

Slaveholding Religiosity & African-American Religion
In Antebellum Slave Narratives

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Approved:

Slave narratives tell stories of shared experiences of hope, disillusionment, joy and despair, experienced by members and descendants of the African diaspora who were subjected to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Those experiencing this shared yoke of bondage had varied responses, many of which clung to religious beliefs. Of those who clung to faith as their own response to slavery, a consistent pattern emerges in which authors present a division between the white southern slaveholder's religiosity and their own personal and communal religion. The stark division that emerges in each of the five narratives discussed in this thesis emphasizes a critique by each author of what they deemed "false" slaveholder religiosity. Each author presents this religious division through compelling and complex personal evidence based upon differing convictions, beliefs, geographical location, moments of religious awakening, and time periods. This thesis will explore how each author presents his or her own method of coping with their realization of a disturbing division between slaveholder religiosity and their own religious beliefs in their narratives.

In this thesis I seek to explore the interconnectedness between what the authors describe as slaveholder religiosity, the authors' own forms of religious belief, and the extent to which those religious convictions informed their actions during the antebellum era. The negative term "religiosity" refers to false religious practices due to deceitful intent or ignorance. I juxtapose "religiosity" with the term "religion" based upon demarcations made by the authors of these slave narratives. This differentiation was based upon the authors' belief that there was a false and a true form of religious practice of Christianity. In each narrative studied for this project, the authors describe the "religion" of slaveholders and their supporters as false, often a form of religiosity that

was taught to their slaves. Many of the authors write about their own rejection of this religiosity. In its place, the authors propose a true form of religious belief based upon the tenets that God wants mankind to treat one another justly and compassionately and that God desired the equality of all mankind. Both slaveholder religiosity and slave religion were supported by Scripture, but the slave narratives I discuss also reference being led by “the spirit” of God as well as the word of God in the form of the Bible. Moreover, the slave narratives refer to God’s natural law as antislavery. Therefore, religiosity is used in conjunction with false religion which sanctions slaveholding. In contrast, African American religious practice described by the authors rejects slavery and offers an egalitarian alternative.

My interest in slave narratives was piqued during my sophomore year as an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina. This was the first time that I found a slave narrative required for a course; and, honestly, it was also the first time that I had ever read a slave narrative. I recall the deep emotions that I experienced as I read *My Bondage, and My Freedom* by Frederick Douglass. I wondered why no one had exposed me to this profoundly inspiring historical art form before that semester. This was a history that I connected with on an academic and a personal level. As I began to explore the online collection of slave narratives on the “Documenting the American South” website, these stories began to come alive. These are not just words written on a page, but life-giving stories. These are rich, humanizing stories that provide a voice to those who were once chattel slaves and considered as being no more valuable than animals. In chapter eight of his first narrative Douglass stated it this way, “There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being,

and were all subjected to the same narrow examination.” However, these narratives finally give those oppressed a voice with which to cry eternally against the dehumanizing effects of slavery.

Slaves were not mere chattel; they were people, with hopes and aspirations. Although these dreams were often unfulfilled under the oppressive yoke of slavery, slaves still dared to hope. Hoping in the midst of circumstances that were unbearable, these antebellum authors did the unimaginable and decided not only to live audaciously, but to write their stories so that generations could learn to do the same.

Whilst I was taking the course on slave narratives, I was also taking an interestingly named course entitled, “African-American Religion.” Ironically, the culminating theme of this course discussed how this term “African-American Religion” was a misnomer because a race of people may practice a set of religious beliefs or tenets, but cannot hold claim or possessive license to a religion. Despite the course title, I learned a great deal about the syncretic nature that pervades African-American religious practice. African-American culture is one of constant adaptation. I started to see how my two courses were interconnected. As I read more slave narratives I saw how religious faith was critical to many of the authors and how it was important to the maintenance of their hopefulness. However, the more critical essays I read, the more I saw religious faith diminished when scholars considered the extent to which it played a role in the authors’ lives while enslaved in the antebellum United States. Thus, I embarked on a journey to delve into religiosity and religion as expressed by the authors of five key slave narratives.

Introduction of Primary Sources Analyzed:

The primary sources chosen for this thesis are ones that speak to both the physical and spiritual journeys of those who were enslaved, yet courageously struggled for freedom despite their circumstances, and recorded their stories before the emancipation of the slaves in 1865. Each of these narratives is an antebellum account of the author's experience in slavery. Each speaks to the unfathomable atrocities suffered by slaves and the ways in which these authors reconciled their faith with the circumstances of their world in slavery. The authors chosen have complex stories; no one narrative looks the same. Yet, the narrators existed in a world that regarded them as all the same. As I write about their faith I aim not to make the same mistake. Because the authors included made a clear distinction between religiosity and true religious faith in their narratives, this thesis seeks to navigate blasphemy and piety in their texts to discover a greater understanding of the distinctions made by these authors.

The first narrative consulted is Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789). This narrative, as do all of those chosen, reviews the author's life in slavery, his religious conversion experience, and a portion of his life after slavery. The second narrative discussed is *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written By Himself* (1811). Next I examine *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and *My Bondage and, My Freedom* (1855) also by Douglass. The last narratives consulted are *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861) and *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave,*

Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828, collaboratively produced by Truth and Olive Gilbert in 1850.

Biographical Information for Each Author:

Each of these five authors details his or her personal experiences in slavery, journey to freedom, and post-slavery life. Each of the authors connects his or her ascent to freedom to a spiritual journey, which some depict explicitly and others implicitly .

The first author discussed had an interesting and adventure-laden life as both a slave and a freeman. Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, writes that he was born in the part of Africa then known as Guinea in a village called Essaka. However, “external evidence in baptismal and naval records indicates that he was born in America rather than Africa” (Carretta 7, 8). Despite the discrepancies of his birth story and whether this part of his narrative is autobiographical or a biographical collection of stories that he heard and wrote down, Equiano was in fact a slave, first in Barbados and later in England under the ownership of Colonel Henry Michael Pascal (Carretta 34, 39). After approximately seven years at sea aboard different Royal Navy vessels prior to and during the Seven Years’ War, or the French and Indian War, (Carretta 44-45), Equiano spent a short time with the Guerin family who lived in the Westminster suburb of London. It was under the care of the two Guerin sisters that Gustavus was sent to school and baptized on the 9th of February 1759 at St. Margaret’s Church, Westminster. Baptism was an unusual occurrence for a slave (Carretta 80). Equiano continued expanding upon the spiritual and practical knowledge that he had gained while with the Guerin family after he left them to go back to seafaring. In 1762 he was denied his freedom and sold by his master, British naval officer Colonel Pascal, to Captain Doran of

the British navy. In 1763 Captain Doran sold Vassa to a Quaker by the name of Robert King (Carretta 94). However, because Equiano was hired out by King, Equiano was able to save enough to purchase his own freedom in July 1766 after approximately 23 years in slavery (Carretta 114-115).

To date, there is no comprehensive biography of John Jea, “The African Preacher.” However, his story of spiritual awakening and religious calling as a slave is compelling. Jea was born in 1773 and would have been approximately 38 years old when his narrative was published. The text is extremely detailed about many aspects of his life as a slave, but Jea is tactful in keeping obscure some information, such as the details of his marriage to his second wife (Charity Jea) and the name of his first Black American preaching companion. Jea begins by discussing the way he entered into slavery; this history seems to contribute to his sense of identity and pride. He describes his birth in the town of Old Callabar, in what is now present-day Nigeria (Jea 3). He says that his father’s (English) name was Hambleton Robert Jea and his mother’s (English) name was Margaret Jea (Jea 3). They were bought by Oliver and Angelika Triebuen, who made the unusual decision to purchase a slave family together and sent them to New York as a unit (Jea 3). Another peculiarity of Jea’s story is the boldness with which he addresses and defies his master. This may be explained through his still having a sense of pride and identity due to his knowledge of his family history (Jea 10). Jea describes how he was defiant as a young boy; because of this, his master tried to beat him into submission and made him “go to a place of worship” regularly as his punishment (Jea 10).

After going to church for some time, Jea accepted the words of the minister and at the age of fifteen had a conversion experience that changed him from a rebellious youth

into a pious one (Jea 14, 18-19). Jea then discusses a vision he had in which an angel taught him how to read the first chapter of the gospel of St. John (Jea 35). This “angel” very well could have been a person in the community who taught him to read, but Jea describes this moment using religious terminology. The law of the land during Jea’s time stated that “if any slave could give an account of what he knew of the work of the Lord on his soul he was free from slavery by the Act of Congress, that was governed by the good people the Quakers” (Jea 39). Thus, because of his ability to read, or memorize, the first chapter of the gospel of John, Jea was granted his freedom (Jea 39).

The next author discussed in this thesis is the well-known anti-slavery lecturer and writer, Frederick Douglass. Frederick Bailey was born into slavery in February of 1818 on the Eastern Shore in Tuckahoe, Maryland (McFeely 3). While he was a slave in Baltimore, under the auspices of Mrs. Sophia Auld, Bailey learned how to read and write. Around the age of twelve, when he was “not more than thirteen” he had a conversion experience that led him to adopt Christianity. For Douglass conversion meant “a change of heart which comes by, ‘casting all of one’s care’ upon God and by having faith in Jesus Christ ...” (*My Bondage* 117, 131-32). While enslaved, Bailey had a varied range of experiences, a house slave in Baltimore, a field slave in St. Michaels, Maryland, and a skilled slave who hired his time in Baltimore (McFeely 26-39, 40-48). It was not until September of 1838, when he was twenty years old, that Frederick Bailey took his first step to become Frederick Douglass through a courageous escape to New York under the disguise of a free Black sailor, using the Underground Railroad (McFeely 71).

Of the authors mentioned Harriet Jacobs had one of the more peculiar journeys to freedom. Her escape involved her concealment from the public eye for “nearly seven

years” (Jacobs 173). Jacobs was born to Delilah and Elijah Jacobs in the town of Edenton, North Carolina in 1813 (Yellin 3, 6-7). After Jacobs’ mother passed away when Harriet was six years old, her mistress, Margaret Horniblow, taught the slave girl to read (Yellin 11). When her mistress passed away, a deathbed transaction granted twelve-year old “Hattie” to Margaret’s niece, Matilda Norcom, daughter of Dr. James Norcom (Yellin 15). Thus, Jacobs fell into the hands of the power-hungry Dr. Norcom and his unsolicited habitual sexual demands and assaults on her young existence (Yellin 16-23). While in her early teens Jacobs fell in love with a free Black carpenter who offered to buy her freedom, a request that Dr. Norcom vehemently denied. Seeking an alternative to being forced to become Norcom’s concubine, 15-yearold Jacobs chose to become the mistress of a prominent, single, white man in Edenton, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer (Yellin 24, 26). After being expelled from the Norcom household and having two children by Mr. Sawyer, Jacobs went into hiding in the attic of her grandmother’s house (Yellin 49-62). Nearly seven year after entering her grandmother’s attic, Jacobs fled Edenton on a vessel that took her to Philadelphia (Jacobs 172, 176).

Similar to Douglass, Sojourner Truth was an abolitionist; she was also an itinerant preacher and feminist despite being obliged to earn her living (like Jacobs) as a domestic. Although Sojourner Truth was illiterate, she was urged to produce an autobiography, and with the assistance of her friend Olive Gilbert she was able to publish her narrative in 1850. Sojourner Truth was born around 1797 and named Isabella by her parents, James and Elizabeth Baumfree, in the Dutch community of Hurley in Ulster County, New York (Painter 3- 5, 11). Isabella was auctioned off at the tender age of nine and continued her life under the ownership of the Neely family that lived in Twaalfskill, New York (Painter

13). As a slave Isabella worked in both domestic and farm labor. She passed through the hands of several enslavers including an inn-keeping family named Schriver and the Dumont family, with which she lived for sixteen years (Painter 14-15). During the 1820's Isabella had a religious awakening, embraced the Holiness Methodist doctrines, and quit drinking. In 1826 Isabella heard the voice of God urging her to leave Master Dumont and journey to freedom with the Van Wagener family of Wagondale, New York (Painter 27, 25). This was certainly not the end of her journey, but it was the end to a history of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of Mr. and Mrs. Dumont (Painter 14, 16). After a move to New York City and two negative religious experiences with alternative religious groups, on June 1st, 1843 Isabella renamed herself Sojourner Truth and embarked upon her Spirit-led journey as an itinerant Christian preacher and lecturer (Painter 45-61, 73).

Each of these five narratives will be discussed using five guiding questions. A.) What is the proportion of positive and negative references to religion in the narrative, and what does this say about the author's views of religion and religiosity? B.) How does each author discuss and distinguish slaveholding religiosity? C.) What are the distinguishing characteristics of African American slave religion according to the author, and what does this religion offer a slave? D.) To what extent does each author try to reconcile his or her actions in the world with his or her beliefs? E.) How does each author state his or her own religious beliefs? What is explicit; what is implicit? This thesis will conclude by comparing and contrasting the main features of each of the five narrators' religious beliefs.

Chapter One: Slaveholder Religiosity & Its Grip On Master:

In his first narrative Frederick Douglass defines slaveholder religiosity as “the corrupt, slaveholding, women whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land” (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* 100). This is the scathing and judgmental assessment that we see some antebellum authors of slave narratives embrace. Other authors, such as John Jea, are more gracious in their tone towards slaveholders who they believed were merely benighted rather than evil. Nonetheless, each of the five authors discussed in this chapter makes a distinction between his or her own beliefs and the slaveholders’ false beliefs. This chapter seeks to explore the complexities of how each author discusses slaveholder and other forms of patriarchal religiosity.

Throughout *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African Written by Himself* (1789), Equiano critiques slaveholder religiosity by challenging “nominal” European Christians to follow the tenets of their faith. He believes that these nominal Christians allow and assist in the continuation of the slave trade, which Equiano believed was barbarous. Thus, in his autobiography he likens Christians who support the slave trade to savages. Equiano writes, “The white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner, for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty” (Equiano 35-36). This quotation highlights the brutality of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and links it with European savagery, which is contrasted with Christian morality. Equiano highlights the irony that Europeans believed Africans were savages, when in actuality they were enslaving other human beings, which Equiano argues was a sign of moral savagery. He does this in order to build an argument

against the beneficiaries of the slave trade. He presents a different but logical point of view through the eyes of an enslaved African who experienced the slave trade as a barbarous attack by European men.

Equiano also argues that Englishmen call themselves Christians, yet act in ways that are contradictory to the basic Christian principle “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12). He builds his case against hypocritical Christians by highlighting the inherent hypocrisy of calling oneself a “Christian” and participating in the cruelty of the slave trade. In chapter five the author describes a “nominal Christian” slave trader discussing his sale of 41,000 people into slavery. After hearing that the trader cut one man’s leg off for running away, Equiano then asked him how he, the trader, could answer before God. The slaver then gave an insufficient response, which further supported Equiano’s argument (Equiano 95). Equiano discusses multiple accounts of “Christian” slaveholders who contradicted their own religious text. Through this method Equiano sets up a sound argument with which to critique Great Britain’s condoning of the Atlantic slave trade. Equiano describes his perspective on slaveholder religiosity by emphasizing the barbarity of the slave trade and the hypocritical nature of slaveholding religiosity when compared with Biblical doctrine.

In “Moses and the Egyptian: Religious Authority in Olaudah Equiano's ‘Interesting Narrative,’” Eileen Razzari Elrod argues that Equiano’s consistent piety and earnest faith set the tone for the narrative, making Equiano’s narrative a spiritual autobiography of sorts (Elrod 409-425). John Jea’s *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself* (1811) also fits into this category of spiritual autobiography because the central purpose of the

narrative seems to be to give details about Jea's earnest faith and his conversion story. Because of this, I think Jea discusses slaveholder religiosity to enhance, by contrast, his own conversion story. By demonstrating his master's religiosity as a foil, Jea presents his own faith as genuine.

Jea discusses slaveholder religiosity in the first pages of his narrative by giving examples of his own master's cruelty rationalized by religion. In one passage Jea writes:

“We were obliged to thank him for the punishment he had been inflicting on us, quoting that Scripture which saith, ‘Bless the rod, and him that hath appointed it.’ But though he was a professor of religion, he forgot that passage which saith, “God is love, and whoso dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him” (Jea 4).

This passage demonstrates how Jea describes slaveholder religiosity. He does not highlight a direct moment when he began to differentiate from slaveholder religiosity, but he uses instances where the slaveholder contradicts the Bible to show the hypocrisy of slaveholding beliefs. Jea then speaks about the totality of the slave system and broadens the scope of critique by discussing slaveholders, stating, “we were often led away with the idea that our masters were our gods; and at other times we placed our ideas on the sun, moon and stars, looking unto them, as if they could save us” (Jea 5). Jea defies and rejects his master's religion by highlighting the hypocrisy of the slaveholders' faith, thereby declaring his own form of religious freedom.

A little more than two-thirds of the religious references in Jea's narrative are positive. This demonstrates Jea's deep sense of faith and religious purpose formed despite his master's original intent to use religion as a form of punishment. “In addition to this punishment, they made me go to a place of worship, while other slaves enjoyed a rest” (Jea 10). Through what his master intended as punishment, Jea ultimately finds

what he considers true faith and a way to subvert the system of slavery through the spiritual freedom of his newly found belief system (Jea 19). Previous to his conversion Jea writes that he was “stubborn, not caring whether he lived or died” (Jea 10) and that he “could not bear to be where the word of God was mentioned, for I [Jea] had seen so much deception in the people that professed to know God” (Jea 10). In these passages we see that Jea had a rebellious attitude before he was a Christian. After his conversion he still subversively rebelled against the system of slavery by expressing what his master regarded as an impudent indignation at his master’s religiosity. As a result, Jea’s master beat him just as much after his conversion, to keep him from going to the house of God (Jea 20). Jea briefly discusses religion negatively at the beginning of his narrative, but after his conversion he describes religion as a positive influence in his life.

Jea’s narrative is written in the form of a religious testimony. He confesses that he was an enemy to God at one time, and highly negative towards and critical of religion. After his conversion Jea has less to say about slaveholder religiosity, especially after Jea recounts his own conversion experience. This is further evidence that *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself* (1811) is a spiritual autobiography and religious testimony which begins negatively and ends triumphantly.

The righteous anger and outrage towards slaveholder religiosity throughout *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* are in stark contrast to the tone of the spiritual autobiographies of Equiano and John Jea. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is unashamedly averse to religiosity. In this narrative, Douglass treats religion in favor of slaveholding, which he calls the “the

slaveholding religion of this land,” as intentionally protecting and shielding the atrocities of American slavery.

The adjectives Douglass selects to describe slaveholder religiosity are associated with evil and the enemies of religion. These adjectives condition his antebellum readers to view slavery negatively, and thus to agree with his argument that slavery is totally inconsistent with Christian religious principles. Words such as “infernal,” “blasphemous,” and “demon[ic]” are used to describe the system of slavery in the narrative. Douglass uses this language to describe slavery and its effects on good people such as Mrs. Sophia Auld (*Narrative of the Life* 43), and then counters those descriptions of slavery with positive religious language such as “heavenly” and “angelic” when describing freedom from slavery. Thus, from the beginning of the narrative Douglass conditions the reader to equate “good” or “true religion” with freedom for slaves, and “evil,” “false religion,” or “religiosity” with slavery. By using religiously dichotomous language to describe slavery adversely and describe freedom positively, Douglass shows the religious depravity of slavery to be so blatant that the “religion of the land” seems to sanction the manifest evil of slavery.

Two-thirds of the religious references in Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* are negative. Douglass’s first narrative takes such a harsh stance against Christianity, what he called “the *slaveholding* religion of this land,” that he felt he needed to write an Appendix to his narrative explaining that he was not against Christianity as a religion. He was simply against “*slaveholding* religion,” which, he added, was utterly distinct from “Christianity proper.” “Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest, possible

difference. . . To be the friend of one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other” (*Narrative* 100). Douglass left no doubt in the *Narrative* about his “love” of “the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ.” Therefore, he had nothing but “hate” for the “hypocritical Christianity” of the slaveholders and their defenders.

A large portion of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is dedicated to the detailed description of the slaveholders in St. Michaels, Maryland and their “cruel and cowardly” piety (*Narrative of the Life* 73). Douglass begins with a narrow focus specifically on Master Thomas Auld and his conversion to Christianity, which was a highly disappointing event in the eyes of Douglass (*Narrative of the Life* 56). Douglass’s critique then widens to include other “religionists” in the community whose piety produced “appalling barbarity” to their slaves (*Narrative of the Life* 72-73). Douglass reports that when his own master was converted at a religious camp meeting, Auld became “more cruel and hateful in all his ways” (*Narrative of the Life* 56). Due to Auld’s insincere “conversion” to Christianity, Douglass argues, the slaveholders’ religion is “religious sanction” for slaveholders’ malevolence towards their slaves (*Narrative of the Life* 56).

Next Douglass discusses Edward Covey, who is first mentioned sardonically as “a professor of religion -- a pious soul -- a member and a class-leader in the Methodist church” (*Narrative of the Life* 58). Subsequently, Douglass describes Covey, the slave-breaker, as the one master who Douglass acknowledges broke him spiritually, emotionally, and physically (*Narrative of the Life* 63). Douglass presents Thomas Auld and Edward Covey as prototypes for the cruelty and self-justification that Douglass saw in slaveholders who professed Christianity.

Later in this narrative Douglass moves the reader towards his macro-level conclusion that *all* pious slaveholders are cruel. Without directly asserting his opinion, Douglass presents the idea that it is impossible to be both a truly devoted Christian *and* a slaveholder. With this assumption Douglass echoes his mentor and employer, at that time, William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison calls slaveholders “man-stealers” and writes that they and those who support slavery are the foes of both God and man (*Narrative of the Life*, 11). Douglass elucidates this inability to be both a slaveholder and a true Christian when he writes:

Were I to again be reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. It was my unhappy lot not only to belong to a religious slaveholder, but to live in a community of such religionists” (*Narrative of the Life* 72-73).

To Douglass “religious” slaveholders seemed to be the most confident in their religious justification for their cruelty towards their slaves. Therefore, the “religious” slaveholders had less inhibition in punishing their slaves, even if it was contradictory to the Christian faith. Douglass notes this contradiction by demonstrating the hypocrisy of religious slaveholders who cruelly tried to whip the “devil” out of their slaves; such is the case with Rev. Hopkins (*Narrative of the Life* 72), or with Mr. Covey’s encouragement of his slave, Caroline, to commit adultery with a married man (*Narrative of the Life* 62). All of these accounts produce a larger argument that Douglass builds about the impossibility of one’s being both a true Christian and a slaveholder.

According to Douglass, slaveholders use “devil” to characterize “impudent” slaves. Impudence in a slave is the first warning sign that he has the “devil” in him and therefore needs to be whipped. “Does a slave look dissatisfied? It is said, he has the devil in him, and it must be whipped out. Does he speak loudly when spoken to by his master? Then he is getting high-minded” (*Narrative of the Life* 73). These are examples of slave impudence according to slave holder religiosity. While a “high-minded” white person might be thought of as virtuous and respectable, slaveholder religiosity treats a “high-minded” slave as an immoral threat.

Douglass inverts the word “devil” and applies it to the slaveholders, suggesting that they, not the “impudent” slaves, were actually the “devils.” The inversion of “devil” is clearly seen when Douglass and his companions are foiled in their plans to escape slavery:

A band of pirates never looked more like their father, the devil. They laughed and grinned over us, saying, ‘Ah, my boys! We have got you, haven't we?’ [...] They would impudently ask us if we would not like to have them for our masters [...] Then they would curse and swear at us, telling us that they could take the devil out of us in a very little while, if we were only in their hands. (*Narrative of the Life* 82).

Douglass writes about how William Freeland’s mother calls him a devil and blames him for corrupting the minds of the other slaves in influencing them to run away (*Narrative of the Life* 81). This connection between slave rebellion and Satanic efforts to overthrow God’s proper order underlies the slaveholders’ tendency to accuse impudent slaves and slave resisters of having the devil in them. However, by linking the taunting slave-catchers to “their father the devil,” Douglass highlights them as the true evil-doers, not the slaves.

In his Appendix, Douglass attempts to make amends for his cynical attitude and harsh criticism of religion by differentiating “Christianity proper” from the “*slaveholding religion*” of the land (*Narrative of the Life* 100). The differentiating factor between the two is the hypocrisy practiced by those following the religion of the land. Douglass says these false Christians “outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity” (*Narrative of the Life* 102). Then he details the ways in which they show hypocrisy through “hating their fellow brother” and neglecting them. However, adding to his first narrative’s complexity, Douglass mentions one minister in St. Michaels, George Cookman, whom slaves regarded as a genuinely good and truly religious man (*Narrative of the Life* 56). Douglass also writes that Covey deceived himself into thinking he was a true follower of Christ (*Narrative of the Life* 62), implying that Covey was perhaps more misguided and self-deceived than evil. Nevertheless, the preponderance of Douglass’s references to the religion of slaveholders is highly negative. Throughout his narrative insists on the rank hypocrisy of slaveholder religion through the use of dichotomous language and extensive anecdotal evidence.

Douglass’s second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), treats slaveholding religiosity within the United States with less harshness than does his 1845 narrative. Although he views religiosity as an evil, false religion that slave masters used to deceive slaves, he also discusses it as a false doctrine by which pro-slavery advocates deceived and justified themselves. Douglass views some slaveholders, such as Sophia Auld (*My Bondage* 123-28), as deceived by a false religion that made slavery good, proper, and biblical (*My Bondage* 126-27). This shift in his harsh critique of slaveholding religiosity to a more lenient stance toward some slaveholders is seen through contrasting

his first analysis of Sophia Auld and her “infernal” transformation into a malicious slaveholder in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (*Narrative of the Life* 43) with his second analysis of her in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. The second analysis makes concessions to Sophia Auld by stating that she had indeed become a slave to the system of slavery, and was thus deceived by it (*My Bondage* 128).

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave* Douglass treats Sophia Auld with pity when describing the transformation that occurred after she became a slaveholder:

“But, alas! this kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon” (*Narrative of the Life* 40).

Here Douglass uses “fatal poison” to describe the power that slaveholders held. He also describes the power dynamics of slavery as an “infernal work” that seem to have overtaken Sophia Auld. In *My Bondage and My Freedom* this transformation of Sophia is much more complex and less dichotomous than in the first narrative. In his second narrative Douglass discusses how Sophia Auld was “remarkably pious” and he goes into much greater detail about how she attended church services and frequently read the Bible (*My Bondage* 117). Douglass even goes to the extent of saying that it was impossible to see Mrs. Auld and not think, “That woman is a Christian” (*My Bondage* 123). Douglass makes his biggest concession to Auld when he writes, “A noble nature, like hers, could not, instantly, be wholly perverted; and it took several years to change the natural

sweetness of her temper into fretful bitterness. In her worst estate, however, there were, during the first seven years I lived with her, occasional returns of her former kindly disposition” (*My Bondage* 1116-117). In 1855 Douglass not only blames the system of slavery more than Sophia Auld for her moral downfall. He also acknowledges in 1855, that even after slaveholding had damaged her “natural sweetness,” she was still not totally and negatively transformed. Her “kindly disposition” sometimes “return[ed].” In “her worst estate,” she was mainly a pawn in a larger system of slaveholder religiosity.

William Freeland, on the other hand, is not described as a pious master in either of Douglass’s autobiographies. Yet Douglass gives more detail about Freeland in his second autobiography, which makes the reader more sympathetic towards him (*My Bondage* 194). Douglass writes:

“Among the many advantages gained in my change from Covey's to Freeland's--startling as the statement may be--was the fact that the latter gentleman made no profession of religion. I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south--as I have observed it and proved it--is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes” (*My Bondage* 194).

Because William Freeland had never been a Christian, Douglass did not attack him for covering or justifying cruelty with religiosity. Because Freeland treated his slaves fairly and was not a religious hypocrite, Douglass wrote about him sympathetically. When discussing slaveholder religiosity in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass reserved the charge to southern slaveholders who committed “horrid crimes” against slaves and tried to justify their deeds with their religion.

There is an obvious tonal shift between Douglass’s first and second narratives. This shift may be due to the differences in the way that Douglass addresses the topic of

religion and religiosity in each narrative. The tone of Douglass's first narrative is much more earnest and confrontational. The differences can be attributed, in part, to the ratio of negative to positive references to Christianity in the first narrative versus Douglass's second narrative. In his first narrative Douglass draws his readers' attention almost exclusively to false and hypocritical practices of Christianity, whereas *My Bondage and My Freedom* is not always as judgmental.

The change in tone may also be attributed to changes in Douglass's views about the antislavery cause. The first narrative was supported and published with the help of William Lloyd Garrison, who had absolutist views about morality and Christianity as expounded upon in Garrison's preface to Douglass's first autobiography (*Narrative of the Life* 11). Because Garrison was so heavily involved in Douglass's first narrative, some ideas in Douglass's text were likely influenced by Garrison's highly moralistic view of Christianity. Due to Douglass's break with the Garrisonians he may have felt more creative license in his second autobiography to speak more freely about the moral complexities of certain slaveholders without feeling that he was being disloyal to Garrison's anti-slavery argument. Thus, the first narrative presents a more emotionally-charged emphatic tone, whereas Douglass's second narrative makes more concessions to slaveholders such as William Freeland and Sophia Auld because of their genuineness and conscious or subconscious rejection of slaveholder religiosity.

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs discusses slaveholder religiosity through individual examples of slaveholders committing atrocities, yet still professing religion. Through these individual examples she tries to make the case that they represent the majority of slaveholders and their religious beliefs. Jacobs does

this when she discusses a slave master who shot a slave woman through the head because she had run away and had been brought back (Jacobs 58). This master “boasted of the name and standing of a Christian, though Satan never had a truer follower” (Jacobs 59). In her chapter entitled, “The Church and Slavery,” Jacobs presents the ways in which she began to make a distinction between slaveholder religiosity, or religion of the South, and what she considers true Christianity. One significant factor that influenced this change happened on the heels of the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831. Due to the slave insurrection led by Nat Turner, slaveholders had the desire to “give the slaves enough religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters” (Jacobs 79). However, the very way that slaveholders meant to suppress the slaves in Jacobs’s hometown became the way in which they were able to hear what Jacobs considered true Christian doctrine from an Episcopalian pastor (Jacobs 83). Through this experience Jacobs began to differentiate the religiosity of the slaveholders from true Christianity.

In a chapter entitled “The Church and Slavery,” Jacobs asks the question,

Are doctors of divinity blind, or are they hypocrites? I suppose some are the one and some the other; but I think if they felt the interest in the poor and the lowly, that they ought to feel, they would not be so *easily* blinded. A clergyman, who goes to the south, for the first time, has usually some feeling, however vague, that slavery is wrong. The slave holder suspects this and plays his game accordingly [...] He comes home to publish a “South Side View of Slavery” and to complain of the exaggerations of abolitionists. He assures people...that the slaves don’t want their freedom (Jacobs 85).

In this passage Jacobs makes two pertinent statements. First she appeals to the reader’s morality, and the importance of the author’s initial negative reaction to slavery. Jacobs vehemently denounces proslavery works such as those that emerged from Reverend Nehemiah Adams’s visits to the South (Jacobs 85, 229). She emphasizes the clergyman’s

initial uneasiness about the morality of slavery as the correct response. She warns, however, that those who initially feel that slavery is wrong are often distracted by slaveholder religiosity and convinced that slavery is good and proper.

Secondly, Jacobs presents the hypocritical nature of clergymen who fail to take an interest in the “lowly” and the “poor” (Jacobs 85). To Jacobs, these clergymen are hypocritical because she thinks they “ought” to feel compassion for poor and lowly slaves (Jacobs 85). Similar to Equiano, Douglass, and Jea, Jacobs views pro-slavery religiosity as a form of religious pretense. She believes that those practicing this form of religiosity are also beguiled by slaveholders who desire to deceive and justify their actions through their false religion.

Jacobs does not refer to the “religion at the south” as a form of Christianity. By doing this she emphasizes that hypocrisy is the main tenet of this “religion”. She explains that actions such as taking communion and paying tithes are considered “religious” in the South, but she infers that those actions are only outward gestures, not what makes one a Christian at heart (85). She then explains that if a pastor commits adultery with a white woman it is a sin, but if adultery is committed with a Black woman in the South it is permissible, allowing the pastor to continue to be a “good shepherd” (85). Through this example we see Jacobs again highlighting the duplicity of church leaders in the South and their tendency to ignore their own religious commandments when race is a factor. This is emphasized once more at the end of the chapter when Jacobs’s master demands that she obey his orders to give herself to him sexually. Jacobs responds by saying, “the Bible didn’t say so” (Jacobs 86).

Jacobs denounces slaveholder religiosity by juxtaposing slaveholder false religion with what she considers to be genuine religion. Jacobs does this when she juxtaposes Reverend Pike, who taught that slaves must obey their masters so that they do not “offend” their heavenly Master (Jacobs 80), with the Episcopalian pastor who taught the slaves that God “judges men by their hearts, not by the color of their skins” (Jacobs 83). Rev. Pike’s teachings are scoffed at and thought of as amusing by the slaves whom Jacobs portrays as having true knowledge about what it means to be a genuine Christian (Jacobs 80). Leaving Rev. Pike, the slaves went to “enjoy a Methodist shout.” Anticipating her white reader’s negative reaction to African American religion as primitive and emotional – merely a “shout” – Jacobs then adds, “Many of them [slaves at Methodist meetings] are sincere, and nearer to the gate of heaven than sanctimonious Mr. Pike, and other long-faced Christians, who see wounded Samaritans, and pass by on the other side” (Jacobs 80). In this reference to the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:33, Jacobs compares hypocritical white southern Christians to the two Jewish men in the parable who pass by, rather than helping a wounded man in the road. A Samaritan, part of people who were despised by Jews at the time, was the only one who had compassion and saved the wounded man. This comparison of the slaves to the Samaritan may have dual meaning for Jacobs. First, Jacobs asserts that slaves can have a more genuine faith than Reverend Mr. Pike, a benighted preacher of slaveholder religiosity. She may also be arguing that although her race is despised, like the Samaritans, they are the ones who will be viewed as precious in the sight of God because of their genuine Christian charity.

Sojourner Truth defines religiosity as any form of religion that is created or misdirected by the whims of men (i.e. slaveholders, masters, employers) rather than by God's spirit. She warns against false religious doctrines that seem at first to be true, but in actuality may be religiosity created by man. Her narrative cautions readers against false religious doctrine by speaking of her own mistaken beliefs earlier in her life. About four-fifths of *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828* (1850) is made up of positive references to religion, while one-fifth are negative. The breadth of religious references in Truth's narrative centers on Truth's faith journey and the experiences that led to the formation of her religious doctrine and adherence to a unique form of spiritualized Christianity.

From her narrative, it is evident that Sojourner Truth depends more upon her own God-given internal spirit or moral compass than what is told to her to be true from man (Gilbert 109). Because Truth is not literate she cannot study the Bible in depth as some of the other authors do. Nevertheless, she does not merely accept what those in authority say, having learned from past mistakes (Gilbert 33-34). Truth relies upon the "spirit" to discern truth from error. She depends upon the spirit as an indicator of true religion and its opposite, religiosity. For Truth, slavery is an inevitable outcome of religiosity because both place the authority of the flesh over the spirit of God. This is the conclusion that Truth came to:

"She then firmly believed that slavery was right and honorable. Yet, she now sees very clearly the false position they were all in, both masters and slaves; and she looks back, with utter astonishment, at the absurdity of the claims so arrogantly set up by the masters, over beings designed by God to be as free as kings [...]" (Gilbert 34).

This passage condemns the blasphemy of slaveholders who play God over their slaves.. Yet Truth seems to take a less critical view of slaveholder religiosity than many of her contemporaries, such as Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs.

Truth believes that both slave and master were benighted by slavery. According to Gilbert, Truth thinks enslaver and enslaved were all in a “false position.” Gilbert also writes that Truth learned to “look back with utter astonishment at the absurdity of the claims so arrogantly set up by the masters” (Gilbert 34). These words sound less like the words of an illiterate Sojourner Truth and more like the words of the Garrisonian woman writing Truth’s narrative. The reader has a clue as to Truth’s personal feelings about slaveholder religiosity when we read her direct statement that staying faithful to her master ““made me true to my God”” (Gilbert 34). Thus, Sojourner Truth may have had a more gracious view of her masters, especially Dumont, than Olive Gilbert seems to want to acknowledge. Throughout the narrative Truth is quoted as making concessions for Dumont, who seemed to have the controlling and manipulative grasp of an abuser over Truth even after her liberation from slavery. Gilbert and possibly Truth seem to believe that both slaveholder and slave held false beliefs that were complex and required greater understanding.

When Truth discusses her adherence to the teaching of Matthias and her employer Mr. Pierson, she does not recount any internal fervor following their teaching. Instead she treats her brief conversion to their beliefs as a momentary delusion that swept her away because the main leaders of the Matthias cult were also her employers. This lapse in judgement, as Truth would have us to believe, was brief and came from a place of ignorance and of being “alone” in the house and deceived by what seemed to be true at

first (Gilbert 90-91). Truth can more easily justify her own mistaken belief in Matthias by noting how easy it was for even her employer Mr. Pierson to be deceived. Truth realizes that, after leaving Dumont, she had once again created another god for herself in Matthias, whom she tried to please by giving his religious community all of her savings (Gilbert 97). Isabella's desire to please Mr. Pierson and Matthias, who claimed to be John the Baptist and God the Father on earth, may have made it easy for her to accept their beliefs and follow them (Gilbert 92). Nevertheless, just as Mr. Dumont failed Isabella, so too, Matthias and Mr. Pierson failed her.

This cult led by Matthias ended up accusing Isabella of murder (Washington 63). Because of this accusation and the realization that "the precepts, 'Do unto others as ye would that others should do unto you...had been but little thought of by herself, or practiced by those around her,'" Sojourner Truth left the city of New York (Gilbert 99). Because the followers of Matthias did not do unto her as they would have others do to them, she concluded that Matthias's followers were misled by false religious belief. Isabella "came to the conclusion that she had been taking part in a great drama, which was, in itself, but one great system of robbery and wrong" (Gilbert 98). Truth judged religiosity as beliefs that do not recognize the "golden rule" (Matthew 7:12). Subsequently, she concluded that patriarchal religiosity had failed her just as much as the people involved did.

While definitions of slaveholding religiosity vary from author to author, several common factors are intertwined throughout the narratives. Slaveholding and patriarchal religiosity are often referred to as false doctrines by the authors of these narratives. The slaves see their masters' ethical dealings with their slaves as indicative of the genuineness

of their masters' conversion experience. If, after conversion, a master treated his slaves kindly or emancipated them, slaves concluded that their master had had a genuine conversion experience. But if the supposedly converted slaveholder did not treat his slaves better or emancipate them, then this became yet another example of slaveholding hypocrisy. The narratives also point to a shared belief that religiosity was in opposition to natural and biblical laws that suggest that God's desire is to see all men and women free.

Through this analysis of the five texts under discussion, we see that slaveholder and patriarchal religiosity is viewed differently by each author. Equiano's and Truth's narratives define white religiosity as failing to apply the golden rule in one's dealings with slaves. To slaveholders, doing unto others as they would have done to them is God's expectation only when whites deal with other whites. Jea and Truth are more gracious and lenient to slaveholder religiosity, believing that the slaveholders were just as benighted as the slaves. Equiano, Douglass and Jacobs are harsher and express more judgement about slaveholder religiosity. These three authors all highlight the hypocrisy of slaveholder religiosity, with Douglass and Equiano emphasizing not just the error but the barbarity of the hypocritical behavior. On a spectrum, Douglass and Jacobs are the most critical towards pro-slavery advocates and their religiosity. These two narrators portray slaveholders' religious pretenses as intentional forms of deception in which the church and slaveholders were in collusion to delude slaves into believing in a religion of submission.

Chapter Two: Faith That Justifies and Faith That Leads

In Chapter One I discussed how Olaudah Equiano, John Jea, Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth defined and dealt with slaveholder and

patriarchal religiosity in their antebellum contexts. We explored the complexities present within each author's discussions, contemplations, and general analyses of what they defined as slaveholder religiosity or false religious practice. The authors' ideas about what signifies true religious practice are similarly complex and varied. Differences in religious faith and practice begin to emerge when analyzing how their religious beliefs affected their actions in the antebellum world. In this chapter I will discuss what each author believed to be true religion as expressed in each of their narratives. These findings highlight the overwhelming importance of religion to the authors and how their faith influenced key decisions in the trajectories of their lives.

Before exploring the complexities and differences among the authors' belief systems, it is necessary to define the religious beliefs that most of the authors adhered to in their narratives. For instance, their ideas about spiritual justification are comparable to one another. Because Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or, Gustavus Vassa, the African* take a comprehensive view of these beliefs, I use their narratives as a lens through which to examine the other narratives and their commonalities. After discussing the commonalities, I analyze the differences between how each author practiced Christianity and how that practice informed life decisions in each narrative. In order to do this, I look at key events that occurred in each author's life that indicate how each author utilized or chose not to utilize religious beliefs to address these life circumstances. Finally, I discuss why it is critical to note the importance that religion had in the lives of many authors of antebellum slave narratives.

Olaudah Equiano, John Jea, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth all explicitly state that they believe that people attain salvation (justification) through praying to and believing in Jesus Christ as savior. In the following paragraphs I explore the commonalities of Christian salvation doctrine shared among these authors. The experiences of Douglass and Equiano provide a framework in which to explore these similarities. In *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglass describes his religious conversion as one in which he “finally found that change of heart which comes by ‘casting all one's care’ upon God, and by having faith in Jesus Christ, as the Redeemer, Friend, and Savior of those who diligently seek Him” (*My Bondage* 131-132). This trust in Jesus and believe in him as “savior” are common features amongst all of the authors discussed in this chapter.

Equiano states it this way, “I was then convinced that by the first Adam sin came, and by the second Adam (the Lord Jesus Christ) all that are saved must be made alive. It was given me at that time to know what it was to be born again” (Equiano 198). Similar to Douglass’s, Equiano’s conversion experience is based upon salvation through faith in Jesus Christ rather than perfection through good deeds (Equiano 197-99). Throughout his narrative Equiano fervently wrestles with knowing whether or not he was truly saved. He finds a redemptive solution to his faith crisis when he prays and the Spirit opens his heart to receive the truth of salvation through faith in Jesus (Equiano 200). John Jea and Sojourner Truth have similar accounts of conversion through praying to and believing in Jesus Christ as their savior (Jea 19-20; Gilbert 50; 67-70). Douglass, Equiano, Jea, and Truth all explicitly state that through prayer they received Jesus Christ as their savior.

Harriet Jacobs is the only author who does not explicitly state her belief in Jesus Christ as her savior. Jacobs grew up in Edenton under the mentorship of her grandmother Molly Horniblow. Horniblow taught Jacobs that because she was a Christian she must accept her status as a slave, but this was a doctrine that Jacobs eventually rejected. This may be why Jacobs does not explicitly state her belief in salvation through Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. However, after Jacobs escaped from slavery, she does write, “...my home in Steventon [England] was in the family of a clergyman, who was a true disciple of Jesus. The beauty of his daily life inspired me with faith in the gentleness of Christian professions. Grace entered my heart, and I knelt at the communion table, I trust, in true humility of soul” (Jacobs 202). Although it is uncertain what Jacobs intended by the phrase “grace entered my soul,” we can infer that she is referring to her accepting “grace” through the personhood of Jesus Christ. This conclusion is likely because she acknowledges having been “inspired...with faith” by a clergyman whom she judged to be a “true disciple of Jesus.” Nevertheless, Harriet Jacobs has a more convoluted route to the Christian faith that will be addressed later in this chapter.

Olaudah Equiano, John Jea, and Sojourner Truth also reference the importance of the Spirit of God leading them to conversion and directing other decisions made in their lives. Equiano speaks very little of the Spirit of God leading him, but he does mention it briefly, “Sure I was that the Spirit which indited the word opened my heart to receive the truth of it as it is in Jesus--that the same Spirit enabled me to act faith upon the promises that were so precious to me, and enabled me to believe to the salvation of my soul” (Equiano 150-151). This brief statement near the middle of his narrative suggests that the Spirit of God led him to his conversion to Christianity. He writes that the Spirit “enabled”

him to “believe to the salvation” of his soul (Equiano 151). Jea discusses the Spirit of God when he recounts his earnest prayers to know God as a young boy:

“Having a very strong desire to know God, I often retired into some private place to pray [...] But I have great reason to bless the Lord, that though my heart was deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, yet he did not destroy me, but that I might by his Spirit be converted to God”(Jea 13).

The passage emphasizes the importance that Jea places on prayer and the Spirit of God assisting in his conversion to Christianity. This is a moment when Jea is reflecting upon the circumstances of his youth and when he writes through a religiously retrospective lens. Jea also states, “I was led, guided, and directed by the Spirit, who taught me all things which are of God, and opened them unto my understanding” (Jea 20). This highlights the significance that Jea places upon the Spirit of God in his daily life, even when that commitment to the Spirit led to his being whipped more severely by his master (Jea 20). Of the five authors referenced in this thesis, Jea and Truth refer most frequently to the Spirit of God leading and directing the decisions in their lives. Truth says, ““The Spirit calls me there, and I must go”” (Gilbert 100). In this defining moment Truth discusses how the Spirit of God led her to leave New York and preach the gospel. Although three of the five authors discuss the Spirit of God and its leading, neither Douglass nor Jacobs writes about the Spirit of God leading or directing their lives. However, Douglass and Jacobs do refer to religion affecting their lives in other tangible ways that will be discussed later in this chapter. The majority of the authors discussed in this thesis consider prayer to and a belief in Jesus Christ as their savior to be tenets of “true” conversion. Next I review the differences between the authors and their practice of

their religious faith to show how those practices informed their decisions and actions in the world.

Equiano had an intriguing faith journey; he is one of the few authors who explore differing religious groups including the Anglican Church, the Quakers, and Jews (Equiano 184). After encounters with these religious groups left him spiritually unfulfilled, he encountered an “old sea-faring” man and a Methodist minister who invited him to a “love-feast” (Equiano 189). During his time at the “love feast,” which was actually a church service with no food, Equiano heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ preached. Equiano then decided to adhere to the specific belief system of this Protestant denomination that emphasized that all people are sinners and that faith in Jesus is the only way to be justified because of God’s grace (Carretta 164-75). Equiano’s narrative makes a clear distinction between his actions before he was a true Christian and afterwards. Before his conversion he helped to sell others into slavery, he blasphemed God, and got into brawls (Equiano 189). After his conversion he describes himself as an evangelical missionary at sea (Equiano 209-214).

Throughout the narrative Equiano references his Christian faith by recounting treacherous events that should have led to death, but instead miraculously allowed those involved to live. However, critics could explain his (and other African-American authors’) spirituality and use of religious language as a means to conceal egotistical or overly proud anecdotes and statements. Also an author who constantly refers to God’s mercies extended to himself or herself, the author may seem vain, as though he or she were a special favorite of God. Equiano addresses this accusation of vanity on the first page of his narrative. “I believe it is difficult for those who publish their own memoirs to

escape the imputation of vanity; nor is this the only disadvantage under which they labour” (Equiano 3). This acknowledgement of his own potential to sound vain within his autobiography shows that Equiano is aware of this challenge. He tries to counteract the charge of vanity by stressing that his is “the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant” (Equiano 3). Because “there are few events in my life, which have not happened to many” (Equiano 4), Equiano suggests that he is a representative man, not “a saint” or “a hero.” What makes Equiano’s autobiography significant is that it does not promote its author, he writes that it “promotes the interests of humanity” (Equiano 4).

Equiano’s faith journey shapes the overall tone of the narrative, so much so that he ends the narrative with Scripture. At the end of the narrative Equiano encourages the reader to walk in obedience to the Bible and to “become better and wiser, and learn ‘to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God!’” (Equiano 254). Throughout his text Equiano often “wrestled hard with God” in prayer, yet finally we see that he encountered God in a very real way in chapter ten of his narrative (Equiano 197). In the passage below Equiano produces a statement of faith that follows the orthodox Protestant belief that “believers are justified, or saved, only through faith in Jesus Christ,” whose goodness atones for the sinfulness of human beings (Carretta 162).

“On the morning of the 6th of October [...] the Lord was pleased to break in upon my soul with his bright beams of heavenly light; [...] I saw clearly with the eye of faith the crucified Saviour bleeding on the cross on mount Calvary: the scriptures became an unsealed book [...] I saw the Lord Jesus Christ in his humiliation, loaded and bearing my reproach, sin, and shame. I then clearly perceived that by the deeds of the law no flesh living could be justified. I was then convinced that by the first Adam sin came, and by the second Adam the Lord Jesus Christ all that are saved must

be made alive. It was given me at that time to know what it was to be born again” (Equiano 197-198)

Before his spiritual rebirth and realization of justification through the grace of God, Equiano struggled to find “true” religion. He was a “nominal Christian,” in word but not always in deed. His conversion or “rebirth” changed his relationship with God and with others. It also changed the trajectory of his life. His spiritual revival deeply affected his life purpose.

After his conversion Equiano begins to evangelize and witness to other crew members while at sea, particularly on his voyage to Cadiz in 1775 (Equiano 209, 214). The voyage to Cadiz was threatened because the vessel “struck against a rock and knocked off a garboard plank...” (Equiano 209). Even though Equiano “saw no way of escaping death” in that moment, he relied upon his faith and saw death would bring about sudden glory in transporting him to heaven. Thus in the midst of this dire situation, Equiano is “calm” and tells his shipmates about the “peace of God” (Equiano 209).

This example of spiritual peace during a deadly situation can be contrasted with an earlier “near-death-experience” that Equiano recounts in chapter eight of his narrative. In this incident the Georgia-bound sloop that Equiano was on was “pierced and transfixed” among rocks (Equiano 148). “All my sins stared me in the face; and especially I thought that God had hurled his direful vengeance on my guilty head for cursing the vessel.” (Equiano 149). In this account Equiano is far less calm and feels as if the lives of those on board were his responsibility. He also expresses guilt and remorse for past sins that he committed. Equiano’s reaction during this situation is very different from his “near-death” experience after his conversion (Equiano 149). His desire to know God and be spiritually justified drives him in this situation rather than the peace of God

that he later experiences. We see here that Equiano's practice of his faith produced peace within him, and thus he would argue that religion offers slaves solace despite threatening situations.

Equiano does not discuss other slaves' religious beliefs and practices in his text, possibly because of his unique situation as a maritime slave who had little contact with the religious practices of slave communities. Equiano learned from free white men the doctrines that contributed to his faith. One white teacher was Daniel Queen, who was on board the vessels Equiano worked on (Equiano 79). His other religious instructors were an old "sea-faring man" and a Methodist minister (Equiano 189).

Because of his faith as "a protestant of the church of England" and his personal convictions, Equiano denounced the trans-Atlantic trade (Equiano 235). At the beginning of his narrative he writes that its purpose is to "promote the interests of humanity" (Equiano 4). This statement is the first indicator that Equiano's narrative seeks to promote the "interests of humanity" by denouncing the continuation of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Later in his autobiography he praises and presents an award to the Quakers of Philadelphia for "freeing and easing the burthen of many of my oppressed African brethren" (Equiano 239). Although he does not blatantly state that slaves should be freed, he does praise the Quakers for freeing slaves, and even attributes his own freedom to God, stating that he would tell his first master "what the Lord had done for me in so short a time" (Equiano 137). In these statements, we start to see Equiano's belief that God desired an end to the slave trade.

Later in the narrative when discussing the British House of Commons' debate on whether to end the slave trade, Equiano writes "May Heaven make British senators the

dispersers of light, liberty and science, to the uttermost parts of the earth: then will glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, and good-will to men...May the blessings of the Lord be upon the heads of all those who commiserated the cases of the oppressed negroes” (Equiano 250). These statements testify to Equiano’s belief in a social gospel, not simply a gospel centered on one’s personal saving relationship to God. He writes that he hopes “Heaven” would make the senators vote against the slave trade, and be “dispersers of light” to bring “glory to God.” For Equiano, God is actively concerned about the fate of Africans oppressed by the slave trade. Here we see a rare glimpse of Equiano’s Christian faith informing his actions in the world. Believing that God opposed the slave trade, Equiano wrote as though it were his duty, as a disciple of Christ, to speak out against Britain’s role in the slave trade.

Jea, similar to Equiano, participated in a form of religious “witnessing,” or evangelism through writing this narrative. In his narrative, Jea also reflected on how he was spiritually impacted by events that occurred in his life. This emphasis is not unique to Jea, but of the six narratives analyzed in this thesis, Jea inserts evangelistic addresses into his text far more than do the other authors.

One example of Jea’s inserting evangelistic discourse into his narrative occurs early in his text when he is a young boy still in slavery. In this instance Jea reflects on the rejoicing that took place amongst slaveholders because of an American victory over “the Indians” (Jea 8). After discussing the paradox of the “Christian” slaveholders celebrating the killing of thousands of Native Americans, Jea addresses the reader with an evangelistic outburst on the failings of “neglecters of the Gospel,” some of whom Jea seemed to believe would read his narrative:

“My dear reader, consider the great obligations you are under [...] that you were not born in Africa, and sold for a slave, on whom the most cruel tortures are exercised,[...] and above all, be thankful for the opportunities you have of knowing the ‘true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent,’ and recollect that as you possess much, much will be required; [...] you had better be a slave in any dark part of the world, than a neglecter of the gospel in this highly favoured land; [...] But, to return to myself, it was evident that our masters did not believe the report God gave of his Son ...” (Jea 8-9).

Jea directly addresses his European readers in this passage by warning them of being neglecters of the Gospel. He states that to whom much is given, much is required.

Therefore, those who were born in Britain, because of their good fortune of not being enslaved, owe it to slaves of African descent to share the gospel with them. Jea then explains that if those who are in a “highly favoured land” like Britain did not share the gospel with those who were less fortunate, they would be considered “neglecters of the gospel” and slaves to their own passions (Jea 9).

In this passage Jea leaves the world of his narrative and literally preaches to his British readers about how they should help slaves know “the ‘true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent.’” After his discourse Jea then adds, “But, to return to myself” in order to transit back to his story. Jea uses events from his past to preach directly to his reader frequently in his narrative. In this passage he even encourages his British readers to evangelize slaves as well. This address and others in his text highlight the importance of evangelizing in Jea’s practice of the Christian faith. In this regard, Jea’s manner of writing is unique among the six examined, yet it gives us insight into practices that he valued in his observance of faith.

Jea is also the only author who emphasizes the importance of Spirit *and* water baptism in the Christian justification process. Jea writes that when he became a born-again Christian, he shared his faith with his friends and told them (and the reader) how they could become a Christian. “I bid them [my friends] leave off their sins and wickedness ... and be saved by grace, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and said that they must be regenerated and born again of the water and of the Spirit, or else they could not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Jea 25). This passage demonstrates Jea’s belief in the importance of water and Holy Spirit baptism to becoming a born-again Christian. In contrast, we see Equiano discount his baptism in St. Margret’s Anglican Church in Westminster by explaining that he was not a born-again believer until his encounter with the Methodist church (Equiano 63, 199). This difference is important because Equiano’s and Jea’s beliefs about steps needed to become a born-again Christian seem to diverge when discussing the relative importance of baptism.

After Jea’s conversion to Christianity and freedom from slavery, he explains “born again” Christianity as a means of providing spiritual salvation, tangible peace, and spiritual freedom for slaves.

“My master beating me to keep me from attending the house of God, but all this did not hinder me, for I blessed and praised his holy name that I was counted worthy to suffer with my blessed Jesus; and in all my sufferings I found the presence of God with me, and the Spirit of the Lord to comfort me. I found the hand of the Lord in everything, for when I was beaten it seemed that the Spirit of the Lord was so great on me, that I did not regard the pain and trouble which I felt”(Jea 20).

In this passage the Spirit of God comforted Jea when he was enslaved. Jea’s faith provided him with solace despite the violence of his master and the horrific

circumstances he faced while in slavery. In “all [his] sufferings” God was present with him. Here we see that, as in Equiano’s case, religion provided Jea with tangible peace. Jea also seems to believe that religion offered slaves spiritual freedom. Jea believed that slaves could be spiritually liberated according to the “spiritual law of liberty.”

Throughout his narrative Jea inverts what it means to be a slave and what it means to be free. Near the beginning of his autobiography Jea writes, “recollect also that even here you might be a slave of the most awful description...a slave to sin...and, unless you are made free by Christ, through the means of the gospel, you will remain in captivity, tied and bound in the chains of your sin” (Jea 9). His definition of ‘true’ freedom is being made “free by Christ” and he defines slavery as being enslaved to sin (Jean 9). By this definition a slave could be a free man and a slaveholder could be a spiritual slave.

Spiritual liberty was of greater importance to Jea than the physical emancipation of slaves. Jea discussed this when he wrote about his own mother and brother being converted to Christianity. Jea writes that after their conversion he “daily exhorted them to hold on until the end, and at last they should receive the crown that fadeth not away” (Jea 65). This is a reference to 1 Peter 5:4, which says “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.” The “Chief Shepherd” is an allusion to the second coming of Christ Jesus, which Christians believe would not occur until the end of the world. Jea exhorts his family with the promise of eternal liberation, but not physical liberation (which was not in his power to give them). Thus Jea focuses on spiritual freedom as more important than physical as far as the soul is concerned.

Another example of this emphasis on true liberation occurring in the afterlife arises when Jea writes that he and another man preached to other slaves that they should not covet the “dainties” of the world, but should instead “cease to do evil and learn to do good” (Jea 40). However, in this passage Jea also states that he “encouraged the other poor slaves to seek the Lord, and to be earnest in prayer and supplication...for the Lord would hear and deliver them, if they sought him in sincerity and in truth, as the Lord delivered me” (Jea 40). His “deliverance” may be interpreted as spiritual deliverance, physical deliverance, or both. I believe Jea refers to his spiritual deliverance because he also quotes from the book of First Peter, which says that followers of Jesus will suffer as Jesus suffered. According to Jea, suffering for doing good works is a part of being a Christian, even suffering under the yoke of physical slavery. Physical freedom was important to Jea. He encourages his mother and brother to apply for their physical emancipation under New York law, but he emphasizes spiritual freedom far more than physical because the former was eternal, while the latter was only temporal.

Jea never petitions for the emancipation of slaves or the end of the slave trade in his narrative as Equiano, Truth, and Douglass do. He instead exhorts his readers to experience freedom from sin. Jea’s opening discussion of the importance of spiritual freedom, his message to slaves, his treatment of his family’s liberation, and his silence on the emancipation of slaves and the end of the slave trade highlight the importance he placed on spiritual liberation. Unfortunately this overshadows what he may have felt about physical liberation of slaves. However, had Jea written in favor of the emancipation of slaves or in favor of the termination of the slave trade, he might have placed his career in jeopardy. Wariness of making a political statement may have led Jea to write more

cautiously than other authors so he would not to lose his reputation as an unbiased spiritual leader. Nevertheless, Jea still makes a statement through his silence. There is enough textual evidence to demonstrate that spiritual freedom was of greater importance to Jea. If Jea had valued physical freedom as much as spiritual freedom, he, like Equiano, Truth, and Douglass may have been driven to act and write more about that belief.

Jea believed that all of the major events of his life were religiously motivated. His emphasis on the Spirit of God leading him may also have given him a sort of religious credibility that justified his actions to his Christian readers. Similar to Equiano's post-conversion experience, Jea's life purpose centered on spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Jea 31). Because of the centrality of Jea's faith and his evangelically focused account of his life during and after slavery, it is difficult to isolate key events in his life when he did not utilize religious beliefs to aid in the handling of life circumstances. Like Equiano, Jea has a conversion experience that completely changes the way he views himself in the world and his actions. After his conversion Jea transforms from being an indignant and rebellious slave who is frequently punished by his Master to a pious one. Although Jea discusses his theology with great detail, he discusses political matters infrequently compared with other authors. He does not petition for the freedom of slaves nor discuss his own views regarding the emancipation of slaves. This could be because the purpose of his narrative was to proselytize non-believers rather than plead for the anti-slavery cause as we will see Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth do.

Although Douglass was a supporter of the anti-slavery cause, which he believed was also a religious cause; Douglass had a tumultuous relationship with aspects of Christianity. Douglass critiques religiosity within the Christian church, but he does not

seem to object to most doctrinal beliefs of Christianity. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass attacks religiosity but not core tenets of Christianity when practiced rightly. In his autobiographies, Douglass's practice of Christianity appears to be consistent with the evangelical program of the abolitionist movement. He believed that he was doing his Christian duty when struggling for the emancipation of slaves (*My Bondage* 165-66).

In his first narrative Douglass views Christianity as a religion that primarily offers slaves hope because of his belief that genuine religion features a supreme God who is just and desires for slaves to be free. Douglass expresses the justice of God when he discusses how the cruel overseer Mr. Severe “died as he lived, uttering, with his dying groans, bitter curses and horrid oaths. His death was regarded by the slaves as the result of a merciful Providence” (*Narrative of the Life* 24). When Douglass writes of divine Providence sending him to Baltimore, he says he had a deep spiritual conviction that “slavery would not always be able to hold me.” He adds that in his darkest moments during slavery, this “living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me. . . . This good spirit was from God” (*Narrative of the Life* 39). Ultimately these beliefs point to his conviction that true religion offers slaves sustaining hope.

Douglass also uses his faith to justify fighting Covey and escaping slavery in his narratives. These are two significant life events when Douglass seems to justify actions based on a belief that God wanted the slaves to be free. Douglass writes that after he fought Covey, he was resurrected from the “tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” (*Narrative of the Life* 69). Douglass reconciled this event with his beliefs about God by describing Covey as an agent of Satan. “Everything he possessed in the shape of learning

or religion, he made conform to his disposition to deceive. Covey seemed to think himself equal to deceiving the Almighty” (*Narrative* 61). By resisting the impious Covey, known to his slaves as “the snake,” Douglass justified himself. His Christian duty demanded that he prevent Covey from whipping him. Only by such resistance would Douglass have a spiritual as well as physical victory, what he called “a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” (*Narrative* 69).

Douglass also justified running away to his reader and to his companions by presenting the idea that God, who is good, supported the abolition of slavery, which is evil. Because of this belief Douglass justifies his first attempt at running away by writing that he meant to “impress them with the gross fraud and inhumanity of slavery” (*Narrative* 76). Douglass writes, “Here were the difficulties, real or imagined—the good to be sought and the evil to be shunned” (*Narrative* 77). Statements like this one, which create a moral and religious dichotomy between the evil of slavery and the goodness of freedom, are how Douglass commonly argued against slavery in his first narrative.

This tendency to use religion to justify his actions is apparent in *My Bondage and My Freedom* when, of his escape to freedom he writes: “God and right stood vindicated. I WAS A FREEMAN, and the voice of peace and joy thrilled my heart” (*My Bondage* 252). Douglass believed that his freedom from slavery was what allowed God and right to be victorious over the evil of enslavement. Douglass believed that his involvement with the anti-slavery cause was one that God himself supported. This is exemplified in *My Bondage and My Freedom* when we see his use of religiously connotative language to describe the abolition movement. On the last page of *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglas writes, “while Heaven lends me ability, to use my voice my pen, or my vote, to

advocate for the great and primary work of the universal and unconditional emancipation of my entire race” (*My Bondage* 300). This is one of many examples in *My Bondage and My Freedom* of the strong connection that Douglass makes between the abolition movement and God’s plan not only for himself but for all those enslaved.

However, there are points where Douglass negatively links religion with the abolition movement. These moments occur when Douglass critiques the paternalistic structure of *some* sects of abolition, just as Douglass critiques some religious denominations. One such example is when Douglass describes his adherence to William Lloyd Garrison. “I was on the anti-slavery question, a faithful disciple of William Lloyd Garrison” (*My Bondage* 293). When we review other antebellum slave narratives, we see the word “disciple” usually evoked to characterize a follower of Jesus Christ or a member of a particular Christian denomination. Because Douglass uses it to describe a man whom he had, at that point in his career, separated from because of paternalistic experiences, it can be assumed that Douglass is speaking negatively of paternalistic religious doctrine and practices.

Thomas Peyser explores the possibility that Douglass’s views on religion in his first narrative should not be taken at face value, but should instead be seen as an attack on Christianity. Peyser believes Douglass was restrained from an outright decry against Christianity because of religious anti-slavery supporters, but in actuality his tone denotes that he was in fact denouncing the Christian faith as a whole (Peyser). Although Douglass does undermine certain denominations of Christianity and he does attack paternalistic religiosity in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, it is possible to take Douglass’s Appendix to his first narrative at face value.

Douglass certainly condemns religiosity and certain churches, but he does not condemn religion rightly practiced and the Christian faith as a whole. Peyser is correct in writing that Douglass would not have been able to denounce Christianity blatantly without societally condemning himself. However, Douglass does give a firm account of his gratitude to Providence for sending him to Baltimore (*Narrative of the Life* 39). He also defends Christianity in his Appendix, which he did not have to do. In his narrative Douglass writes that he was appalled that the cruel slave holders who ended his Sabbath School called themselves “Christians! humble followers of the Lord Jesus Christ!” (*Narrative of the Life* 75). I do not believe Douglass would have written these accounts or would have been so appalled at these slaveholders calling themselves Christians if he had no faith in Christianity. If Douglass had, as Peyser said, denounced Christianity, it would not have mattered to him whether or not slaveholders called themselves Christians. Douglass would not have critiqued their practice of Christianity, if there was no right way, in his eyes, to practice the faith.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglass reviews his personal spiritual awakening with an entire chapter entitled, “Religious Nature Awakened.” This “religious nature” was ushered in through Frederick’s relationship with a free black drayman whom Douglass called “Father” or “Uncle” Lawson and another African American man named Charles Johnson (131). The experience with Uncle Lawson is completely omitted from Douglass’s first narrative, for reasons that the reader can only surmise were due to a differing objective in the second autobiography. Perhaps by 1855 Douglass wanted greater freedom to discuss specific details of his religious growth than was available when he first wrote his 1845 narrative. Or perhaps Douglass in 1855 better understood

that he must balance religious criticism with positive religious anecdotes to garner greater support from a majority white, Judeo-Christian audience. The latter argument is the more plausible. Douglass writes in 1855 that he “finally found that change of heart which comes by ‘casting one’s care’ upon God and by having faith in Jesus Christ, as the Redeemer, Friend, and Savior of those who diligently seek Him.” Thus Douglass asserts to his readers his true piety and dedication to the Christian faith (*My Bondage* 131-32). He traces his faith to the hours he spent as a boy in Baltimore under the spiritual tutelage of Lawson. “I [Douglass] could teach him the letter, but he could teach me the spirit” (*My Bondage* 132). The detailed account of Uncle Lawson and the spiritual awakening he inspired in Douglass let the author more closely align with what his audience would have wanted to hear about Douglass’s encountering God and finding true faith. This is probably why Douglass included this story and other anecdotes like it in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Ultimately for Douglass, true religion offered slaves like himself justification, protection from evil, and hope through the promise of freedom.

Harriet Jacobs’s relationship with religion was as complex as Douglass’s but her faith journey is more obscurely rendered in *Incidents* than is Douglass’s in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Throughout Jacobs’s narrative she uses religious language when she describes her grandmother and various abolitionists who had an impact upon her life. She also uses this language, to a lesser degree, when she discusses the religion of the South. Yet she very rarely uses religious language to describe her own religious beliefs. When Jacobs does discuss religion’s effect on her, she usually prays for protection, or cites the tenets of her grandmother’s teachings as sources of guidance.

In her article, "Dismantling the House of the Lord: Theology as Political Philosophy in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," Sharon Carson writes that although a "theological" voice is central to Jacobs's text, she has ambivalence towards Christianity. To Carson, Jacobs' ambivalence poses an ideological tension between the experiences of black Americans and white Americans within the Christian tradition (Carson 53-55). I agree with Carson's assessment of Jacobs' ambivalent tone, but this may be due to a multiplicity of reasons. One reason for Jacobs's ambivalence may be the tension between her dismay over God's failing to protect her from her master's undesired sexual aggression and her genuine admiration of true Christian faith as practiced by others she esteemed.

By the end of *Incidents*, Jacobs expresses a complex yet somewhat favorable stance towards genuine religion. Carson highlights Jacobs's ambivalence towards religion at the end of the narrative and believes that this signals an ambivalence that flows like an undercurrent throughout the book (Carson 53). I contend that although ambivalence is an undercurrent, Jacobs still admires aspects of the faith of her grandmother and others whom she deemed true adherents to Christianity. Two-thirds of the religious references in Jacobs's text are positive. This high volume of positive religious references may indicate that Jacobs admits that there is a genuine form of faith and religious practice although she herself may not have accepted it. Nevertheless, she believes this genuine faith exists. Jacobs identifies three people in her text as genuine followers of Christianity and notes how they affected Jacobs's own beliefs. Besides her grandmother's genuine faith, Jacobs notes a young woman who inherited slaves (Jacobs 59) and an Episcopal minister who shared the gospel with slaves in Edenton as exemplifying true Christianity (Jacobs 83).

Jacobs highly reveres her grandmother, Molly Horniblow, and her grandmother's genuine faith. Jacobs's first mention of religion in great detail arises as she discusses the piety of her grandmother despite negative circumstances that occurred in her life. Jacobs discusses Molly's piety and work ethic as indicators of the respectability and uprightness of this self-emancipated slave woman. During the antebellum era, many whites thought that if slaves were emancipated, they would become a burden on the State. By emphasizing her grandmother's hard work and patient devotion, Jacobs refutes that assumption.

At an early age, Jacobs was exposed to a positive perspective on religion and Christianity through her grandmother. In Chapter 4 of her narrative Jacobs portrays her much admired and virtuous grandmother as a prototype of the way in which Jacobs herself would try to handle the trials of her own life. In Chapter 4 Jacobs writes,

Most earnestly did she strive to make us feel that it was the will of God: that He had seen fit to place us under such circumstances; and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for contentment. It was a beautiful faith coming from a mother who could not call her children her own (Jacobs 23).

Jacobs goes on to say that she and her uncle "condemned" the idea that God willed that they were slaves. Throughout the narrative Jacobs wrestles with the idea that God allowed her to be a slave. Because of this struggle she diverges from her grandmother's strict adherence to faith as a teenager. Her faith is also undermined by the fact that her prayers for freedom were unanswered (Jacobs 67). Her adolescent doubts are compounded by questioning why God permitted her to experience the unsolicited sexual harassment and abuse of her master, Dr. Flint (Jacobs 35-37). At points in the narrative

Jacobs begs God for her death and the death of her child; this is seen most poignantly at the birth of her first child out of wedlock with Mr. Sands (Jacobs 71). Yet as a young girl Jacobs gives her beloved grandmother's advice to her uncle Benjamin when he plans to run away. She tells him to "Put your trust in God" and to "call on God" because He "lightened her [grandmother's] burdens" (Jacobs 29). However as Jacobs grows older she begins to doubt some of her grandmother's beliefs.

A second individual whom Jacobs mentions as having true faith is a young woman who inherited slaves from another family member. "The young lady was very pious, and there was some reality in her religion. She taught the slaves to lead pure lives" (Jacobs 59). This speaks to the "true" piety that Jacobs admired in this woman who treated her slaves well. Jacobs goes on to say, "*Her* religion was not a garb put on for Sunday, and laid aside till Sunday returned again" (Jacobs 59). This religious reference is both a compliment for true religious practice and a condemning judgement on those who do not live a Christian life.

The last person who influenced Jacobs's religious beliefs is the kind-hearted Episcopal minister she encounters during her time as a slave. The teachings of this pastor were also aligned with the commonly held belief of Jacobs's grandmother and other slaves who believed that God judges according to what is in the heart. That the state of the soul rather than the color of the skin being most important to God is referenced multiple times in *Incidents* (Jacobs 83, 59, 41-42, 213). The kind-hearted pastor taught the slaves that "God judges men by their hearts, not by the color of their skins" (Jacobs 83). Thus, we can see that Jacobs assumes that in true Christianity, people, especially white people, act with kindness and moral concern for others regardless of color.

A huge moral crisis occurred in Jacobs's life when, at the age of fifteen, Jacobs decided to engage in a sexual relationship with Mr. Sands (Samuel Tredwell Sawyer), a white unmarried gentleman of considerable status (Jacobs 62). Jacobs discusses her relationship with Mr. Sands with considerable forthrightness. Although she asks her reader's pardon for transgressing sexual norms, Jacobs also tries to justify herself in her narrative by indicating that her status as a slave made it impossible to keep "all principles of morality" (Jacobs 65). She writes, "I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling with the demon of Slavery...I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man...and I became reckless in my despair" (Jacobs 64). Jacobs then discusses how she accepted Mr. Sands as a lover since there was no other way to evade, her master, Dr. Flint's (Dr. Norcom) sexual aggression. Jacobs "made a headlong plunge" into an extramarital relationship with Mr. Sands to avoid being sexually abused by Dr. Flint (Jacobs 65). During this process Jacobs does not write about her faith, except to say that she felt that God had forsaken her (Jacobs 64). What she does write about is her lingering sense of guilt over having betrayed her grandmother's moral principles. Given her acute sense of shame, Jacobs may not have felt that she could ask for God's forgiveness, or she may have felt that God had been so disengaged from her life that she had no reason to trust God at all.

Yet she excuses some seemingly immoral actions of genuine Christian slaves, such as herself, because the conditions of slavery produced an environment in which it was impossible to live a truly moral life. Amongst slaves in Edenton who may have often been justified in what would typically be seen as immoral actions due to their circumstances in slavery, this doctrine of God knowing the heart seemed to be widely

popular. This is demonstrated in the story that Jacobs tells of Luke whom Jacobs encounters after her escape from slavery. Luke tells her that because his master did not pay him wages, he had right to steal money that he hid in his deceased master's trousers (Jacobs 210). Jacobs defends Luke's actions in this way:

“This is a fair specimen of how the moral sense is educated by slavery. When a man has his wages stolen from him, year after year, and the laws sanction and enforce the theft, how can he be expected to have more regard to honesty than has the man who robs him? I have become somewhat enlightened, but I confess that I agree with poor, ignorant, much-abused Luke, in thinking he had a *right* to that money, as a portion of his unpaid wages.”

Here we see Jacobs justifying Luke's actions based on the lack of moral education he received under slavery, which led him to adopt an alternate survival ethic with which Jacobs sympathized.

The second significant event in Jacobs's young womanhood occurs when she flees her master to go into hiding. At this time Jacobs states that she prayed twice “that God would not forsake me” and that God would give her “guidance” (Jacobs 108). Here we see that instead of being led by the Spirit of God or by the prompting of God, Jacobs practices a faith that is more responsive to circumstantial trials. Later in life when she is in difficult situations, she sometimes calls upon God, but often she makes decisions for herself. Jacobs justifies her escape to freedom by writing that God understands the plight of those who were enslaved. However, she does not seem to rely upon faith as a daily guide in her life as John Jea and Sojourner Truth do. At times Jacobs treats God as one who permits negative events in her life, but on other occasions, God appears to be a protection from harm. For Jacobs, true religion offered slaves moral justification and

protection (Jacobs 202, 171), but whether she saw true religion consistently offering her the same sort of justification and protection is much more difficult to assert.

When assessing the overall theme of Truth's narrative, we see that she is a firm believer in true religion as spirit led. Truth emphasizes the spirit-led life with much more frequency than Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs do in their narratives. Isabella's actions even before becoming Sojourner are very directly governed by spiritual impressions that she receives in the form of revelations and visions. Sojourner's actions throughout her narrative are primarily explained as occurring because of the prompting of God's spirit, as noted when she decides to leave New York and change her name to Sojourner Truth (Truth and Gilbert 97-106). All other occurrences that were not in line with God's spirit are explained by unfeeling selfishness and wickedness (Gilbert and Truth 98-99). Truth believed that true religion offered all people, including the slave, the opportunity to be led directly by God.

A reader may be uncertain about some of her narrative's statements about her own faith because her narrative was written by an amanuensis, Olive Gilbert. However, Truth's direct quotations written by Gilbert articulate her religious beliefs about God, her view of Jesus, and her own spiritual encounters. Truth freely discusses spiritual matters but gives few details about her own physical abuses or experiences in slavery as other authors do. This may be due to her experience of sexual abuse at the hands of her mistress while she was enslaved (Painter 16). Truth does not discuss things that may cause the audience to look upon her as impious. She also does not viscerally denounce slaveholder religiosity in the same sardonic ways as do some of the other authors previously discussed.

It is arguable that Truth's religious journey to enlightenment began when Dumont reneged on his promise to free her and her husband, Thomas, one year before they were legally freed by state statute (Gilbert 39). This experience of betrayal became a catalyst for Truth's dependence upon herself and God solely for religious truth. Because of Isabella's reaction to the revocation of her freedom by Mr. Dumont and the resulting actions she took, we can see this as a turning point in her life. Isabella realized that slave masters were not truthful and were, "TERRIBLE for promising to give...and [when] one claims the promise, they, forsooth, recollect nothing of the kind" (Gilbert 39-40). Truth transitions from regarding "her master as a *God*" (Gilbert 33), to feeling betrayed by one she placed so much faith in. This feeling of betrayal by one she placed her faith in as a god arguably propelled her into the faith journey that she took after leaving Mr. Dumont very soon after this incident (Gilbert 41). Because Truth no longer had an earthly "god" to place her faith in, her next encounter with God occurred after her son was sold away to the South without her knowledge while she was with the Van Wagener's (Gilbert 44). Due to this experience Sojourner is propelled into a stronger and deeper relationship with God and begins to live a more spiritual life than before leaving Dumont.

During Isabella's relatively peaceful stay with the Van Wageners, she has a vision when Dumont visits. Dumont's sudden appearance presents an opportunity for Isabella to psychologically break from him. This rupture may also signify a spiritual break that ushers in Isabella's increased faithfulness to God. During Isabella's early years Mr. Dumont became Isabella's god. When Isabella finally separates from him completely by not going on the wagon home with him from the Van Wageners's home, it is as if she is breaking a psychological devotion to a deity. It was her "new" God that caused her to be

unable to see the Dumont's wagon, causing her liberation from the "old" god (Gilbert 65). This revelation of light and of the physical person of Jesus through a vision all occurred immediately after the physical appearance and psychological separation of Isabella from Mr. Dumont (Gilbert 67).

Immediately after her final attachment to men (Matthias and Pierson) whom she treats as gods, Isabella leaves the city and changes her name to Sojourner Truth. This name change signifies an increased dependence upon her spirit or inner moral compass rather than depending upon the teachings of other men. It is during this period that she becomes a spiritual icon and itinerant preacher (Gilbert 100). This faith journey that Truth's narrative provides the reader personifies Truth's moral and religious belief that one must be led by the spirit of God rather than the teachings of man.

When reviewing the narratives discussed in this chapter, we see two camps begin to emerge, those authors who justified their actions through faith, and those who practiced Spirit-led religious observance. Douglass and Jacobs do not record their daily commitment to the practice of religion, but instead these authors seem to turn to religion to justify their actions in the world. Harriet Jacobs, Olaudah Equiano's early life *before* his conversion, and Frederick Douglass seem to use faith to vindicate their beliefs, practices, and moral decisions. They did not claim explicitly that they were Spirit-led in their narratives.

In their narratives Douglass and Jacobs more openly express ambivalence towards certain forms of falsely practiced Christianity and their undisclosed feelings about their own practice of Christianity. Douglass's faith is piqued early on as a boy of twelve or thirteen while living in Baltimore. He finds that Christianity provides a sense of

justification, protection, and hope through the promise of freedom. Jacobs also finds some sort of justification of her actions and hope in religious practice. Their practice of Christianity allows them the freedom to do what they feel to be right and then justifies the actions they took using Scriptural teachings. Conversely, Equiano, Jea, and Truth's actions appear in their texts as justified because they were led by the Spirit of God. Faith allows Douglass and Jacobs the freedom to do what they feel to be right, but as a result they wrestle with their faith, their actions, and the actions of others in the world who profess faith a great deal more than Equiano, Jea, or Truth. The challenge for Douglass and Jacobs is neatly fitting religion into their own conceptualization of the world.

Equiano, after his conversion, John Jea, and Sojourner Truth tended to write of their religious practice as being Spirit-led. Douglass and Jacobs do not explicitly claim to have been led by the Spirit of God and their texts tend to discuss the "Spirit" and its leading far less than Jea, Truth, and Equiano. A discussion of the Spirit of God tends to differentiate authors who claim to be led by God and those who do not make this claim. The justifications for actions taken by the authors are acutely different as well. Equiano, Jea, and Truth have instantaneous justification for their actions in the world because they can always rely on the fact that the Spirit of God led them to participate in whatever action they take. They, therefore, do not have to wrestle with fitting God into their conceptualization of the world because God is their world. They believe their view of the world after being "born-again" is aligned with God and His leading rather than their own leading. Thus, if something goes wrong or right they can trust that it was the will of God for it to occur because they were being led by Him.

While it is important to note the differentiating practices of each author, it is also interesting to view the similarities of these authors' parallel religious tenets of salvation coming through faith in Jesus Christ. The authors differ in practices, and in some beliefs such as baptism. But at the core of many of their key decisions in life, they utilize their faith to justify, gain spiritual freedom, protect, inspire hope, and lead decisions in their lives.

Each author also makes a key distinction between false slaveholder religiosity and their own form of religious practice. It is important to note that the three authors who were least condemning of slaveholder religiosity in Chapter One of this thesis (Equiano, Jea, and Truth) were also the three that wrote most about the Spirit of God leading them. Is the leading of the Spirit of God related to a less critical view of slaveholder religiosity? I would answer by saying yes, it seems that the more times the author mentions being Spirit-led, the more concessions they seem to make for slaveholders. Douglass and Jacobs were far more critical towards slaveholder religiosity than Equiano, Jea, and Truth. This research should certainly be continued to delve into why there is a correlation between authors describing themselves as being Spirit-led and their having a less critical view of slaveholder religiosity.

Overall, my hope is that this thesis highlights the significance that religious faith had to these five African American antebellum authors, and perhaps to countless others who were enslaved as well.

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