**Slave Religion**

By the eve of the Civil War, Christianity had pervaded the slave community. Not all slaves were Christian, nor were all those who accepted Christianity members of a church, but the doctrines, symbols, and vision of life preached by Christianity were familiar to most.

The religion of the slaves was both visible and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adapted. Regular Sunday worship in the local church was paralleled by illicit, or at least informal, prayer meetings on weeknights in the slave cabins. Preachers licensed by the church and hired by the master were supplemented by slave preachers licensed only by the spirit. Texts from the Bible, which most slaves could not read, were explicated by verses from the spirituals. Slaves forbidden by masters to attend church or, in some cases, even to pray, risked floggings to attend secret gatherings to worship God.

His own experience of the “invisible institution” was recalled by former slave Wash Wilson:

“When de niggers go round singin’ ‘Steal Away to Jesus,’ dat mean dere gwine be a ’ligious meetin’ dat night. De masters … didn’t like dem ’ligious meetin’s so us natcherly slips off at night, down in de bottoms or somewhere. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.”

**Master’s Preachin’, Real Preachin’**

Slaves frequently were moved to hold their own religious meetings out of disgust for the vitiated gospel preached by their masters’ preachers. Lucretia Alexander explained what slaves did when they grew tired of the white folks’ preacher: “The preacher came and … he’d just say, ‘Serve your masters. Don’t steal your master’s turkey. Don’t steal your master’s chickens. Don’t steal your master’s hawgs. Don’t steal your master’s meat. Do whatsomever your master tells you to do.’ Same old thing all the time.… Sometimes they would … want a real meetin’ with some real preachin’.… They used to sing their songs in a whisper and pray in a whisper.”

Slaves faced severe punishment if caught attending secret prayer meetings. Moses Grandy reported that his brother-in-law Isaac, a slave preacher, “was flogged, and his back pickled” for preaching at a clandestine service in the woods. His listeners were flogged and “forced to tell who else was there.”

Slaves devised several techniques to avoid detection of their meetings. One practice was to meet in secluded places—woods, gullies, ravines, and thickets (aptly called “hush harbors”). Kalvin Woods remembered preaching to other slaves and singing and praying while huddled behind quilts and rags, which had been thoroughly wetted “to keep the sound of their voices from penetrating the air” and then hung up “in the form of a little room,” or tabernacle.

On one Louisiana plantation, when “the slaves would steal away into the woods at night and hold services,” they “would form a circle on their knees around the speaker who would also be on his knees. He would bend forward and speak into or over a vessel of water to drown the sound. If anyone became animated and cried out, the others would quickly stop the noise by placing their hands over the offender’s mouth.”

A description of a secret prayer meeting was recorded by Peter Randolph, who was a slave in Prince George County, Virginia, until he was freed in 1847: “The slave forgets all his sufferings, except to remind others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming: ‘Thank God, I shall not live here always!’ Then they pass from one to another, shaking hands, and bidding each other farewell.… As they separate, they sing a parting hymn of praise.”

**Two Extremes**

Many slaveholders granted their slaves permission to attend church, and some openly encouraged religious meetings among the slaves. Baptisms, marriages, and funerals were allowed to slaves on some plantations with whites observing and occasionally participating. Annual revival meetings were social occasions for blacks as well as for whites. Masters were known to enjoy the singing, praying, and preaching of their slaves. Nevertheless, at the core of the slaves’ religion was a private place. For no matter how religious the master might be, the slave knew that the master’s religion did not countenance prayers for his slaves’ freedom in this world.

The religious format varied from plantation to plantation for the slaves. Former slave John Brown depicted two extremes: “Sunday was a great day around the plantation. The fields was forgotten, the light chores was hurried through, and everybody got ready for the church meeting. It was out of the doors, in the yard.… Master John’s wife would start the meeting with a prayer and then would come the singing—the old timey songs. But the white folks on the next plantation would lick their slaves for trying to do like we did. No praying there, and no singing.”

Some masters did not allow their slaves to go to church and ridiculed the notion of religion for slaves because they refused to believe that Negroes had souls. Others forbade their slaves to attend church because, as an ex-slave explained, “White folks ’fraid the niggers git to thinkin’ they was free, if they had churches ’n things.”