

Education and Access to Christian Thought in the Writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Anna Julia Cooper

JoJo Magno, Senior Adjunct of Humanities, Warren County Community College, Washington, NJ

Let them give to the slave...the right to read the word of God, and to have such education as will fully develop his intellectual and moral nature; the right of free religious opinion and worship.

– Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*

A boy...had only to declare a floating intention to study theology and he could get all the support...he needed...[w]hile a self-supporting girl had to struggle on by teaching...and actually to fight her way against positive discouragements to the higher education.

– Anna Julia Cooper, “The Higher Education of Women”

Abstract

In attempting to climb past the racist and sexist barriers which existed in nineteenth-century America, women could look to writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Anna Julia Cooper. Their works not only reflect the conditions of women and African-American women in particular, but also call for access to educational opportunities for these women to provide a gateway to Christian thought. Bible study and theological education extended the idea of women and blacks as God's creatures, possessed of a soul, and rebutted the use of Scripture by Southern white males to promote slavery and segregation.

Introduction

Reviled as sentimental and considered little more than armchair sociology from a woman whose experience in the South consisted of “a visit of a few days’ duration to friends in Kentucky,”¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) is in fact full of challenges that go beyond emotion and abolitionist arguments. When read in connection with Stowe’s other works, and in contrast to the writings of contemporary preachers, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* presents a clear call for increased understanding of Christian theology in general and Scripture particularly, for the good of blacks and women in the South. This call was picked up by Anna Julia Cooper, whose *A Voice From the South* (1892) lauds *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Stowe and frequently associates ideas of education with the social and moral benefits of intelligent Christian understanding.

1. Basil Davenport, review of *Goodbye to Uncle Tom*, by J.C. Furnas, *Book-of-the-Month Club News* (1956).

The Sanction of the Almighty

Why was it necessary for Stowe and later Cooper to call for learned approaches to Christian ideals? Both before *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* publication and in response to its message, some Southern Christian thinkers used a certain interpretation of Old (and sometimes New) Testament teachings to defend slavery (and later, segregation and disenfranchisement). If Stowe was no expert in Southern life or the true lot of the slave, she was undoubtedly an expert in Christian thought. Her detractors picked, in this area at least, a very poor platform on which to stand against her. It would take all of her considerable knowledge of Christian ideals to rebut the strident moralizing of the pro-slavery preachers, and she therefore concluded that it was in the best interests of all who shared her desire for abolition to also educate themselves in this area. Since women play the most significant role in the education of children, Stowe's female characters demonstrate how a command of Scripture is essential in opposing the white males who make the pro-slavery or Jim Crow laws; their education must not be neglected. But above all, Stowe tells us, blacks should learn to read and have access to their Bibles. Like Martin Luther, who objected to the Word of God transmitted to laypeople via a priestly scholar of Latin, Stowe recognized that secondhand knowledge of the Bible was acceptable when nothing else was available, but inferior to direct apprehension of Scripture. She places this sentiment into the mouth of her "little evangelist," Evangeline "Eva" St. Clare:

"But they ought to read the Bible, mamma, to learn God's will."

"O! They can get that read to them all *they* need."

"It seems to me, mamma, the Bible is for every one to read themselves."²

And Uncle Tom himself does the best he can despite his limited literacy:

As for Tom's Bible, though it had no annotations and helps in margin from learned commentators, still it had been embellished with certain way-marks and guide-boards of

² Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Random House, 1981; Bantam Classics, 2003), 299-300.

Tom's own invention, and which helped him more than the most learned expositions could have.³

Education is not a certain line of defense against misapprehension of God's word on slavery and the state of the Southern black. Stowe creates a hierarchy of Biblical education and enlightenment among her white characters. At the lowest order is Eva's cousin Henrique, who replies to Eva's question, "Doesn't the Bible say we must love everybody?" with "O, the Bible! To be sure, it says a great many such things; but then, nobody ever thinks of doing them, – you know, Eva, nobody does."⁴ Eva's mother, Marie St. Clare, moves past Henrique's ignorance into a dangerous bit of learning as she parrots her preacher's assertion that the text "He hath made everything beautiful in its season" (a conflation of Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 3:11) shows how "all the orders and distinctions in society came from God...and he applied [the text] so well to all this ridiculous fuss that is made about slavery, and he proved distinctly that the Bible was on our side."⁵

But these half-literate interpretations are easily dismissed by Eva's intense faith. Much harder to challenge, and requiring more sophisticated Biblical understanding than that of Tom or Eva, are the messages by the Southern preachers who use Scripture to defend, and even sanctify, slavery. When these are invoked by Stowe's more learned white characters, she counters them with intelligent educated women like Miss Ophelia, the New England cousin of St. Clare; Mrs. Bird, the Senator's wife in the free state of Ohio; Rachel Halliday, the Quaker woman who runs the Underground Railroad sanctuary; and most notably Mrs. Shelby, the wife of Tom's first, humane, owner. Upon her husband's reminder of such a preacher's sermon, Mrs. Shelby heatedly replies: "I don't want to hear such sermons; I never wish to hear Mr. B. in our church

3. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 164.

4. *Ibid.*, 309.

5. *Ibid.*, 207.

again. Ministers can't help the evil, perhaps...any more than we can, – but defend it! – it always went against my common sense.”⁶

Close reading reveals Stowe's unequivocal rejection of Southern male preachers' use of Biblical admonition. Largely demonstrated by her female, black, and child characters, but also by her own didactic voice, the message of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one of internalization of New Testament ideology. Eva preaches love to Topsy, and succeeds where Ophelia's moralizing has failed; Tom preaches patience and empathy to the Shelby slaves who wish that the slave trader Haley would burn in hell forever: “I'm afeared you don't know what ye're sayin'. Forever is a *dre'ful* word...you oughtenter wish that ar to any human crittur.”⁷ Mrs. Shelby believes that the best Christian lesson she can give her maid Eliza regards how she should love and care for her husband and son: “I have talked with Eliza about her boy – her duty to him as a Christian mother, to watch over him, pray for him, and bring him up in a Christian way...I have told her that one soul is worth more than all the money in the world.”⁸

At times the instruction of the pro-slavery ministers is deemed so pernicious that Stowe must insert her authorial voice and didactic tone in response, for not Eva's sincerity, Tom's simple piety nor Mrs. Shelby's impassioned humanity will suffice. Such a challenge comes when Tom contemplates the suicide of a young slave whose infant has been sold while she is distractedly looking over the railing of the *La Belle Rivière* to try to catch sight of her husband. Stowe explains Tom's thoughts as they might be viewed by the Southern preachers:

To him, it looked like something unutterably horrible and cruel, because, poor, ignorant black soul! he had not learned to generalize, and to take enlarged views. If he had only been instructed by certain ministers of Christianity, he might have thought better of it...but

6. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 38

7. *Ibid.*, 61.

8. *Ibid.*, 37.

Tom, as we see, being a poor ignorant fellow, whose reading had been confined entirely to the New Testament, could not comfort and solace himself with views like these.⁹

In Chapter 12, in a conversation in the passengers' quarters aboard the *La Belle Rivière* ensues when one of the children reports that there are slaves in the hold. After a light and sentimental regret is expressed by one of the women and contradicted by another, who claims that "they are better off than they would be to be free," a preacher begins careful instruction in Scripture:

"It's undoubtedly the intention of Providence that the African race should be servants, – kept in a low condition," said a grave-looking...clergyman... " 'Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be,' the scripture says."

"I say, stranger, is that ar what that text means?" said a tall man, standing by.

"Undoubtedly. It pleased Providence, for some inscrutable reason, to doom the race to bondage, ages ago; and we must not set up our opinion against that."¹⁰

This preacher of Stowe's will not question with his intellect the "inscrutable" wisdom of Providence, and so she can only challenge him through the words of "an honest drover" who slyly remarks, "See what 'tis, now, to know scripture. If ye'd only studied yer Bible, like this yer good man, ye...could jist have said, 'Cussed be' – what's his name? – 'and 'twould all have come right.'"¹¹

The citation "Cursed be Canaan" (Gen. 9:25-27) is an encapsulation of the major Southern Christian justification of slavery, segregation, and disenfranchisement which was elucidated in lengthy "scholarly" publications. In 1843, Josiah Priest published the 570-page *Bible Defence of Slavery, or, The Negro Race as Deduced from History, Both Sacred and Profane, Their Natural Relations - Moral, Mental, and Physical - to the Other Races of Mankind, Compared and Illustrated - Their Future Destiny Predicted, Etc.* which asserts explicit Old Testament authority:

9. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 148.

10. *Ibid.*, 140.

11. *Ibid.*

“...the institution of slavery received ‘the sanction of the Almighty in the Patriarchal age’.”¹² Jesus, Priest claimed, intimated approval of slavery (“its legality was recognised, and its relative duties regulated by our Saviour, when upon earth;”¹³) by pointed silence on the issue: “the practice passed by without reproof in the New Testament.”¹⁴ Priest stipulates that the numerous Old Testament comments concerning “bondsmen” or “bought servants” are in fact references to “the Negro or Canaanite slave.”¹⁵ Without further explanation, throughout he equates the Negro race with those descendants of Noah’s grandson Canaan, son of Ham, whom Noah declares were to be “cursed” servants to the descendants of Noah’s other sons, Shem and Japheth. Although the text is indistinct – Noah’s wrath is incurred by Ham’s witnessing him drunk and “uncovered” and may refer to the vintner Noah’s shame as the descendant of Cain the husbandman¹⁶ – eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentary clearly asserts that

This [Gen. 9] certainly points at the victories in after-times obtained by Israel over the Canaanites...The whole continent of Africa was peopled mostly by the descendants of Ham; and for how many ages have the better parts of that country lain under the dominion of the Romans, then of the Saracens, and now of the Turks! In what wickedness, ignorance, barbarity, slavery, and misery most of the inhabitants live!¹⁷

Therefore, “Canaanites” equals “Negroes,” and any scriptural admonition regarding the slavery of Canaanites is plainly applicable to the American South. The connection is so commonplace that this commentator, Matthew Henry, feels compelled to add:

But this in no way excuses the covetousness and barbarity of those who enrich themselves with the product of their sweat and blood. God has not commanded us to enslave negroes; and, without doubt, he will severely punish all such cruel wrongs.¹⁸

12. J. F. Brennan, “Publisher’s Preface” to Priest’s *Bible Defence of Slavery*, vi.

13. Ibid.

14. Josiah Priest, *Bible Defence of Slavery* (Louisville, KY: Willis A Bush, 1843), 346.

15. Ibid., 106. The word “slave” only appears in the King James Old Testament once, Jer 2:14, to observe that the people of Israel are not slaves but the chosen people. All other references use some variation on “servant.”

16. William Neil, *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 35.

17. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary* (1706; Christ Notes, 2009), Genesis 9.

18. Ibid.

In 1856 *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery*, by Thornton Stringfellow, D.D. was presented to the public. In addition to the same claims rooted in Mosaic law as those of Priest, Stringfellow develops the “Cursed be Canaan” motif at length:

Here, language is used, showing the favor which God would exercise to the posterity of Shem and Japheth, while they were holding the posterity of Ham in a state of abject bondage. May it not be said in truth, that God decreed this institution before it existed; and has he not connected its existence with prophetic tokens of special favor, to those who should be slave owners or masters? He is the same God now, that he was when he gave these views of his moral character to the world; and unless the posterity of Shem and Japheth, from whom have sprung the Jews, and all the nations of Europe and America, and a great part of Asia, (the African race that is in them excepted,) –I say, unless they are all dead, as well as the Canaanites or Africans who descended from Ham, then it is quite possible that his favor may now be found with one class of men who are holding another class in bondage. Be this as it may, God decreed slavery – and shows in that decree, tokens of good-will to the master.¹⁹

It is noteworthy, though understandable, that more attention should be paid to these scholarly discourses on a vague text than to Stowe’s own indirect jab at that same text. Written in 1956, J. C. Furnas’s *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* devotes five full pages to atrocities perpetuated on blacks in the name of the curse of Canaan: “...[C]hurchgoers were not inclined to question the parson’s authority for identifying the seed of Canaan with the field hands of Georgia...[n]either was Mrs. Stowe so inclined...she did not touch on ‘Cursed be Canaan...’ ”²⁰ Furnas may be referring to Stowe’s omission in her *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1854) but he significantly fails to mention the reference in the novel itself. Clearly, education in Bible interpretation and textual exegesis remains sorely lacking among Stowe’s detractors even into the twentieth century.

Furnas’s criticisms ring especially hollow when we read Chapter 14 of *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, entitled “The Hebrew Slave-Law Compared with the American Slave-Law.” This chapter does little *but* question the authority of parsons who would use the former to justify the

19. Thornton Stringfellow, *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery* (Richmond, VA: J.W. Randolph, 1856), 6-7.

20. J.C. Furnas, *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (New York: William Sloane, 1956), 291.

latter. The principle of her argument²¹ is threefold: first, that many things justified in Mosaic law are no longer deemed acceptable, such as polygamy (Ex. 21:9-11), genocide (Deut. 9:12; 20:16-18) and murderous retribution (Num. 35:9-39); second, that even these activities are given strict parameters in Mosaic law because, she contends, each was “an ameliorating law, designed to take the place of some barbarous abuse...because the attempt to enforce a more stringent system...would have only produced greater abuses”²²; and finally, that St. Paul had declared the Hebrew system “imperfect” and “superseded by the Christian dispensation.—Heb. viii. 13.”²³ Beyond these interpretations is a mitigating factor, applicable even if Stowe had found no other weaknesses in the comparison between Hebrew and American slave-law. The goal of Hebrew slave-law was to assure the education and elevation of the “debased, half-civilised race, which had been degraded by slavery in its worst form among the Egyptians, was gradually elevated to refinement and humanity.” The American slave-holder has no such obligation even with the advantages offered by “printing and books.”²⁴

Note Stowe’s use of the word “degraded.”²⁵ Used frequently by Priest and Stringfellow, this term became popular even among African-Americans to explain their own condition. As early as 1768, Phillis Wheatley referred to hers as a “benighted” race, “black as Cain”²⁶ still in the thrall of African paganism. Degradation was as often a self-inflicted condition as one imposed upon the race. In 1831, Maria Stewart expressed concern for her race’s “wretched and degraded situation” and declared herself “sensible of the gross ignorance that prevails among

21. This argument is derived from a summary written by her husband Dr. Calvin E. Stowe, Professor of Biblical Literature at Andover Theological Seminary. *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 224-225.

22. Stowe, *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 225.

23. *Ibid.*, 223.

24. *Ibid.*, 224.

25. Max Müller defines *degradation* as applying to those races which seem to have no organized religion, or at least so little that it offers no benefit to morality. “Essays on the Science of Religion,” *Chips from a German Workshop* (London: Longmans, Green, 1867), 60.

26. Phillis Wheatley, “On being brought from Africa to America,” in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773), 18.

us.”²⁷ For Wheatley, improvement lay in Christian education from her master and mistress; for Stewart, only with knowledge of the principles of religion and morality could the “the chains of slavery and ignorance burst.”²⁸ Priest is confident that degradation is as inherent a characteristic as the color of their skin; nineteenth-century women know that Christian education provides elevation. Would it not seem likely then that the ladies of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist missionary auxiliaries would insist, in the name of Christian decency, education in the service of such progress?

In the judgment of many Southern Christian churches, whose documents on slavery are presented by Stowe in Part IV of the *Key*, denial of education and the resulting ignorance and immorality were the fault of the abolitionist pamphlet-writers whose dangerous tracts must be kept from the slaves at all possible costs, lest they cause restiveness. She quotes “Rev. James Smylie, stated clerk of the Mississippi Presbytery” who uses an analogy: If parents were faced with the choice between allowing their children to read works which might convince them that they owed their parents no obedience, or keeping them illiterate, the lesser of the evils was clearly illiteracy – always supposing that this could be remedied at a later date when the pernicious written material had ceased to be produced. Thus the church’s official position was that slaves should be taught Christian morals orally and kept deliberately illiterate; the consequential ignorance and immorality was a necessary ill – one that was often used to justify the perpetuation of the myths of racial inferiority.²⁹

Christianity and Morality

In Southern white perceptions, Christian education for blacks, especially women, was a double-edged sword. On the one hand it provided the best control over the perceived weaknesses

27. Maria Stewart, “Religion And The Pure Principles of Morality,” *African-American History*. Web.

28. *Ibid.*, 2.

29. Stowe, *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 390-391.

of the race; on the other it promoted two dangerous ideas: the brotherhood and equality of all mankind under God; and Jesus' redemption of immortal souls, of which even the benighted acknowledged the blacks were possessed:

“Don't you believe that the Lord made them of one blood with us?” said Miss Ophelia, shortly.

“No, indeed, not I! A pretty story, truly! They are a degraded race.”

“Don't you think they've got immortal souls?” said Miss Ophelia....

“O, well,” said Marie, yawning, “that, of course – nobody doubts that.”³⁰

The problems of the “degraded race” were, most notably, sexual immorality and heathenish religious practices, both of which seemed best addressed by proper Christian instruction such as would be given to children in catechism. Just as slavery was the only way to make the indolent work:

There is no system but that of compulsory servitude, by which this labor, on which so much depends, can be done; for if it is left to the free will or the necessities of the blacks, there could never be any certainty, as instances of freed blacks...refusing to work, has often occurred, and this even among the better sort, such as were members of religious societies.³¹

so God's condemnation was the only way to prevent a general decline into moral turpitude:

Lewdness, of the most hideous description, was the crime of which they were guilty, blended with idolatry in their adoration of the gods, who were carved out of wood, painted, and otherwise made, so as to represent the wild passions of lascivious desires, in both male and female forms. This was the character of all the Hamethian race in old Canaan...That such practices did prevail among the people of Ham, is stated not only by Moses, in his time, but Herodotus...says the same thing respecting the negroes of his age...he saw...an Egyptian woman accompanying with a he-goat, in the very streets of the city she lived in...which proves the incurable proneness of that people, the negro race, to the most extraordinary and shameful abuses of human nature...To the female character among the black population, we cannot allude but with feelings of the bitterest shame. A similar condition of moral pollution and utter disregard of a pure and virtuous reputation, is to be found only without the pale of Christendom.³²

Given these views, it was natural that white masters should insist upon decent Christian behavior – if not for the slaves' salvation, at the very least to prevent revulsion in decent folk.

30. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 197.

31. Priest, *Bible Defence*, 352.

32. *Ibid.*, 178-179; 184.

This responsibility fell to Christian women, who believed unequivocally in equality under God and the presence of an immortal soul in all humans. When St. Clare brings Topsy, the slave child, to his cousin Ophelia, she asks why; he replies, "For you to educate—didn't I tell you? You're always preaching about educating."³³ Ophelia's work with Topsy (alternately "the little heathen" and "the young disciple") involves catechism, reading the Bible, and moral instruction. St. Clare teases Ophelia for her "orthodox New England" ways, pointing out how remote they are from the real problems of the slaves, to which she replies, "It is your system makes such children."³⁴ St. Clare softens his jibes when he recalls how his mother functioned in that same way as a moral instructor: "The Bible was my mother's book."³⁵

Uncle Tom's original owner Mr. Shelby bases his trust in Tom on Christian faith: "Tom is a good, steady, sensible, pious fellow. He got religion at a camp-meeting...I've trusted him, since then...and I always found him true and square in everything...'Tom,' says I to him, 'I trust you, because I think you're a Christian.'"³⁶ Even the hardened slave-trader Haley has to agree: "I consider religion a valeyable thing in a nigger, when it's the genuine article"³⁷ – an attitude condensed succinctly by William Capers, a slaveholding clergyman: "Religious instruction of the Negroes will *promote our own morality and religion*."³⁸ The other, perhaps unseen, consequence of Christian instruction for slaves was the fervent adoption of American Protestantism among blacks. Highly accessible preaching and conversion experiences which did not require literacy were excellent means to bring blacks into the churches; there, a blend of pagan African worship and American revivalism evolved into the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and African

33. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 272.

34. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 281.

35. *Ibid.*, 209.

36. *Ibid.*, 2.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Qtd. in Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. Updated ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 2004), 165 (emphasis Raboteau's).

Baptist churches, among others.³⁹ As these institutions grew independent of white churches, black religious leaders had to take on the responsibilities associated with preaching from Scripture; literacy and Bible study were required. Uncle Tom plays this role among the slaves on the Shelby farm; it is his titular cabin which provides the meeting-house and his well-annotated Bible which supplies the text. Tom's study and preaching are exemplary:

Uncle Tom was a sort of patriarch in religious matters, in the neighborhood. Having...a greater breadth and cultivation of mind than obtained among his companions, he was looked up to with great respect, as a sort of minister among them; and the simple, hearty, sincere style of his exhortations might have edified even better educated persons. But it was in prayer that he especially excelled. Nothing could exceed the touching simplicity, the child-like earnestness, of his prayer, enriched with the language of Scripture, which seemed so entirely to have wrought itself into his being, as to have become a part of himself, and to drop from his lips unconsciously.⁴⁰

Raboteau states: "Temporal rulers...have had abundant opportunity to ponder the disruptive implications of a religious conscience owing ultimate allegiance to a 'higher authority' than their own."⁴¹ American Protestantism reassures blacks that all people are truly equal under God; that salvation is for all who come to Jesus; that all possess an immortal soul and, as illustrated in a hundred Negro spirituals, that Canaan is *not* the Africa of their birth and cursed state, but the compensatory Kingdom of God for the meek, the suffering, and the oppressed of this world. On that "great getting' up mornin'," all souls will be seen through a light of righteousness and reverence and not through the temporal covering of the flesh.

Where some found a call to slave rebellion, as described by the corrupt lawyer Mr. Jekyl in Stowe's later novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*:

It's a notorious fact that the worst insurrections have arisen from the reading of the Bible by these ignorant fellows. That was the case with Nat Turner, in Virginia. That was the case with Denmark Vesey, and his crew, in South Carolina. I tell you, sir, it will never do, this turning out a set of ignorant people to pasture in the Bible! That blessed book is a

39. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 132-133; 200-206.

40. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 33.

41. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 290.

savor of life unto life when it's used right; but it's a savor of death unto death when ignorant people take hold of it. The proper way is this: administer such portions only as these creatures are capable of understanding. This admirable system of religious instruction keeps the matter in our own hands, by allowing us to select for them such portions of the word as are best fitted to keep them quiet, dutiful, and obedient.⁴²

Uncle Tom finds the strength to bear slavery's burden: "No! no! no! my soul an't yours, Mas'r! You haven't bought it,—ye can't buy it! It's been bought and paid for, by one that is able to keep it!"⁴³ Tom is no easier for the slaveholder Simon Legree to tolerate than Vesey or Turner would have been, and Tom's Christian assertions do not stop Legree from ordering him beaten to death.

Kill him he can; subdue him he cannot:

[Tom] felt strong in God to meet death...looking up, [he] said, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit! Thou hast redeemed me, oh Lord God of truth!" and then quietly yielded himself to the rough, brutal grasp with which Quimbo seized him...a higher voice there was saying, "Fear not them that kill the body, and, after that, have no more that they can do." Nerve and bone of that poor man's body vibrated to those words, as if touched by the finger of God; and he felt the strength of a thousand souls in one.⁴⁴

In the balance, Christian education is deemed too dangerous for slaves, despite its moral benefits, and yet withholding it is a difficult conclusion to justify, given the white supremacist's challenge to abolitionist claims over the incompatibility of Christianity with slavery and oppression. Their resulting position can only be one of fear. Anna Julia Cooper declares:

In the old days, I am told that two or three Negroes gathered together in supplication and prayer, were not allowed to present their petition at the throne of Grace without having it looked over and revised by a white man for fear probably that white supremacy and its "peculiar" system might be endangered at the Court of the Almighty by these faltering lips and uncultured tongues! The same fear covers the white man's heart today. He dare not face his God with a lie on his lips.⁴⁵

42. Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*. (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1856), 196.

43. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 407.

44. *Ibid.*, 468

45. Anna Julia Cooper, "The Ethics of the Negro Question" (1902) In *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 206.

Christian Women, Black and White, Need Higher Education

Mrs. Shelby, Mrs. Bird and Miss Ophelia model Christian education not only for the blacks but also for their husbands and families. Mr. Shelby credits his wife with her resolve to inculcate Christian morality and principle in their slaves, in the same way Senator Bird yields to his wife's unspoken insistence that they take in the runaways Eliza and Harry despite his own vote in favor of the Fugitive Slave Act.⁴⁶

Yet these women who drove the abolitionist movement forward on Christian tracks were not entitled to the benefits of formal education or involvement in theological debate. The many publications presented so far in defense of slavery are all the product of male clergy, Doctors of Divinity, graduates of collegiate theological courses of study. Repudiation of these theories was found around the kitchen table, or in the parlor over tea or needle-work, and the authority granted to each side of the debate was commensurate with society's current opinions of their relative intellectual value. Harriet Beecher Stowe received roughly the equivalent of such a degree through osmosis (father, two brothers, and husband all were so educated), and was still challenged fiercely even by abolitionists on the grounds that she had sentimentalized the issue; Jane Tompkins explains the widely-held view that "sentimental novels written by women in the nineteenth century were responsible for...the degeneration of American religion from theological rigor to anti-intellectual consumerism."⁴⁷ In reply to such criticisms, she published the *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* which attempted to provide a systematic, scholarly argument for, among other points, the need for sensible Christian thought in discussions of slavery. Chapter 15 of the *Key* reprints a letter from a slave mother to her daughter's owner who intends to sell her:

46. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*., 92.

47. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 124.

You are an office-bearer in the church, and a man of prayer. As such, and as the absolute owner of my child, I ask candidly whether she has...received at your hands, in faithful religious instruction in the Word of God, a full and fair compensation for all her toil? It is not to me alone that you must answer these questions. You acknowledge the high authority of His laws who preached a deliverance to the captive, and who commands you to give to your servant "that which is just and equal." Oh, I entreat you, withhold not, at this trying hour, from my child that which will cut off her last hope, and which may endanger your own soul!⁴⁸

This entreaty fails. The appeal of the uneducated, sentimental Christian mother is overwhelmed by the power of the "professedly religious man," the slave-owner. The educated (and still sentimental) Stowe can only report, after the fact. Later, in *Dred* she will fictionalize a similar incident when Nina Gordon appeals to Jekyl's Christian nature for the sake of a slave mother: "I should think...that you might see with the eye of the Gospel, sometimes! Do you think, Mr. Jekyl, that doing this is doing as I should wish to be done by, if I were in the place of this woman?" to which Jekyl replies, "My dear Miss Gordon, young ladies of fine feeling, at your time of life, are often confused on this subject by a wrong application of the Scripture language," adding later in private to Nina's brother Tom, "Very natural, —fine feelings, but uninstructed."⁴⁹ Only the white patriarch can be trusted to interpret Scripture well enough for legal or ethical applications. Nina's lesson is reinforced in a more sympathetic but no less absolute manner by the victim herself, Milly: "You folks have de say all on your side, with your ministers preaching us down out of de Bible; you won't teach us to read." Excusing the heat of this protest, Milly explains: "I... didn't know God, and my heart was like a red-hot coal."⁵⁰

To the young black woman named Annie Haywood who entered St. Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute in Raleigh in 1867, the limitations on Christian education for black women were not yet apparent. Anna Julia Cooper would pursue higher education for

48. Stowe, *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 237.

49. Stowe, *Dred*, 201-202.

50. *Ibid.*, 217

herself and for others well into the twentieth century, observing along the way that despite the opportunities created for black women and men as teachers of black children, and for black men as ministers, in her 105 years of life the doors of education never fully opened.

In “The Higher Education of Women” Cooper describes how she was not permitted to study as a seminarian would and was instead enrolled in the “Ladies' Course,” with special permission to attend occasional classes in the “Gentlemen’s Course,” until eventually the administration noted that there were nearly as many women as men in the men’s classes; the ladies’ curriculum was clearly inferior and on its way to obsolescence. The remainder of the essay develops the idea that educated Christian women can bring “heart” to the world, in sharp contrast to the derision of the weak so often brought by warlike white males; and she inextricably connects “the thinking woman” (that is, the educated woman who has been encouraged to think) with revolution in these areas:

[My] theory of the thinking woman's mission [is] to put in the tender and sympathetic chord in nature's grand symphony...Now I claim it is the prevalence of the Higher Education among women, the making it a common everyday affair for women to reason and think and express their thought, the training and stimulus which enable and encourage women to administer to the world the bread it needs.⁵¹

in September 1902, Cooper addressed the General Conference of the Society of Friends at Asbury Park, New Jersey.⁵² This address neatly weaves all of the threads of her inheritance as an educated black woman who originated in slavery – her mother was owned by her father – and has seen forty years of unequal educational opportunities for women and blacks; has seen the struggles of the children she helped educate as they competed with whites for jobs and social status; has lived through the forcible termination of her teaching career because she became a

51. Anna Julia Cooper, “The Higher Education of Women” (1890-1891). In *A Voice from the South*, ed. Mary Helen Washington (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), 56-57.

52. The speech was published as “The Ethics of the Negro Question,” in Lemert and Bahn, 1998.

married woman, and the subsequent reinstatement upon her widowhood. The “Negro Question,” the thesis of her address, is phrased: “How can the Negro be best helped? What can be done by the man who loves his fellowmen and needs...only to be assured of methods? What is the best means of the Negro's uplift and amelioration?”⁵³ Her answer is similarly direct: “In a word I answer: Christian Education.” She of course uses considerably more than that promised word to drive home this pivotal, this ultimate, answer:

The black man is not a saint, neither can he be reduced to an algebraic formula. His thirty or forty checkered years of freedom have not transfigured *en masse* ten million slaves into experienced, thrifty, provident, law abiding members of society. There are some criminal, some shiftless, some provokingly intractable and seemingly uneducable classes and individuals among blacks as there are still unless I am misinformed, also among whites. But our philosophy does not balk at this nor do we lose our belief in the efficacy of Christian teaching and preaching. Turn on the light! Light, more light! There will always be some who do not live up to the light they have. But the Master has left us no alternative. Ye are the light of the world.⁵⁴

The call to education for blacks and women appears in much nineteenth-century women’s writing: in fiction, in speeches, in memoirs and slave narratives, the call goes out. In the works of black men like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington we find a similar call for decent training, and the economic and social opportunities which it can bring, for all blacks. But the strongest, most urgent call comes from women like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Anna Julia Cooper who know that it is only through learning that true freedom can be found at the heart of the Christian ethic.

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