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Civil Religion in the Discourse of Frederick Douglass

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ABSTRACT: *The concept of "civil religion" harks back to the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Emile Durkheim but its significance in United States context has been pointed out by Robert Bellah in his 1967 seminal article "Civil Religion in America". In his analysis of famous speeches and writings by American politicians and thinkers, Bellah contended that religious language is a major feature of American rhetoric and that civic consciousness in the US is shaped by metaphors and ideas about God and Christian religion in general. The present paper examines the relevance of the concept in the field of African-American literature where it has remained largely unaddressed despite the bulk of African-American political speeches and their religious rhetoric. It seeks to unravel the religious dimension of Frederick Douglass's discourse in its relation to American civil religion. Through a close reading not only of Douglass's speeches but also of his autobiographies, notably The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and of his historical novel The Heroic Slave, it purports to highlight how Douglass at once relates to mainstream American civil religion and departs from its dominating white male discourse.*

KEYWORDS: Frederick Douglass, American Civil Religion, Discourse Analysis

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Introduction

The early twenty-first century witnessed a renewed interest in the concept of “civil religion” with the return of religious rhetoric to American political discourse after 9/11 events and “the war on the axis of evil” (Cumings, Abrahamian and Ma’oz 2006). However, the concept can be traced back to the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Emile Durkheim (Cristi 2001). Yet, its significance in United States context has been emphasized by Robert N. Bellah in his 1967 seminal article “Civil Religion in America”. Through his analysis of famous speeches and writings by American politicians and thinkers, Bellah asserts that civic consciousness in the United States is shaped by metaphors and ideas about God and Christian religion in general and that religious language is a major feature of American rhetoric. The present work contends that it can even be traced not only in African-American political speeches but also in literary works, especially by authors like Frederick Douglass who are not associated with civil religion at first glance.

The Origin of Civil Religion

Civil religion is also referred to by scholars as common religion, public religion or civil piety. It can be considered as a blending of nationalist and religious sentiments (Pinter 2016). Its origins can be traced back to Jean Jacques Rousseau’s Social Contract whereby members of a society are bound by certain values. According to Marcela Cristi, “while Rousseau coined the term *civil religion*, he created, in fact, a *political religion* for the use and benefit of the state” (2001, 46). She argues that Rousseau attached political and national attributes to creeds and beliefs.

While Emile Durkheim has not specifically employed the term civil religion, his “premise is that civil religion is not something to be *imposed* on the individual. Rather it is a cultural and social force *acting* upon him. Citizens are not *expected* to endorse the creed; … Civil religion springs from society itself and is carried on every time the group meets and celebrates together” (Cristi 2016, 39-40, italics hers). Durkheim’s concept shifts from the power of the state adopted by Rousseau and focuses on the spontaneous celebration of beliefs within a society. In the American context, this association concurs with the arrival of the first pilgrims to the New World.

American Civil Religion

Robert Bellah (1967) defines it as “a religious dimension of the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion”. He finds it not only in political utterances but also in rituals such as celebrations of American national holidays, or on monuments and symbols.

Bellah traces the American tradition which he considers to be “the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God’s will on earth” (1967, 2) in the works and speeches of famous American politicians from the Founding Fathers to U.S. presidents. He shows how religion, and more particularly the idea of God, plays a “constitutive role” in American life.

He initiates his demonstration with J. F. Kennedy’s inaugural address where he highlights three instances of reference to God at the beginning and end of his speech. He claims that failing to do so might cost Kennedy votes but he stresses the neutral reference to God without mentioning any Christian diction. Bellah holds that the religious dimension has pervaded every aspect of American life, not just politics, and he insists on describing this phenomenon as “American civil religion”.

After Bellah, in the 1970s, Martin E. Marty (1974) distinguished between two kinds of American civil religion, “the priestly and the prophetic” and between a God-oriented and a nation-oriented version while Roderick P. Hart (1977) examined civil religion in his book *The Political Pulpit* as a rhetorical phenomenon governed by an “unwritten contract between politics and organized religion”.

The religious symbolism of the American presidency as an institution has especially been the focus of research on civil religion. By analyzing presidential speeches, Pierard and Linder (1988) observe that the president can be considered "as the high priest of the civil faith" who "leads the people in affirming and celebrating the nation" (1988, 25). They conclude that "most presidents have been a mixture of prophet, priest, preacher, and pastor; and any president can be any or all of these, if he chooses" (Pierard & Linder 1988, 26). More recently, Ceri Hughes (2019) has conducted a computer-assisted analysis of American presidents' speeches, from F. D. Roosevelt to Donald Trump, to study the frequency of religious words and explicit references to "God, the Bible, Christ and salvation", thereby quantifying the significant corpus of civil religious elements in their discourse. Yet, American authors have also been found to have a propensity towards a blending of civil and religious rhetoric in their literary works, especially the African-American ones.

African-American Civil Religion

Regarding African-American authors, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was not only a civil rights leader, he was also a Christian priest like his father and grandfathers for four generations. As a preacher, he had received a divinity degree from Crozer Theological Seminary and a PhD in systematic theology from Boston University. At the young age of 25, he was named pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, on the ground of his preaching abilities and oratorial qualities (Graham 2020).

King's speeches and writings are therefore likely to abound in civil religious discourse. He acknowledges that "in the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher" (cited by Graham 2020), showing that references to the Bible and religious sermons are the basis of his speeches in favour of Blacks' civil rights. In his article "Exemplifying Public Discourse: Christian Faith, American Democracy, and Martin Luther King Jr.", Timothy Beach-Verhey considers him both as a "Baptist preacher shaped by the language and practices of the church as well as a civic activist struggling to realize the promise of American democracy" (2004, 115). He contends that Rev. King is "an exemplar of both Christian faithfulness and democratic citizenship", which makes him a true proponent of American civil religion. His speeches are suffused with calls for Christian love in front of political and social struggle, as when he claims in his sermon "Loving your Enemies": "In *Matthew 5:43-45* Jesus says, 'You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!" (King 2012, 45). His powerful images against racial discrimination and oppression of Negroes in the U.S. are carefully drawn from the Bible which he knows by heart and from which he can easily find the pertinent parable and the compelling metaphor.

His famous "I Have a Dream" speech about a better future for American society is rife with Christian faith and religious citations, such as *Isaiah 40:4-5*, to express his dream for mankind saying,

> I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope... With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood (King 1963).

King holds that religious belief is the common ground on which to build a nation respectful of civil rights for all, epitomizing American civil religion as the ideal path for equality and "brotherhood".

Another famous African-American author who is deeply connected to religious rhetoric is James Baldwin. Like the protagonist of his novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, Baldwin grew up in the Pentecostal faith and was a front-church preacher until the age of 17, when he abandoned religious occupation to be a writer (Baym 2003, 2414). According to James H. Evans, "Baldwin's importance as a social critic and public intellectual" cannot be dissociated from the religious and theological dimensions of his writings. Fiction and non-fiction alike, his

works are suffused with civil religious discourse and his indictment of blacks' oppression is conveyed through biblical metaphors and allusions.

Indeed, Baldwin effectively "uses religious categories and the moral injunctions of the scriptures in his analysis of the oppression which continues to afflict both minority Americans and millions worldwide" (Schnapp 1987, iii). Patricia Schnapp considers Baldwin as belonging to a movement "now known as black theology or black liberation theology" (Schnapp 1987, 1) that had started in the 1960's.

> During the heart of the Civil Rights movement, they began to reinterpret the meaning of Christian faith from the perspective of the black struggle for liberation in the U.S. Focusing on liberation themes in the Bible, black theology celebrates Moses and Christ as the hero-liberators of the Old and New Testaments respectively (Schnapp 1987, 1).

Hence, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* collection of essays on the racial situation in 1960's America is highly prophetic and religion-bent. Published on the one-hundredth anniversary of emancipation from slavery, it derives its title from Negro Spiritual songs with reference to the Old Testament; "God gave Noah the rainbow sign/No more water, the fire next time". Even Baldwin's novels are deeply steeped in religious discourse. His most famous one, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, for instance, which is largely autobiographical, is titled after the celebration and spreading of the news of the birth of Jesus Christ and features a store-front preacher named Gabriel who sustains the same relation to his step-son as Baldwin's own step-father, frequently employing Christian diction and religious references to portray the lives of blacks in the Harlem district of New York City.

Moreover, in *Giovanni's Room*, the narrator, purposefully named David, also employs recurrent biblical references as in "I really felt at that moment that Judas and the Savior had met in me" (Baldwin 1956, 147) and in "the heavy grace of God, which has brought me to this place, is all that can carry me out of it" (Baldwin 1956, 223-24), to give but few examples.

King was a pastor and Baldwin started his career as a church-front preacher; it is only natural that religious rhetoric abounds in their writings. Such is not the case of Frederick Douglass, yet his works are so suffused with religious references that he can be considered as an outstanding figure of American civil religion.

Frederick Douglass's Civil Religion

Frederick Douglass is the most outspoken African-American voice of the nineteenth century. A former slave who escaped the fetters of the peculiar institution, he became famous by touring town halls and giving speeches in favour of abolition before publishing no less than three autobiographies and a historical novel, in addition to editing several journals. He also held various diplomatic offices after the Civil War. As an orator with a political agenda, he would suffuse his discourse with religious references in the tradition so aptly characterized by Robert Bellah and his followers as American civil religion.

The notion of civil religion as defined by Bellah is strongly associated with speeches and oral addresses. Examining Douglass's famous speeches shows them to be thoroughly impregnated with religious discourse and Biblical quotations, not just neutral references to God.

Indeed, in his famous oration on Independence Day at Rochester in 1852 titled "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?" Douglass begins by conventional references to God and the Almighty as in "Would to God, both for your sakes and ours", "And let me warn that it is dangerous to copy the example of nation whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrevocable ruin!" (Douglass 1852).

He then specifically refers to Christian religion as in "confessing and worshiping the Christian's God, and looking hopefully for life and immortality beyond the grave" and subtly associates the Bible, the holy book of Christianity, with the American constitution, denouncing slavery not only as a shameful crime but most importantly as a religious sin:

> Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the Constitution and the Bible which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery – the great sin and shame of America! (Douglass 1852)

In the tradition of Puritan literature and the analogy between the elect pilgrims of Plymouth Plantation and the people of Israel who have been persecuted for their faith, Douglass highlights the parallel between the situation of American slaves and "the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people" when he quotes the Psalm "By the Rivers of Babylon" and adapts it to the American context:

> By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! We wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song; and they who wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? (Douglass 1852).

Douglass relates the civil notion of independence with the religious feast of Passover and celebration of the freedom of the Hebrews from Egyptian persecution when he reminds his fellow white Americans that "This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance" (1852). The Fourth of July is an opportunity for Douglass to indict the hypocrisy of the American celebration of independence and freedom while denying them to black Americans held in slavery. Yet in so doing, he overreaches political rhetoric towards religious references and Biblical images.

Douglass had recourse to a straightforward use of religion in one of his speeches as can be inferred from its title, "The Church and Prejudice", which was delivered at the Plymouth County Anti-Slavery Society on November 4, 1841. He lengthily describes his master's "Methodist piety" while ironically denouncing his total departure from Christian mercy in his treatment of his slaves of which Douglass was a direct witness:

> I used to attend a Methodist church, in which my master was a class leader; he would talk most sanctimoniously about the dear Redeemer, who was sent "to preach deliverance to the captives, and set at liberty them that are bruised"–he could pray at morning, pray at noon, and pray at night; yet he could lash up my poor cousin by his two thumbs, and inflict stripes and blows upon his bare back, till the blood streamed to the ground! all the time quoting scripture, for his authority, and appealing to that passage of the Holy Bible which says, "He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes!" Such was the amount of this good Methodist's piety (Douglass 1950a).

For a speech about the hypocrisy of the Christian church towards slaves in America, it is all the more expected that Douglass should use religious discourse to drive his point home to his audience. He carefully selects forceful and vivid examples from the Bible pertaining to deliverance and captives to extend the analogy to American slaves and ironically expose the blindness of the white Southerners to the situation of their slaves.

Moreover, the same religious discourse is repeatedly used in political speeches aimed at the American institutions as in his oration "The Right to Criticize American Institutions", a Speech before the American Anti-Slavery Society on May 11, 1847:

> I am here, a simple man, knowing what I have experienced in Slavery, knowing it to be a bad system, and desiring, by all Christian means, to seek its overthrow. I am not here to please you with an eloquent speech, with a refined and logical address, but to speak to you the sober truths of a heart overborne with gratitude to God that we have in this land, cursed as it is with Slavery, so noble a band to second my efforts and the efforts of others, in the noble work of undoing the yoke of bondage, with which the majority of the States of this Union are now unfortunately cursed (Douglass 1847).

References to Christianity and to God recall the staple discourse of American civil religion found in so many political speeches as demonstrated by Bellah. Frederick Douglass's discourse is deeply impregnated with religious images and he invariably refers to white Southerners as "Christian slaveholders", implicitly denouncing the incompatibility of Christianity with slavery, though his irony is lost on most of his audience of whites as when he says: "I am not thought of, or spoken of, except as a piece of property belonging to some Christian slaveholder, and all the religious and political institutions of this country, alike pronounce me a slave and a chattel" (Douglass 1847). The issue of slavery having both religious and political implications constitutes an ideal instance for the use of civil religion discourse.

The notion of freedom for Douglass is closely associated with a divine attribute as in "freedom which every being made after God's image instinctively feels is his birth-right" (Douglass 1847). When Douglass lists American institutions, he generally begins with the one he deems most important, the Church, followed by political ones, in tune with his audience who rank them in the same order, as when he claims that "A country, the Church of which, and the Government of which, and the Constitution of which, is in favour of supporting and perpetuation this monstrous system of injustice and blood? I have not, I cannot have, any love for this country, as such, or for its Constitution" (Douglass 1847).

Douglass invariably incorporates religious references in his speeches in favour of abolition. In "What the Black Man Wants", a speech delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Anti Slavery Society in Boston on April 1865, the subject of the meeting was "equality of all men before the law" (Douglass 1950b). Yet, the orator repeatedly quotes from the Bible, introducing his references by "It is said in the Scriptures" (Douglass 1950b) as if he were preaching from the pulpit.

Most of the religious rhetoric identified as mainstream civil religion has been found in American political speeches, especially by presidents, and Douglass's oratory indictments of slavery are thus expectedly teeming with Christian references and biblical quotes. However, Douglass also employs religious discourse when departing from his main subject and voicing concern with women's rights, deploring their inequality just as he demands blacks' emancipation as well as their "elevation" to the level of their white counterparts. He forcefully asserts: "I hold that women, as well as men, have the right to vote [applause], and my heart and voice go with the movement to extend suffrage to women" (Douglass 1950b). His position on universal rights regardless of race or gender is reflected in his crucial role in the 1848 Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention. It comes as no surprise that his last public appearance, just before he died on the same evening, was at the meeting of the National Council of Women at Metzerott Hall in Washington D.C. (Walker 1973, 24).

Though mostly known as the father of the slave narrative literary genre with no less than three autobiographical accounts of slavery, the only work of fiction Frederick Douglass has written is the historical novel *The Heroic Slave* (1853) about the slave rebellion led by Madison Washington which likewise provides recurrent evidence of civil religion. Indeed, even a fictionalized account of a slave mutiny on board *The Creole* is teeming with religious discourse. Douglass opens *The Heroic Slave* with a quote from the hymn "God is love" (2015) and devises the motto for antislavery resistance from a Biblical source, summarized in *Romans 13*: "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God" (Douglass 2015, 3) which becomes in his historical fiction, "God is my witness that LIBERTY, not malice, is the motive for this night's work" (Douglass 2015, 48). Religious diction of a primarily Christian source which is the main feature of American civil religion is recurrently

associated with the social and political themes of slavery and insurrection as a characteristic of Douglass's discourse in his novel.

Douglass lengthily quotes the prayer uttered in the woods by an old slave while Madison is watching from his hiding place: "O deliver me! in mercy, O God, deliver me from the chains and manifold hardships of slavery! With thee, O Father, all things are possible. Thou canst stand and measure the earth. Thou hast beheld and drove asunder the nations,—all power is in thy hand…" (Douglass 2015, 17-18). The old man is quoting from *Matthew 19 :26* as cited by the editors in Note 17 and many such biblical references are pointed in the novel in the form of notes.

This aged character is not unlike the slave Tom who is invariably invoking the mercy of God throughout Harriet Beecher Stowe's celebrated novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Stowe's use of a devout Christian as her slave hero and focus on religious language may be traced to her family background. Her father, Lyman Beecher, was the president of the new Lane Theological Seminary and Pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church while her mother Catherine founded the Western Female Institute to train "home missionaries". She then married Calvin Stowe, a professor of Biblical literature (Baym 2003, 772).

Harriet Beecher Stowe's religious background of Christian orthodoxy explains the pervading of Christianity, and even Catholicism, on her writing as contended by LuElla D'Amico (2022) but Douglass lacks any background of the sort and his religious images depart from the meek fatalism expressed by Uncle Tom. He may have intended this old slave in his novel *The Heroic Slave* as an allusion to Uncle Tom that was very familiar to his readers, especially as Douglass was, according to Robert Levine, "convinced both of the social uses of the novel and of Stowe's humanitarianism," and relied on his publications to advertise Stowe's novel, contributing to its influence by printing numerous articles about it as well as the occasional "worshipful profile of Stowe" (Levine 1992, 71-93).

What is noteworthy in Douglass's works is that slaves and slaveholders alike invoke religious discourse in relation to the peculiar institution of slavery. Douglass insists that both the victim and the torturer pray the same God and invoke His blessings upon their endeavours. He especially denounces the hypocrisy of slaveholding priests when he exposes the contradiction of preaching and whipping in an Appendix to *Life of an American Slave*. He vilifies "The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week" and "fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus" (1845, 119), denouncing the violence of slaveholders towards their human chattel that ought to be incompatible with Christian teachings.

Throughout his works, Douglass insists on ascribing the qualifier "Christian" to white slaveholders and repeatedly refers to America as a "Christian country" not merely to point to its manifest destiny as a "city on a hill" or the promised land of the Founding Fathers but to expose its reliance on the sinful institution of slavery from its birth. He constantly vilipends the religious bigotry of slaveholders who pretend to be good Christians while inhumanely mistreating fellow human beings who worship the same God. Douglass clearly distances himself from such religion which is stripped of its values of love and mercy. In the Appendix to *Life of an American Slave*, he clearly voices his own religious stance: "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" (Douglass 1845, 118).

Douglass has recourse to civil religious rhetoric most particularly in his autobiographies such as *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. He exposes the White Southerners' religious argument to justify slavery by referring to Ham's curse and employing Christian religion as an imperious duty to hold African Americans in servitude. He shows how they insisted on imposing prayers and church attendance on their slaves in order to instil in them the notions of obedience and fatalism. Douglass succeeds to thwart this argument through his own example by employing civil religious discourse.

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> Every year brings with it multitudes of this class of slaves … it is nevertheless plain that a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the South, and are now held in slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa; and if their increase will do no other good, it will do away the force of the argument that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right. If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the South must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters (Douglass 1851, 12).

He balances political and economic arguments with religious references to demonstrate not only the fallacy of the religious justification of slavery but also the adulterous and therefore sinful fathering of slaves by their white owners. The "unscriptural" nature of American slavery is opposed by Douglass to the proponents of servitude as implementing the will of Noah who cursed Ham and all his descendants. Even if admitting the validity of Ham's curse, Douglass sets himself as the epitome of the unlawful and "unscriptural" enslavement of the son of a white man, his own master.

Unlike mostly illiterate slaves, Douglass had the chance to learn to read while a house servant to Mrs Sophia Auld who had been a weaver by trade before marrying a slaveholder and owning slaves herself. Douglass borrows biblical metaphors to reflect the radical transformation of that sweet lady into a pitiless mistress, "her angelic face soon gave place to that of a demon" (Douglass 1851, 35). Slavery is considered by Douglass as the "fatal poison of irresponsible power" (1851, 35) and equally harmful to both blacks and whites. It "soon commenced its infernal work" on Mrs Auld when it had been denounced earlier in the *Narrative* as "the hell of slavery" (Douglass 1851, 13). The diction used by the author, such as angels, demons, infernal and hell, clearly derived from Christian religious images, is juxtaposed with political and social issues conveyed through the narrative of his own life as a slave in the American South.

When Douglass returned to the United States a free man in 1847 (Biography 2014), he created some abolitionist journals such as *Frederick Douglass Weekly* and *The North Star* whose motto was "Right is of no Sex – Truth is of no Color – God is the Father of us all, and we are all brethren" (Biography 2014). This motto is a notable instance of civil religion for it combines secular concerns with religious references. Douglass repeatedly refers to slaveholders as Christians, another evidence of his reliance on civil religion as many American orators across the centuries. But his purpose is always double-fold, to appeal to his audience with a language they can easily identify with and at the same time underscore the irony of Christianity and its liberating role just as he points to the scandal of American slavery in a land of freedom.

Conclusion

Civil religion in the works of Frederick Douglass belongs to the American tradition of incorporating religious references and Christian images into discourse on secular issues. But unlike white male orators who invoke divine endorsement of theirs deeds and the blessing of God upon their endeavours, Douglass employs his religious references ironically to denounce the blindness of so-called Christians to the suffering in bondage of their black brothers.

While white southerners have reached for the Bible to find justification for slavery notably with Ham's curse, Douglass uses Christian images to denounce slaveholding and employs irony to expose the incompatibility of Christianity with the maltreatment of slaves. He also uses religious imagery when he advocates equal rights for all, regardless of race and gender as can be noted from his support for women suffrage. His civil religious discourse can thus be considered as relating to mainstream American civil religion as well as departing from its dominating white male discourse.

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