

# Slave Agency and Christianity in the United States South

Bachelor's Thesis

Jeske van Otten

Supervisor: Dr. J. van den Berk

**Radboud Universiteit**



## **Abstract**

Slave religion and slave rebellion were closely examined to find out to what extent Christianity can be considered as an instance of slave agency. Firstly, the concept of agency was explored and defined in relation to slavery. Specific significant religious practices were analyzed, which can all be understood or interpreted as examples of slave agency. Slave rebellion was defined as the most extreme form of slave agency. The role of religion was explored in three significant slave revolts, which all demonstrated to have religion at its core. Together, these findings suggest that Christianity can be considered as an instance of slave agency to a large extent.

**Keywords:** slavery, slave agency, religion, Christianity, slave rebellion, United States south

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## Introduction

*I'm so glad I got religion in time,*

*I'm so glad I got religion in time,*

*I'm so glad I got religion in time.*

*Oh mah Lawd, Oh mah Lawd, what shall ah do to be saved?*

Many sorrow songs like these were practiced by slaves on the southern plantations in the United States'. Like this one, a large number of them were religious songs. As the song already suggests ('I'm so glad I got religion in time') religion was a significant part of slave life. Regarded as nothing more than property, slaves were subject to their masters' will. Some aspects of slave life, however, might indicate they were able to exert some form of control over their life. Religion was one of these aspects.

Scholars have been discussing the role of religion in slavery for a long time. A lot of attention is centered on the importance of the role religion played in enabling slaves to survive their bondage. The approaches of scholars, however, have differed. In the mid-1900s Newbell Puckett was the main scholar writing about slaves' religion. His view was very Eurocentric, claiming that "the great mass of common Negro superstitions of today are of Continental origin" (584), thus saying African-American slaves copied their religion from Europeans. Although he does not focus much on this, he also describes religious songs and the Bible as important practices used by slaves to survive slavery. Later, in the 1970s, Albert Raboteau adapted this Eurocentric view by using slaves' African backgrounds to explain their religious practices, in his book *Slave Religion; the Invisible Institution*. He viewed slave religion more as a combination of African and European traditions, in which the practice could function as mental survival. Raboteau's work still serves as a fundamental role in the field of slave religion, which many contemporary scholars base their work on. In the 1990s and 2000s academic emphasis shifted more towards the role female slaves had in religion, and more attention was given to the nature of slaves' religion, its varieties, and how it represented survival. So, research shifted from being very Eurocentric towards acknowledging the importance of African religions more. Toyin Falola,

a Nigerian scholar, wrote an important work for the acknowledgement of the importance of African origins in slavery. In *The African Diaspora: Slavery, Modernity and Globalization* he offers an extensive history of the dispersion of millions of Africans to the Americas. Other scholars that have written key works on African-American religion are Dwight Hopkins and Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood. Throughout these works, attention has been placed on the role religion played in enabling slaves to endure slavery. Less focus, however, has been placed on to what extent it can be seen as more than simply a way to survive, but as a feature of autonomy or independence, as agency.

The concept of agency has a very extensive history of research. As early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the Enlightenment, questions about human free will arose. John Locke was the first to bring up the idea that people could act as agents of their own free will. With this idea of agency, the discussion of free will versus determinism was brought into the world. Philosopher Immanuel Kant provided the world with a theory in which free will and determinism are compatible. This discussion still endures. Michel Foucault is very influential in this field today. In *The Subject and Power*, he creates important ideas in relation to human power and freedom.

History has always been my main interest in the American Studies field. African-American history, in particular, fascinates me. Slavery is an extremely miserable chapter in the American history, of which the aftermath is still visible in some parts of contemporary society. Slaves' struggle for autonomy, independence and freedom is something that makes me raise questions. The relevance of it and my own interest, combined with my intrigue in philosophy and in human behavior in general, lead to the choice of this topic. As explained above, there has been much research on slave religion, but less focus has been on religion as an instance of slave agency. Therefore, my research will fill a gap and be a good addition to previous research. I am going to research the following question; to what extent can the practice of Christianity be considered as an instance of slave agency in the United States South?

Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische have developed an extremely useful theory on agency in their paper "What is Agency?". This theory, which provides a threefold idea to the concept of agency, will form the framework of this thesis. Building on their theory on agency, I will explore in how far slaves experienced this concept through their religion. I will conduct literary research to come to an answer to my research question. Especially Albert Raboteau's

work will be important as it provides very central and crucial points in the field of slave religion, which is why it will also be fundamental in the discussion on slave religion in this thesis. On some points, however, Raboteau's work falls short. Especially on specific religious practices and agency, Raboteau's book is not elaborate or updated enough. I will use other works in those points, like Falola's or Hopkins', to make the discussion more complete. Next to these secondary sources, I will include several primary sources to complement this research. These will include interviews with former slaves conducted by the Federal Writers Project in 1936.

My research will start with a discussion on agency. What is slave agency? Concepts like freedom and power are important in this chapter. I will try to create an understanding of the concept which can function in this thesis. The next chapter will revolve around Christian slaves' religious practices. What daily religious practices did they have and what did these practices include? Furthermore, I will connect these practices to agency. To what extent can they be interpreted as aspects of slave agency? The last chapter will revolve around slave rebellion. I will explore rebellion as the ultimate expression of agency. By using case studies, I will research the role of religion in slave revolts. How did religion function in these rebellions?

## **Chapter 1 – Slave Agency**

The concept of agency is central to my research question, therefore it is important to first come to a definition which can function sufficiently in this thesis, both in general terms as in the context of slavery. First of all, I am going to explore the term of human agency, after that the term of power and then agency in the context of slavery, slave agency.

### **Agency**

Agency is a complex term, which in itself does not immediately give a clear direction in this thesis. Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische list several terms in the introduction of their research which agency is often associated with: “selfhood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity” (962). The Oxford Dictionary defines the term agency as the “ability or capacity to act or exert power; active working or operation; action, activity”. Although these terms and this definition give a sense as to what agency might include, they still do not give a concrete idea. Besides that, as John Walter states, the term of agency is often defined as “philosophical opposition to the condition of slavery” (115), which positions agency against bondage, but still fails to get to the core of the concept itself. Agency is an unclear term and still often debated by scholars, but I will try to set out the different ways of looking at it and provide the meaning as I will use it in this thesis.

The idea of ‘free will’ surfaced in the Enlightenment, when human beings were increasingly seen as rational creatures with the ability to make their own decisions, rather than creatures subject to God’s will. So, there has not always been the belief humans had the ability to do what they want. When the dominant thought was that human beings were destined to God’s will, a discussion about ‘agency’ and its meanings did not exist in the way it exists now. However, when this idea did surface, it immediately prompted a discussion to which a large part of the present-day discussion on agency can be traced back (Emirbayer and Mische 964). John Locke brought up “a new conception of agency that affirmed the capacity of human beings to shape the circumstances in which they live” (Emirbayer and Mische 965). This idea, originating in the Enlightenment, is still the basis of modern thinking about freedom (Emirbayer and Mische 965). Opposite to the idea of a free will, there was the idea of determinism. Determinism states that human beings have no free will, they cannot change anything because everything is already fixed. This means that the way people are or what happens during their life cannot be changed in

any way, not by any circumstance or event or by the persons themselves. This can be viewed in a religious way, by saying God has a plan for every human being and has pre-determined everyone's life. Next to this, there is what is called 'social determinism'. This viewpoint looks at determinism in a more social-cultural way, claiming that someone is born in a certain position in society and will remain in that position throughout his or her life. Determinism seems to make the existence of free will impossible. However, Immanuel Kant unites the ideas of free will and determinism, claiming they can co-exist. A simplified explanation of his theory is that the world where we live in has two layers, one in which we are determined, and one in which we do have a free will (Emirbayer and Mische 965). Essentially discussions on human agency have a long history.

When we step away from this philosophical analysis and move on to a somewhat more social approach, we arrive at a more concrete explanation of the term agency. According to Emirbayer and Mische, there is not a onefold understanding of agency, but it should be seen as a concept with several elements. There are the iterational element, the projective element and the practical-evaluative element to agency. In short, these elements include the past, future and the present. People "reactivate past patterns ... which helps to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time" (971). The projective element, the element which includes the future, "encompasses the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action" (971). The last element is "the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments ... of presently evolving situations" (971). According to Emirbayer and Mische people act the way they do through a combination of these three factors which are constantly cooperating. It is an interplay between "habit, imagination and judgement" (970) which makes people agents of their own will and gives them a feeling of autonomy.

Although Emirbayer and Mische claim their explanation is very practical, the term agency might still remain vague. In order to come to a clearer explanation, I will delve into two other concepts before moving on to slave agency. Two other concepts which are important to agency, are power and freedom (Millward 195). A condition to be an 'agent' seems to be that one is free and able to experience freedom. As stated above, the Oxford Dictionary says agency is 'the ability to exert power'. But what is meant by power and freedom?

## **Power**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines power as “the ability to act or affect something strongly; physical or mental strength; might; vigor, energy; effectiveness”. Michel Foucault is the leading scholar on theories about power. In “The Subject and Power” he creates a theory on power. Foucault states that “the term ‘power’ designates relationships between partners” (786). He defines the exercise of power as “a mode of action upon the action of others” (791) and this can either be positive or negative. When it includes governing something (politics, children, elderly, etc.), it includes relationships with free subjects and can be regarded as positive (790). Generally, power is more associated with negativity. Foucault claims that a power relation is negative when the subject is less free. When the subject is not free at all, a power relation does not exist; “slavery is not a power relationship when a man is in chains” claims Foucault (790). However, this does not completely apply to slavery in the south of the United States. Although slaves were chained or locked up as punishment sometimes, they were put to work all day and therefore free of chains the majority of time. So, according to Foucault’s theory there existed some form of a power relationship among slaves and their masters in the American south.

Power is a “renunciation of freedom” (788), so power excludes freedom according to Foucault. If this is the case, and if we view agency as ‘the ability to exert power’, one has to be free to be able to exert power, “freedom [is] the condition for the exercise of power” (790). If we would then say slaves are human beings who are not free, that would mean slaves would not be able to experience agency. However, a closer examination of the concept of freedom and freedom in the context of slavery shows that this can imply something else.

## **Freedom**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines freedom as: “The state or fact of being free from servitude, constraint, inhibition, etc.; liberty”. Foucault defines it as “individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized” (790). Looking at these definitions, slaves definitely did not have freedom. They were not free from servitude, as they were forced to do work. They were also not able to behave or react in several ways, as they were forced to do what their master said and if they did not, they would be severely punished. However, this is looking at freedom in an absolute way. The claim that enslaved people could experience freedom in this

way cannot be argued. However, it can be claimed that slaves experienced freedom to some extent within the boundaries of slavery. Jessica Millward shows in an account of different slavery studies, that different scholars argue that slaves could experience, or at least imagine freedom in different ways. For example, Damian Pargas puts much emphasis on the slave family (Millward 198). Pargas reasons that “manifestations of freedom were ... defined by access to family” (Millward 198). Family enabled a sense of freedom and “served as the cornerstone to forming a collective identity” (Millward 198). The notion of family as an instance of slave agency can also be explained through the three elements of agency as Emirbayer and Mische explained. A person often identifies him or herself through their family, the family that raised them and has lived with them for decades. Family can also give a purpose in someone’s life, a reason to live on and to have faith in the future. The institution of slave family helped to make judgements in the present, as a family could set certain values and morals. Besides family, Pargas claims the cultivation of slaves’ own crops also gave a sense of freedom. They could feed their families or sell the products and this could also be a way towards ‘real’ freedom (Millward 198). This feeling of autonomy is important in the idea of ‘freedom’ and thus also in the concept of agency. Millward states that “the idea that freedom was not an abstraction; freedom [could be] experienced” (198).

### **Slave Agency**

What is then enslaved agency? Before the 1960s the “dehumanizing aspects” of slavery were emphasized and slaves were automatically victimized by that (Palmié xvii). Scholars mostly viewed slaves as human beings with no influence or say in their life whatsoever, subject to the will of their masters and therefore not as agents in any way. However, a shift in the approach of historians started to occur slowly. Already in 1944 Ralph Ellison posed the question: how can a people “live and develop for over three hundred years simply by *reacting*? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them?” (qtd. in Palmié xvii). Ellison posed this question long before other scholars were concerned with this matter. He was an African American writer, therefore more involved and integrated in the question. Slowly, more historians began to be occupied with Ellison’s question and they were increasingly confronted with the dilemma; could they explain slaves’ life by describing them as mere victims or was there more to it? It was during the 1970s that an increasing number of works were published in which slaves were recognized as agents and as being able to “create themselves out of what they found around them” as Ellison already

stated. Slavery research “switched from the passive voice into the active voice” (Palmié xvii), meaning the view of slaves changed from mere helpless victims to actors. This switch raised many new questions. If slaves had some sort of control, in what way and in which elements of their lives could this be observed?

Scholars have shaped the idea of slave agency in different ways. As said above, Damian Pargas has looked at slave families. According to Pargas the slave family gave a sense of freedom, and as I explained, freedom is tied to agency. Many scholars have also connected the task system to agency. In this labor system, which existed in some states, slaves were assigned a certain amount of work each day after which they could do something for themselves. This could include working the land, hunting, fishing, or other work for their family. The ability to determine their own activities to some extent, gave them a feeling of control, of agency (Morgan 567). These are ways scholars have looked at slave agency before. I want to explore religion as aspect of slave agency. As explained in the introduction, there has been research on slave religion and its different aspects, but not as much as on religion as a part of slave agency.

The idea of slave agency, as it will be used in this thesis, does not mean the ability to exert power or the condition of absolute freedom, as both of these were not possible or absent in the life of slaves. However, agency will be considered as it exists within the limits of slavery. It involves the slaves’ feeling of autonomy. As is explained by Johnson, slave agency is strongly associated with and connected to slave resistance, and therefore resistance is also very important. As Johnson states “cultural autonomy has been seen as in-and-of-itself a form of resistance to slavery” (118) and “through employing shared cultural forms - arguments, prayers, fables, etc. - enslaved people flourished even in their slavery, and set about forming the alliances through which they helped one another resist it” (119). Christianity is more than just a cultural form, but parts of it can be considered as part of culture and it was believed in and practiced by many slaves. In this thesis, I will use a number of aspects of slave agency in order to test them against religion and to explore in how far agency is executed through religion. As already mentioned, autonomy is one of them. To what extent did several aspects of religion give slaves autonomy or at least a ‘feeling’ of power? The other aspect is freedom. What features gave slaves a feeling of freedom? A major part and the most obvious part of slave agency is resistance. To what extent did religion provide a basis for resistance and even rebellion? The three elements of agency as

stated by Emirbayer and Mische will also form an important component in exploring religion as an instance of slave agency. In the next chapter I will look at slaves' religious practices and see in how far these included the aforementioned aspects.

## **Chapter 2 – African American Slave Religion**

By far the largest part of American slaves was Christian and only a small percentage held other religions, only an estimated 10% was Muslim for example (Raboteau 46). I will therefore focus on Christianity and when talking about religion in this thesis, I am referring to the Christian religion. Although conversion of slaves to Christianity was somewhat controversial in the first years of slave trade, it became more widespread at the time of the American Revolution. The conversion to Christianity did not mean original African religious traditions faded completely. Slaves managed to preserve their traditions to some extent and created a more distinct African American religion through combining them with Christianity. This African American Christianity included practices which slaves performed even within the severely limited space they had in their life. In this chapter I will explore the conversion of slaves to Christianity, their original African religions and the religious practices of African American slaves. What main daily religious practices did slaves develop as part of a distinct African American religion and in how far did these separate practices contain elements of slave agency?

### **The Conversion of Slaves to Christianity**

Slaves who were imported into the British colonies (so before 1808; the abolition of slave trade) usually came from the west coast of Central Africa. These people came from tribes that already had highly developed religions. African tribal religions played a vital role in people's daily life. Interestingly Christianity was used by many to justify the slave trade as it was believed that these 'pagans' were being 'saved' (Raboteau 96). Despite these beliefs, converting slaves was controversial during the first hundred years of slave trade. Various elements of Christianity were in direct contradiction to the idea of slavery, hence conversions were not as widespread in the beginning of slavery, in the southern colonies, as they later would be. First of all, there was the Biblical belief that Christians should not hold other Christians captive, meaning if a slave was converted he or she should be freed. In addition, it was feared slaves would regard themselves equal to their masters once converted which could lead to resistance or even rebellion (Raboteau 102). Only in 1729 it was officially ruled that conversion did not have any consequences regarding a slave's legal and social status (Smythe 492-3). Secondly, it was feared that conversion would interfere with the labor system, as slaves were supposed to work on Sundays instead of attending mass. There were also more practical explanations for the lack of conversions in the early years of slavery. For example, slaves were often unable to understand

any Christian writing, since they could often not read in English. This combined with the fact that it was very hard for missionaries to travel the country for conversion due to the undeveloped infrastructure and the predominantly economic priorities of the planters (Smythe 493; Raboteau 98), made conversion very sparsely in the beginning of slave trade.

Around the American Revolution, Christianity started to spread more among slaves. One of the developments that made the religion more widespread was the booming cotton industry. As the demand for cotton grew, the demand for labor grew and therefore the number of slaves in the colonies increased immensely which made the concentration of slaves on plantations rise. This made it easier for missionaries to reach the slaves and convert them (Smythe 494). Additional to this, was the growing number of American born slaves at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which meant that both language and cultural boundaries started to fade more and more (Raboteau 149). Distinct from these practical developments, was “the coming of the evangelical Christian bodies” (Smythe 494). The Great Awakening played a pivotal role in the spread of the evangelical religions. This revivalist movement preached salvation by Jesus Christ and was heavily focused on the personal element of religion (Raboteau 128-32). The Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian religions were focused on converting slaves. These evangelical religions were very attractive to slaves for several reasons as, generally, they were simple and personal religions. To become a Baptist or Methodist the only thing necessary was to “accept Christ as personal Savior” (Smythe 495). This made the religions very accessible to slaves, in contrast to the complicated articles and rituals they had to comprehend in order to become an Anglican (Smythe 495). The Awakening focused on “the inward conversion experience, and tended to de-emphasize the outward status of men” (Raboteau 148), meaning the status of slaves or their skin color did not matter in the conversion and the focus was “to *feel* personally that Christ had died for them as individuals” (Raboteau 148). During and after the Awakening the membership of especially the Baptist and the Methodist denominations grew immensely (Raboteau 131). Slaves were more open and ready for Christianity because they “already had a highly developed religious lives” (Smythe 492). Overall the belief that conversion was positive for slaves emerged, because they were “taught to serve out of Christian love and duty” according to planters (qtd. in Raboteau 104). Eventually, planters used Christianity to justify slavery *and* to make slaves more obedient.

## **The African Religious Traditions**

As I mentioned above, African people who were captured and brought into slavery, already had highly developed religions. Although some African people had already been in contact with Christianity or even been converted to it in Africa by European missionaries, the vast majority of them held traditional indigenous religions and firstly encountered Christianity in the New World (Frey and Wood 33/36). The slaves mostly came from the West coast of Africa, a region with several hundred different religions. As Raboteau explains, all these religions varied significantly and even differed from village to village. The basic principles and patterns, however, showed strong similarities and fundamentally the religions can be regarded in the same way (Raboteau 7). What has to be taken into account is that most things we know about these religions come from European accounts, and is therefore probably incomplete or at least biased, as Frey and Wood state in the introduction of their book *Come Shouting to Zion*. However, these missionary accounts are the only ones available and therefore the only option in trying to understand the indigenous religions.

Generally, African religions believed in one High God, and numerous 'lesser Gods', which varied locally. The High God was perceived as the "Supreme Creator" of everything, but the people themselves are more in contact with or worship the lesser Gods more (Raboteau 8-9). In Yorubaland (a region in West Africa), for example, Oludamare was the high supreme God, but he controlled the world through lesser Gods who people worshipped more. These lesser Gods were often thought to be represented by or embodied in natural elements, such as rocks, trees or a rainbow (Frey and Wood 11). Ancestors are very important in these African religious traditions as it was believed "they are born again in their descendants" (Raboteau 12). It is also for this reason funerals are very important and it was of foremost importance that these happened according rituals, as the dead would be born again. Besides that, dead ancestors had the power or influence to "bless or curse the living" (Frey and Wood 12), which also explains why they were respected and worshipped so much. Older people were seen as closer to these worshiped ancestors and therefore held a privileged position in these societies. Magic is "an integral part of religious life for many African peoples" (Raboteau 13). Natural powers were important, but above that spiritual powers, which were often seen as the cause and solution to illness. African religions were preoccupied with the effects of evil, such as diseases and natural disasters (Frey and Wood 15). Worshipping the gods and ancestors was considered important and done through

extensive rituals and sacrifices. Dancing and singing are among the most significant characteristics of African religions and part of these rituals; “dancing, drumming and singing play a constant and integral part in the worship of the gods and the ancestors” (Raboteau 15). It is of no surprise that African religions are often called “danced religions” (Raboteau 15). Dancing, singing and drumming was of utmost importance in the rituals and sacrifices. One ritual in which these come to the foreground is possession. During this ritual, a devotee was possessed by a God. Each god or spirit had his or her own rhythm, song or dance. The god or spirit entered the devotee and this would manifest itself by the dance and rhythm (Frey and Wood 13-4).

By highlighting some of these characteristics and beliefs, I am still not close to a complete or full account of African religions. These were highly developed and too complex for a limited scope like this thesis, and as I mentioned any account of African religions is incomplete in some way. However, it does give a general view which is important to understand slaves’ daily religious practices. Part of the system of slavery, was the attempt to completely eradicate all parts of African culture. If this did not happen, it was feared the culture would form a basis for resistance or rebellion as slaves could form one front. A major part of African culture was religion. Despite the attempts to eradicate African religion coupled with the increasing conversions to Christianity, slaves managed to preserve their own traditions and together with Christianity merge them into a distinct religion. Although slave trade was officially abolished in 1808, Hopkins argues the trade continued unofficially until 1865, and therefore the African traditions continued to have an influence (115). This development of their own belief system, and therefore the unwillingness to be subject to the religion their masters wanted, is already an instance of agency on itself. This point will be elaborated further in the next part of this chapter.

### **Religious Practices of Slaves and Slave Agency**

Many of the aforementioned characteristics and beliefs were not part of Christianity to which the majority of slaves were converted. Obviously, these African traditions could never stay intact in a completely new society, however when looking at religion in the life of slaves, we can see many of these return in some sort or shape and they developed into new and distinct African-American traditions (Hopkins 135). By mentioning some of the African religious traditions, slave religion is better to be understood. In exploring Christianity as a part of slave agency, there are a few practices I want to discuss. In his 1901 essay *Faith of Fathers*, W.E.B DuBois states the

slave religion existed of three elements, the preacher, the music and the frenzy or shouting (singing), as Raboteau recalls in his book (266). I will include these three elements in this discussion as they were significant practices in slaves' daily life and therefore valuable in this discussion. I will add two more practices to these, as it can be argued those three are not the only important practices. I will add secret meetings and dancing as elements, since they have been defined as significant practices by various scholars (Raboteau 35; Hopkins 135; Falola 204). I will explore these practices after which I will view them in the light of the characteristics of slave agency as I have explained in the first chapter. In this part of the chapter I will use interviews with former slaves that were held as part of the Federal Writers Project (FWP), from 1936 to 1938 (National humanities Center, NHC).

### *'Secret Churches'*

First of all, we have to consider that part of slave religion happened in secret. Raboteau's work is called *Slave Religion; The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, a title that already indicates this secret or 'invisible' aspect. Though slaves were converted to Christianity, this did not mean masters allowed them to practice this religion openly. In some cases, slaves were allowed to go to church, but only under supervision of their master or some other white person, as former slaves recall in the FWP interviews (NHC). Whenever slaves were allowed to go to church, they had to sit in the back and sit on the floor, as former slave Sarah Douglas explains. The preachers would preach to the white people first, after which they would address the slaves saying they should always obey their masters, should not steal or not try to run away (NHC par. 2). So, if slaves were allowed to attend church, this was mostly focused on controlling them, and not on the actual religion. The masses were meant for free white people, and could generally not fulfill slaves' religious needs. Next to the slaves that were allowed to attend church, there were many slaves that could not practice religion at all. Both aforementioned reasons made slaves develop a secret religious life. As Raboteau puts it; "the religious experience of the slaves was by no means fully contained in the visible structures of the institutional church" (212).

At some point, this secret religious life was so highly developed, that it even grew into what could be called 'secret churches'. Slaves would meet up somewhere outside of the plantation during the night and held their own religious gatherings. Slaves would call these gatherings "stealin' the meetin'" (Hopkins 135). Former slave Peter Randolph recalled:

“Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamp, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place. ... This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees and bending them in the direction of the selected spot “(qtd. in Raboteau 217)

Next to gathering in a distant place in the woods, slaves used several techniques to avoid discovery by their masters. They would hang up pieces of cloths and wet them or speak over a vessel of water to drown the sound of the prayers and songs. As former slave James Southall recalled “dey would take cooking pots and put over dey mouths so de white folks couldn’t hear ’em” (NHC par. 5). Sometimes they would just pray and sing very softly (Hopkins 137). During the secret meetings, slaves would hold prayers and sing songs. Often these would cover topics such as the future, pain and relief. In particular freedom was a common subject during these secret meetings. Some slaves believed freedom to be nearby, “I know that one day we’ll be free and if we die before that time our children will live to see it” (qtd. in Hopkins 137). Others only saw it as part of an unrealistic utopian world (Raboteau 218).

The secret meetings or churches allowed slaves to develop their own religion, “in the secrecy of the quarters or the seclusion of the brush arbors the slaves made Christianity truly their own” (Raboteau 212). Explaining secret churches through the elements of Emirbayer and Mische as mentioned in chapter 1 is useful to explore slave agency in these meetings. Through the gatherings slaves created their own identity, or became aware of their own identity, which is a major part in the iterational element. Hopkins says the meetings helped slaves to “recreate the self” (137), so create an identity. The projective element is also present, as the meetings reminded slaves there might be a life outside of slavery. As former slave Randolph said, during the meetings “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!’” (qtd. in Raboteau 217). The meetings brought hope and prospects into slaves’ lives. In the prayers during the meetings, slaves were reminded of the fact that slavery was evil and that the evil would finally be punished, it made them judge the situation they were in. This is crucial in the practical-evaluative element. The secret religious life gave slaves some sort of autonomy as they could hold their own meetings and determine what they did during those meetings. The feeling of autonomy slaves gained with the meetings made them into agents in their own way. Besides the element of

autonomy, the meetings also gave the slaves positive emotions. After the meetings, slaves would “generally feel quite happy” (Raboteau 217). So, we find many elements of agency in the secret meetings. The fact remains, however, that the meetings were secret and therefore the slaves were very restricted in what they could do during the gatherings and were constantly in danger of the consequences of being discovered.

Although these secret meetings are likely to have been widespread, as we can recall from former slaves or fugitive slaves' accounts, there was also a considerable number of masters who let their slaves practice religion by allowing them to preach, read the bible, dance and sing, elements which I will discuss now.

### *Dancing*

In Christianity dancing was mostly seen as heathen, something which was seen as “secular forms of amusement” (Raboteau 66). In African traditions, as explained before, dancing was much more than amusement and a very significant part of the tradition. The part of African religions and African American religions that shows most similarities or “continuities” is the “style of performance in ritual action” (Raboteau 35). This means that the way the slaves acted in rituals had strong resemblance to the original African rituals, especially the dancing and singing during these practices. Frey and Wood state that especially in the areas where the slave trade remained the longest and where the slave concentration was highest, dancing was most pervaded in slave religion. This can be seen in the American south, where African derived religious dancing was widespread (145).

Most African originated dancing is derived from Orisa dancing. Orisa is a lesser god that represents the high God in the Yoruba religion. The dancing is very much based on experience and emotions (Falola 187-8). It also has greatly influenced Christianity, both in dancing and singing (Falola 204). A common form of a religious dancing ritual was “ring shout”, which also included what DuBois called ‘frenzy’ and believed to be one of three elements of slave religion. This ritual was mostly performed after prayer meetings. Although not many sources are available, it is most likely slaves stood in a circle and moved in a circular motion, clapping their hands, stamping their feet and singing or praying in a shouting manner. One of the first accounts of this ritual is most likely that of John Watson from around 1819. He wrote that “with every song so sung, they have a sinking of one or other leg of the body alternately; producing an audible sound

of the feet at every step” (qtd. in Frey and Wood 146). Another account of religious dancing from around the same, broadly concurs. A circular movement, drum sounds, clapping of the hands and stamping of the feet were all features included in it (Frey and Wood 146).

The religious singing and dancing made the slaves more conscious of their “cultural independence” (Frey and Wood 148). It also gave them their own identity as Falola states, “through music and dance Africans have been able to reinscribe their Africanness and identity in hostile, racialized environments” (187). The iterational element of agency can be tied to this practice, as slaves used their old traditions and created their own identity with it. They did not give in to the Christianity as their master wanted, but created something different. The dancing and singing gave slaves cultural independence, an instance of independence which can be viewed in the light of agency. Their bodies were still captured but at least they had some part of themselves, their cultural identity, which they could regard independent from their masters. As is stated by Toyin Falola in *The African Diaspora*; “[Music and dance] have served as *agencies* of resistance ... during slavery” (187). Essentially, the dancing slaves practiced was so distinct that it gave them the feeling of having their own cultural identity, or independence. This notion can be regarded as part of agency.

### *Singing (music)*

Singing was often practiced together with dancing, and therefore some part of it is already included under the ‘dancing’ heading. As can be seen from the quote from Falola, next to dancing, music was a large part of slaves’ identity. Singing could take place as part of secular amusement or entertainment, in which the songs were often light and happy (Falola 192). More often, however, these songs were part of religious traditions and more heavy and serious in content. W.E.B. DuBois was the first to refer to these songs as “sorrow songs” in his work *The Souls of Black Folks* and called them “the greatest gift of the Negro people [to the nation]” (168). Despite their names, these songs did not only include despair and sorrows, but were often an expression of faith and hope (Komunyakaa 282). These sacred songs were mostly practiced while slaves were doing work in the fields. While singing these songs, slaves timed their labor to the songs’ rhythm and tempo, and this helped them to get through another tough day of hard work. Next to this practical role the songs fulfilled, there was the spiritual role. The slaves expressed their faith in the songs. DuBois argued already in his 1903 book that these songs had a double

meaning and that under the religious lyrics rests a deeper political meaning (Komunyakaa 282). In his essay *Sorrow Songs and Flying Away: Religious Influence on Black Poetry*, Yusuf Komunyakaa illustrates this idea explaining that “although sacred, the lyrics of these sorrow songs are nonetheless political, coded with an astute awareness of the temporal struggle for survival, the need for protest” (283). He mentions the example of *Mary Don You Weep*, a famous sorrow song which is still influential today. These are the two middle verses of the song:

*Mary, don you weep an Marthie don you moan,  
Mary, don you weep an Marthie don you moan;  
Pharaoh's army got drown-ded.*

*Oh Mary don you weep. I think every day an I wish I could,  
Stan on de rock whar Moses stood.  
Oh Pharaoh's army got drown-ded.  
Oh Mary don you weep.*

The first line refers to the biblical story of Mary of Bethany who lost her brother Lazarus. Jesus was moved by her weeping and raised the man from death again. The line reminded slaves to keep on believing and have faith. *Pharaoh's army died* refers to the Biblical story of Jews that were enslaved in Egypt. Moses led these Jews out of bondage, and Pharaoh's army went after them to recapture them. The army drowned in the sea that God had just parted for the Jews to cross. It reminded the slaves that even though they were in this situation now, they had hope for a better future and in the end God would punish the wrong (Komunyakaa 283). This is an example of how a religious song had a deeper meaning and included a form of protest. Songs that were too obvious or clear in their message, however, were often restricted as former slave Leah Garret recalls that “dey didn't 'low us to sing such song as ‘We Shall Be Free’” (NHC par. 7). Nevertheless, Komunyakaa states that “the music gave elastic voice to the desire for emancipation either in this world or the next” (284), meaning that the sorrow songs were more than just a religious practice. It did not only help slaves to survive, but it also gave them a voice and hope for a better future. This faith in a future outside of slavery, shows that the practice of

singing can be viewed in the light of the projective element. In that way, the religious songs can be regarded as an instance of agency.

### *Slave Preachers*

As a core element of slave religion, DuBois mentioned the slave preacher. The slave preacher was the most important person in slave community life and had significant influence on this community. It was the closest to a leadership position a slave could ever have. The role of slave preacher was two-sided. On the one hand, they were the ones that brought the religion to the slaves. Preachers were the ones to lead the baptisms, funerals and weddings of the slaves, all very special rituals. It is fair to say he gained some sort of authority in the slave community. Black preachers made preaching their own by “vivid imagery and dramatic delivery” (Raboteau 235). Sermons often included a buildup to singing shouting and dancing. Some preachers learned to read, but illiteracy did not necessarily form an obstacle for preachers. On the other hand, the preachers were in a very difficult situation as they were always carefully watched by their masters. They were very restricted in what they could preach and had to follow their masters’ orders. If they preached something that could be perceived as promoting equality they would face serious consequences. As former slave Leah Garrett recalled: “Dey let de colored preachers preach but dey give ’em almanacs to preach out of” (NHC par. 7). Often they were criticized for being “the master’s mouthpiece”, meaning they simply preached whatever their master told them to preach (Raboteau 232-7). Looking at the slave preacher from this viewpoint, black preaching was clearly not a part of agency. It was just a way for masters to get their message across and keep the slaves content, but it did not give slaves any autonomy or sense of freedom. However, many preachers also preached during the secret meetings, which gave them more independence to talk about freedom and equality. Slaves understood preachers were restricted in what they could say, and often did not see him as the master’s mouthpiece but as someone who was chosen by God to get the word across (Smythe 496). The preacher brought the religion *to* the slaves. Their stories and prayers gave slaves hope and faith. The fact that some preachers learned to read and write, was very important, which we will also see in the next chapter in the case of Nat Turner.

In this chapter, we have seen that, despite their conversion to Christianity, slaves managed to keep some of their African traditions and developed these into a distinct African American

religion. Daily practices, as I have defined them, which were part of that religion were secret meetings, dancing, singing and preaching. As I have explored, agency can be interpreted to be present, at least to some extent, in all of these daily practices. In the next chapter, the analysis will go beyond these daily practices and focus on what could be called the ultimate expression of slave agency, rebellion.

### **Chapter 3 – Slave Rebellion**

In this chapter, the analysis will go beyond the daily religious practices of slaves and will focus on slave rebellion. Discussing slave rebellion is valuable in this thesis because it is the most concrete quest or fight for freedom, and is therefore very important in this discussion on slave agency. I will explore slave rebellion as an expression of agency. Since rebellion and agency are so interconnected, it is important in this thesis to research the role of religion in slave rebellion. The question in this chapter is therefore twofold: To what extent is slave rebellion an instance of slave agency and how did religion play a role in slave rebellion? Firstly, I will discuss slave rebellion, and slave rebellion as an expression of slave agency by using elements of agency as explained in chapter 1. In this chapter I will use several case studies and explore the role of religion in those rebellions. I understand that on each of these case studies alone a whole thesis could be written, however, I think it is useful to look at these rebellions and zoom in particularly on the aspect of religion in them. From there, a more general conclusion in this chapter can be drawn.

#### **Slave Resistance: Rebellion and Agency**

Agency and resistance are closely associated. Resistance to slavery by slaves, in any form or way, is in essence an expression of agency. As I mentioned in chapter 1, cultural autonomy on itself was a form of resistance. With different cultural forms, slaves shaped their own identity, as we have also seen in the previous chapter. Here, I will discuss other, more direct forms of resistance. These direct forms of resistance saw slaves express their dissatisfaction and discontent towards the system they were captured in. As we will see, the form and level of resistance differed and therefore also the level of agency associated with it.

Resistance was something some slaves practiced every day, but usually in a covert manner, meaning that slaves performed this outside of the master's awareness. Small, daily acts of resistance were often performed in the form of "crime' against property" (Franklin and Schweninger 2). There are numerous examples of such acts. Slaves would damage boats, tools or wagons, set barns and stables on fire, abuse livestock or steal masters' money or possessions. Some would sabotage by working slowly, damaging the crops or faking illness. All these acts interfered with the system. The frequency of these acts varied from plantation to plantation, depending on the size of the plantation and the consequences slaves faced after such acts.

However, in general the acts were most likely widespread (Franklin and Schweninger 2-4). These day to day acts of resistance were meant to show slaves' discontent about the situation they were in. They were supposed to disrupt the system. It could be argued that these were an act of agency at least to some extent, because they show that slaves condemned the system they were in. This means that they made a normative judgement about their situation, which is included in the practical-evaluative element as Emirbayer and Mische have defined. However, these were not acts that openly fought for freedom.

One step further than these actions, was open individual defiance. This often meant slaves openly refused to work or to obey orders. This would often lead to “verbal and physical confrontations” (Franklin Schweninger 6). A large number of slaves went on the run each year. In *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*, winner of the 2000 Lincoln Prize, John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger present the history of slaves that resisted the system by running away. Fleeing could only happen under certain circumstances, as Franklin and Schweninger explain. Especially “the breakdown of management” of plantations, after slaves had been sold to southern plantations or had been severely punished, were circumstances under which slaves were more prone to run away (47-8). A large group of these runaway slaves did never intend to run away permanently, but just wanted to escape for a few hours. Slaves that did want to run away permanently refused to submit, and wanted an escape, a flight to freedom. Although a large number of runaway slaves were recaptured, the act of escaping still shows many elements of agency. It shows they felt sufficient autonomy to take the chance and run away on their own. Slaves were aware that running away, like any other form of resistance, would be met with cruel punishment. Therefore, slaves were agents in this case, because they made a normative judgement about their life (practical-evaluative element) and were aware of the possible consequences of their action, but still took the risk because they believed in a better future (projective element).

Although running away can already be seen as a clear form of resistance, rebellion was the most overt and extreme form of defiance utilized by slaves. The most straightforward answer to ‘what was a slave rebellion?’ would be; a fight for freedom. However, there is a lot more to this ultimate quest for freedom. Early slave revolts mostly sought escape and freedom, while later ones had an added political dimension (Genovese xxi). In *Rebellion to Revolution* Eugene

Genovese lists several circumstances under which slave revolts in the southern colonies were more likely to happen. Among these were; a distant or impersonal master-slave relationship, wherever an economic crisis or famine occurred, plantations that had slave numbers exceeding one hundred, where blacks outnumbered whites or African born slaves outnumbered American born slaves and where there was the opportunity for runaway slaves to form a colony that was stronger than the plantation regime (11-2). There were many more circumstances which might have spurred rebellions, and often it was a combination of these that made slaves revolt (Genovese 12). In the south of the United States plantations were smaller compared to those in the West Indies, and whites still represented the vast majority, which made revolts there less likely to happen there than in other areas. As early as 1943, however, Herbert Aptheker counted over 200 conspiracies and actual revolts in the southern colonies between the early 1600s and the start of the Civil War, in his book *American Negro Slave Revolts*. Among these plots and rebellions are the ones I will discuss later.

Slaves did not revolt individually, but would conspire and form a group with other slaves. A revolt on one's own would obviously be knocked down immediately. These conspiracies were formed highly secretly. Therefore, the extreme dangers of writing down plots, along with widespread illiteracy, means there is a lack of primary evidence documenting these conspiracies (Franklin and Schweninger 12-4). Despite this, it is highly likely a "remarkable communication network" existed among slaves which helped these conspiracies develop (Franklin and Schweninger 13). According to Marion Kilson, slave revolts in the United States can be separated into three categories which all have different methods and goals, and as I mentioned earlier some revolts were not only aimed at freedom but had an extra political dimension to them. Revolts can be classified as "systematic or rational revolts, unsystematic or vandalistic revolts and situational or opportunistic revolts" (175). The first type, the systematic and rational revolt, was aimed at "overthrowing the slave system itself" and eventually building their own state. Among these were Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey, whose conspiracies envisaged gaining control of a city with their revolt. I will discuss these plots later. This first type of revolts required a systematic scheme. Careful planning often started months in advance, but this had the negative consequence of increasing the chance of being discovered by the plantation management (Kilson 176). The second type Kilson identified, was an unsystematic, often random attempt at "destr[oying] slave holders and their property" (176). The spontaneous character of these revolts meant they were

more likely to reach the stage of action, but simultaneously the lack of a clear goal often meant an increased chance of being defeated and recaptured (Kilson 176-8). Nat Turner's rebellion would be classified as this type 2. The third type particularly aimed at escaping slavery. Similar to type 1, the method was carefully planned, but like type 2, it often happened spontaneously (Kilson 178).

Now I have created a general understanding of slave rebellion, its circumstances and goals, let us move on to an analysis of rebellion in relation to agency. In what way can slave rebellion be interpreted to contain the elements of slave agency? First of all, the element of autonomy. All categories of rebellions include an attempt of gaining power. The three types all aim to gain power over one's own life again, (re)gaining one's freedom, which is the most obvious and probably also the main reason for rebellion. Moreover, both type 1 and 2 seem to aim at something more than just freedom. In type 1, slaves tried to build their own state and in type 2 slaves attempted to gain control over the plantation. In other words, autonomy is a dominant feature in all revolts. All three elements of agency of Emirbayer and Mische seem to be present in all three types of rebellion. As they state, people can be considered agents of their own will when there is an interplay between "habit, imagination and judgement" (971), which clearly is the case in rebellions. The practical-evaluative element can be found in the planning of the revolt. Slaves had to make a practical estimate as to what the risks were and how best to overcome these. Besides that, the very fact that they decided to revolt, shows they made a normative judgement on the situation they were in. Although I will explore this in more detail later, habits in the form of religion and certain traditions played a role both in the ideology and in planning of the rebellion. This shows the iterational element was also included. The projective element was to be found in the imaginations of the rebels. Whether it would be only freedom, or overthrowing the system, the rebellions all had a goal for the future. Regardless of the success or effectiveness of the revolts, they included all these elements and a clear interplay between them took place. All elements as I defined in the first chapter exist in these revolts and therefore I would claim slave rebellion is the most extreme and direct form of slave agency. In chapter one I mentioned that I would explore agency as it existed within the limits of slavery. Rebellion, however, went in some cases even beyond these limits. Slaves tried to win back control, and in some cases even tried to gain power, thus crossed the boundaries of the system. However, this

conclusion does not account for the relation of religion and agency, therefore I will discuss the role of religion in rebellions now

### **Slave Rebellion and Religion: Case Studies**

As we have seen in the beginning of the chapter, there are many circumstances under which a slave revolt was more likely to happen. These circumstances spurred a rebellion. Genovese states that up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century religion provided ideology for rebellion, and notes that revolutionary elements were especially contained in Christianity (28). If rebellion is the ultimate expression of slave agency, it is highly important to discuss the role of religion in it in this thesis. But how did religion function in these rebellions? Generally, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner's rebellions are considered to be among the most important slave revolts of the United States' history (Genovese 4; Henderson 193; Wilmore), which is why I will look at these particular revolts.

#### *Gabriel's Conspiracy*

Gabriel was a slave of Thomas Prosser, whose plantation was just outside the city of Richmond (Newman 6). Gabriel had a special position as a slave, since he was a blacksmith who had learned to read and write. He was often hired out to different places, leaving the plantation often and seeing many different places (Genovese 44). In the spring of 1800, he carefully planned his revolt together with some others, among them, his brother, Solomon (Schwarz 284). His plan was to completely destroy slavery in Virginia, by killing the plantation holders and taking hold of the city of Richmond. He wanted to make an agreement with any remaining slave holders for liberating those who were still enslaved. Gabriel envisioned an actual well-organized army to achieve all this, and himself as the self-proclaimed general. Although it is unclear how many slaves were involved in the conspiracy, Gabriel himself claimed he had about ten thousand men ready to fight for freedom. The original plan was to attack Richmond in the evening of August 30, 1800, but because of a storm the plan had to be cancelled. Before that evening, however, two slaves had already revealed the plans to their master. On September 12, the first five slaves involved were executed, and another 30 were to follow in the two weeks after. Gabriel himself escaped, but was captured and hanged on October 7. This was most likely the first well-planned, systematic conspiracy of slave rebellions in the United States (Wilmore 54-5). Newman argues in his essay *The World Turned Upside Down* that it is important to view Gabriel's conspiracy in the

light of other events and developments occurring at that time. Both the Haitian rebellion and the French revolution formed an inspiration and provided a model for Gabriel's plot. The undeclared war between the U.S and France, left Gabriel expecting to receive support of the French.

These aspects are important when considering the conspiracy, as Newman claimed. However, religion seems to play a pivotal role in the ideology and planning of this rebellion. As said above, Gabriel enjoyed the privilege of learning to read, which allowed him to become a fervent student of the Bible. Gabriel believed he was chosen by God to be "a deliverer of the people" and found various passages in the Bible which he believed referred to the slaves' right to stand up against their masters (Wilmore 54). Especially Judges 15 and the role of Samson in it were of importance to Gabriel (Wilmore 55):

"14 As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting. The Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. 15 Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men. ... 20 Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines".

In this part, Samson takes revenge on the Philistines for murdering his wife, by killing 1000 of them. Gabriel identified with Samson and saw himself as a modern-day Samson. This passage provided him with a justification for his plan. He would break free, murder the slave holders, and take power in the city of Richmond, like Samson did. Essentially, the Bible inspired Gabriel to organize the revolt.

#### *Denmark Vesey's Conspiracy*

In the same year as Gabriel's conspiracy, Denmark Vesey bought his freedom of his owner Captain Joseph Vesey after winning a lottery (Genovese 44; Wilmore 57). Denmark grew up as a slave on the island of St. Thomas, and at the age of 14 he was bought by the captain on one of his voyages in order to become his personal servant. For 17 or 18 years, he travelled the world together with his owner. This position gave him considerable more freedom than the average slave, and consequently, made him cultured and literate. After winning a lottery and buying his freedom for 600 dollars, he moved to Charleston, SC, to work as a carpenter (Johnson 916-7). In the next twenty years, he travelled much and studied many books. He also joined the

black Methodist Church. Around 1822 he began planning his revolt together with some others. His main companion was Gullah Jack, who was a native African priest. Their idea was to attack the Charleston arsenal, destroy the plantation houses, kill every white man they saw and finally seize the city of Charleston. The plan was set for June 16 1822. On May 25, however, one of the slaves involved could not contain himself and told his master. Within thirty days from then, 131 people were arrested. 37 were executed, among them Denmark Vesey. The others were either transported out of the state or the United States, or severely punished.

Like Prosser, Vesey was a fervent student of the Bible, and in addition to that he also preached the Bible. A passage of particular importance to him was Zechariah 14:

“A day of the Lord is coming, Jerusalem, when your possessions will be plundered and divided up within your very walls. I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, ... Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city. Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle”.

It is fairly clear how Vesey applied this passage to himself. He could take revenge towards the sinners and take the city of Charleston. He most likely also preached these passages in church meetings. Other passages, like Joshua 6 in which is spoken about “armed men”, were also important in Vesey’s justification for his rebellion (Wilmore 58). Like for Gabriel, the Bible was also an inspiration and justification for Vesey’s plans. As mentioned before, Vesey was a member of the black Methodist Church. This church, established in 1816, was used as a tool, both to preach the ideological thought behind the revolt and to recruit slaves. It served as a complex communication network. All main figures in the conspiracy were members of the black Methodist Church, be it of different congregations, and one of them even was a preacher (Wilmore 60). The church was immensely important in the conspiracy.

Vesey is often portrayed as “a religious man who melded the Christianity of Europe with the spiritual consciousness of Africa” (Johnson 915). Vesey spoke both in the language of Christianity and in African traditional language to his followers, making his appeal very “subtle and sophisticated” and also attractive to slaves who had not (yet) been converted to Christianity (Genovese 46). Vesey himself fulfilled the Christian part, and Gullah Jack provided the African appeal in the revolt. He instructed the slaves to hold a piece of crab claw in their mouths during

the revolt for example, or to wear charms (Wilmore 59). Together, they really created a distinct African-American religious approach to their plans, an approach that inspired many slaves to join the revolt. Vesey himself was a former slave, but inspired many slaves to join through the distinct religious touch to his conspiracy.

### *Nat Turner's Rebellion*

In the same year as Gabriel was executed and Denmark bought his freedom, Nathaniel Turner was born into slavery on a plantation in Southampton County, Virginia. Most things we know about Turner's own thoughts and religious views, come from *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. This book was written by Gray right after the rebellion, and is based on an interview he had with Turner just before he was executed. This is the only source available in trying to understand his motivation for the rebellion and therefore extremely important. What has to be taken into account however, is that Gray was a white lawyer with his own agenda. The interview was later used in court against Turner. Despite these limitations, the confessions have formed the basis for much of the research on the rebellion and simply cannot be neglected. In *Nat Turner* Eric Foner creates an extensive analysis of Turner's life and his rebellion. Foner argues that Turner might have inherited some of his parents' rebellious spirit. His mother had to be prevented from killing her son rather than seeing him grow up in slavery and his father escaped when Nat was still young (1). Nat's mother learned to read and write, and taught this to her young son (Foner 1; Lampley 25).

From the beginning, religion played an important role in Nat's life. His grandma, with whom he had a very close relationship, was extremely religious and spiritual and therefore spurred the religion in Nat. Furthermore, from an early age, his parents permeated him with the belief that he was brought on this earth with a certain mission and was "intended for some great purpose" (Foner 1; Lampley 25; Wilmore 64). This thought was shared by many people on the plantation, which caused Nat to have some sort of 'prestige' on the plantation (Foner 2). Not only fellow slaves, but also many whites thought Nat had "too much sense to be a slave" (Lampley 49). His owner, Benjamin Turner, was a Methodist and promoted religion on his plantation. Being one of the few who could read the Bible, combined with his strong beliefs and assumed status, made Nat into a popular preacher on the plantation. This placed him in an even more advantageous position, as he could often travel to other plantations and therefore had the platform

to gain influence among a large volume of slaves (Foner 2). His own strong beliefs and his influential position as a preacher “would serve as a catalyst for his insurrection” (Lampley 25).

As becomes clear from *The Confessions*, Nat saw “dreams, revelation, signs, scripture, and direct inspiration from God that guided him to rebel” (Lampley 41). A few extraordinary events that happened to Nat after 1825 gave direct rise for the rebellion. He claimed he received several signs in the form of characters on leaves, or blood streaming from a corn. One day while praying, a spirit said to him “Seek ye Kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you” (Foner 2; Lampley 49). According to Nat, this spirit continued to speak to him, expressing God’s will. After this sign he ran away into the woods, but returned after 30 days. He returned because the Spirit had told him to, and the good and evil needed a confrontation on earth in order to find the Kingdom of Heaven. After his return, he had another vision, this time of blacks and whites engaged in a battle. This was the sign for Nat that he would be involved in a battle over slavery during his lifetime. On May 12, 1828, the Spirit appeared again telling Nat he should “fight against the serpent” (Lampley 52). The serpent was a symbol for slavery. He would receive a sign whenever the time was right (Lampley 52; Wilmore 67-8).

This would take two years, when in February 1831 a solar eclipse occurred. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Turner’s rebellion was of the unsystematic and random category. Unlike Vesey and Prosser, he did not plan his revolt in detail and his plan did not involve hundreds of slaves. Only four others, whom Nat trusted the most, were included. On the set date, July 4<sup>th</sup>, Nat was ill and the plan had to be cancelled. On August 13<sup>th</sup>, a new sign in the form of a green sky came to Nat (Foner 3). On Sunday August 21<sup>st</sup>, Nat and four others went to the house of John Travis, Nat’s master. Here they killed seven people. After this first killing, many others joined this rebellion of destruction. On August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 57 whites had been killed by 70 slaves. The next day however, troops came and killed on every single black person they saw in the Southampton County, killing as many as 100 blacks. Twelve slaves were transported to another state and twenty were hanged. Turner himself was only captured by November 5<sup>th</sup> and sentenced to hang (Foner 5; Wilmore 71). It is clear how important religion was in Turner’s life. Turner saw “his violent mission as God’s will” (Lampley 41). The many religious and spiritual signs he received guided him to his revolt. Although it is not completely clear what Turner’s exact goal in

the rebellion was, apart from revenge, it is likely he believed in some sort of final judgement of God in which the slaves would be glorified and whites would be punished (Foner 9).

The idea that religion was a prevalent factor in these three conspiracies is very clear. Although it is very hard to grasp its exact meaning, I will list here how religion functioned in these rebellions. First of all, it is important to note that Prosser, Vesey and Turner were all literate. This enabled them to read the Bible, become very acquainted with it and acquire a certain position on their respective plantations. Religion gave them the prestige, as official or unofficial preacher, they needed to organize such revolt. They all strongly identified with certain figures in the Bible, and had certain passages they found important which provided them with the necessary messages to sow the seeds for a rebellion. The Bible served as a sort of blueprint for these rebellions. Next to the Bible as source for rebellion, religion gave slaves hope in the future, as we have seen in chapter 2. This faith in a better life was necessary for rebellions to develop. All revolts, some more than others, had a goal. Belief that there was a better future was necessary for these goals. Besides that, these goals were often also religious ones, like the belief in a final judgement. Furthermore, as we have seen in Vesey's conspiracy, the distinct African-American religion was important. With certain religious practices, such as dancing and singing, as explained in chapter 2, slaves created their own identity. This own identity enabled slaves to make their own decisions, and also made the revolts more appealing. Religion provided the ideology, but also served for practical means. Religion provided a network and community which slaves could build on while organizing the revolts. Besides that, slaves were often recruited during these religious meetings. Religion provided slaves the resources necessary to start a rebellion. Without religion, none of these rebellions or conspiracies would or could have happened and therefore it served a pivotal role.

## **Conclusion**

As I have discussed, agency is a complex concept which consists of several aspects. The interaction between the past, the future and the present is central to it. Tied to these aspects are habits, imaginations and judgements, which people continuously connect to each other and make them act the way they do. This interaction makes people agents of their own will. Slave agency makes the complex term of agency even harder to grasp. Although there has long been a denial towards any control or autonomy in slaves' life, slowly more recognition towards slaves' ability to act as agents has been accepted. Slave agency should therefore be viewed within the limits of slavery, but it does include the same aspects as agency among free people. Feelings of autonomy and an own distinctive identity are crucial.

The conversion of slaves towards slavery did not mean their own African traditions vanished. Instead, slaves managed to blend these original beliefs into Christianity which resulted in a distinct African-American religion. This religion included practices such as dancing and singing which can be traced back to the indigenous African religious. Other significant aspects that were part of this slave religion, were the secret meetings slaves organized and the slave preachers that gained an important position on the plantations. All these practices and features of slave religion, created a distinct religion which, as I have argued, gave slaves awareness of their cultural independence and own identity. These aspects are crucial to agency. Besides that, secret meetings and rituals like singing and dancing also gave slaves a happy feeling and a belief in a better future. These religious practices, all include at least one element of the three that are central to agency. The fact that they are part of a distinct African-American religion formed out of traditions, automatically makes it an interplay between the element of the past (habits) and either the present or the future element. This can include the judgement of the slavery system or the belief in a life outside of slavery respectively. In other words, I have argued that in the most significant practices and aspects of slave religion, agency is present to a large extent.

Resistance towards the slavery system, in any way or form, should be seen as an instance of agency. Slave rebellion can be seen as the most extreme form of agency as I have claimed. It includes all three main aspects of agency, which allows interplay between all of them. Besides that, rebellion shows a large degree of autonomy and feeling of power. Considering the most

important slave rebellions in American history, religion played a pivotal role in the ideology and planning of them.

All things considered, the large extent to which agency is present in the religious practices and the fundamental role of religion in slave rebellions, which are an ultimate expression of agency, shows that the practice of Christianity can be considered as a substantial part of slave agency.

In this thesis, I have looked at slave religion in the United States' south as a whole, regardless of the different states or plantations. Raboteau has mainly focused on this same area, without much focus on specific states or specific locations. However, it is highly likely religious practices differed somewhat from plantation to plantation. More research should therefore be done on slave religion in different areas and on different plantations. Besides that, further research could also be conducted on different religions. A small percentage of slaves were Muslim, for example. Questions of agency in this religion of slaves could be posed and it could be compared to agency in Christianity. The lack of primary sources will remain an obstacle in all research on slave religion. The primary literature that does exist, however, such as Nat Turner's Confessions, the interviews conducted by the FWP or slave narratives, I highly recommend reading as they grant us a better insight into slave life and religion.

All in all, the awareness that slaves could act as agents of their will and life, with the help of their own distinct religion, is highly important in the field of American history and slavery studies. It shows that religion functioned as a fundamental factor in slave life and it shows that slaves had hope and control in their bounded life. Slaves created hope and control with their religion, which could eventually even lead them to make decisions *outside* of their bondage. This awareness contributes towards a more active interpretation of slaves in the system of slavery as a whole. Although religion is only one aspect of slave life, this insight of Christianity as an important instance of slave agency, helps us to move towards an interpretation of slavery in which slaves were agents. Specifically, agents who have always contributed to the insecurity of the slavery system and, therefore, also to the abolition of that system.

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