

BY HERMAN E. THOMAS*

Toward an Understanding of Religion and Slavery in J.W.C. Pennington

While one can isolate several significant themes in the life and work of James W. C. Pennington, this investigation focuses on religion and slavery. These two themes constitute major focal points in the life of this black minister whose public life spanned the period of "militant abolitionism" and much of Reconstruction. To demonstrate the inter-relationship between religion and slavery in his life, we shall discuss Pennington's (1) refutation of the religious proslavery argument and (2) his defense of affiliating with a denomination with slaveholders. This essay will show that Pennington based his opposition to slavery on a rational interpretation of Biblical literature and defended his affiliation with the Presbyterian denomination as a right of individual conscience. Since no detailed biographical account of this black religionist has been published, a very brief sketch of his life seems in order.

Born a slave on a plantation in Maryland, January 15, 1809, James Pembroke assumed the name of Pennington after his escape in 1827 at the age of eighteen. Following a sojourn of almost a year at Quaker residences in Pennsylvania, he located in Newton, Long Island, New York. Shortly after settling in Newton, he became a Christian convert. Even before his conversion, Pennington contemplated what he could do for those still in slavery (especially his biological parents and eleven brothers and sisters) as well as for blacks in the North. Following reconciliation with God, he decided to focus on helping the free black population in the North. It was not, however, until 1835 that Pennington began formal preparation for the Christian ministry by moving to New Haven, Connecticut. He taught in a black school and was allowed to sit outside the classroom and hear lectures at Yale Divinity School. In 1838, he returned to Newtown, was ordained a minister, and served the black "Presbyterian Church" there for two years. This was the first of seven churches in three denominations (Presbyterian, Congregational and AME) Pennington would serve as pastor over a ministerial career of some 32 years.

Concurrent with his career as minister, Pennington achieved wide recognition as an abolitionist and reformer. Shortly after becoming a Christian, he launched his public career as an opponent of colonization and an advocate of the abolition of slavery. He attended the first "National Convention of Colored People" in 1830, and was elected President of the Convention in 1853.

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In addition to participating in the Convention movement, Pennington spoke, wrote, and travelled in support of the abolition of slavery.

Pennington delivered two very important addresses, *An Address Delivered at Newark, New Jersey, At the First Anniversary of West Indian Emancipation, August 1, 1839*; and *The Reasonableness of the Abolition of Slavery at the South, a Legitimate Conference from the Success of British Emancipation: An Address Delivered at Hartford, Connecticut on the First of August 1856*. He also published a number of invigorating intellectual articles including "A Review of the Slave Trade," and "The Self-Redeeming Power of the Colored Races of the World" both of which appeared in the *Anglo-African Magazine* (1859). His proclamation of the "gospel" of abolition carried Pennington to Europe, and the West Indies. During his second visit to Europe in 1849-50 (his first had been in 1843), the University of Heidelberg respectfully conferred a doctor of divinity degree upon Pennington. The degree was awarded, not because of his accomplishments as a scholar though he had a number of publications including his *Text Book History* and *The Fugitive Blacksmith* by late 1849, but for what he symbolized: what a black former slaver turned black abolitionist could achieve if given a chance. Without a doubt, Pennington's potential for success achievements in spite of the odds were evident. He had largely educated himself; was renown teacher and preacher, and organizer of the Union Missionary Society in 1841, the forerunner of the American Missionary Association of 1846; and the official representative of the free black people of Connecticut at the World Anti-Slavery Convention meeting in London, England in 1843. These accomplishments pre-dated the conferral of the D.D. degree. Later, in mid-1855, Pennington would ride inside a New York City streetcar in defiance of a city ordinance permitting black passengers only on the outside, take the issue to court, and end segregated streetcars in New York City, and thus prefigure Martin L. King and Montgomery ninety-nine and one-half years later.

But by late 1855, Pennington's public career had reached its zenith. For unknown reasons, he was no longer pastor of Shiloh (First Colored Presbyterian Church) in New York after 1855. Lewis Tappan, his longtime associate in the abolition and missions movement, recorded that Pennington had succumbed to alcohol in late 1854.

Pennington also recovered from addiction to alcohol and continued his crusade against slavery through the Civil War. In 1865, Pennington travelled South, was ordained an AME minister, and assigned to the Natchez, Mississippi charge. By 1868 he was in Portland, Maine at the Fourth Congregational Church which he left in 1870 to become pastor of a black Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, Florida. He died in October, 1870, still ministering to the needs of his people.

Pennington was a black man committed to the utilization of Christianity as both a faith and a vehicle of racial uplift.

1. Pennington's Refutation of the Religious Pro-Slavery Argument

Even in the confines of slavery Pennington felt that slavery was wrong. After his escape to free territory, he encountered both black and white

abolitionists who embraced contrasting concepts as to the most effective approach to abolish the "peculiar institution." He sympathized with most of their views without moderating his inherent, personal resentment of the slave system. A few years after his ordination to the ministry he set out to refute the contention that Biblical literature sanctioned institutional slavery.

In the North, where he was exposed to evangelical Protestantism, the Bible greatly influenced Pennington's development into an active abolitionist and an opponent of slavery. In approaching the issue of slavery and the Bible, Pennington carefully selected his words in asking the question "Is slave holding consistent with the Gospel? That men in other ages had been slaveholders was a fact in the Bible. But the Bible was more important for what it revealed "as consistent or inconsistent with the moral nature of God." With specific regard for slavery, Pennington's primary concern was "is it consistent wi [th] the will of God?" or is it shown to be "right in His sight?"¹

Applying the test of consistency to the Old Testament for those who argued that black people were descended from Cain, Pennington retorted with what he called "the schoolboy's textbook fact, that Cain lived before the deluge, [and] that all his posterity were swallowed up!"² Moreover, black people were not descendants of Canaan, the youngest son of Ham, presumably cursed by his grandfather, Noah, and his posterity doomed to slavery. Ham's son, Canaan had settled in the land called Canaan, but his son Sabetecha settled in Africa from whence black people came.³

Furthermore, the argument that the curse was intended to extend to Canaan's posterity was generally "inferred from the fact that the land which they [the Canaanites] inhabited," was given to the Israelites.⁴ However, for Pennington, the inference was not clear, for the very fact of the Canaanites possessing the land "may have been the reason why they were doomed." Pennington thought that God appropriated the land before the Canaanites occupied it; therefore, they had no claim upon it. The land was already destined by God to be Israel's.

Finally, there was no evidence that the words of Noah carried divine punitive sanction. Pennington saw no evidence to support the proslavery claim. If such support was to be found, then God might be made to

¹ The above biographical sketch was based largely on the following sources: James W. C. Pennington, *A Text Book History of the Origin and History of the Colored People* (Hartford: L. Skinner, 1841); James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; Or, Events In The History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States*. 3rd ed. (London: Charles Gilpin, 1850); Wilson Armistead, *A Tribute for the Negro* (Manchester, England: William Irwin, 1848); Howard H. Bell, ed., *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864* (New York: Arno Press, 1969); *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1838-1858*; (reprinted, Philadelphia, 1894); "Pennington James W. C.," *Dictionary of American Biography*, XIII (1946); and John Hooker, *Some Reminiscences of a Long Life* (Hartford, Connecticut: Belknap and Warfield, 1899).

² James W. C. Pennington, *A Text Book History of the Origin and History of the Colored People* (Hartford: L. Skinner, 1841), p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 12.

⁴ *Genesis* 17:8

contradict himself, for according to Ezekiel, neither the father nor the son was accountable for the sins of the other. Probably the most convincing proof that Noah's utterance was made without divine approval was the fact that he was under the influence of wine. Thus, of Noah's so-called damnation of black people, Pennington asked, "Is the spirit of wine the spirit of God?"⁵

He also maintained that American slavery existed in violation of a Biblical understanding of the covenant relationship. A "covenant" was an agreement to do something which was either right or wrong. It was right only if it was the "embodied expression" of God's righteous will.⁶ A covenant was wrong from the time of inception if it bound men to do wrong and did not carry divine sanction. In the twenty-eighth chapter of Isaiah, the rulers of Jerusalem made a covenant with death and an agreement with Sheol. It was wrong and unalterable except by a new covenant which would annul the one with death and Sheol.⁷

By perpetuating slavery, he contended, the United States had made a covenant with death and that not only was American slavery inconsistent with a Biblical understanding of the covenant relationship particularly in the Old Testament, it was proscribed by Jesus in the gospel. "The gospel rightly understood, taught, received, felt and practiced," Pennington proclaimed, in a letter to his family, "is as anti-slavery as it is anti-sin."⁸ Rather than citing chapter and verse condemning slavery, he quoted legal definitions and attributes of slavery. More specifically, he quoted from the Synod of Kentucky's exposition of slavery:

There are now in our whole land two millions of human beings, exposed, defenceless, to every insult, short of maiming or death, which their fellow men may choose to inflict. *They suffer all* that can be inflicted by wanton caprice, by brutal lust, by malignant spite, and by insane anger. Their happiness is the sport of every whim, and the prey of every passion that may, occasionally, or habitually, infest the master's bosom. If we could calculate the amount of woe endured by ill-treated slaves, it would overwhelm every compassionate heart—it would move even the obdurate to sympathy. There is also a vast sum of suffering inflicted upon the slave by humane masters, as a punishment for that kind of idleness and misconduct which slavery naturally produces.⁹

After exclaiming that he wanted "no higher authority than this" Pennington asked how this description of slavery compared with the Gospel. "Does it [the Gospel] sanction 'cruelty'? Does it sanction 'mangling'? . . . Does it sanction 'imprisonment'? Does it sanction 'starvation'? Does it sanction 'torture'?"¹⁰ The Gospel sanctioned none

⁵ Pennington, *Text Book History*, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ James W. C. Pennington, "Covenants Involving Moral Wrong Are Not Obligatory Upon Man: A Sermon Delivered In The Fifth Congregational Church, Hartford, On Thanksgiving Day, November 17th, 1842 (Hartford: H. T. Wells, 1842), p. 3

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ James W. C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; Or, Events In The History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States*. 3rd ed. (London: Charles Gilpin, 1850, in *Five Slave Narratives*, edited by William L. Katz (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 76.

¹⁰ James W. C. Pennington, "A Two Year's Absence; Or, A Farewell Sermon, Preached In the Fifth Congregational Church, November 2nd, 1845 (Hartford: H. T. Wells, 1845), p. 28.

of these, and it, therefore, did not approve of slavery, he concluded.

Pennington also appealed to the day of judgment to augment his belief that slavery was inconsistent with the Bible. He encouraged slaveholders to desist from wrongdoing and perform "a little for the glory of God before the day of account" came for both slaves and masters.¹¹ In anticipation of the day of judgment, slaveholders were being informed that they would not inherit eternal life for they had denied the opportunity of salvation to slaves who also were God's creatures. For Pennington, it mattered not whether a slaveholder was a seller of rum or a professor of religion; his duty was to free the slave. Slavery was contrary to the will of God and unsanctioned, in Pennington's mind, by the Bible. In spite of his argument that slavery was un-Biblical, Pennington was accused of affiliating with a slaveholding denomination.

2. Pennington's Defense of Affiliating with a Denomination with Slaveholding Members

In 1853, Pennington was elected Moderator of the Third Presbytery of New York.¹² About a year later, he was accused by an unidentified antislavery writer of Canastota, New York of being proslavery ecclesiastically. The writer stated in a May 29, 1854 article that Pennington was:

a member of the Third Presbytery of New York a body in full communion with men thieves . . . who have labored to make it easy for the dragon of slavery to slime his way through these Northern States represented by the celebrated Dr. Cox, who rejoiced in General Assembly, that they had capped the volcano, by strangling the cry of the slave for at least three years. The New York and New Jersey Synods echoed the voice of the Teneral Assembly by declaring agitation on the slavery question 'undesirable and inexpedient.'¹³

The author concluded by contending that Pennington "concurred in the [General Assembly] resolution," and wanted to know if "Dr. Pennington" would sever his ecclesiastical relationship with the Presbyterian Church.¹⁴

In response to the accusation of "pro-slavery sentiment and action," Pennington commented: "I have never spoken one word, or cast a vote, on any occasion, or in any place, pro-slavery wise, positive or implied . . . and if any man, or party of men, persist in the charge, [I will] challenge the proof; where did it come, let me have it!"¹⁵

In his second installment, he proceeded to summarize his experience as a free man noting that "In 1827, I escaped, without the aid or assistance of any human being, from Maryland slavery to Pennsylvania freedom." He

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

¹² Pennington, "Farewell Sermon," p. 29.

¹³ *Minutes of the New York Third Presbytery, July 5th, 1853*, unpublished MSS, The Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, p. 305.

¹⁴ *Douglass' Paper*, June 9, 1854.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* At the time this charge and question were leveled, Pennington was involved in negotiations to rescue his recently captured brother from re-enslavement. See *Douglass' Paper*, May 11, 1855.

also stated that he had lived "in Connecticut 8 years, in Great Britain 2 years, in Jamaica, Long Island 8 months, in France, Germany, Russia and Belgium, together 3 months." In addition, "I am a black man," he proudly proclaimed, "of 3rd generation line pure Mandingo stock." Since "no descendant of [his] race" had made such a charge against him, he wondered "why should white men seek this quarrel with me?" Abusing and misrepresenting him would not free enslaved black people, he reasoned.¹⁶

Pennington presented himself as a self-made man who had achieved some standing among the "men of this [United States] land." Yet he felt himself pounced upon as though he were "an Alabama slaveholder." He had promised God as he escaped that "if God [would] deliver me from my pursuers, I [would] never surrender my manhood to mortal men . . . that oath I never have and never will violate."¹⁷

For this reason, he addressed a Newtown meeting related to selecting delegates to the first National Negro Convention in 1830, and was elected a delegate. At the time he penned this anti-colonization address, he was a servant in the home of the President to the Brooklyn Colonization Society, who confronted him with it following his return from the National Convention. Pennington informed this gentleman that black people at the Convention in Philadelphia did not wish to be returned to Africa. Not wishing to work against the desires of black people, the President went to the meeting of the Society that day, and disbanded the organization, and Pennington worked for this gentleman for almost two more years. Moreover, Pennington declared that his "own patriotic spirit" motivated him to commence his activity on behalf of the race. Asking for approval by any "license" agency such as white antislavery societies, he observed, "never occurred to me."¹⁸

Pennington devoted the third installment to repudiating charges of affiliating with a proslavery presbytery. The accusatory article was published in the *Pennsylvania Freeman* by an unidentified author. The author charged Pennington with being a member of the presbytery in which Dr. S. H. Cox, a proslaveryman, was a member, and explained that enigma by supposing that Pennington was "either ignorant of the position of that church in respect and sympathy for them in bonds," or he supported the proslavery position of the church.¹⁹

Pennington immediately removed the thunder from the first charge by saying: "As a minister, I have never been a member of any presbytery with Dr. Cox."²⁰ It was true that after his conversion Pennington became a member of Laight Street Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn of which Cox was the minister. At that time, however, Pennington was not a minister, but a member of the session. Cox's house was attacked in 1835 because of

¹⁶ *Douglass' Paper*, February 23, 1855.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Douglass' Paper*, April 6, 1855.

²⁰ *Douglass' Paper*, May 4, 1855.

his antislavery stand. That same year, he resigned as pastor of the Laight Street Church and accepted a professorship at Auburn Seminary. Later he was minister of the New School First Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn. By 1846, he had become a proslaveryman who supported the inclusion of slaveholders in the Evangelical Alliance, an ecumenical association of Protestants for temperance and Sabbath reform. The shift was clear when Cox, in a letter, charged Frederick Douglass, who spoke at the London meeting, with interjecting slavery into the proceedings and then charging American temperance societies with racial prejudice. Cox, then, was an abolitionist who defected from the movement and became an antiabolitionist. The first Presbyterian church he served in Brooklyn, however, was not a part of the Third Presbytery in which Pennington was a minister. Since Pennington's Shiloh Church was a part of the New School Third Presbytery and Cox's church was probably a part of the Presbytery of Brooklyn, they were not, and had not, been ministers in the same presbytery.²¹

As a matter of fact, in 1845, Pennington had clarified his relationship to his former pastor. In a preface to an appropriately titled "Farewell Sermon" he acknowledged the adoption of the "sentiment of my former pastor and venerable father in the gospel" on the subject of applying "church discipline to slaveholding." According to Pennington, Cox had written in 1836 that slaveholders should be "excluded from the communion of the church" and that "members of the church, individually, ought to withdraw communion from slaveholders and slavedealers universally."²² Pennington concluded by noting that he believed Cox's statement when he first read it and still did. "If my beloved pastor has changed from this sentiment," he added, "I have not changed with him." Pennington, then accepted Cox's views stated in 1836, but he rejected his mentor's post-1836 thoughts upon the relationship between the Church and slavery.²³

Since Cox remained in the New School Presbyterian Church, the *Freeman* was apparently alluding to the action of Cox during the General Assembly in 1853. This New School Assembly voted to request the presbyteries in each of the slaveholding states "to submit to the next assembly specific information regarding the exact number of slaveholders in connection with the churches under their jurisdiction, and the number of slaves held by them," and "whether slaves are admitted to equal privileges and powers in the church courts."²⁴ Generally speaking, the Assembly wanted information about "the religious well-being of the enslaved."²⁵ While the request infuriated southern representatives, they only submitted a statement of protest to the Assembly. Cox, however,

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* This discussion on Cox is based on Theodore Savage, *The Presbyterian Church in New York City* (New York: The Presbytery of New York, 1949), pp. 172, 173, 17, 204, 17.

²³ Pennington, "Farewell Sermon," pp. 7-8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Minutes of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 1838-1858*, (reprinted, Philadelphia, 1894), p. 392.

composed a very lengthy statement of objection. Basically, he was convinced that "by the proposed act Slavery [would] not be at all shaken [but] strengthened—if assailed through that most questionable and ambiguous principle which abolitionists are now laboring to force upon our acceptance, even that the slaveholding is in itself a ground of exclusion from the Christian sacraments."²⁶ Cox was opposed to Christian abolitionism which embraced no fellowship with slaveholders by denying them both church membership and the Lord's Supper. Pennington, of course, supported the position of the General Assembly and opposed the views of Cox.

Pennington was fully aware of the proslavery sentiment in the Presbyterian Church. In July, 1853, as the moderator of the New School Third Presbytery of New York, he informed his fellow ministers: "It is to be deeply regretted that some leading Presyterian theologians among us have . . . undertaken to justify slavery from the Bible." Because he was certain that "a fair and open discussion would prove that the proslavery men were in error," he called upon Presbyterian ministers and members to cease their support of slavery and adopt the "progressive opinion" of some in the denomination who viewed slavery as unBiblical and un-Christian. Pennington had in mind Presbyterians, among others, who supported such voluntary associations as the American Home Missionary Society which received financial assistance from Presbyterians and Congregationalists and admitted slaveholders to church membership. He knew also that some Presbyterians contributed to the American Bible Society which had rejected a \$5,000 grant from the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1834 for the purpose of placing Bibles in the hands of all slaves. Pennington was also aware that the American Tract Society refused to circulate literature dealing with slavery. By calling for open debate while refusing to allow fellowship with slaveholders, through his leadership as moderator Pennington was trying to move the Presbytery, and possibly the New School, closer to adopting a Christian abolitionist stance.²⁷

On a more personal level, Pennington maintained that the *Freeman* (newspaper), "notwithstanding the import of his name," had not learned that "colored men have as strong a jealousy of their rights of private judgment and conscience as white men have, and as high a sense of propriety." As a black man, therefore, he was free to be a Presbyterian if that was the desire of his conscience. Consequently, if the *Freeman* had a quarrel with the Presbyterian Church "as a body," that would have been understandable, for it would have been a matter of church doctrine or policy. "But," Pennington explained, "to single me out as an offender [of my people], and purposely linking [sic] my name with that of an odious individual white man [Dr. S. H. Cox]—falsely,—too and then tell me virtually that in no constituent part of the Presbyterian Church shall my fugitive heels find a resting place, is equivalent to telling me that I shall

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 393.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 395-396.

not be a Presbyterian! Private judgment is the domain of the black man as well as the white. Any man, or body of men, who attempts to invade that sacred right, I must regard as the most dangerous of all men to me."²⁸

In addition to arguing that as a black man he was entitled to think for himself, Pennington perceived the charge by the *Freeman* as an attack upon "colored men, by professed friends of the race." He explained: "We become obnoxious to some of our professed friends when we do not gee and haw . . . at their bidding. I have yet to learn that a mere profession of abolitionism gives any white man a right to take me by the coat button and lead me whithersoever he will."²⁹

In his May, 1855 final installment on the matter of his alleged proslavery sentiments, Pennington submitted a letter from the Albion Anti-Slavery Society charging him by stating that "in one of your late Conventions in New York" a resolution declaring agitation on the slavery question "undesirable and inexpedient." The letter from this Michigan society also deemed it "undesirable and inexpedient" to send "any aid" for the "pretended deep affliction" of Pennington concerning his fugitive brother, Stephen.³⁰

The response of Pennington to this charge was sharp and precise. "First," he said, "I made no appeal to Mr. Tuttle [the Society's corresponding Secretary] or his society in the redemption of my brother—Stephen Pembroke, from slavery," and second, that he did not support the resolution alluded to in the letter. In the third point of his refutation, he stated that he had received "letters of tender sympathy, enclosing material 'aid' from persons of all classes," which had permitted the return of his brother and some of the family one month after their capture in New York City. Finally, since no response had been received from the Albion Society, "Let the world," Pennington advised his readers, "be the judge between us."³¹

In this contest with his adversaries, Pennington demonstrated that from a religious perspective slavery was wrong and unjust. In addition, he showed that a black man was capable of intellectual reflection; that he was entitled to private judgment and that a black man in high position would still act for the good of the race.

Pennington was a black Christian minister and abolitionist who utilized religion in the fight against slavery. More than a century after the abolition of physical slavery and the death of Pennington, freeing individuals and institutions of religion from "mental slavery" to work for the reform of a society that continues to oppress black people, remains a formidable challenge for black religionists.³²

²⁸ Pennington expressed his position on pro-slavery in the New School in a sermon, *Christian Zeal. A Sermon Preached Before The Third Presbytery of New York in Thirteenth Street Presbyterian Church, July 3rd, 1853* (New York: Zuille and Leonard, 1854), p. 13. Information on religious voluntary associations was recorded by William Goodell, *Slavery and Anti-Slavery* (New York: W. Harned, 1852), pp. 209, 211, and 213, respectively.

²⁹ *Douglass' Paper*, May 4, 1855.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Douglass' Paper*, May 11, 1855.

³² *Ibid.*