Bonds of Salvation

How Christianity Inspired and Limited American Abolitionism

Ben Wright

Never go to the southern states of America! they are polluted with slavery, and slavery is the most demoralizing thing under the sun. It is the parent of oppression, the nurse of sloth and guilty passions. It is the bane of man, the abomination of God. Where slavery reigns the human being is made a beast of burthen, or the slave of lust. The poor half-famished negro, trembles at a tyrant's nod, and loses every good quality in the servility of a drudge, or the wickedness of a prostitute. O that this scandal of humanity were annihilated!

— Joshua Marsden, 1814[1]

JOSHUA MARSDEN NEVER PENNED A PETITION AGAINST SLAVERY, wrote a representative in favor of abolition, nor joined an antislavery society. Despite describing slavery as "the bane of man, and the abomination of God" and earnestly yearning "that this scandal of humanity were annihilated," this Methodist missionary did nothing more than write these seven sentences, buried in a lengthy autobiography designed to celebrate missionary work. Yet he was not alone in his seeming hypocrisy. Even as the early abolitionist movement scored victories for freedom, few American Christians took organized action against slavery. Marsden and countless others watched on the sidelines as the evil institution grew. How did American Christianity enable this inaction, and what changed to inspire the later, larger, more active, biracial Christian abolitionist movement?

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1 Joshua Marsden, *Grace Displayed: An Interesting Narrative of the Life, Conversion, Christian Experience, Ministry, and Missionary Labors of Joshua Marsden (New York: 1814), 190.*

Marsden penned this sole antislavery statement while reflecting on his 1808 experience watching enslaved men, women, and children rake salt on the beaches of Bermuda from sunup till sundown, backs bent under the brutal sun. But despite the dreadful scene, Marsden's attention turned heavenward, and he anguished over the failure of missionaries, bemoaning that the residents of Bermuda "have no meetings of any kind; no professors of religion… Alas, pleasure seemed their pursuit; money their god, and blindness to futurity their only refuge."[2] Slavery, that bane of man and abomination of God, not only oppressed the enslaved, but it also slowed the spread of salvation on the island. Instead of embracing Marsden's ministry and growing in Christian piety, the white men and women of Bermuda bowed before a false idol of slave-made wealth. Marsden hated slavery for fostering both brutal oppression and luxurious vanity, but his hatred for slavery paled before his desperate panic that his own church was failing to spread the Gospel to those otherwise destined for an eternity of torment. Marsden had a mission to save the world. Nothing could get in his way, not even the agents of torture empowering an increasingly powerful Atlantic slave system, nor the impassioned abolitionists seeking to destroy slavery.

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The vast majority of Americans who opposed slavery never took action by participating in the abolitionist movement. White Christians struggled to imagine a biracial kingdom of God, and racism deeply poisoned American Christianity in both overt and subtle ways. But while Marsden saw African-descended peoples as spiritual kin, he still refused to participate in the movement designed to end their oppression. And he was not alone. The absence of racism was not sufficient to turn white Christians into abolitionists. Spiritual visions of salvation redirected white Christians away from the confrontational political and legal action required to emancipate the enslaved. The spiritual cosmologies of most white American Christians devalued the work of abolitionists and their pragmatic, legalistic, political agendas. Men and women like Marsden imagined themselves in an international, millennial battle for the spiritual salvation of everyone, enslaved and free. The activism of black

2 Ibid., 190.

Christians appeared to them a distraction for the more holy work of expanding salvation for all. Marsden and those like him understood themselves as part of a process that would liberate souls both in this world and the next. For these Christians, it was only worth changing laws if doing so directly enabled the spread of the gospel.[3] Salvation could not wait. The outpouring of God's justice was nigh. Marsden was bringing it. And the world would soon be made anew.

Not even the righteous appeals of the oppressed could compete with these romantic religious dreams. In the minds of Christians like Marsden, tedious lawsuits for freedom or divisive politicking distracted, or even stymied, the international salvation that would save everyone. And yet a very small minority of white Christians did pursue abolition. For these men and women, their religious visions pursued purification rather than the expansion of conversion. This religious distinction between purification and conversion shaped the ideological possibilities of early American antislavery. Abolitionists worked to purify the nation of slavery, but the majority of white Christians prioritized expanding salvation and accordingly remained outside of the organized antislavery movement. During the 1830s, a new generation of white abolitionists joined their long-active black coreligionists and shattered the conversionist endorsement of the status quo. By 1845, the collision of abolitionism and salvation shattered the nation's largest Protestant denominations.

To understand how religion shaped the development of American abolitionism, we must uncover intellectual worldviews that looked to heaven to change life on Earth. From the American Revolution until at least the dawn of the nineteenth century, Americans optimistically believed that the world was rapidly improving, and that improvement would continue through the extension of the gospel. A small number sought to purify the nation before converting others, but in the first three decades after the American Revolution, these activists were drowned out by conversionists.[4] But conversion necessitated coordination, and independence from Britain required the creation of new methods of coordination. By 1814, the nation's largest Protestant traditions had formed new national denominations equipped to carry the gospel across the American continent and eventually all over the

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3 The fight to disestablish state churches, particularly in Virginia, did animate usually politically resistant white evangelicals, but this animation was short-lived. Once they secured disestablishment, these Christian activist networks fell dormant. By the late eighteenth century, slavery, on the other hand, was no longer seen by most Christians as an obstacle for conversion. See Katharine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

4 I refer to my actors as conversionists and their ideology as conversionism largely because all other terms are too narrow. These beliefs transcended the theological boundaries implied by labels like evangelicalism or even missionary Christianity. Even the nascent anti-missions movement shared a belief that conversion would remake the world in a more peaceful and just fashion, and while evangelicals were more zealous in extending salvation, nearly all Christians believed that conversion would solve the world's problems more effectively than political action.

globe. Constructing national institutions required avoiding the divisiveness of slavery, and American denominations worked to contain the agitation of black activists and instead worked to expand salvation.
To further facilitate the expansion of salvation, these new denominational institutions established the many organizations that collectively made up the so-called "benevolent empire" of social reform, including the American Colonization Society, formed in 1815 to address the problem of slavery. But yet again, salvation structured even this movement, as colonizationists maintained their coalition only by promising to extend salvation to the continent of Africa through the divine power of settler colonialism. By the early 1830s, a new national abolitionism emerged in opposition to the colonizationist movement. This movement too relied upon the need to convert the world, and increasingly rancorous conflicts over slavery and salvation tore apart the three largest American Protestant denominations by 1845. In each phase of this process, Americans remained deeply concerned about salvation: the salvation of their neighbors, their churches, and their nation. Throughout the early history of the United States, dreams of salvation structured the limitations and possibilities of both American abolitionism and its opponents.

Following this story changes our understanding of the era in at least five ways. First, we see the role of religious convictions in creating the ideological worlds of the early republic. Second, in seeking to understand the ideas underpinning abolitionist action, we move beyond the old paradigm of gradual versus immediate abolitionism and replace it with conversionism and purificationism. Third, we see how millennial dreams of salvation structured early American religious and political culture. Fourth, we come to recognize and understand antislavery Americans who have thus far remained outside of the focus of antislavery studies because they never took organized political action. Fifth, we rethink our broad narratives of American religious history, complicating the emphasis on democratization or diffusion with the recognition that this was an era of institution building, catalyzed by the need to expand salvation. These institutions enabled and inhibited American reform, including abolitionism. Eventually the collision of slavery and salvation destroyed America's religious cultures.

Religious Americans in the late eighteenth century expected a new world to appear with the expansion of Christian conversion. A prophetic few adopted an alternative antislavery of purification, but these cries were either muted by the limitations of their source (i.e. the marginal Quakers or declining Calvinists) or they were drowned out by the challenges of rapid migration in the aftermath of the American Revolution. The challenges of this migration caused conversionists to focus energies on missionary outreach, resulting in the consolidation of religious authority in new denominational bodies by 1814. These new bodies created an opening for reform but restricted it from taking an aggressive, coercive shape. African colonization appeared to promise a solution by foreground-

ing the conversion of Africa. By 1830 it became clear that religious conversion would not solve the problem of slavery. Conversionist antislavery was turned into a conservative weapon by proslavery apologists, who wielded the weapon so well that abolitionists eventually broke the bonds of religious unity by denying enslavers positions as sanctioned missionaries. National religious cultures forged by dreams of conversion were undone by the inextricable connection between conversion and slavery. The pursuit of salvation motivated the formation, development, and dissolution of national American religious cultures. Emancipation only arrived via the deadly reality of civil war. Yet, for nearly a century prior, antislavery was inextricably tied to visions of American salvation.

Uncovering the theological worldview of early American social reform explains not only how Christians like Joshua Marsden could hate slavery and yet seemingly do nothing; it also clarifies the ideological underpinnings of American antislavery, recasting the political strategies of gradualism and immediatism as cosmological worldviews privileging purification or conversion. This is a story of how Christianity structured what was ideologically possible, as Americans reckoned with the nation's sin of slavery. Understanding the limitations of those possibilities explains how antislavery Christians enabled the expansion and entrenchment of human bondage, necessitating the cataclysm of war to finally secure emancipation.

Joshua Marsden's antislavery was not hypocritical, nor was it apathetic. Marsden hated slavery and looked with great anticipation for the day when God would fulfill his promise of deliverance for all creation. Marsden staunchly believed that the hours of study, preparation, and active ministry that occupied his time would serve to accelerate this glorious day. And he expected that day to come soon, for, as he wrote in 1814, "the Redeemer's kingdom is gloriously near. If the world is to be reformed, God will doubtless employ his Son—his Son will employ the gospel as the brightest transcript of his divine, gracious, and holy nature." Marsden dedicated his life to missions that he believed were "in the hands of a wise Providence, capable of doing infinite good."[5] But these hopes and expectations hinged on a converted populace. Achieving this goal required a responsive, active church that included both enslavers and abolitionists. Conversionism provided an expectation of emancipation, but also a challenge to meet the needs of the age through institutional development, organization, and ultimately social transformation. Each stage of this progression shaped the worlds of American antislavery. By foregrounding ideas of religious conversion and religious purification, we can begin to understand the problem of human bondage and its potential solutions, as did the men and women whose lives included both dreams of salvation and the nightmare of American slavery. A

5 Marsden, *Grace Displayed*, 214.