11.6: Religion and Honor in the Slave South

Economic growth, violence, and exploitation coexisted and mutually reinforced evangelical Christianity in the South. The revivals the Second Great Awakening established the region’s prevailing religious culture. Led by Methodists, Baptists, and to a lesser degree, Presbyterians, this intense period of religious regeneration swept the along southern backcountry. By the outbreak of the Civil War, the vast majority of southerners who affiliated with a religious denomination belonged to either the Baptist or Methodist faith. Both churches in the South briefly attacked slavery before transforming into some of the most vocal defenders of slavery and the southern social order.

Southern ministers contended that God himself had selected Africans for bondage but also considered the evangelization of slaves to be one of their greatest callings. Missionary efforts among southern slaves largely succeeded and Protestantism spread rapidly among African Americans, leading to a proliferation of biracial congregations and prominent independent black churches. Some black and white southerners forged positive and rewarding biracial connections; however, more often black and white southerners described strained or superficial religious relationships.

As the institution of slavery hardened racism in the South, relationships between missionaries and Native Americans transformed as well. Missionaries of all denominations were among the first to represent themselves as “pillars of white authority.” After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, plantation culture expanded into the Deep South, and mission work became a crucial element of Christian expansion. Frontier mission schools carried a continual flow of Christian influence into Native American communities. Some missionaries learned indigenous languages, but many more worked to prevent indigenous children from speaking their native tongues, insisting on English for Christian understanding. By the Indian removals of 1835 and the Trail of Tears in 1838, missionaries in the South preached a pro-slavery theology that emphasized obedience to masters, the biblical basis of racial slavery via the curse of Ham, and the “civilizing” paternalism of slave owners.
Slaves most commonly received Christian instruction from white preachers or masters, whose religious message typically stressed slave subservience. Anti-literacy laws ensured that most slaves would be unable to read the Bible in its entirety and thus could not acquaint themselves with such inspirational stories as Moses delivering the Israelites out of slavery. Contradictions between God’s Word and master and mistress cruelty did not pass unnoticed by many enslaved African Americans. As former slave William Wells Brown declared, “slaveholders hide themselves behind the Church,” adding that “a more praying, preaching, psalm-singing people cannot be found than the slaveholders of the South.”

Many slaves chose to create and practice their own versions of Christianity, one that typically incorporated aspects of traditional African religions with limited input from the white community. Nat Turner, the leader of the great slave rebellion, found inspiration from religion early in life. Adopting an austere Christian lifestyle during his adolescence, Turner claimed to have been visited by “spirits” during his twenties and considered himself something of a prophet. He claimed to have had visions, in which he was called on to do the work of God, leading some contemporaries (as well as historians) to question his sanity.

Inspired by his faith, Turner led the most deadly slave rebellion in the antebellum South. On the morning of August 22, 1831, in Southampton County, Virginia, Nat Turner and six collaborators attempted to free the region’s enslaved population. Turner initiated the violence by killing his master with an ax blow to the head. By the end of the day, Turner and his band, which had grown to over fifty men, killed fifty-seven white men, women, and children on eleven farms. By the next day, the local militia and white residents had captured or killed all of the participants except Turner, who hid for a number of weeks in nearby woods before being captured and executed. The white terror that followed Nat Turner’s rebellion transformed southern religion, as anti-literacy laws increased and black-led churches were broken up and placed under the supervision of white ministers.

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Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\): This woodcut captured the terror felt by white southerners in the aftermath of Nat Turner’s rebellion. After the rebellion, fearful white reactionaries killed hundreds of enslaved people—most of whom were unconnected to the rebellion—and the state created stricter, more limiting laws concerning slavery. African American Intellectual History Society.

Evangelical religion also shaped understandings of what it meant to be a southern man or a southern woman. Southern manhood was largely shaped by an obsession with masculine honor, whereas southern womanhood centered on expectations of sexual virtue or purity. Honor prioritized the public recognition of white masculine claims to reputation and authority. Southern men developed a code to ritualize their interactions with each other and to perform their expectations of honor. This code structured language and behavior and was designed to minimize conflict. But when
conflict did arise, the code also provided rituals that would reduce the resulting violence.

The formal duel exemplified the code in action. If two men could not settle a dispute through the arbitration of their friends, they would exchange pistol shots to prove their equal honor status. Duelists arranged a secluded meeting, chose from a set of deadly weapons, and risked their lives as they clashed with swords or fired pistols at one another. Some of the most illustrious men in American history participated in a duel at some point during their lives, including President Andrew Jackson, Vice President Aaron Burr, and U.S. senators Henry Clay and Thomas Hart Benton. In all but Burr’s case, dueling helped elevate these men to prominence.

Violence among the lower classes, especially those in the backcountry, involved fistfights and shoot-outs. Tactics included the sharpening of fingernails and filing of teeth into razor-sharp points, which would be used to gouge eyes and bite off ears and noses. In a duel, a gentleman achieved recognition by risking his life rather than killing his opponent, whereas those involved in rough-and-tumble fighting achieved victory through maiming their opponent.

The legal system was partially to blame for the prevalence of violence in the Old South. Although states and territories had laws against murder, rape, and various other forms of violence, including specific laws against dueling, upper-class southerners were rarely prosecuted, and juries often acquitted the accused. Despite the fact that hundreds of duelists fought and killed one another, there is little evidence that many duelists faced prosecution, and only one, Timothy Bennett (of Belleville, Illinois), was ever executed. By contrast, prosecutors routinely sought cases against lower-class southerners, who were found guilty in greater numbers than their wealthier counterparts.

The southern emphasis on honor affected women as well. While southern men worked to maintain their sense of masculinity; so too southern women cultivated a sense of femininity. Femininity in the South was intimately tied to the domestic sphere, even more so than for women in the North. The cult of domesticity strictly limited the ability of wealthy southern women to engage in public life. While northern women began to organize reform societies, southern women remained bound to the home, where they were instructed to cultivate their families’ religious sensibility and manage their household. Managing the household was not easy work, however. For women on large plantations, managing the household would include directing a large bureaucracy of potentially rebellious slaves. For most southern women who did not live on plantations, managing the household included nearly constant work in keeping families clean, fed, and well-behaved. On top of these duties, many southern women were required to help with agricultural tasks.

Female labor was an important aspect of the southern economy, but the social position of women in southern culture was understood not through economic labor but rather through moral virtue. While men fought to get ahead in the turbulent world of the cotton boom, women were instructed to offer a calming, moralizing influence on husbands and children. The home was to be a place of quiet respite and spiritual solace. Under the guidance of a virtuous woman, the southern home would foster the values required for economic success and cultural refinement. Female virtue came to be understood largely as a euphemism for sexual purity, and southern culture, southern law, and southern violence largely centered on protecting that virtue of sexual purity from any possible imagined threat. In a world saturated with the sexual exploitation of black women, southerners developed a paranoid obsession with protecting the sexual purity of white women. Black men were presented as an insatiable sexual threat. Racial systems of violence and domination were wielded with crushing intensity for generations, all in the name of keeping white womanhood as pure as the cotton that anchored southern society.