

The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia

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Review

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Irons, Charles F. *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia*. University of North Carolina Press, \$59.95 hardcover, \$24.95 softcover ISBN 9780807831946

Christianity and the Defense of Slavery

The Origins of Proslavery Christianity begins by posing a compelling question: why did the majority of Southern Christians fail to hear the moral call of their religion to reject slavery? But this is not solely a book about white Southern evangelicals, who accounted for nearly all white Christians in the antebellum era, nor does it treat them primarily as functionaries of a proslavery society. Rather, in an effort to take evangelicalism as an analytical category, Charles Irons focuses on the lived experience of black as well as white evangelicals, arguing that white proslavery Christians forged their ideas in response to and in dialogue with their enslaved and free black co-religionists. While I am not convinced that evangelicalism can serve an analytical category—unlike race, gender, and class, the analytical categories to which Irons compares evangelicalism, Southern religion did not previously appear in historians' works as a social structure—Irons' approach is nevertheless salutary, since it writes black people into a history that concerns them centrally and since it yields a book that takes religion and its practitioners seriously. And although Irons convinces us that whites shaped their proslavery Christianity in response to the actions of blacks, he also shows that proslavery Christianity arose in spite of, not because of, blacks' professions to faith.

The narrative arc of the book, a revised version of Irons' University of Virginia dissertation, begins in the colonial period with the origins of the evangelical movement. At that time the Anglican Church dominated the religious landscape and black Virginians lived mostly outside the church, a consequence in part of the widespread idea that heathens could be more justifiably enslaved than Christians. But the impulse to convert slaves dated from

the colonial period, too. In the late seventeenth century some Virginians began to argue that slavery could provide a means by which to Christianize Africans, and that Christianity could make better slaves.

These two key arguments began to dominate whites' ideas about slavery and religion only after the revivals of the mid to late eighteenth century brought significant numbers of black and white Virginians into evangelical churches. Through their emphasis on salvation rather than earthly station, early Methodist and Baptist preachers found a way out of the earlier difficulties regarding slave conversion. As Irons describes, "More than freedom, [George] Whitefield wanted enslaved men and women to hear the Gospel 'preached with power amongst them, that many will be brought effectually home to God'" (35). In contrast to those historians, including myself, who have given eighteenth-century Methodists and Baptists credit for their antislavery actions, Irons emphasizes that "evangelical dissenters . . . were reinforcing rather than challenging the practice of slaveholding" in this era (44). Thus, a key part of the answer to the question of how proslavery Christianity came about is that from the beginning evangelical churches integrated slavery with their message of salvation.

Another important development dated from the eighteenth-century revivals, too. Afro-Virginians themselves began to preach, though they operated under the aegis of white-controlled churches. The success of black preachers accounted in part for the high number of black converts, helping to create a biracial church in the Revolutionary era. Worshipping together with enslaved blacks in an era of liberty spurred some "internal conflicts over slavery" among white evangelicals, conflicts church leaders "resolved . . . by forcing the discussions outside the church and into the statehouse" (66).

And there they remained. With slavery designated a topic outside the bounds of discussion, white and black evangelicals focused instead on creating a set of working relationships within church structures. These relationships were complex. White evangelicals found in paternalism a solution to the problem of holding equal in fellowship those they also held in chains. Black men and women, by contrast, seem to have sought a measure of autonomy wherever possible, creating in the early national period the commonwealth's first independent black churches. But African Americans also submitted to church discipline and on rare occasions used churches as a forum in which to criticize their masters by bringing cases against them. Since the interactions between blacks and whites in individual churches and in cases of church discipline seem

to strike at the heart of the book's concerns, and since Irons bases his argument partly on the idea that it was "[a]lways in response to queries from or about the enslaved [that] whites worked to define the mutual responsibilities of masters and slaves to one another," (86) more examples of these interactions than the few that appear in the book would be welcome.

In response to the bloody 1831 slave rebellion led by Nat Turner, an enslaved religious leader, white evangelicals changed somewhat the form, but not the basic content, of their proslavery ideas and behavior. In particular, white evangelicals reoriented their energies increasingly toward missionary work among enslaved Virginians. They also assented, but only temporarily, to the new Virginia law that banned religious meetings of slaves; after a few years whites began again to allow blacks to meet independently and also to have their own churches as long as they were guided nominally by a white pastor.

Allowing slaves to preach and worship in quasi-independent black churches supported the antebellum-era mission to the slaves, as Irons explains in the book's most important and explanatory chapter (five). In the three decades before the Civil War, blacks' continuing conversion to Christianity, which resulted in part from the appeal of black-dominated spiritual gatherings, proved to white evangelicals that God had ordained slavery as part of His divine plan: the placing of black slaves under the care of whites had been in order to bring them to Christ. That black Christians seem to have found in their religion a way not to be under the care of whites did not enter into the equation in whites' minds; and neither did black Christians seem aware that in joining Southern churches they abetted proslavery arguments and helped Southern whites respond to the criticism of abolitionists.

Irons' story ends with the secession crisis, the Civil War, and its aftermath. He shows that like many other white Virginians, evangelicals held firm against secession until hostilities broke out, and that their religious faith then helped them bear the assaults of war. But Afro-Virginians' actions during those turbulent years prove of much more consequence to the book's arguments. They not only left white-controlled churches, they formed truly independent black churches. The postbellum churches quickly attracted a much larger percentage of the black population than the antebellum churches had done, which, Irons argues convincingly, demonstrates the extent to which African Americans' interpretations of Christianity before the war had diverged from the views of the masters who sought to control them.

The Origins of Proslavery Christianity makes useful contributions to a number of distinct historiographical discussions, including those about Revolutionary-era evangelicalism and slavery, the colonization movement, and the role evangelicals played during the secession crisis and in the Confederacy. It also includes a number of helpful maps and an appendix charting church membership, resources to which many students will wish to turn.

But its main contribution lies in the significance of the story it tells. Although he never states it in so many words, Irons shows that Christianity's inherent flexibility and its emphasis on the next world more than on this one made proslavery Christianity possible. Given the choice to mold society toward their religion or to mold religion toward their society, white Southern Christians saw little contest. The tragedies of their choice are many and obvious, but Irons points out that proslavery Christianity, as self-serving as it was, nevertheless created a community of black and white Southerners. Once that community dissolved after the Civil War, violent white supremacy rushed in to fill the gap where patronizing white supremacy, in the form of the mission to the slaves, had been. In that way, proslavery Christianity had served as a brake on the most brutal aspects of the deep racism that undergirded Southern slavery.

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