

Christianity among African-Americans

Combining literary analysis and historical data to examine the role of
Christianity among African-Americans between 1800 and 1865

BA Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University
Francisca Seele
3685934
Supervision: dr. Roselinde Supheert
Second Reader: dr. Derek Rubin
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Introduction

The memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) tells the story of the author himself, Frederick Douglass. Douglass was born a slave but managed to obtain his freedom. In his writings, Christianity is often mentioned. The author himself is a Christian and he does not oppose the institute of Christianity, though he does criticize the way slaveholders in the South practice their Christian beliefs. This memoir is an example of an antebellum slave narrative that discusses Christianity among African-Americans. There is more African-American literature that features Christianity. Examples are *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Ann Jacobs and *Appeal ... to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) by David Walker. Like Douglass, Jacobs was born a slave and gained her freedom later in life. In her work, Jacobs criticizes the Christian Church. Walker was born a free man, and in his work he uses Christianity to urge African-Americans to revolt. The works of Douglass, Jacobs, and Walker are featured in the authoritative *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (2004). This anthology is a collection of the most important works of literature, which means that the selected texts can be considered as mainstream literature. This paper will examine the way in which Christianity is portrayed in mainstream literature written by people of African descent.

The institutes of slavery and Christianity are both crucially present in the history of the United States of America. Being brought to the New World, African slaves were forced to leave behind a great part of their own culture and religion. This was done for a reason, as African culture presumably had “the power to unify the slaves and thus enable them to resist or rebel” (Raboteau 4). In addition, Raboteau argues that it would not have been possible for African culture to remain intact in a new environment (8). This means that both through force and

circumstances, the African roots of the slaves faded. Over the years, many slaves converted to Christianity, either voluntarily or forcibly. However, it must be noted that it was not always everyone's intention to convert slaves. Raboteau argues that “during the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth century there was a great deal of indifference, reluctance, and hostility to the conversion of slaves” (66). On the other hand, not all slaves were willing to convert to Christianity, which was by some regarded as a “white man's religion” (121, 176). Although by no means all slaves were willing to convert, many did. A simple reason for this is that, as time passed, slaves became accustomed to the culture and religion of the New World while their African past grew fainter (Raboteau 92). Over time, slaves began to teach one another the doctrine of Christianity (Raboteau 177). Another factor that accelerated the conversion of slaves was the successive waves of revival, or Great Awakenings. Raboteau argues that the waves of revival “reminded American protestants of the importance of the conversion experience” (120).

Historian David Fountain argues that while most authors and historians claim that Christianity was the most common form of religion among African-Americans, this was not the case. He states that “a religious diverse antebellum slave community is a plausible alternative to the idea of Afro-Christianity as the centerpiece of antebellum slave life” (3). Fountain criticizes the ideas of scholars like Genovese, Blassingame, Levine, and Bole, who argue that Christianity was the main religion among slaves. Fountain's statement does not contradict the ideas of Raboteau, and he even states that the work of Raboteau represents “some of the most detailed research that describes the emergence and growth of Afro-Christianity” (2). The author mentions various reasons why other authors name Christianity as the main religion among slaves. One of these is that Christian services of worship were probably “the most visible public behavior

exhibited by members of the slave population” (8). Another reason he addresses is that “many antebellum slave narratives were a means to further the abolitionist cause” (8). Fountain's book shows that the role of Christianity among slaves in the antebellum period is still a matter of debate.

The objective of this paper is to formulate an answer to the question what role Christianity played among African-Americans between 1800 and 1865. To provide this answer, a literary analysis of mainstream African-American literature will be combined with historical data. The mainstream literature that will be analyzed are the texts by Walker, Douglass, and Jacobs. In the first chapter, the texts will be analyzed to determine how Christianity is represented in them. This chapter will show that there is a distinction between the Christian beliefs of white people and that of people of African descent. Chapter 2 will discuss the historical background of the texts and their authors. It will show that the use of Christianity had a positive effect on the image of the texts and their authors. In chapter 3, historical data will be examined to determine whether these texts justly represent the time they were written in. In this paper, it will become clear that while Christianity is very present in mainstream African-American literature, lack of data makes it difficult to determine whether this corresponds to the actual historical situation.

Chapter 1: Literary Analysis

When reading the stories by Walker, Jacobs, and Douglass it becomes clear that all three authors are Christians. They all have faith in God, be it in their own ways. In the following section, their views on religion, as expressed in the texts, will be discussed. A distinction can be made between

the way the authors view the religion of white people, and that of people of African descent. First, the Christian beliefs of white people, according to the authors, will be examined. The authors are critical of the Christian beliefs of their white oppressors, and this shows in the texts. After this, the religion of the authors themselves, and their fellow people of African descent, will be discussed.

1.1 White Christianity

In the work of all three authors, both white people and people of African descent are Christians. However, these groups have different ideas on the practicing of their beliefs. Christianity is used by white people as a justification for slavery. For example, David Walker mentions that there are people who believe that the enslavement of people of African descent is designed by God. He writes that there are those “who are of the firm conviction that heaven has designed us and our children to be slaves and *beasts of burden* to them and their children” (803). Frederick Douglass also comments on this subject, and he refers to various verses from the Bible that are used as a means of justification. He addresses the case of Noah and his son Ham, as described in Genesis 9:20-27. Ham had seen Noah drunk and naked, and as a punishment, Noah cursed the son of Ham, Canaan, to be the lowest of slaves. As Ham is seen as the forefather of Africans, people believed that Africans were cursed to be slaves. As Frederick Douglass states, “God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right” (876, 877). However, Douglass argues that this verse can no longer be used as a justification for American slavery, as many slaves are children of white fathers, mixing the bloodline. He writes: “If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural” (877).

Whether Douglass in fact believes this interpretation of the Biblical verse is not clear, but it is clear that he finds fault with the rationale. Another verse that was used to justify slavery was Luke 12:47: “He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.” Douglass writes that his master, Captain Auld, would cite this passage when performing acts of cruelty. Captain Auld had converted to Methodism and this made him “more cruel and hateful in all his ways” as “he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding ways” (898). Though it is not made entirely clear, Douglass writes that Captain Auld met with religion at a Methodist camp-meeting, implying that he was not a religious person before his conversion (898).

Douglass goes on to criticize the way southern white people practice their Christian beliefs. In the case of his master, Captain Auld, Douglass expected that the conversion to Methodism would make him kinder and more humane. Instead, it made him more cruel and hateful. Douglass seems to criticize the hypocrisy in the Christian religion of southern white people. For example, Douglass recalls that his master and mistress would pray for God to “bless them in basket and store,” while in fact, food was in abundance and the slaves were the ones malnourished (898). In addition, Douglass writes that one time, many people “all calling themselves Christians” destroyed the Sabbath school for slaves he attended (910). Jacobs also addresses the wrongdoings of Christians. She writes that her mistress taught her the following verses from the Bible: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” and “Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them” (Mark 12:31, Matthew 7:12). However, as Jacobs learned that she was to serve a five year old child instead of gaining her freedom, she wrote: “But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor” (845). She

also criticizes her master, calling him an “old sinner” as he refuses to let anyone whip her, while he exposes her to other acts of cruelty (848). Walker mainly criticizes the way white people have treated people of African descent in general, not mentioning personal experiences. While addressing this issue, he also emphasizes the Christian religion of these white people. He writes:

I promised in a preceding page to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the most incredulous, that we, (colored people of these United States of America) are the *most wretched, degraded* and abject set of beings that ever *lived* since the world began, and that the white Americans having reduced us to the wretched state of *slavery*, treat us in that condition *more cruel* (they being an enlightened and christian people) than any heathen nation did any people whom it had reduced to our condition (805).

Walker goes on to claim that the colored people have suffered “miseries under the christians” (808). In addition, he makes a distinction between his God and the God of slavery when he refers to “All persons who are acquainted with history, and particularly the Bible, who are not blinded by the God of this world” (804). With “The God of this world,” Walker means the God of the world of slavery. It is clear that Walker condemns the way white Americans practice their Christian faith. This applies to Douglass as well, though he makes a clear distinction between Christianity in general and the “slaveholding religion” of the United States (927). He views himself as a follower of the former: “I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land” (927). Both Douglass and Walker see themselves as followers of the right kind of Christianity. Jacobs does not claim such a thing, but it is evident that she also is a devout Christian. In the next section it will become clear in what ways these

authors view themselves as Christians, and how they practice their religious beliefs.

1.2 African-American Christianity

All three authors consider themselves Christians. This is shown in various ways, and the many times the authors address God in their writings is an example of this. In the first sentence of his work, Walker appeals to God: “and I pray God, that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more” (802). Later on in his work, when he writes about being suppressed by white people, he continues: “Oh! Pity us we pray thee, Lord Jesus, Master” (Walker 807). Jacobs addresses God as well, writing: “God pity the woman who is compelled to such a life” and “God forgive the black and bitter thoughts I indulged on that Sabbath day!” (853, 858). Though Douglass does not address God directly, he does write that he has shared his thoughts with Him. Among these thoughts were the following: “I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free!” (Douglass 903). It is clear that, despite the difficult challenges they are faced with and the tough situation they find themselves in, the authors have strong faith in God.

When a positive event occurs in their lives, both Jacobs and Douglass attribute this to a divine providence. This is the case when Jacobs is spared the fate of concubine of her master, and when Douglass is chosen to move from the plantation to the city, where life as a slave was less harsh (847, 888). In addition to this, when the cruel overseer Mr. Severe dies, Douglass states that “his death was regarded by the slaves as the result of a merciful providence” (880). When Jacobs is saved from her former master by a mister Bruce, she sees her friendship with him as a gift from God (860). Walker does not speak of divine providence. He is, however,

convinced that God is on the side of the people of African descent: “Fear not the number and education of our *enemies*, against whom we shall have to contend for our lawful right; guaranteed to us by our Maker; for why should we be afraid, when God is, and will continue (if we continue humble) to be on our side?” (808). Walker states that God hears the cries of oppressed people, and he will, one day, bring the oppressors to justice. Here again he distinguishes the “oppressor's God” and the “Lord our God,” and he states that God “being a just and holy Being will at one day appear fully in behalf of the oppressed, and arrest the progress of the avaricious oppressors” (804). It is evident that all three authors show strong faith in God. Both Jacobs and Douglass attribute multiple positive events to a divine providence, while Walker is sure such a divine intervention will happen in the future.

Walker's text is not a narrative, and he does not discuss various events that occurred in his life. As a result, he does not write about the way African-Americans practice their Christian beliefs. Jacobs hardly discusses this topic either, only once mentioning that, due to circumstances, she was not able to visit a church in order to worship God (858). More becomes clear in the narrative of Douglas, as he describes multiple events where he and his fellow slaves tried to practice their religion. For example, Douglass writes about a Sabbath school that was set up for the slaves:

While I lived with my master in St. Michael's, there was a white young man, a Mr. Wilson, who proposed to keep a Sabbath school for the instruction of such slaves as might be disposed to learn to read the New Testament. We met but three times, when Mr. West and Mr. Fairbanks, both class-leaders [spiritual leaders in the Methodist Church], with many others, came upon us with sticks and other missiles, drove us off, and forbade

us to meet again. Thus ended our little Sabbath school in the pious town of St. Michael's (899).

Douglass later started his own Sabbath school, where he taught his fellow slaves "how to read the will of God" (910). He describes that the white oppressors would not allow such practices, and how the slaves had to keep up appearances that they were spending their Sundays with sports and alcohol (910). Douglass describes the reason behind this: "for they had much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports, than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings" (910). The author writes that he organized his school at the house of a free man, and that there were over forty students of all ages at one time (910). As it was extremely dangerous for these slaves to visit this Sabbath school, Douglass argues, it is evident that they were truly keen on learning the ways of the Christian faith (911).

In his narrative, Douglass writes that the slaves were allowed time off between Christmas and New Year's Eve (907). Whether the slaves actually celebrated Christmas does not become clear, but it is evident that it was regarded as a holiday. Slaves were allowed to visit family, though most slaves spent their time getting drunk. As Douglas writes: "It was deemed a disgrace not to get drunk on Christmas" (907). A slave that did not get drunk went against its master's wishes, and it was argued that this slave did not work hard enough during the year to provide the means to acquire alcohol (907). It does become very clear that according to Douglass, this holiday was forced upon them by their masters. He states that the masters "disgust the slave with freedom, by only allowing him to see the abuse of it" (908). As Douglass is very negative about the meaning of Christmas when spent this way, and because he does not mention any religious aspect of the holiday, it cannot be said with certainty whether the slaves practiced their Christian

beliefs through the celebration of Christmas. It is, however, clear that Christmas was a holiday for slaves, meaning that this was another way in which Christianity was present in their lives.

1.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, the authors' views on religion and the practicing of their religious beliefs, as expressed in the texts, have been discussed. It has become clear that the authors distinguish their own religion from the religion of their white oppressors. Though both Christian, the slaveholders' interpretation of their beliefs differs from that of the slaves. It is evident that slaveholders draw on the Bible to justify their slaveholding ways. There are many verses in the Bible that can be used to this purpose. The authors criticize the religious beliefs of their masters, stating that the masters' stance on religion is hypocritical. Douglass and Walker even go so far as to state that these white people do not worship the right God. They write that they themselves are the right kind of Christian, while the white people are not.

All three authors are devout Christians, and this becomes apparent in various ways. The authors often address God. Walker and Jacobs do this in prayer, while Douglass speaks to God in his thoughts. They have much faith in God, as they all attribute positive events to divine providence. Walker and Jacobs do not write about the way Christianity is practiced by people of African descent. Douglass does write about his experiences in this respect, and sharing his memories of Sabbath schools is an example. In the next chapter, the authors and the publication of their works will be discussed.

Chapter 2: Historical Context

The three texts that are discussed in this paper all play an important role in the struggle against the institution of slavery. Douglass and Jacobs show audiences what it was like to be a slave, while the text by Walker is filled with reasons why a revolt against slavery would be justified. In this section, all three authors and the events surrounding the publication of their works will be discussed. This is relevant because it shows what role Christianity played in the lives of the authors, and how the religion influenced the texts. It will become clear that religion could be, and was, used as a tool to appeal to an audience.

2.1 David Walker

David Walker's text, *Appeal ... to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, was published in 1829. This text is argued to be “one of America's most important pieces of literature written during the nineteenth century” (Asukile 16). In his work, Walker criticizes slavery and he urges his readers to unite against this institution. Already before the publication, Walker played an active role in the struggle against slavery. Crockett writes that he was “a leading Boston abolitionist, an active member of the Massachusetts General Colored Association, and a frequent public speaker against slavery” (306). Walker himself was not a slave, as his mother was a free woman. His father, however, was a slave, and Garnet argues that Walker's “soul became ... indignant at the wrongs which his father and his kindred bore” (4). His work caused controversy, and a year after its publication Walker died at the age of 34, rumored to be poisoned (Garnet 5).

Walker distributed the text as a pamphlet. The author owned a second-hand clothing shop, and he placed his pamphlet in the pockets of clothes that he sold, thus reaching a wide audience

(Crockett 306). The pamphlet reached into the slaveholding South, and there it met with great fear from slaveholders. Crockett writes that the text “represented one of the slave owner's greatest fears, blacks (not whites) writing and reading about abolitionism” (305). The text did not just cause a stir among slaveholders in the South, as Asukile argues that it “caused much controversy for white abolitionists, slaveholders and those who shared pro-slavery sentiments in America” (16). Asukile also writes that the text “was considered subversive, seditious, and incendiary by most white men in northern and southern states” (16).

Walker's *Appeal* was deemed to be dangerous as it was “among America's earliest militant abolitionist publications with a wide distribution” (Crockett 305). Unlike Douglass and Jacobs, Walker does not try to convince the white audience that the institution of slavery is bad by sharing the story of a harsh life. His text is more a call to arms, where slaves are urged to revolt against their oppressors (810). As a reaction to the publication of this text, many southern states “immediately passed harsh laws, some requiring the death penalty, against possession or distribution of Walker's appeal, or similar materials” (Crockett 305). Garnet writes that “this little black book produced more commotion among slaveholders than any volume of its size that was ever issued from an American press” (4).

As has been shown in the previous chapter, Walker heavily relies on religion in his work. He often makes comparisons between the African-American cause, and that of suppressed groups whose stories are told in the Bible. The author was a very religious man, who “was a strong believer in Christianity and a staunch and faithful member of the black Methodist church in Boston” (Crockett 306). In contrast to Douglass and Jacobs, it is hard to find any evidence that shows whether Walker deliberately used Christianity in his work to appeal to an audience, let

alone to appeal to a white audience. It is clear, however, that Walker was a Christian. The importance of his work and the element of Christianity in this work contribute to the view that Christianity was the main religion among people of African descent in the United States.

2.2 Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass' narrative, *The Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, was published in 1845. Before he wrote his book, Douglass was an abolitionist speaker, just as Walker. Matlack writes: "He became the greatest of the ex-slave orators" (16). Douglass was a learned man, though this was not always an advantage. People had certain expectations of what a slave should be like, and Douglass did not fit this description. As a result, people doubted Douglass' credibility: "Since he did not talk, look, or act like a slave (in the eyes of Northern audiences), Douglass was denounced as an imposter" (Matlack 16). It was, however, important for Douglass to meet the expectations of the white audience. His story was used as a way to further the abolitionist cause, and to meet these expectations his white sponsors merely wanted him to be the "showcase specimen of a fugitive slave" (Matlack 17). This meant that he was to act as an uneducated slave, as this was what people expected. It would not have been easy for Douglass to refuse to act this way, for even white abolitionists perceived themselves as the superior species. These white leaders were largely in control of the abolitionist cause (Matlack 15-16). Douglass was paid by the American Anti-Slavery Society for his lectures, and this contributed to the power that the white people had over the author (Levine 72). According to Matlack, Douglass wrote his book both to gain credibility, and to gain independence from his white sponsors (16, 17).

The Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave is probably “the best-known and most influential slave narrative written in America,” according to Matlack (15). Levine adds that “Douglass emerged as the most visible and respected abolitionist of the time” (72). The reviews from two newspapers of that time affirm these statements. In *The Liberator* from May 30, 1845, Lynn Pioneer writes that the book is “the most thrilling work which the American press ever issued – and the most important.” The *New York Daily Tribune* writes on June 10, 1845 that “it is an excellent piece of writing, and on that score to be prized as a specimen of the powers of Black Race.” However, it must be noted that one of these newspapers, *The Liberator*, was an abolitionist paper. This review also shows the bias of the paper in the issue. It is remarkable that both newspapers pay attention to the subject of religion in the book. The *New York Daily Tribune* addresses it as follows: “Upon the subject of Religion, he speaks with great force, and not more than our sympathies can respond to.” Pioneer from *The Liberator* writes: “A spirit of the loftiest integrity, and a vein of the purest religious sentiment, runs through its pages, and it must leave on every mind a deep conviction of the author's strength of mind and purity of heart.” The fact that the religious aspect of his work received these positive reviews shows that Douglass made a good choice by involving his religious beliefs in his book. It is striking that this was, in fact, a deliberate choice, as will be explained next.

As noted before, the white audience Douglass was writing for had certain expectations of a book written by a slave. Douglass knew that the success of his work depended on the reaction it would provoke. Matlack explains: “However resentful of white paternalism, Douglass remained acutely aware of the audience for whom he was writing. The form and style of the *Narrative* were carefully tailored to persuade and, above all, not to offend a white readership.

Only the white majority had the numbers and power to make a difference on the issue of religion” (17). Not offending the white readership entailed not being too critical of religion. Chapter 1 has shown that Douglass heavily criticizes the way southern white people practice their Christian beliefs. However, not to offend his readers, Douglass makes a distinction between Christianity in general and the “slaveholding religion” of the United States (927). The impression that he was too critical of Christian religion would “gravely damage the effectiveness of his work” (Matlack 18). Though criticizing the Christian beliefs of southern white people, Douglass presents himself as a faithful Christian. This too, is well thought-out, as according to Matlack “Douglass' portrayal of himself as a faithful suffering Christian is part of a careful strategy to expose the sham piety of slave masters” (18). This strategy had the goal to appeal to “the moral pretensions and guilt feelings of Churchly whites in the North” (Matlack 18). Pioneer from *The Liberator* wrote that the book “will generate a public sentiment in this nation, in the present of which our pro-slavery laws and constitutions shall be like chaff in the presence of fire.” Pioneer was right in predicting that the book would have an impact on the nation: “Within four months of its publication in 1845 five thousand copies were sold. Aided by favorable reviews and new editions, both in America and Britain, some thirty thousand had been sold by 1860” (Matlack 15). It is evident that Douglass succeeded in appealing to his audience.

It shows that the way in which Christianity is portrayed in Douglass' narrative is a carefully planned strategy. Douglass makes sure not to criticize Christianity itself, but only the way southern slaveholders practice their Christian beliefs. In addition, he presents himself as a faithful, suffering Christian to appeal to the white people of the North who had the power and the numbers to make a change in the institution of slavery. Because Douglass enlarges the role of

Christianity to appeal to an audience, his portrayal of the religion might not be fully accurate.

2.3 Harriet Ann Jacobs

Harriet Ann Jacobs' narrative, originally called *Linda: Or Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, was published in 1861 (Smith Foster 61). In this narrative, Jacobs writes about her life as a slave, under the pseudonym of Linda Brent. The narrative is deemed controversial, though this is not because of its anti-slavery theme. Zafar writes that “Jacobs was either decried as inauthentic or dismissed as atypical,” because previous slave narratives were all written by men (4). Smith Foster adds to this that still many readers “continue to resist identifying the book as an autobiography by a former slave woman named Harriet Jacobs” (64). When the book was first published, it did appeal to some readers: “At the time of the first edition *Incidents* was received politely, if not appreciatively” (Zafar 3). However, Zafar also states that “with the coming of the Civil War the appearance of 'another' slave narrative may have 'seemed of minor importance’” (3). It was not until well into the twentieth century that Jacobs' narrative started to be taken seriously in the academic world (Zafar 4).

Like Douglass, Jacobs was aware of the kind of audience she was writing for. However, when she wrote the narrative she “resolved to 'give a true and just account . . . in a Christian spirit,' but not to pander to her audience” (Jacobs qtd. in Smith Foster 61). This statement would suggest that Jacobs did not use Christianity as a means of receiving sympathy from her audience to pursue her anti-slavery cause. Gunning agrees with this, stating that Jacobs defined herself as “a mother who has led her children out of slavery and who now seeks to create a subjective role as an abolitionist writer and social critic” (133). This means that Jacobs had made the decision

not to define herself as a Christian, but rather as a mother. In addition, Gunning does not mention that Jacobs deliberately incorporated the aspect of Christianity to appeal to her audience, and it is hard to find any evidence of such a thing among other scholarly works, or even in the text itself. As a result, it can be argued that Jacob's portrayal of Christianity corresponds to reality.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, all three authors and the events surrounding the publication of their works have been discussed. It has become clear that all three works have different backgrounds. The text by Walker was published to many controversies, and in certain states possession and distribution of the pamphlet was made illegal. Walker used Christianity to get his point across, but it is not clear whether he did so deliberately to appeal to his audience. The use of Christianity in a text could in fact be beneficial for the reception. The audience had certain expectations about the content of the texts, and the use of Christianity had a positive effect on the image of the text and its author. Douglass was aware of the audience he was writing for, and he made sure to incorporate Christianity to appeal to this audience. In the case of Jacobs it has been made clear that Jacobs herself did not want to adjust her story to appeal to a certain audience.

Though not all three authors deliberately included Christianity in their works, all texts incorporate the religion. These three texts are among the few written by African-Americans between 1800 and 1865 that are included in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. As a result, these texts contribute to the view that Christianity was the main religion among African-Americans, regardless whether this was the author's intention. However, because Douglass enlarges the role of Christianity, his portrayal of the religion might be inaccurate. In the next

chapter, historical data will be analyzed to determine what role Christianity actually played among African-Americans between 1800 and 1865.

Chapter 3: Historical Developments

As Christianity plays an important role in the texts written by Walker, Douglass, and Jacobs, and as these texts are among the few written by African-Americans between 1800 and 1865 that have been selected to be in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, it can be argued that these texts give the impression that Christianity was the main religion among African-Americans. This chapter will research whether the texts justly represent the time in which they were written. First, it will be examined what part of the American population had Christian beliefs. After this, it will be discussed how people of African descent were able to practice their Christian beliefs in the United States.

3.1 (The Lack of) Statistics

The first half of the nineteenth century has been characterized as a period of religious revival, also referred to as the Second Great Awakening. Norton writes that “a series of religious revivals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century ... raised people's hope for the Second Coming of the Christian messiah and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth” (307). Church membership and the overall number of Christians grew in this period of revival, partly due to the large scale conversions organized by revivalists. Camp meetings are an example of a method of conversion: “Rural women, men, and children traveled long distances to camp meetings, where they listened to fiery sermons preached day and night from hastily constructed

platforms and tents in forests or open fields” (Norton 307). As described in chapter 2, Douglass' master, Captain Auld, attended a Methodist camp meeting where he learned about this religion. Captain Auld's conversion thus corresponds to the historical context that it is placed in.

The exact number of conversions and the overall number of Christians in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century are hard to determine. Finke and Stark attribute this to lack of membership statistics, and argue that because of this “it has not been possible to quantify the sudden rise of American Catholicism beginning in the mid-1840s, the rapid growth achieved by the Methodists and Baptists, the waves of immigrant Protestant denominations, or the Westward movement of the churches” (180). Though it is true that there are very few, if any, official records on membership statistics of the various churches, Methodists do form an exception to this. The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church, which together now form the United Methodists Church, have kept records on membership since the eighteenth century. When viewing these records, it is evident that church membership grew in the nineteenth century. In 1800, the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church had 65,181 members, which accounted for 1.2 percent of the total population of the United States. In 1810 this number had grown to 175,088, a rise of 168 percent, now accounting for 2.4 percent of the total population. In 1860, 1,802,927 Americans were members of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church, accounting for 5.7 percent of the total population (United Methodist Membership Statistics).

The official records of the United Methodist Church do not distinguish between white and African-American membership, but Raboteau argues that African-Americans formed a large part of the Methodist Church membership. He states that “in 1797 the black membership stood at

12,215, or almost one-fourth of the total Methodist membership” (131). Unfortunately, the author does not mention any records of African-American Methodist Church membership after this period. He does, however, cite a clergyman from the nineteenth century who addresses the African-American Baptist Church membership: “According to Charles Colcock Jones, the black membership of the Baptists increased from about 18,000 in 1793 to about 40,000 in 1813” (131). This would mean that about 2.8 percent of the African American population in the United States at that time were members of the Baptist Church. However, Raboteau casts doubt on these figures, stating that they are “probably inflated” (131).

It is not clear what percentage of the population held Christian beliefs. Although figures are missing, Raboteau does argue that by the second decade of the nineteenth century, “the majority of slaves ... remained only minimally touched by Christianity” (149). It was only by “the eve of the Civil War,” which started in 1861, that “Christianity had pervaded the slave community” (212). Raboteau argues that a large part of the slave community practiced Christian beliefs, be it hidden from their white oppressors (212). This corresponds to Douglass' *Narrative*, in which he writes about the Sabbath school he and his fellow slaves attended without their master's knowledge (910). The fact that religious practice was hidden from the white masters contributes to the lack of records on the religious beliefs of African-Americans. Without exact figures, it is impossible to determine the exact role of Christianity among African-Americans. In the next section more will become clear about how people of African descent practiced their Christian beliefs in the United States.

3.2 Practicing Christianity

The way in which people of African descent practiced their religious beliefs differed depending on the time and place. There was a difference between African-Americans in rural areas, and those that lived in urban areas. In addition, there was a difference between free African-Americans and slaves, and within the slave community the level of the assigned job also mattered. Raboteau argues that “it was in the urban settlements that religious instruction for slaves became more feasible than it would be on the plantations for a long time” (114). The author adds that between 1780 and 1820, the African-Americans that had the highest chance of converting to Christianity were “household servants, slave artisans, and urban slaves” (149).

In the introduction it has been briefly discussed that people of African descent were forced to leave a great part of their own religion behind them when they came to America. However, Gomez argues that “throughout the colonial period, the vast-majority of African-born slaves and their progeny continued to practice various African religions” (246). In addition, slave owners in the South were wary about the conversion of slaves: “From colonial times through the first decades of the nineteenth century most southern planters feared that converted blacks would become unruly or might even demand freedom and equality” (Touchestone 99). Gomez agrees, stating that “fears that slave conversion would ultimately undermine and weaken the slaveocracy fueled slaveholder opposition” (248). It is evident in the text by Douglass that the white oppressors would not allow Douglass' Sabbath school. Before he started his own Sabbath school, Douglass briefly attended a Sabbath school which had a white instructor, and this was not accepted either. These incidents show that slaveholders would indeed not allow slave conversion, perhaps because of the fears mentioned by Touchestone and Gomez. Though the author was not a

slave, the text written by Walker confirms the slaveholders' fears. This African-American author was a devout Christian, and he does use the Christian religion to justify his claims for freedom and equality.

According to Touchestone, “from the mid-1840s through 1860 the planters of the Deep South demonstrated a growing interest in the religious instruction of slaves” (100). For a part, this was a reaction to the growing interest that the slaves themselves had in the religion. The slave owners saw that African-Americans indeed started to use Christianity and the writings in the Bible as a tool of revolt (Gomez 257). Gomez writes that:

The South's answer was to seize control of black religious life. Blacks, whether free or enslaved, could no longer lawfully assemble without the supervision of whites. They were to be instructed in the faith by white teachers and preachers, not black ones, and for the first time many slaveholders began to request that itinerant preachers include their plantations in their circuits (257).

Another reason for slaveholders to embrace the conversion of African-Americans to Christianity was the moral behavior that it would teach the slaves. Touchestone writes: “Many masters saw religious training as a means of improving the morality of blacks” (103). Frey agrees to this, stating that Christianity “offered an ideology of submission that served the interests of slave owners” (99). In the texts by Walker and Douglass, not much can be found on this development that occurred in the South. An explanation for this is that the events these authors describe mainly preceded this development. The narrative of Jacobs may have taken place during this development, but the author barely writes about the practicing of Christian beliefs.

3.3 Conclusion

Lack of membership statistics makes it difficult to determine church membership, and especially African-American church membership. It is, however, clear that between 1800 and 1865, both white and African-American church membership grew. Camp meetings were a tool to convert people to Christianity, and in Douglass' text this tool of religious revival is present. Raboteau states that mid-nineteenth century a large part of the slave community practiced Christian beliefs. Yet, without exact figures it is not possible to conclude that Christianity was the main religion among African-Americans.

The first half of the nineteenth century was an eventful period regarding religion. At the beginning of the century, many slaveholders were reluctant to introduce the Christian faith to people of African descent. Slaveholders feared that the religion would undermine the institute of slavery. This attitude is present in Douglass' *Narrative*, while Walker's texts serves as a confirmation for the slaveholder's fears. Throughout the nineteenth century a development took place in the slaveholder's attitudes regarding the issue. Christianity was now regarded as a tool to teach the slaves moral behavior. However, this shift in attitude is not visible in the texts by Walker, Douglass, and Jacobs.

Conclusion

In this paper, the role of Christianity among African-Americans between 1800 and 1865 has been discussed. Three texts and their authors have been examined, namely *Appeal ... to the Coloured Citizens of the World* by David Walker, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* by Frederick Douglass, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Ann Jacobs.

These texts are among the few dating from 1800-1865 by African-Americans that have been included in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Because this anthology is a collection of the most important works of literature, the selected texts can be considered as mainstream.

In the first chapter, the texts were analyzed to determine how Christianity is represented in them. Christianity plays an important role in all three texts, and this comes across in various ways. It is clear that the three authors are devout Christians. All three authors, however, do criticize the way their white oppressors practice their Christian beliefs. A distinction can be made between the Christian beliefs of the white people and that of the people of African descent.

In the second chapter, the historical context of these texts has been discussed. It is clear that the audience had certain expectations about the content of the texts and the image of the authors. Christian elements in the texts had a positive effect on their reception. However, it is not clear whether all three authors used this to their advantage. In his text, Walker certainly uses Christianity to urge African-Americans to revolt, but it is not possible to say whether he did so deliberately to appeal to his audience. Both Douglass and Jacobs were aware of the audience they were writing for. However, while Douglass responded to the expectations of his audience with the use of Christianity, Jacobs refused to do so.

In the third chapter, it has been discussed whether the texts justly represent the time they were written in. This chapter has shown that some events described in the works by the three authors correspond to the actual historical events. The three texts fit well into their actual historical context. As a result, we can confidently argue that the texts do justly represent the time they were written in. However, seeing that these texts are among few written by African-Americans between 1800 and 1865 that have been selected to be in the *Heath Anthology of*

American Literature, it can be argued that these texts give the impression that Christianity was the main religion among African-Americans. Because of a lack of membership records, it is difficult to determine whether this impression is correct.

The main objective of this paper was to formulate an answer to the question what role Christianity played among African-Americans between 1800 and 1865. By combining a literary analysis and historical data, it has become clear that Christianity played a large role among African-Americans. The exact size of this role, however, is difficult to determine.

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