

Religion & Race in the Early Republic:
Slavery and the Frontier in the Second Great Awakening

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This essay will examine religion in the Early Republic, with a focus on the Second Great Awakening, as it pertains particularly to the question of race. During this period, we had not yet reached peak racism. While racist attitudes were certainly present, and strongest in the Deep South, there was a sense in the early parts of this period that slavery might expire naturally, suggesting that there was still no a clear consensus on racial attitudes, they had not yet calcified into the kind of racial attitudes we would recognize as racist. It was also the case that the arguments for racial inferiority were pre-Darwinian and so drew from a variety of different sources.

In this same period, we can see the position on race undergoing a change toward this calcification. There were two forces that seem to play an important role in this regard, as they had done since the founding of the early colonies: slavery, and the relationship with Indians on the frontier. During the Second Great Awakening, we begin to see splits in religious thinking among Northern evangelicals and Southern evangelicals, splits that remain within churches to the present day. These splits were triggered by some churches advocating for the abolition of slavery, while others moved to defend the institution. We will also examine the role that religion played on the frontier, as we see a change in the relationship of whites to the native populations. Early colonist sometimes strove to convert the Indians (with varying degrees of “success”), but as the frontier pushed further West, conversion efforts and peaceful coexistence were replaced with a series of Indian wars that would dominate most of the rest of the century as Indians resistance to encroachment of whites increased. We want to examine the role that evangelicals played on the frontier, what relationships their arguments in that context had to the arguments about slavery in the East, and the role that new religions, like Mormonism, played in the dialogue between religion and race.

The purpose of this historiographic essay is to examine the role that religion played in forming and perpetuating racialized attitudes leading up to the period of westward expansion and to understand how these attitudes contributed to that expansion. When considering sources on Manifest Destiny, the intersection of race and religion forms something of a gap in the literature. The intersection of race and westward expansion is sometimes addressed in the last half-century or so, but religion really is not. The goal of this essay is basically twofold: one, to consider the impact of religion on the culture and how it contributed directly and indirectly to westward expansion, particularly with the respect to the religious motivations for moving westward (if any), and how that impacted settlers' interactions with the native populations; and two, the role of religion in the slavery debate. We are interested both in the role of religious people and their real-world actions, as well as the theological claims made as they relate to the related to blacks (free or enslaved) and the native populations. The intersection of religion and race described here appears to be a gap in the literature. No book-length work appears to exist on the topic directly. It is not that the question has never been asked per se, but it is only dealt with in the context of books on religion alone, or race alone. The sources described below only begin to shed some light on these issues. I have needed to look a little more broadly for this information from sources that address religion primarily or race primarily. They may address the topic as an aspect of a larger examination, sometimes for a significant fraction of the text. This particular intersection of lenses has not yet drawn sustained attention.

My analysis of their context will focus on what they have to say about the issues highlighted above. We'll examine first the sources that are more specific to the idea of race and religion, either with slavery or on the frontier, to determine how these texts handle the issues under examination. Then we will look at the texts that focus on religion in this period generally

and how they address slavery and the frontier. Finally, we'll examine how texts centered on race (slavery and the frontier) focus on issues of religious support for slavery, abolition, and westward expansion. One important point worth making here is that the focus on my investigation with respect to religion is the religious attitudes of whites toward blacks and American native populations. While some of that certainly may entail a knowledge of how Indians and slaves received and modified white religion, to better understand Manifest Destiny, we will focus on how whites used religion to support their own aims and the impacts the attitudes of white settlers moving westward and those arguments had with respect to race.

We will establish through the course of this essay the intersection of race and religion is examined through various lenses, there is still much to learn about the role that religion and race played in Western expansion. Three aspects are addressed most frequently: missionary activity to convert the native populations, racialized attitudes toward slavery, and evangelical theology more broadly. Sometimes, these three areas are paired together (such as missionary work by evangelicals on the frontier), or (evangelicals and slavery), but little is made of the impact of evangelicals and their non-missionary interactions with settling the West, particularly as it came to conflict with the native populations, and in what way those attitudes were connected to racialized attitudes connected to slavery.

Let us examine the approaches to this topic that we do have.

Linford Fisher's book, *The Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Cultures in Early America*, focuses primarily on New England interactions with native populations early in the colonial period, through the early American Republic. The book tries to trace a history that is largely unwritten, and pieces together early Christian conversions of native

people, and how these Christianized Indians, using primary sources from private and church-related collections, evolved over time. Fisher concludes his book by saying:

[S]uch a change was never complete, and in other ways, Natives in 1820 operated with pragmatic, community-centered frames of reference similar to those of their ancestors in 1700 or even 1600. Native understanding of the world ran deep, so deep, in fact, that two hundred years of colonialization could only reshape, not obliterate, their communities and cultures, as in evidenced by the religious and cultural diversity and the vitality exhibited by these same Native groups today.¹

This makes for an interesting comparison between the way early natives were treated, as compared with later Indian encounters on the frontier, and can illuminate how the ways Americans interacted with the native populations changed over time.

A book written along somewhat similar lines is *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* by Anthony F.C. Wallace. The timeframe of this book and the geography of this book are similar to Fisher's book in that the Seneca were not a trans-Mississippian tribe, and the narrative ends rather early in the 19th century, which is about the timeframe in which my interest is really beginning. As a foundational work, to provide background, this resource is certainly valuable. We do see some interesting dynamics at work. Wallace notes: "The Quakers did not come to the Seneca to convert them to Christianity...."² This suggests that different Christian denominations treated the native populations differently. The book does shed some light on what early reservations were like, which may make a useful point of comparison for reservations further to the West.

The focus of both of these books is on the beliefs and accommodations of the native populations. Historically, we tend to see that earlier in the period and in the near west that

conversion, and thus more egalitarian motives toward the natives were at play. Some information on white attitudes can be gleaned from these sources, but they are not directly on point. Perhaps it would be better to describe my interest here as focused on “racism” rather than “race”. The quote from Fisher makes clear the purpose of the text is to understand modern religious practices by looking at the history, and not racial attitudes toward the native peoples. Likewise, Wallace looks at dynamics within the Seneca, though it does highlight some of the mixed attitudes toward non-white races and emphasizes cultural imperialism in the absence of virulent racial animus.

A source more about white interaction with the native populations is by Julius Rubin, *Perishing Heathens: Stories of Protestant Missionaries and Christian Indians in Antebellum America*. This book forms an important complement to the Fisher and Wallace books. Rubin looks at events circa 1800 and 1830, roughly coinciding with the Second Great Awakening, and efforts on the frontiers to convert the native populations. The author considers a number of different factors that impacted the success or failure of these missionary efforts, everything from disease, resistance by the native people, inter-tribal war, and displacement of tribes from lands taken over by white Americans. Rubin focuses particularly in the Trans-Appalachian and Trans-Mississippi West rather than tribes originating in New England and the Northwest Territories. Rubin also explores the theological positions held by these missionaries, and their connection to the larger religious culture.

One interesting contrast that can be explored with this book in the context of westward expansion is the way in which the missionary approach to Indians to convert them to Christianity differed from the approach nominally Christian settlers took to those same groups. He notes of one missionary:

He made a compelling argument for the capacity of the Cherokees to adopt Christianity and ‘civilized’ laws, constitutional governance, agriculture, language and literacy, schooling, and evangelical religion. Arguing against the prevailing attitude that Natives were racially inferior, Brown asserts their ‘natural capabilities for moral cultivations’ made them ‘susceptible to mental as well as religious improvement as much as any people on the Globe.’³

Rubin looks at both Eastern tribes that were forced westward, as well as tribes that originated further west. Rubin considers the role of mixed-race members of the community and their relationship to Christianity and the native religions. This attitude is similar to that found in the Fisher and Wallace texts, but we do begin to see the changing attitudes of religious believers toward race as the missionary culture is replaced by settlers. Also worth noting here is that the Wallace book was published in the late 1960s on the heels of the Civil Rights movement (as will be the case with many of the sources focused on race). Fisher and Rubin, however, were both published in the last decade. The four decade gap is striking.

Rebecca Goetz takes a close look at religion in Virginia in the colonial period and the early Republic to examine how Christian views of converted natives and African slaves contributed to the later evolution of western ideas of race in her book *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race*. She looks at early initial conflicts among Christian whites as to whether non-white populations could be properly civilized through conversion to Christianity, or whether or not they could become true Christians at all. Eventually, violence between whites and non-whites led to the majority of whites in Virginia adopting the later view. However, the former view did not disappear, and led eventually the rise of the abolitionist

movement that would precede the Civil War. She offers a concise statement of what she is attempting with this book:

The story of race as it unfolded in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English North America shows that race was not a predictable product of colonization; it was carefully invented and reinvented, and religious belief was a critical part of constructing and defining human difference.⁴

Several of the books that follow touch on some of these themes in particular chapters, though perhaps not for the complete text. While this perspective in the eastern states provides us a window on the white culture that permitted and endorsed slavery and may be considered emblematic of southern slave culture more broadly, this book would have to be compared to attitudes toward race in states further westward, and perhaps toward native populations in Florida to develop a complete picture of mixture of racial and religious attitudes that propelled white settlers westward. Of all the books in this analysis, this Goetz text is perhaps the one that is most thematically on point. Although it does not address the question of religion and race on the frontier, it does address the racialized attitudes and their religious connections. A text of this sort focused on this dynamic in Kentucky or Missouri would be ideal.

Many of the sources under examination here talk about Protestant religions which dominated in early America, but John Dichtl's *Frontiers of Faith: Bringing Catholicism to the West in the Early Republic*, examines the role of Catholic missionaries, particularly in the Ohio Valley, during the period of the Second Great Awakening. The religious revival of the period swept up Protestants and Catholics alike, and sometimes brought them into cooperation, and sometimes into competition, but in a fashion that differed from the Protestant-dominated East. Among the issues addressed by the book is the role of slavery on the frontier and in relation to

Catholic teaching, and how Protestant ministers responded. Many of the Catholic priests in the area were French, and they not only targeted other Protestants for conversion, but especially the “heathens”. This book could be a point of comparison for the efforts for Catholic conversion of the native population on the other end of the continent by the Spanish, for a comparison of their methods and attitudes toward them once converted, a topic covered by Gossett, who covers the history of race in the New World, and dwells in some depth on Catholic attitudes toward race in New Spain.⁵ The dynamics of equality, race and enslavement struck me as particularly similar.

Rixey Ruffin’s book, *A Paradise of Reason: William Bentley and Enlightenment Christianity in the Early Republic*, is included here, in part, to complement Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*. William Bentley was a preacher from 1783 to 1819. Bentley responded to the Enlightenment, not by reflexively rejecting it, but by embracing as much of it as he could—like Jefferson—and he pushed his faith as far as he could toward the Enlightenment ideal of rationalism, while still calling his faith Christian. That he was a pastor in Salem, Massachusetts provides an especially interesting backdrop to his efforts. Ruffin examines Bentley’s theology and the impact his rationalism had on merchant, theology, philosophy, politics, class, gender and dissent.⁶ The Enlightenment helped contribute to a lot of odd blend of perfectibility and racial inferiority that became prominent in this period. This text provides some insight into a particular brand of New England Christian thought, and local attitudes toward race. Jefferson, of course, expressed his often-conflicting opinions on race⁷ himself, and was likewise rooted in Enlightenment thought. However, unlike Bentley, Jefferson was a holder of slaves, and so comparing their conflicting views rooted in similar intellectual frameworks is especially informative. This text continues a long historical tradition within the history of religion of doing a deep dive into the preaching of particular ministers or groups of ministers, somewhat similar to

the Caldwell book below. Because this is one of a whole class of sources on sermons from different preachers, it's likely that an itinerant minister or one stationed close to the frontier would provide more direct evidence of religious thought on racial inferiority.

Gregory Wills attempts to consider the conflicting impulses of democratic revolution and religious authority in the context of the Southern Baptists, focusing on Georgia in *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900*. While the narrative of the book does extend beyond the period for our course, the majority of the book does address the relationship between Baptists and the Second Great Awakening, and theological questions related to Calvinism,⁸ which makes it a solid complement to William Caldwell's book *Theologies of the American Revivalists: From Whitefield to Finney*. The theme running through the book is how these contrasting forces are united in the Baptist mind through the idea of discipline. One hears echoes of southern gentlemen during the Revolution preaching indifference and democratic virtue. He also spends an entire chapter looking at the black Baptist churches, their relationship to slavery, and how black Baptist churches, and their organization, differed from white Baptist churches. The Wills book examines how church discipline was applied differently in white and black evangelical churches. By comparison, Caldwell looks the theological trends in the American revivalist movement. This work provides a broader look at the multiple trends in both the First and the Second Great Awakenings, making this an excellent text for put these two movements into their historical contexts, and how they relate to each other. Movements included in his analysis include New Divinity, Taylorism, Baptist, Princeton and Restorationist, which were active throughout the Second Great Awakening, in north and south, and on the frontier. Caldwell examines these movements through the work of particular preachers and theologians including Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley and Joseph Bellamy,

among others.⁹ This book attempts to answer the question: how were revival theologies different from each other? Important to this conversation is the role of Calvinism in the evangelical movement. This was one of great splits in evangelicalism, and Calvinism can be linked to ideas of racial inferiority when proto-scientific views are overlooked.

Nathan Hatch looks at religion in the early Republic in this multiple award-winning book, *The Democratization of American Christianity*. He posits that there were five distinct traditions begun in this period that helped to shape the future of American religion: evangelical revivalists, black churches, and three Christian denominations: the Methodists, the Baptists, and the Mormons. Hatch describes the general forces at work shaping religion in the early Republic including the Democratic revolution, and the crisis of authority. He looks at the rise of mass movements that gave us the Second Great Awakening. He addresses major themes still present in American religion: millennialism, Calvinist orthodoxy and control, mass religious culture and populism.¹⁰ For the purposes of this essay, my interest is primarily on the chapter covering the black church, black preachers, and the relationship to slavery, as well as the chapter on Joseph Smith. We've seen many of these texts are broadly on religion and religious movements in the period, but they do address the question of race as just one aspect of a religious tradition. Nearly all of the more recent texts use Hatch as a source.

Richard Abanes provides an in-depth look at the history of Mormonism in *One Nation Under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church*. Mormonism is, in so many ways, the fundamental frontier religion. Founded in the middle of the Second Great Awakening, it's impossible to consider Mormonism without considering the subject of race since Mormon claims about the native population in the New World, and dark-skinned peoples in general, are central to the claims of the faith. Their origin story from their founding in New York and passing

through Ohio, Illinois, Missouri and eventually into Utah under the weight of persecution is fundamental to their identity even today.¹¹ Abanes considers the history of the LDS church on race, slavery, and movement to the frontier along with their teachings on the native populations they encountered, using public records, but also records only available within the LDS Church. The relationship of Mormonism to race is complex and distinct in some ways from race in more mainstream religions of the period, but common themes do appear. All Mormons were explicitly white (that only changed as recently as the late 1970s) and so directly reflect the racial attitudes of a significant chunk of white settlers. Mormons were generally scorned for their religious views, and not their racial views. While later Mormons would argue for their racial beliefs on Joseph Smith's teaching, his own attitudes about race are more likely to be rooted in the New England culture of his birth.

The period that saw the rise of the Second Great Awakening also saw the rise of other prominent social movements such as the Transcendentalists, as embodied by Emerson and Thoreau. While more literary and spiritual than religious, Transcendentalism has nonetheless left its own impact on American culture during the same period as the Second Great Awakening. While providing an overview of both movements, Barry Hankins illustrates in *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists* the interaction of these two movements and its influence on the biographies of two dozen American thinkers, politicians and other key figures. Susan B. Anthony, Lyman Beecher and Nat Turner are among those figures examined in this context, using writings from the figures involved, exploring the religious and philosophical claims on religion, race and gender. To the extent that prominent figures help to shape the culture, the influences here can shed some light on how these various ideas shaped the forces that shaped the period. He also provides a discussion of revivals, abolition and the frontier,¹² all of which are

important to understanding the ideas that formed the cultural backbone of white settlers pushing westward.

A more firsthand account of frontier religion can be examined in John Taylor's *Baptists on the American Frontier: A History of Ten Baptist Churches*. The third edition is edited by Chester Raymond Young. This collection of history of Baptist churches on the frontier (as far west as Kentucky) was originally published in 1820 and is the oldest book in our discussion. The book itself doubles as a primary source as the author used firsthand accounts of churches that he himself was a member of during this critical period. Among the issues examined is slavery. The edits and annotations include better document sources used by Taylor, correct errors and provide greater geographical context.¹³ Church histories form an important type of history that focuses on local events. This one is particularly important because unlike eastern church histories that focus on a single church, this source examines several different church histories encountered as the author moved west. This continual movement was particular to frontier living, and so this is highlighted in a unique way, allowing us to compare and contrast attitudes toward race as the churches move west.

The intersection of race and religion is also dealt with in sources that primarily focus on race, which became especially important after the expansion of Civil Rights in the 1960s. Unlike the sources looked at at the beginning of our discussion on native populations, the ones to follow focus on the slavery question and racial inferiority have formed a sustained presence in the literature. Topics like these have formed the basis of whole research careers, spawning a series of books by the same author(s) on closely related topics.

Michael Morrison and James Brewer Stewart's book, *Race and the Early Republic: Racial Consciousness and Nation-Building in the Early Republic*, looks at how the idea of race

evolved from late colonial times to the early-mid-nineteenth century. The book is a collection of essays from nine authors on the topic of race in this period. Morrison has also specifically looked at race, slavery and Manifest Destiny in another book that he himself wrote. This text looks at race, slavery and westward expansion from various perspectives including with respect to the native populations, and in the context of state-building where arguments about race and the rights of various races would have been entered in the record during debates over constitutions and laws. Each article in the book are written by historians from around the country with more than one of the articles considering race in the context of religion.

Winthrop Jordan has two books on race that provide information that is useful here: *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro 1550-1812*, and *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States*.

In the first of these, Jordan takes a comprehensive look at race in America from the earliest colonies and slave-based plantations in the New World through the War of 1812. He looks at a wide variety of experience of racism from antislavery movements, the souls of negroes and spirituality, segregation, expatriation and the mixing of races. Because of the great span of time covered by Jordan's book, it is possible to see the development of ideas and consider the extent to which they had permeated public thought. Jordan's focus here, and in the other book below, is one white attitudes and so fits squarely into the lens under examination.

In *The White Man's Burden*, Jordan deals with the question of religion, not as the principle focus of the book, but a nonetheless substantial portion of the book. Jordan also examines Jefferson's views of race. Both of Jordan's books look specifically at race with respect to the black population in the New World, but in combination with other texts, this will be a

useful point of comparison for looking at attitudes toward native populations and the expansion of slavery on the frontier.

Because I have done a previous historiographic essay on Manifest Destiny, I have largely ignored many of the texts that relate specifically to that question, in large part because I found they did not address the religious aspects of race even when examining race in that context. We see in the previous accounting of sources that there are a few sources that do shed some more direct light on the topic, but not many, leaving the clear impression of a distinct gap in the literature. To try to fill that gap, I have expanded my search for sources somewhat beyond that frame of reference to provide a framework through which one might examine the questions of race and racism on the trans-Mississippian frontier in the context of religion, and specifically the Second Great Awakening, evangelism and Mormonism. This gap seems to me to be particularly striking, as though looking at this question might reveal something that white, Christian Americans would rather not see.

The intersection of race and religion is important in this period because both were driving forces behind western expansion, and the coming Civil War. Religion was a dominant force in American culture during the Second Great Awakening, particularly among the non-elites. We see that during the Second Great Awakening, moral considerations within religion divide the north (where slavery was dying out) from the south (where slavery was getting stronger). Religious denominations divided over irreconcilable differences that are maintained to this day. Racism toward blacks was becoming increasingly virulent, and we see in actions like the Trail of Tears, that these attitudes could sometimes be equally virulent toward the native populations who resisted assimilation and white control. The question that remains, however, is how that transference was made. How did the conflict over land evolve into a war of extermination as

white settlers moved westward? Peering through the lens of religion, westward expansion on the near frontiers have been examined, but strikingly absent is that discussion in the far West. The lens of race has been looked at, particularly the issue of slavery which proved so important for the consequences of western expansion, as well as the assimilation of Hispanics in territories annexed during the Mexican War. The frontier has been examined through the lens of church history, and missionary movements. While religion and racial attitudes are covered from a variety of perspectives, few of those examine them on the frontier to make the connection back to the arguments for slavery in the former colonies. Distinct gaps appear in the literature making this connection between religiously motivated support for slavery and a willingness to see native peoples as worthy of extermination. A closer examination of Calvinist attitudes toward salvation and its relationship to the north-south splits, and attitudes toward racial inferiority should be more closely examined, along with the relationship of these attitudes in the context of Enlightenment thought that, in combination, can mutually support strong attitudes of racial inferiority. An examination of the economic contributions to these religious and racial attitudes is also warranted in future research.

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