Marion Gymnich

‘There is a Great Difference between Christianity and Religion at the South’: References to Religion in Harriet Jacobs’s Slave Narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)

1 Introduction

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, texts in which formerly enslaved people described their experience of enslavement were used as an instrument, as ‘evidentiary testimony’,[1] in the fight for the abolition of slavery in Great Britain and the United States. Their ‘immediate purpose [. . .] was to expose slavery’s horrors and persuade readers to join the abolitionist cause.’[2] Since they present the experience of being enslaved from the perspective of dependent people, slave narratives, as this type of testimonial life writing has traditionally been called, are an important resource for research on strong asymmetrical dependency.[3] These texts document suffering and resilience alike. Moreover, they provide a wealth of information on the everyday life, thoughts, and emotions of dependent people who were cruelly exploited, abused, and sold. Given that the authors often addressed the ‘human causes [of slavery] in an attempt to understand why white people chose to victimize them’,[4] these narratives at times also offer remarkable insights into social and psychological processes that shaped interactions in the context of transatlantic slavery. In terms of content, the depiction of extreme violence is a central feature of this type of writing.

The ‘graphic accounts of [. . .] physical and emotional abuses sadistically inflicted for centuries on African descendants by American nation builders’[5] are often coupled with comments on religious beliefs and practices, as Sally Ann H. Ferguson stresses.[6] In this way, the authors of slave narratives positioned themselves towards Christian-

1 Anna Stewart, “Revising ‘Harriet Jacobs’ for 1865,” *American Literature* 82, no. 4 (2010): 714.

2 Mitch Kachun, “Slave Narratives and Historical Memory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. John Ernest (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 25.

3 For an overview of the genre of the slave narrative, see for example Audrey Fisch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and John Ernest, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

4 Sally Ann H. Ferguson, “Christian Violence and the Slave Narrative,” *American Literature* 68, no. 2 (1996): 298.

5 Ferguson, “Christian Violence and the Slave Narrative”: 297.

6 Ferguson, “Christian Violence and the Slave Narrative”: 297.

Open Access. © 2024 the author(s), published by De Gruyter. BY-NC-ND This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.
https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111380575-007

ity in a country whose identity had been shaped by its close relation to Christian – and specifically Protestant – beliefs since the early colonial period. In the following, I will argue that references to religion were, on the one hand, a tool for criticizing both individuals and a society that claimed to be Christian. On the other hand, authors of slave narratives described religious beliefs and practices as an important individual and communal resource for resilience. In other words, religion may play a complex and ambivalent role in life writing by formerly enslaved people.

Any analysis of Anglophone slave narratives from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries must consider that these texts were typically edited by white abolitionists and possibly changed in the process. Often, we can only guess the extent of the editors' impact on the texts as we know them today. In this context, the potential for significant editorial intervention also means that we cannot rule out the possibility that certain views and beliefs expressed in a text might reflect the opinion of an editor rather than that of the individual whose life is portrayed.[7] Editorial intervention may, of course, have also influenced the way religion is presented in a specific text. The decision to portray a formerly enslaved person as a devout Christian may have been a strategic choice on the part of the editor and / or the author seeking to appeal to Christian readers.[8] Still, references to religion in life writing by formerly enslaved people often turn out to be both too frequent and too variable to be accounted for solely as the result of attempts to gain the favour of a Christian readership. Explanations that fail to consider the complex picture of what religion may have meant for an enslaved person in the antebellum South do not do justice to the texts. Religious doubts and criticism of the Church in the South are juxtaposed with expressions of faith that ring sincere.

The most famous slave narratives tend to portray the life of one enslaved person from childhood to the time when they were manumitted or escaped. Despite their focus on a single person, slave narratives typically include at least glimpses of the lives of other enslaved people. Moreover, the fate of the individual whose life is at the centre of the text is meant to exemplify the suffering of enslaved people in the South in general.[9] The collective dimension that is thus inherent in the genre sets slave nar-

---

7 For a discussion of the ethical implications of collaborative life writing, see G. Thomas Couser, "Making, Taking, and Faking Lives: The Ethics of Collaborative Life Writing," *Style* 32, no. 2 (1998): 334–50.

8 Thomas Peyser, for instance, argues along these lines. He questions the sincerity of expressions of faith in Frederick Douglass' life writing and sees them as an instrument to appeal to readers. Peyser assumes that Douglass sought to strike a balance between 'mollify[ing] the Christian audience whose support he needed and rais[ing] fundamental suspicions about Christianity itself' (Thomas Peyser, "The Attack on Christianity in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*," *The Explicator* 69, no. 2 [2011]: 86).

9 Cf. Michael Basseler, *Kulturelle Erinnerung und Trauma im zeitgenössischen afroamerikanischen Roman: Theoretische Grundlegung, Ausprägungsformen, Entwicklungstendenzen* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2008): 119.

ratives apart from many other types of life writing, especially from traditional autobiography. Yet, while stressing shared experience, narratives by formerly enslaved people also highlight the heterogeneity of dependent people and their lives. By depicting a range of enslaved people, the texts draw attention to the fact that the situation of an enslaved person was shaped by various social factors, including race and gender, as well as age, literacy / education, and religion. Due to these insights into the heterogeneity of enslaved people's experience, James Olney's conclusion that slave narratives produce 'a sense not of uniqueness but of overwhelming *sameness*'[10] seems at least debatable. While there are recognizable templates as far as the plot is concerned, as Olney shows in his influential article, the situation of individuals was still often portrayed in considerable detail and thus should not be reduced to a simple formula.[11]

In the following, I will take a closer look at references to religion in one of the most well-known slave narratives: Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). The text was edited by well-known abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. We cannot be entirely sure how much Child's revisions inform the text and, consequently, the way we perceive Harriet Jacobs. In her preface to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Child claimed that she had not made any significant changes: '[w]ith trifling exceptions, both the ideas and the language'[12] can be ascribed to Harriet Jacobs. Yet, what is meant by 'trifling exceptions' is not detailed. There appears to be a widespread consensus that 'Jacobs, not Child, was the primary author'[13] of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,[14] but we also know that Child's influence led, for instance, to radical changes regarding the ending.[15] Jacobs had intended to end her narrative with a chapter on the abolitionist leader John Brown, who is primarily remembered for the rebellion at Harpers Ferry. This chapter 'was apparently suppressed by Lydia Maria

10 James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo* 20 (1984): 46, original emphasis.

11 Cf. also Lucas McCarthy, "Between the Sublime and the Traumatic: Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 57, no. 2 (2021): 180. McCarthy implicitly confirms the uniqueness of Harriet Jacobs's narrative when he argues that the text 'reveals aspects of an enslaved woman's experience that had previously received little attention, constructs a portrait of a southern African American home rarely presented, and advances the use of dialogue and dialect in slave narratives'.

12 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 5.

13 Stewart, "Revising 'Harriet Jacobs' for 1865": 702.

14 Cf. for example NaTosha Briscoe, "The Struggle for Survival in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century African American Women's Autobiography: Black Women's Narrative of Incarceration and Freedom," *Journal of African American Studies* 26 (2022): 103, 108.

15 Cf. Bruce Mills, "Lydia Maria Child and the Endings to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *American Literature* 64, no. 2 (1992): 255–72.

Child'[16] and was replaced by an ending that focused on the death of Jacobs's grandmother – a chapter that was significantly less political and, at the same time, more religious.

2 Religion in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)

Today, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, originally published under the pseudonym Linda Brent, is among the most famous examples of life writing by an enslaved person.[17] Thus, it is no surprise that the text has already been discussed from various angles.[18] Nevertheless, the role of religion in this narrative has, on the whole, received comparatively little attention, even though Jacobs's account of her life as an enslaved woman is replete with references to Christianity. Robert J. Patterson notes a 'trend in criticism not to explore the religious [. . .] aspects of Jacobs's text.'[19] In a similar vein, Alyssa Bellows observes that 'intertextual scholarship on *Incidents* prioritizes sentimental and popular literature rather than religious texts.'[20] Patterson is among the few scholars who read Jacobs's narrative with an emphasis on religion, arguing that the author anticipates ideas of feminist African American theology and thus can be placed 'within a womanist theological genealogy.'[21] In her life writing, Jacobs offers a multifaceted picture of the significance Christianity could have for enslaved individuals as well as for white and Black American communities in the antebellum South.

One of the main functions of references to religion in Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is undoubtedly a critique of people who claim to be Christians (and

16 Caleb Smith, "Harriet Jacobs among the Militants: Transformations in Abolition's Public Sphere, 1859–61," *American Literature* 84, no. 4 (2012): 743.

17 Robert J. Patterson refers to Jacobs's description of her life as an enslaved person as 'the most well-known, frequently taught, oft-written-about nineteenth-century black woman's narrative' (Robert J. Patterson, "A Triple-Twined Re-Appropriation: Womanist Theology and Gendered-Racial Protest in the Writings of Jarena Lee, Frances E.W. Harper and Harriet Jacobs," *Religion and Literature* 45, no. 2 [2013]: 71.).

18 The themes of Jacobs's text that have been explored in detail include trauma (cf. Lucas McCarthy, "Between the Sublime and the Traumatic: Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 57, no. 2 [2021]: 165–202.) as well as the body and female agency (cf. Melissa Daniels-Rauterkus, "Civil Resistance and Procreative Agency in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Women's Studies* 48, no. 5 [2019]: 498–509; Ingrid Diran, "Scenes of Speculation: Harriet Jacobs and the Biopolitics of Human Capital," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2019): 697–718).

19 Patterson, "A Triple-Twined Re-Appropriation": 72.

20 Alyssa Bellows, "Evangelicalism, Adultery, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 62, no. 3 (2020): 255.

21 Patterson, "A Triple-Twined Re-Appropriation": 56.

reap social benefits from this status) while displaying behaviour at odds with core Christian values. Criticism of white Christians who ignore the principle of loving one's neighbour is a recurring theme in North American narratives by formerly enslaved persons. In his article on the slave narrative as a genre, Olney even lists criticism of Christian enslavers among the typical features of this type of text: 'description of a "Christian" slaveholder (often of one such dying in terror) and the accompanying claim that "Christian" slaveholders are invariably worse than those professing no religion.'[22] According to Jacobs, a callous attitude towards enslaved people could be observed among white Southern men and women alike, irrespective of their claim to be Christians. The author, for instance, describes the callousness of Mrs Flint, the wife of Jacobs's chief tormenter, Dr Flint, who attended church regularly but did not mind watching 'a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash'.[23] Jacobs concludes that 'partaking of the Lord's supper did not seem to put her in a Christian frame of mind.'[24] The author claims in no uncertain terms that persons who treat enslaved people with the utmost cruelty forfeit the right to be called Christians:

> If a slave resisted being whipped, the bloodhounds were unpacked, and set upon him, to tear his flesh from his bones. The master who did these things was highly educated, and styled a perfect gentleman. He also boasted *the name and standing of a Christian, though Satan never had a truer follower*.[25]

The way Jacobs expresses her critique implies that she does not reject Christianity as such. Instead, she critiques people who do not follow the gospel's teachings despite supposedly being Christians. She thus claims the authority to distinguish between a genuinely Christian person and someone who merely pretends to be a Christian.

In a confident tone, Jacobs also rejects one of the most common religious arguments employed to legitimize slavery: 'They seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. What a libel upon the heavenly Father, who "made of one blood all nations of men!"'[26] Here, Jacobs quotes a passage from the Acts of the Apostles (17:26) to discredit the notorious interpretation of Ham's curse (Genesis 9:24–27). The idea that enslaving Africans was justified because they

---

22 Olney, "'I Was Born'": 50. In his analysis of the structure of slave narratives and their recurring features, Olney does not mention any other functions references to religion in slave narratives might have had.

23 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 15.

24 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 15. In a similar vein, Frederick Douglass tends to use the adjectives "Christian" and "pious" sarcastically in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, recalling for instance the 'pious mistress' who did not care if the enslaved people in her household were starving, yet 'would kneel every morning' to ask for God's blessing (Frederick Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself (1845)," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym [New York: W.W. Norton, 2008]: 953–54).

25 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 49; emphasis added.

26 Jacobs: 45.

were descendants of Noah's son Ham, who had been cursed, was widely propagated in proslavery discourse.[27] Thus, it is not surprising that Jacobs was aware of this line of argumentation; she was also bound to be familiar with abolitionist counterarguments that were also based on a reading of the Bible. Jacobs's argumentation reflects the fact that passages from the Bible were 'co-opted for proslavery as well as antislavery arguments.'[28]

Despite the prevailing criticism of people who called themselves Christians while failing to act in accordance with the values propagated in the New Testament, Jacobs's narrative also mentions a few white persons in the South who were inspired by Christian principles to some extent. The following description of a young woman is a case in point: 'The young lady was very pious, and there was some reality in her religion. She taught her slaves to lead pure lives and wished them to enjoy the fruit of their own industry. *Her* religion was not a garb put on for Sunday and laid aside till Sunday returned again.'[29] The metaphor of the 'garb put on for Sunday' captures well what Christianity seems to have meant for many white people in the antebellum South. According to Jacobs, being a Christian was primarily a social role and a public persona constructed and upheld by customary, ritualized performances while having little impact on the individual's values. Jacobs's observation of the young woman that 'there was some reality in her religion' raises the fundamental question of whether being complicit with slavery is compatible with being a Christian at all.

The question of compatibility also seems to inform Jacobs's memory of her first mistress, which turns out to be highly ambivalent. The woman, who treated Jacobs with some kindness and made her familiar with the teachings of the Bible, failed to see the young Black girl as an individual who deserves to be treated as a neighbour, as Jacobs puts it, drawing upon the New Testament:

> My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." "Whosoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor. I would give much to blot out from my memory that one great wrong. As a child, I loved my mistress; and, looking back on the happy days I spent with her, I try to think with less bitterness of this act of injustice. While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory.[30]

The 'one great wrong' Jacobs refers to is the white woman's refusal to manumit her. This decision caused extreme suffering for the enslaved woman, which reminds readers to what extent enslaved people were at the mercy of enslavers' whims.

---

27 Cf. Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

28 Bellows, "Evangelicalism, Adultery, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*": 256.

29 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 50; original emphasis.

30 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 12.

In addition to uttering explicit, bitter criticism of the discrepancy between the enslavers' claim to be Christians and an attitude that was incompatible with Christ's teachings, Jacobs also uses satire to decry hypocrisy among Christians in the South. This strategy is most obvious in the chapter 'The Church and Slavery', where Jacobs provides a satirical account of the kind of sermon enslaved people were likely to hear from white clergymen (if they were deemed worthy of being addressed at all). Already the way in which Jacobs describes the Reverend Pike's process of getting ready to deliver a sermon establishes a distinctly satirical tone: 'Pious Mr. Pike brushed up his hair till it stood upright, and, in deep, solemn tones, began.'[31] Both the Reverend's body language and his pompous manner of speaking are indicative of vanity and self-importance; they turn him into a ridiculous figure.[32] The content and style of his sermon, which is subsequently presented in direct speech, complete the satire.

The essence of Mr Pike's sermon is the idea that enslaved persons please God by serving their enslavers, whereas a refusal to be obedient or to work hard is a sin. To justify his position, the clergyman establishes a parallel between the enslavers and God, i.e., the 'earthly master' and the 'heavenly Master',[33] both of whom, according to Mr Pike, are entitled to expect obedience. The clergyman also draws upon a further strategy for instilling fear in his listeners by stressing God's omniscience: 'Your masters may not find you out, but God sees you, and will punish you.'[34] To hammer this warning home, he repeats the phrase 'God sees you' several times.[35] Through his sermon, Mr Pike means to intimidate the enslaved people, but according to Jacobs, his message has the opposite effect. Rather than responding to his pronouncements in fear, the listeners are 'highly amused'[36] by the preacher's exhortations. They do not see the Reverend as a moral authority.

Jacobs contrasts the hypocrisy and conceit displayed by Mr Pike and other privileged white people with the more genuine Christianity she observed among enslaved persons: 'Many of them are sincere, and nearer to the gate of heaven than sanctimonious Mr. Pike, and other long-faced Christians, who see wounded Samaritans, and pass by on the other side.'[37] In this statement, Jacobs leaves no doubt regarding whom

31 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 67.

32 Bellows aptly describes Jacobs's attitude towards Mr Pike as 'condescending amusement' (Bellows, "Evangelicalism, Adultery, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*": 259).

33 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 68.

34 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 67.

35 Jacobs creates a caricature of the clergyman with a few brushstrokes, relying primarily on the technique of implicit self-characterization in a manner that is reminiscent of similar portraits of ridiculous, conceited characters occurring in works by nineteenth-century novelists like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Mark Twain.

36 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 68.

37 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 68.

she considers true Christians and draws upon the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10: 25–37 to support her point.[38]

Both free and enslaved Black Americans are portrayed as participating in Christian rituals that probably also offered some release for pent-up emotions. At least, this is what might be concluded from Jacobs's observation that Black Americans like 'a Methodist shout' and 'never seem so happy as when shouting and singing at religious meetings.'[39] The enslaved people also created 'their own songs and hymns',[40] which means they displayed a certain agency regarding how they practised Christianity. For a while, they attended a 'little church in the woods',[41] which they themselves had built. According to Jacobs, 'they had no higher happiness than to meet there and sing hymns together, and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer.'[42] However, this autonomy to conduct religious meetings did not last long; their church was destroyed, and they were deprived of their meeting place, which suggests that religious meetings of enslaved people were deemed a threat that had to be quashed.[43]

Instead of gathering in their own place of worship and praying in the ways they considered appropriate, Black Americans were eventually 'permitted to attend the white churches, a certain portion of the galleries being appropriated to their use.'[44] Moreover, they were allowed to participate in communion, though only after the white people. In order to minimize contact between white and Black Christians, separate times for Black people were offered by the Episcopal church, and '[t]he Methodist and Baptist churches admitted them in the afternoon.'[45] Jacobs alludes to the contrast between this segregation in the Church and the teachings of Jesus when she mentions that the white people 'partook of the bread and wine, in commemoration of the meek

38 Though Jacobs's use of the parable of the Good Samaritan is somewhat at odds with the particulars of the biblical text since the Samaritan was the person who helped the wounded man in need, not the one being helped, the parable embodies core ideas of Evangelical Abolitionism: 'In the nineteenth century, Evangelicalism emphasized the necessity to verify one's faith through one's actions [. . .]. in a sermon about the Good Samaritan published in 1885, entitled "Who is My Neighbor?" Reverend A. M'miel argues that acts of kindness reveal a person's true state of heart.' (Kasey J. Waite, "The Spark of Kindness: The Rhetoric of Abolitionist Action in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Rocky Mountain Review* 73, no. 2 [2019]: 175).

39 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 68.

40 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 68.

41 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 66.

42 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 66.

43 A similar event is mentioned in Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), which is set primarily in the Caribbean. The author recalls that 'the poor slaves had built up a place with boughs and leaves, where they might meet for prayers, but the white people pulled it down twice, and would not allow them even a shed for prayers' (Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* [1831, repr., Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004]: 19).

44 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 66.

45 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 67.

and lowly Jesus, who said, "God is your Father, and all ye are brethren."'[46] There is certainly nothing 'meek and lowly' about the Southern Christians as portrayed by Jacobs. The presence of enslaved people in church was tolerated to some extent because religion was seen as an instrument of control and coercion. As Jacobs reflects sarcastically, the rationale was apparently 'to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters.'[47] While white people utilized Christianity to justify and maintain the institution of slavery, enslaved people often interpreted the Bible differently, as exemplified by the arguments brought forth in Jacobs's text.[48]

Southern clergymen are not exempt from being portrayed in a negative light by Jacobs, though there are rare exceptions to her generally negative appraisal of religious leaders. She, for instance, recalls an Episcopal clergyman who was a positive counterexample to the likes of Mr Pike.[49] This Episcopal clergyman, whose name is not provided in the text, was genuinely interested in the enslaved people. In fact, as Jacobs asserts, when this clergyman preached, 'it was the first time they had ever been addressed as human beings'.[50] His attitude is encompassed by his statement that '"God judges men by their hearts, not by the color of their skins"' – a position that Jacobs characterizes as 'offensive to slaveholders'.[51] The wife of this clergyman is likewise described as a positive example, as a 'truly Christian woman'[52] who taught enslaved people to read and write: most importantly, she also eventually manumitted them. This kind of behaviour, however, does not seem to have served as a model for the white community at large. Instead, the clergyman encountered significant opposition to his ministry, which might have been why he departed from the area soon after the death of his wife.

Notwithstanding such exceptions, Jacobs leaves no doubt that the Church in the South was generally an institution that contributed to the maintenance of slavery, as the following succinct analysis reveals:

> There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south. If a man goes to the communion table, and pays money into the treasury of the church, no matter if it be the price of blood, he is called religious. If a pastor has offspring by a woman not his wife, the church dismiss [sic] him, if she is a white woman; but if she is colored, it does not hinder his continuing to be their good shepherd.[53]

46 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 66.
47 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 66.
48 On Christian legitimizations of enslavement, see for instance Katherine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).
49 In this context, it seems noteworthy that Jacobs was baptised as an Episcopalian.
50 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 70.
51 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 71.
52 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 70.
53 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 73.

Jacobs denounces the Church in the South on account of its double moral standards. Nevertheless, the Episcopal clergyman mentioned above, as well as Jacobs's encounter with another Episcopal clergyman during her stay in England, whom she describes as 'a true disciple of Jesus',[54] arguably serve to disentangle Christianity and religion *as such* from the hypocrisy of most Southern clergymen. In other words, Jacobs argues that Christianity ought to inspire an attitude unlike the one that is predominant among members of the Church in the South.

Another facet of the criticism against the Church is its complicity in preventing enslaved people from learning to read and write. To support her argument that enslaved people should be allowed to become literate, Jacobs uses the example of an old man 'whose piety and childlike trust in God were beautiful to witness'.[55] This man asked Jacobs to teach him how to read because he believed reading scripture would bring him 'nearer to God'.[56] Jacobs draws upon biblical language (from John and the Psalms) to emphasize that the old man and others like him ought to have the right to read the Bible: 'There are thousands, who, like good uncle Fred, are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it. [. . .] Tell them they are answerable to God for sealing up the Fountain of Life from souls that are thirsting for it.'[57]

Jacobs also deplores the fact that Christian missionaries teach people in Africa how to read while such knowledge is withheld from enslaved people at home in the United States. Education is a recurring topic in narratives by formerly enslaved people and played a significant role in their struggle for freedom, both symbolically and in a very pragmatic sense. The advantages of literacy are illustrated in Jacobs's narrative. While hiding in her grandmother's house, Jacobs wrote letters to deceive the enslaver Dr Flint, making him believe she had escaped to the North instead of remaining in the vicinity.

Throughout Jacobs's narrative, religion means, first and foremost, Christianity. Only at one point in the text does a brief reference seem to evoke syncretic religious practices. This reference occurs in the aforementioned sermon by Reverend Pike and is meant to illustrate the supposed sinfulness of Black Americans. The clergyman accuses them of 'quarrelling, and tying up little bags of roots to bury under the doorsteps to poison each other with'.[58] Jacobs does not comment on this allegation, which leaves open whether it refers to an actual practice or is merely a product of Mr Pike's imagination. Given that there is no other evidence of a practice like the one alluded to by Mr Pike in the entire text, his allegation may very well be read as groundless suspicion.

54 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 71.
55 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 71.
56 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 71.
57 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 72.
58 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 67.

Alternatively, the half-sentence may indicate actual religious practices that departed from and challenged the Christianity preached by white clergymen. In the latter case, the question of whether the intention behind the practice is indeed an evil one, i.e., 'poison[ing] each other', remains open. Even if we assume that the practice existed in the community, its meaning may have been misinterpreted by Mr Pike. In any case, the fact that Jacobs picks up Mr Pike's allegation and refrains from commenting on it is intriguing. It is tempting to read this passage as Jacobs's acknowledgement of the existence of religious practices that challenge the authority of the Christian Church. By not commenting on this matter, she may have tried to uphold the image of herself as a Christian woman, which was important for her reputation among Northern abolitionists.[59]

Throughout her narrative, Jacobs seeks to present herself as a good Christian; she repeatedly refers to and quotes from the Bible. She also portrays herself as praying or thanking God[60] and kneeling during prayer to stress her devotion. Moreover, adverbs like 'earnestly'[61] or phrases like 'from the heart'[62] are used to communicate the intensity of her prayer. When Jacobs talks about her son having been born prematurely, she explains his survival as a consequence of God's will: 'God let it live.'[63] Statements such as '[t]he heavenly Father had been most merciful to me in leading me to this place',[64] along with expressions like 'through God's providence',[65] 'God being my

59 John Ernest observes a tendency to be cautious in terms of their self-representation among Black Americans involved in the abolitionist movement: 'almost all African American public figures of the time demonstrate a keen understanding of what it means to live in a white supremacist culture. African American narrators accordingly were cautious about the prospect of revealing the details of their lives even to benevolent white readers who were simultaneously being influenced by a culture bent on trivializing, eliminating, and otherwise controlling the African American presence in the North.' (John Ernest, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. John Ernest [New York: Oxford University Press, 2020]: 8.) When Frederick Douglass refers to a practice that evokes non-Christian religious practices in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, he also appears to be cautious. At one point, another enslaved man advised Douglass to make use of 'a certain *root*' that 'would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip' him (Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass": 962, original emphasis). The name of this supposedly powerful root is not mentioned, and the author describes its effects in a rather non-committal fashion. While not commending its use and categorizing the other man's trust in its power as 'superstition' (Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass": 966, n. 3), he refrains from ruling out completely that the root might have worked as a source of protection.

60 Cf. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 76, 87, 91, 92, 96, 103, 116, 117, 126, 130, 172.

61 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 116.

62 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 117.

63 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 60.

64 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 157.

65 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 27.

helper',[66] and 'God in his mercy',[67] evoke a Christian worldview. They also affirm the author's trust in God.

Notwithstanding such utterances, Jacobs openly admits that she, at times, struggled with her faith. For instance, she recalls having sometimes thought that 'there was no justice or mercy in the divine government. I asked why the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been so persecuted and wronged from youth upward. These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter.'[68] In retrospect, Jacobs associates her struggles around faith primarily with the experiences and tendencies of youth.

The idea of a correlation between the age of an enslaved or formerly enslaved person and their faith is reinforced by a striking contrast between Jacobs and her grandmother. Furthermore, there is an equally clear resemblance between Jacobs and her youngest uncle as far as trust in divine providence is concerned. Jacobs remembers being comforted by her grandmother when struggling with her faith as a young girl: 'My heart rebelled against God, who had taken from me mother, father, mistress, and friend. The good grandmother tried to comfort me. "Who knows the ways of God?" said she. "Perhaps they have been kindly taken from the evil days to come."'[69] The grandmother is consistently portrayed as a woman who draws enormous strength from her faith,[70] but her faith also makes her inclined to accept the status quo: 'Most earnestly did she strive to make us feel that it was the will of God: that He had seen fit to place us under such circumstances; and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for contentment.'[71] This stance is apt to stabilize slavery as an institution. Jacobs, by contrast, refuses to be content with her situation – a sentiment that is shared by her young uncle: 'It was a beautiful faith, coming from a mother who could not call her children her own. But I, and Benjamin, her youngest boy, condemned it.'[72] While Jacobs never fails to express the highest respect and admiration for her grandmother, who was manumitted, she disagrees with the older woman's reasoning, which supports the existing system.

The grandmother repeatedly admonished both her son and granddaughter first to consider God's will. When her son Benjamin told her that only the thought of his mother's pain had prevented him from committing suicide, she asked him 'if he did not also think of God.'[73] The son replied, '"No, I did not think of him. When a man is hunted like a wild beast he forgets there is a God, a heaven",' whereupon his mother

66 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 77.
67 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 94.
68 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 115.
69 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 13.
70 Cf. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 138.
71 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 19.
72 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 19.
73 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 24.

scolded him: '"Don't talk so, Benjamin," said she. "Put your trust in God. Be humble, my child, and your master will forgive you."'[74]

Despite her insistence on trust in divine providence, the older woman understood and supported the young people's desire to escape from slavery. She was overjoyed when she heard that her son had escaped. Her happiness was translated immediately into gratitude for God's help. She 'raised her hands, and exclaimed, "God be praised! Let us thank him." She dropped on her knees, and poured forth her heart in prayer.'[75] The woman also helped her granddaughter Harriet when the latter was trying to escape from slavery by hiding the young woman for several years in a secret space inside her house, thus exposing both women to considerable danger.

In the last chapter of Jacobs's narrative, the author once more evokes the figure of the pious grandmother by quoting extensively from a letter, which is the older woman's farewell message. The wording of her letter is again informed by a trust in God and a belief in an afterlife that promises a reunion with loved ones:

> I cannot hope to see you again on earth; but I pray to God to unite us above, where pain will no more rack this feeble body of mine; where sorrow and parting from my children will be no more. God has promised these things if we are faithful unto the end. My age and feeble health deprive me of going to church now; but God is with me here at home. [. . .] Strive, my child, to train them [Jacobs's son and daughter] for God's children. May he protect and provide for you, is the prayer of your loving old mother.[76]

The tenor of this letter rounds off the picture of a woman whose outlook on life and death was shaped entirely by a faith which sustained her.

Jacobs's pious grandmother is doubtlessly an important person in her narrative, both as a motherly figure and a helper. However, she was arguably given inordinate attention, which is granted at the expense of Harriet's voice. The suppression of Harriet's voice is evidenced in an anthology called *The Freedmen's Book*, compiled by Jacobs's editor Lydia Maria Child immediately after the U.S. Civil War. The anthology features excerpts from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in a section titled 'The Good Grandmother'.[77] The title itself suggests that the focus in the section dedicated to Jacobs was shifted from the young woman, whose voice and decisions were at times rebellious and irreverent, to the pious grandmother, who was surely a much less controversial figure for white readers at the time. Thus, although Harriet Jacobs *is* listed as the author of 'The Good Grandmother', it is not her life that is presented here. As Stewart stresses: 'No longer the protagonist of her own narrative, this Jacobs has become an almost disembodied voice, a presence ultimately remarkable for her ab-

74 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 24.
75 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 28.
76 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: 180.
77 Stewart, "Revising 'Harriet Jacobs' for 1865": 709–10.

sence.'[78] *The Freedmen's Book* comprises texts written by Child and various other authors:[79] it was 'produced to educate and assimilate African Americans after the war' as well as 'to commemorate the achievement of this particular community'.[80] Bruce Mills claims that Child had convinced Jacobs to end the narrative of her life with a recollection of her grandmother to stress 'domestic values'.[81] In addition to further emphasizing domesticity, the prominence of the grandmother in *The Freedmen's Book* highlights a belief in divine providence rather than criticism of white Christians in the South, let alone allusions to non-Christian religious practices.

3 Conclusion

This analysis of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has shown that the picture of religion and its meaning for enslaved people in the antebellum South can be complex when portrayed in slave narratives. The use of references to religion can go significantly beyond the single function highlighted by Olney, i.e., criticism of the hypocrisy of white Christians in the South. A comparison of Jacobs's work with other slave narratives promises to reveal even more diverse representations of religious beliefs and practices in slave narratives from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), for instance, includes comments on African religious beliefs and practices as well as references to specific theological texts.[82]

Neo-slave narratives, i.e., historical novels written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that respond to life writing by Jacobs, Douglass, Prince, Equiano and many others, at times also feature references to religion, even though these might not be as prominent as they are in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and some other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts.[83] The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*

78 Stewart, "Revising 'Harriet Jacobs' for 1865": 714.

79 Mills describes the contents of *The Freedmen's Book* as follows: 'This anthology contains biographies of famous black men and women – many written by Child herself – as well as poems, stories, and essays by black authors and other white abolitionists.' (Bruce Mills, "Lydia Maria Child and the Endings to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*": 265)

80 Stewart, "Revising 'Harriet Jacobs' for 1865": 703.

81 Mills, "Lydia Maria Child and the Endings to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*": 256.

82 Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 25–29.

83 Ashraf H.A. Rushdy defines this genre as 'contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative' (Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999]: 3). The genre of the neo-slave narrative responds to slave narratives in manifold ways: 'Since the last decades of the twentieth century, writers across the Black Atlantic have attempted to recover elements of the narrative structure and thematic configuration of slave narratives. The main reasons for

(1987) by Black American Nobel laureate Toni Morrison illustrates this point. *Beloved* is set in Ohio and features characters who have been manumitted or escaped from slavery but continue to be haunted by the memory of their enslavement. As Emily Griesinger points out, *Beloved* does not advocate the 'wholesale rejection of Christianity'.[84] Though the language of *Beloved* is not as steeped in religious rhetoric as are some texts from the nineteenth century, references to religion are occasionally inserted into the characters' speech. The casual tone with which these insertions are frequently made is exemplified by the following comment on preparations for a feast: '"Such a cooking you never see no more. We baked, fried and stewed everything *God put down here*."'[85]

In contrast to life writing by formerly enslaved people, Morrison's *Beloved* leaves significantly more room for syncretic religious beliefs and practices than Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.[86] An elderly woman called Baby Suggs, whose freedom was paid for by one of her sons, is arguably the central figure in *Beloved* as far as the depiction of religion is concerned. Due primarily to her role as an unofficial spiritual leader, Baby Suggs is highly respected within the Black community. This role is marked by the epithet 'holy' accompanying her name. The narrator explains the meaning of this epithet as follows:

> Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it [i.e., the epithet holy], she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it. In winter and fall she carried it to AME's [African Methodist Episcopals] and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed.[87]

This description of Baby Suggs suggests that her approach to ministry is ecumenical and seeks to bridge differences between denominations – something made possible by her 'great heart', i.e., her love. She has developed 'her own brand of preaching',[88] which apparently offers something to the Black community that the churches do not provide. Baby Suggs's sermons do not focus on moral instruction: 'She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more.'[89] She is the centre of meetings

---

this seemingly widespread desire to rewrite a genre that officially lost its usefulness with the abolition of slavery are the will to re-affirm the historical value of the original slave narrative and to reclaim the humanity of the enslaved by (re)imagining their subjectivity.' (Joan Anim-Addo and Maria Helena Lima, "The Power of the Neo-Slave Narrative Genre," *Callaloo* 40, no. 4 [2017]: 3).

84 Emily Griesinger, "Why Baby Suggs, Holy, Quit Preaching the Word: Redemption and Holiness in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Christianity and Literature* 50, no. 4 (2001): 692.

85 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; repr., London: Picador, 1988): 156, emphasis added.

86 Robert Yeates, for instance, discusses representations of 'syncretism of religious and cultural practices' in *Beloved* (Robert Yeates, "'The Unshriven Dead, Zombies on the Loose': African and Caribbean Religious Heritage in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 61, no. 3 [2015]: 515).

87 Morrison, *Beloved*: 87.

88 Morrison, *Beloved*: 147.

89 Morrison, *Beloved*: 88.

that take place outside, in 'the Clearing', i.e., 'a wide-open place cut deep in the woods'.[90] These meetings allow people to release pent-up emotions by laughing, dancing, and crying.[91] The laughing, dancing, and crying that is encouraged during the meeting have a therapeutic effect on a community whose lives have been scarred by slavery. It is tempting to see these meetings in the Clearing as a response to the 'little church in the woods'[92] mentioned by Jacobs or the place of prayer referred to by Mary Prince – places that were destroyed by enslavers. Morrison's historical novel *Beloved* suggests that some neo-slave narratives continue to explore the ambivalent meaning of religion in the history of transatlantic slavery – an ambivalence that can also be gleaned from slave narratives like Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Bibliography

Anim-Addo, Joan, and Maria Helena Lima. "The Power of the Neo-Slave Narrative Genre," *Callaloo* 40, no. 4 (2017): 3–13.

Basseler, Michael. *Kulturelle Erinnerung und Trauma im zeitgenössischen afroamerikanischen Roman: Theoretische Grundlegung, Ausprägungsformen, Entwicklungstendenzen* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2008).

Bellows, Alyssa. "Evangelicalism, Adultery, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 62, no. 3 (2020): 263–74.

Briscoe, NaTosha. "The Struggle for Survival in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century African American Women's Autobiography: Black Women's Narrative of Incarceration and Freedom," *Journal of African American Studies* 26 (2022): 100–112.

Couser, G. Thomas. "Making, Taking, and Faking Lives: The Ethics of Collaborative Life Writing," *Style* 32, no. 2 (1998): 334–50.

Daniels-Rauterkus, Melissa. "Civil Resistance and Procreative Agency in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Women's Studies* 48, no. 5 (2019): 498–509.

Diran, Ingrid. "Scenes of Speculation: Harriet Jacobs and the Biopolitics of Human Capital," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2019): 697–718.

Douglass, Frederick. "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself (1845)," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008): 924–88.

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Ernest, John, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Ernest, John. "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. John Ernest (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 1–17.

Ferguson, Sally Ann H. "Christian Violence and the Slave Narrative," *American Literature* 68, no. 2 (1996): 297–320.

90 Morrison, *Beloved*: 87.

91 Morrison, *Beloved*: 87–88.

92 Morrison, *Beloved*: 66.

Fisch, Audrey, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
Gerbner, Katherine. *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).
Griesinger, Emily. "Why Baby Suggs, Holy, Quit Preaching the Word: Redemption and Holiness in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Christianity and Literature* 50, no. 4 (2001): 689–702.
Haynes, Stephen R. *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
Kachun, Mitch. "Slave Narratives and Historical Memory," in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. John Ernest (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 1–35.
McCarthy, Lucas. "Between the Sublime and the Traumatic: Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 57, no. 2 (2021): 165–202.
Mills, Bruce. "Lydia Maria Child and the Endings to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *American Literature* 64, no. 2 (1992): 255–72.
Morrison, Toni. *Beloved* (1987; repr., London: Picador, 1988).
Olney, James. "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo* 20 (1984): 46–73.
Patterson, Robert J. "A Triple-Twined Re-Appropriation: Womanist Theology and Gendered-Racial Protest in the Writings of Jarena Lee, Frances E.W. Harper, and Harriet Jacobs," *Religion and Literature* 45, no. 2 (2013): 55–82.
Peyser, Thomas. "The Attack on Christianity in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*," *The Explicator* 69, no. 2 (2011): 86–89.
Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* (1831; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004).
Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
Smith, Caleb. "Harriet Jacobs among the Militants: Transformations in Abolition's Public Sphere, 1859–61," *American Literature* 84, no. 4 (2012): 743–68.
Stewart, Anna. "Revising 'Harriet Jacobs' for 1865," *American Literature* 82, no. 4 (2010): 701–24.
Waite, Kasey J. "The Spark of Kindness: The Rhetoric of Abolitionist Action in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Rocky Mountain Review* 73, no. 2 (2019): 163–84.
Yeates, Robert. "'The Unshriven Dead, Zombies on the Loose': African and Caribbean Religious Heritage in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 61, no. 3 (2015): 515–37.