined a scenario wherein God created something good out of a bad situation. In the former quotation, however, Washington specifically urged his white listeners to take pride in the fact that they were directly connected to slavery. Interestingly, this quotation came from a speech that was nearly identical to one given before an assembly at an A.M.E. Zion conference two months later. The speech was mostly a critique of inadequate black ministers in the rural South and, unsurprisingly, his forgiving words about slavery were absent from his A.M.E. address. It should be noted that Washington had different agendas while speaking to these two audiences. His words at the A.M.E. conference were aimed at inspiring strong religious leadership among African American ministers, while the apparent flattery of his white audience was likely meant to help secure financial backing for his various projects, as he depended heavily upon the contributions of white donors (*Up from Slavery* 94). Washington obviously tailored his speeches according his audience’s racial and social makeup, but he consistently critiqued the black religious institutions of his day.

The church was the only institution controlled by southern blacks, yet Washington had no reservations about publicly critiquing it (Harlan 62). The low standard for ministerial credentials and lack of education created a serious problem for southern black churches. To Washington’s understanding, southern blacks regarded higher education and religious ministry as opportunities to “not have to work any longer with their hands” (*Up from Slavery*

62). He worried that it was far too easy for someone to become a minister (“Extracts from Address Before the National Negro Baptist Convention” 155). Beyond his legitimate concerns, Washington employed a caricature of southern rural blacks that delegitimized the institution that had the strongest influence over African Americans (*The Story of the Negro* 1:278). His harshest critique was his most public. In August 1890, the nationally circulated Christian Union published an article by Booker T. Washington where he claimed that the majority of southern black ministers were “unfit, either mentally or morally, or both, to preach the Gospel to any one or to attempt to lead any one.” He claimed that these ministers were corrupt, money-hungry charlatans who led church services and exploited congregants’ emotions by setting them “to groaning, uttering wild screams, and jumping, finally going into a trance” (“The Colored Ministry” 199). These ecstatic religious expressions did in fact constitute a fundamental component of black Christianity, but for Washington to write off this specific religious tradition as merely exploitive registered as an exceedingly sharp rebuke (Raboteau 59-60). In a follow-up statement in *The New York Age*, Washington defended his article by asking, “Who is the better friend to ministry, to the race—the one who speaks out plainly, or the one who is constantly stabbing in private?” (“Unfitness in the Ministry” col A). Washington believed that he was helping his race by being critical of its religion, but he did so while simultaneously flattering white religion.

Washington knew that religion had the ability to move the color line. He attributed the historic openness of Methodist and Baptist congregations to black members to the denominations’ history of religious persecution in America. Several mainline Protestant traditions established early in the nation’s history (most notably the Episcopal/Anglican church) viewed both the Baptist and Methodist denominations as dangerously Nonconformist—a term that referred to an unwillingness to adhere to official church doctrine, administrative structure, and order of worship. As a result, Baptists and Methodists were often jailed or expelled from predominantly Anglican communities in the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries (Gaustad and Schmidt 30-48). Because both denominations had suffered, Washington reasoned, "it was therefore natural that its members should be opposed to slavery" (*The Story of the Negro* 1:261). Religion built a common ground that the black community could share with white Americans and a vehicle by which Washington could navigate between two racial worlds. The social situation for the African American community was terribly dire. Blacks could be lynched for practically no reason except for the color of their skin and racial violence was a constant threat. In response, Washington leveraged the cultural characteristics that carried the most currency with white men of great power: paternalistic, middle-class religion ("Race and Class" 159).

In retrospect, Washington's dualistic religious personality seems counterproductive and altogether harmful to the black cause. Historian David Sehat argues that in order for Washington to transcend his oppressed status and become a full member of American society, he had to adopt at least some of the oppressor's values in order to be recognized as a leader by those with power (Sehat 325-327). "By impugning those who disagreed with him as either lazy or vicious," Sehat has written of Washington, he "effectively tightened his leadership and strengthened his emerging significance before white, northern philanthropists" (Sehat 342). In his history of African Americans, Washington attributed Nat Turner's violent rebellion to religious ignorance and used words like "quaint" and "primitive" to describe southern black theology (*The Story of the Negro*, 1:174). This idea no doubt comforted white southerners who feared that black religious rhetoric could mobilize political action. Washington asserted his authority over black religion by denouncing its most popular caricatures and promoting his version of compliant Christianity. To be clear, Booker T. Washington was not an ordained minister, but his voice held the weight of religious authority across swaths of the black community, or at least his white supporters believed it did. His controversial *Atlanta Address* enjoined freed slaves to refrain from aggressively obtaining suffrage, liberal education, and civil rights, a fact that prompted W.E.B. DuBois to condemn it

as the “Atlanta Compromise,” but earned Washington the title of “Negro Moses” by a white reporter (*Up from Slavery* 116). DuBois may have criticized Washington for his leadership style, but among white southerners, Washington was the perfect leader of the black “Israel.”

Washington did occasionally use his emerging celebrity to admonish white audiences, however. In an effort to gain empathy for the black experience from his white listeners, Washington stated that the solution to the color line resided in white Christians’ ability to imagine what it was like to be black. He argued, “we were forced into this country against our will and against our most earnest protest. That fact alone, it seems to me, gives us a claim upon the generous and helpful consideration of the Christian men of America that cannot be true in the same degree of any other race” (“An Address Delivered to the Faculty and Members of the Theological Department of Vanderbilt” 161, 189). Ultimately, much of Washington’s discourse on religion concerned leveraging influence and acquiring power, albeit for what *he* thought was the good of the black community.

Booker T. Washington’s religious beliefs are clouded with mystery, confusion, and paradox. His personal religious practice at times seems discordant, even hypocritical, an accusation to which he might have replied, “Does it work?” Washington repeatedly proved his preference for results, even over published consistency. His public addresses made it clear that he firmly believed that religion had the ability to reform society and transform the civil status of African Americans. Although he adopted the standards of white economics, education, and religion, it could never be said that Booker T. Washington wanted to be white. He simply wanted African Americans to enjoy the same status, respect, and pleasures as whites. The actualization of racial equality was a nearly insurmountable task for Washington, but he committed his life to that task based on the belief that it was an inevitability in God’s plan (*Up from Slavery* 108). He stated, “In the economy of God there is but one standard by which an individual can succeed—there is but one for a race. This country demands that every race shall measure itself by the American standard” (*Up from Slavery* 146).

Booker T. Washington accepted the American standard with religious conviction. As a leader of the proto-black nationalist movement, he accepted the Protestant ethic of the country's Founding Fathers. He worked to penetrate the strongholds of white hegemony for the sake of the black community. He said, "Mine is not a selfish plea to the church. I want to see the Negro saved for his own sake, and I want to see the Negro saved in order that the white race which surrounds him may be saved" ("Extracts from Address Delivered Before the A.M.E. Zion Conference Charlotte" 212). Washington believed that a practical God could save his race. If true religious striving is, as Washington said, "to be like God," then his entire life was one of practical religion (*Putting the Most into Life* 27).

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