

Robert H. Craig\*

## John Brown and the Struggle for Freedom: The Cost of Liberation and the Burden of Historical Memory

The 1990s have thus far not attested to a lessening of the pervasive reality of the racism that seems so much a part of American life. Charles Long persuasively argues that dominant people use a cultural language, be it theological, political, or socio-economic, which is a language of "conquest and suppression." The very terms that White Americans use to describe themselves render "invisible oppressed people" while preventing those who are more free from "seeing themselves as they really are." Christians too often share in this process by accepting definitions of social reality that obscure rather than expose the nation's longest and deepest injustice. Racism remains the American, and Christian dilemma.<sup>1</sup>

To envision the world differently and to rethink the role Christian faith must play in the struggle for racial justice is one of the central concerns of this essay. My approach is historical in that by focusing on John Brown we can learn something about an

---

\*Robert H. Craig teaches in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Mount Union College, Alliance, Ohio.

<sup>1</sup>Leon F. Litwack, "Trouble in Mind: The Bicentennial and the Afro-American Experience," *Journal of American History* 42/7 (September, 1987), pp.315-337. Charles H. Long, "Civil Rights—Civil Religion: Visible People and Invisible Religion," in *American Civil Religion*, edited by Russell F. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p.214.

exception to the observation made by Joel Williamson that few whites have had "the sensitivity and imagination necessary to put themselves in the place of black people and to understand something about the burden of color. . ."<sup>2</sup>

It should be mentioned that in dealing with John Brown one has a number of problems, not all which are questions of interpretation and analysis, that can be briefly illustrated by how scholars have dealt with Brown's contemporary, Abraham Lincoln. While scholars have been enamored of Lincoln they have tended to vilify Brown. The noted historian of American religion, Sidney Mead, has argued that Lincoln is "in a real sense the spiritual center of American history" in the sense that he embodies not only our aspirations for a more democratic order, but is a conscious link between the unfolding of American history and its "destiny under God." In a similar vein Peter Hodgson believes that Lincoln represents "the critical civil religious tradition at its best" because his thought was "informed" by both the biblical and republican traditions, a weaving together of our revolutionary heritage with the insights and imagery of Christian faith—most succinctly captured by Lincoln's phrase "a new birth of freedom," which expresses our desire that freedom, justice, and equality should govern the formation of human institutions and structures of government.

By contrast, Brown is portrayed as a fanatic, who if not simply a "psychopath" or "madman," at the very least is one whose sanity can be called into question. What his biographer, Stephen Oates, refers to as "anti-Brown prejudice" extends beyond the academic community and cites the rejection of a proposal by the National Endowment for the Humanities for a public television series on Brown on the grounds that the project "did not properly

---

<sup>2</sup>Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.488.

vilify the man as a violent devil whose Harpers Ferry enterprise 'made no sense at all.'"<sup>3</sup>

While granting at the outset the fact that Brown has rarely been dealt with fairly my own approach to Brown is neither to provide some sort of historical corrective that tries to exonerate him or substitutes the angelic for the demonic. Rather Brown can serve as a prism or paradigm by which we may wrestle with a number of issues of ongoing historical importance. The life of John Brown as a human being raises questions about our use of language, particularly what Raymond Williams has referred to as "keywords." These are words which convey something fundamental about ourselves as a people, as can be illustrated in the use of words such as freedom and equality in the context of a society divided along racial lines. Likewise, words are important because they have not only symbolic value, but embody hopes and dreams and as such point to what we can yet become. Beyond mere words there are issues of deeds, concrete acts of liberation that have to do with violence and nonviolence. Furthermore, there is to Brown, even more than Lincoln, a religious dimension—that extends from his own self-consciousness as a committed Christian to his analysis of church and society. Finally, there is the continuing importance of John Brown for the African American community, as illustrated by the assessment of Brown offered by W.E.B. Du Bois and Reverdy Ransom and what they considered to be the legacy of John Brown.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp.73-75. Peter C. Hodgson, *New Birth of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp.39-41. For those interested in a religious appraisal of Lincoln see the study of William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970) (This work has had various editions and titles, among them *The Almost Chosen People* and *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln*). Stephen B. Oates, *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War Era* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), pp.40-42. One recent exception to the general tendency to dismiss John Brown as "insane" is Howard Zinn's history of the United States: *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980), pp.180-182.

<sup>4</sup>Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Glasgow: Fontana/Croom Helm, 1976).

### 1. Freedom, Liberty, and Equality: John Brown and his Contemporaries

During the summer of 1849, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., made famous by his book *Two Years Before the Mast*, was traveling with a number of companions through the Adirondacks when they became lost in the woods. They finally came upon a log-cabin that belonged to "a man named Brown." Only later would Dana realize that he and his friends had been offered food and hospitality by John Brown and his family. At the time the Brown family was living in North Elba, New York, on land that the abolitionist Gerrit Smith had set aside for settlement by African Americans, most of whom were fugitive slaves. What struck Dana, apart from Brown's obvious abolitionist sympathies, was the fact that when they sat down for a meal they were joined by African Americans whom Brown "called. . .by their surnames, with the prefixes of Mr. and Mrs." It seemed to Dana that it was one thing to speak of equality in vague generalities, but quite another to practice social equality between the races. Benjamin Quarles is of the opinion that the encounter between Richard Henry Dana and John Brown is reflective of the fact that Brown did not share the racial prejudice of most White Americans of the antebellum period. Brown is to Quarles a person "of a different mold. To him the color of a man's skin was no measure of his worth. Whites were not innately superior, Blacks not innately inferior."<sup>5</sup>

Eric Foner has stressed that in the decades prior to the outbreak of the Civil War "racial prejudice was all but universal" North and South of the Mason-Dixon Line. One of the many

---

<sup>5</sup>R.H. Dana, Jr., "How We Met John Brown," *The Atlantic Monthly* 28/165 (July, 1871), pp.5-9. *The Journal of Richard Henry Dana, Jr.* Vol.I, edited by Robert F. Lucid (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), pp.364-365. Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown*. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), p.68. *Blacks on John Brown*, edited by Benjamin Quarles (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p.ix.

historical ironies of antebellum America, according to Foner, was that "both racism and anti-slavery thought became more pervasive in the North at the same time." It seems that it was one thing to attack the South's "peculiar institution" and quite another to argue for freedom and equality for African Americans. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his astute observations about the United States of this period, noted "that the prejudice which repels the Negroes seems to increase in proportion as they are emancipated, and inequality is sanctioned by the manners while it is effaced from the laws of the country."<sup>6</sup>

The fear of freedom and equality for African Americans was evident in legal and extralegal restrictions which governed the lives of free Blacks throughout the North. Racial segregation was the norm: segregated schools, prisons, hospitals, churches, and cemeteries. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were for Whites only. Racial discrimination extended from voting to the courthouse, and economic opportunities were most often limited to menial jobs. In fact, racial prejudice was so strong that Indiana, Iowa, Illinois, and Oregon passed legislation which prohibited African Americans from taking up residency. Tocqueville concluded that the meaning of being "free" in the North was very questionable, for what was freedom when the African American could "neither share the rights, or the pleasures, nor the labor, nor the afflictions, nor the tomb of him whose equal he has been declared to be; and he cannot meet him upon fair terms in life nor in death."<sup>7</sup>

By comparison, it has often been assumed that White abolitionists did not share the racist assumptions of the dominant

---

<sup>6</sup>Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp.77,205. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), p.360.

<sup>7</sup>Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp.93-94, 113-114, 153. Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*, *op. cit.*, pp.77-78. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, *op. cit.*, p.360.

White Protestant culture. And yet, the historical record is otherwise. Varying studies of American abolitionism point to what one scholar has called "the chord of prejudice" which characterized White abolitionists' relations to members of the free Black community. White abolitionists spoke of equality between Blacks and Whites, but their verbal utterances did not qualify their own racial prejudices and paternalistic practices that demanded that African Americans conform to White middle class values and standards. Apprehensive that their rhetoric might be taken seriously, White abolitionists clearly expressed their reservations about social equality and full civil rights for African Americans. Furthermore, many were unable to accept Black abolitionists as equals, the most famous example being the relationship between William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, John Brown from an early age was morally outraged at those who not only sought to justify slavery, but acquiesced in pro-slavery interests rather than confront the realities of social evil. Brown contended that his own abolitionist commitments, which would lead to his declaration of an "eternal war with slavery," date from his experience as a young boy. When he was twelve years of age he had the sole responsibility of driving herds of cattle hundreds of miles from Ohio to various army outposts in Michigan to meet the obligations of beef contracts made by his father. On one occasion he stayed briefly with a Michigan inn-

---

<sup>8</sup>Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 160-195. Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism After 1830* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 54-69. George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972), pp. 97-129. William H. Pease & Jane H. Pease, "Antislavery Ambivalence: Immediatism, Expediency, Race," *American Quarterly* 17 (Winter, 1965), pp. 682-695. William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, "Ends, Means, and Attitudes: Black-White Conflict in the Antislavery Movement," *Civil War History* 18 (1972), pp. 117-128. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, "The Role of Blacks in the Abolitionist Movement," in *Blacks in the Abolitionist Movement*, edited by John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), pp. 114-115.

keeper, who held as a slave a boy his own age. The two boys quickly became friends and Brown was shocked by the contrast between the way he was affectionately treated and his friend who was "badly clothed, fed; & lodged in cold weather." He realized that to be a slave meant that you could be beaten at any time with any instrument at hand, which in this case was an iron fire shovel.<sup>9</sup>

John Brown's war against slavery would evolve from the aiding of fugitive slaves, battles with pro-slavery forces in Kansas, to raids in Missouri to free slaves; culminating in his attack on Harpers Ferry. But Brown realized that the problems facing the republic were not confined to slavery alone. Slavery was not only the reducing of human beings to chattel, the private property of others, but the debasing of the God-given worth and dignity that belonged to all human persons. One of his sons, Salmon, recalled that he learned from his father not only a hatred of slavery, but that all persons had the same basic rights to live a full and productive life. To John Brown slavery and racism were "the sum of all villainies" because they were both an affront to a righteous God and an acknowledgement that "human freedom and republican liberty" were only empty and meaningless words.<sup>10</sup>

Black abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Robert Purvis admired Brown because he put into practice what he believed and in the words of Purvis, Brown maintained "that the black man was

---

<sup>9</sup>Letter from John Brown to Frederick Douglass, January 9, 1854, which appeared in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, January 27, 1854. This letter is part of a series of letters edited by Benjamin Quarles. See Benjamin Quarles, "John Brown Writes to Blacks," *Kansas Quarterly* 41/4 (1975), pp.458-460. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, *op. cit.*, pp.12-13. Letter from John Brown to Henry L. Stearns, July 15, 1857 as found in *A John Brown Reader*, edited by Louis Ruchames (London: Abelard-Schuman Ltd, 1959), p.39. Stephen B. Oates, "Years of Trial: John Brown in Ohio," *Timeline* 21 (February-March, 1985), p.2.

<sup>10</sup>Salmon Brown, "My Father, John Brown," as found in *A John Brown Reader*, *op. cit.*, p.183. Letter of John Brown to Frederick Douglass, April 4, 1856 which appeared in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* in May 2, 1856, *John Brown Writes to Blacks*, *op. cit.*, pp.466-67. William Addison Phillips, "Three Interviews with Old John Brown," *Atlantic Monthly* (December, 1879), as found in *A John Brown Reader*, *op. cit.*, p.212-216.

a man, and he laid down his own life to secure for him the rights of a man." These rights entailed African Americans being treated as equals in the political, economic, and social arena. An important comparison can be made with Abraham Lincoln. LaWanda Cox's recent study, *Lincoln and Black Freedom*, is a debate with numerous scholars over Lincoln's changing perspective on race relations. She claims that Lincoln's position was that, given existing political realities, such as the prevailing belief in Black inferiority and the South's defense of slavery, there had to be certain "limits of equality of rights for the black man" as a matter of "necessity," but never of principle. But as circumstances changed, particularly with the onset of the war, Lincoln became committed to "equality beyond freedom from bondage." Brown, by contrast, could not compromise his commitment to racial equality for reasons of political expediency. In fact, it can be contended that Brown far more than Lincoln understood the relationship between freedom and equality. Equality in this case had to do with an affirmation of human dignity and feelings of self-esteem, that all people, Black and White, were in fact equal.<sup>11</sup>

The differences between the commitment to racial equality of Brown and Lincoln raises the larger question of Americans' perception of the meaning of human equality. It has been long noted that Americans have an almost hallowed reverence for the political vocabulary of the revolutionary era, especially for such words as liberty and freedom. References to equality have, there-

---

<sup>11</sup>Frederick Douglass, "Old Brown in Rochester," *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (April 15, 1859) as found in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, Vol. V (Supplementary Volume, 1844-1860), edited by Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p.429. The observation by Robert Purvis cited by Page Smith in his work on *The Nation Comes of Age: A People's History of the Antebellum Years*, Vol. IV (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company), p.1160. LaWanda Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1981), pp.3-43, 22. David Brion Davis, *Revolutions: Reflections on American Equality and Foreign Liberations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp.24-25.



fore, most often been in the context of the celebration of liberty and freedom, whereby equality is primarily an equality of opportunity made possible by the shedding of hereditary rank and privilege. It has also meant that liberty and freedom have been understood in negative terms, the stress being placed on the rights of non-interference in an individual's exercise of his or her freedom and autonomy. Furthermore, Americans' understanding of freedom and liberty have been so wedded to a developing market economy that the amassing of wealth and power were seen to be nothing more than an extension of fundamental human liberty. Isaiah Berlin has rightly noted that there has thus been a link between the advocacy of the maximization of liberty and freedom and the legitimacy of "unlimited competition and acquisition of wealth" which has meant that the exercise of liberty has been compatible with the "presence of extreme want in a society."<sup>12</sup>

The end result has been that cries of liberty and freedom could easily mask unequal human relationships. On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass delivered an address on "The Meaning of the Fourth of July for the Negro" in Rochester, New York. Douglass spoke of the glaring contradictions between America's professed ideals, its "shouts of liberty and equality," and the "gross injustice and cruelty" of slavery. What was the Fourth of July for African Americans but a celebration that was a sham: "your boasted liberty, an unholy license; our national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are" to

---

<sup>12</sup>Frances Moore Lappé, *Rediscovery America's Values* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), pp.7-10. David Hollenbach, *Claims in Conflict* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp.14-15.

African Americans nothing but mere "fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy."<sup>13</sup>

The watchwords of the French Revolution were liberty, equality and fraternity. It can be argued that for John Brown, not unlike the inheritors of the French Revolution, liberty and equality were inseparable, for what was the meaning of liberty if all people were not equal? Perhaps what made possible the necessary link between liberty and equality was an acknowledgement of human interrelatedness, most succinctly conveyed by the notion of fraternity. Historically fraternity has not been a primary American value. But as a concept it is important if, devoid of its sexist connotations, it means a willingness to accept human differences while at the same time "promoting a respect of genuinely equal relations" among people. It seemed obvious to John Brown that expressions of a belief in freedom and equality implied not only the advocacy, but the practice of racial equality. At the same time there was a recognition of human differences. People were not all the same, for the real issue was not human diversity, but power, that differences between human beings can never be a reason for permitting some people to have power over others.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. The Struggle for Liberation: Structural Realities of Violence

Power over others has been most visibly evident in this country in the legitimization of the violence of racial apartheid.

---

<sup>13</sup>Frederick Douglass, "The Meaning of the July Fourth for the Negro," in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, Vol.II, edited by Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950), p.192.

<sup>14</sup>Davis, *Revolutions: Reflection on American Equality and Foreign Liberators*, op.cit., pp.11,21. Robert H. Wiebe, *The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.65. For an assessment of Brown's relationship to the Black community see the recent study of Frederick Douglass by William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1991), pp.194-195. Williams, *Keywords*, op. cit., p.102.

Thus, it seems strange that the most debated aspect of John Brown's career should center on a resort to violence in his war against slavery. One is left with a lingering feeling that such debates only compartmentalize our understanding of the violence of antebellum America—as if violence only emerges as an issue because of John Brown.<sup>15</sup>

What is overlooked is that slavery was above all else an institutionalized embodiment of the violence of the status quo. Brown, Douglass, and members of the Black community knew all too well how violence shaped patterns of Black-White relations from birth to death. This form of violence is best labeled as structural violence, which can be defined as “when institutions or structures of society violate the personhood of society's members.” Justice is best rendered to John Brown and his contemporaries when we speak about the day-to-day violence that shaped the lives of millions of African Americans, North and South of the Mason-Dixon Line, and the degree to which struggles against the violence of oppression should be viewed as attempts to stem the tide of dehumanization.<sup>16</sup>

African Americans such as Martin Delany shared Brown's belief in the liberative role violence could play in the struggle for freedom of an enslaved people. Writing for Frederick Douglass' *North Star*, Delany asserted that slaves would never be free so long

---

<sup>15</sup>Lawrence J. Friedman, “Antebellum American Abolitionists and the Problem of Violent Means,” *The Psychohistorical Review*, 9/1 (Fall, 1980), pp.23-26. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “John Brown, Weathermen, and the Psychology of Antinomian Violence,” *Soundings* 58/4 (1975), pp.417-438. John Demos, “The Antislavery Movement and the Problem of Violent Means,” *New England Quarterly* 37/4 (December, 1964), pp.501-526. Richard King, “Violence and John Brown,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 5 (1974), pp.9-12. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, *op. cit.*, pp.196-222. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal*, *op. cit.*, pp.19-33. Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp.231-267.

<sup>16</sup>Quarles, *Allies for Freedom*, *op. cit.*, p.35. Brown, *Religion and Violence*, *op. cit.* p.8.

as they waited on the "master's good will." Freedom would come for the slave only in the midst of a fight for liberty when the slave was "redeemed from the portals of infamy to the true dignity of his nature—an elevated freeman." It was better, thought James T. Holly, that "his countrymen should be dead freemen than living slaves." In contrast, Frederick Douglass could not consciously take the life of another human being, even the life of someone who had oppressed him. Douglass was well aware of the vicious nature of slavery as a system of domination and, because of that, he understood "white Southerners as fellow human beings trapped like himself in a tragic and absurd system."<sup>17</sup>

While Douglass raised questions about the ambiguous nature of physical violence he knew, like Brown, that violence was not simply acts committed by individuals. Brown, in particular, held in special contempt elected public officials who undermined republican values of liberty and freedom in their service of pro-slavery interests—designating them "fiends clothed in human form." The height of political hypocrisy, for Brown, was most evident in those who claimed that they stood for "law and order." Brown wondered what kind of law and order the nation represented when it sanctioned slavery, which was nothing more than "perpetual imprisonment" and "servitude" that was in "utter disregard and violation of those eternal and self-evident truths set forth in our Declaration of Independence."<sup>18</sup>

John Brown believed that his life was in service to the liberation of African Americans from bondage and his death would contribute to an end to the violence that typified the daily lives of

---

<sup>17</sup>Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.234-235. Ronald T. Takaki, *Violence in the Black Imagination* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), pp.25-26.

<sup>18</sup>Quarles, "John Brown Writes to Blacks," *op. cit.*, pp.458-460. Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader*, *op. cit.*, pp.111, 114-115.

millions. Before the sentence of death was pronounced at his trial he stated that "if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say let it be done."

Unfortunately, the abolition of slavery did not bring about an end to violence. From the beginning of Reconstruction to the present, Black Americans have been terrorized on a "massive scale unknown to previous history." John Brown's observation concerning the legitimation of structural violence by the dominant social order points to one of the great paradoxes of the African American experience. Herbert Shapiro in his remarkable study of *White Violence and Black Response* makes the claim that:

the Constitution stands as a great safeguard of individual freedom, and the courts and the police are supposedly established to enforce the law. Controversial issues are to be resolved not in the streets but through the democratic processes of elections. But for blacks the liberal values have been turned into their opposites. The courts have most often stood silent in the face of racist violence or have turned their wrath against the victims, not the perpetrators; the police have protected the mob rather than the mobbed and have often either aided the lynchers or displayed amazing identity with them. When race is concerned, legislative or juridical action to deal with controversial issues has often taken a back seat to the work of terrorists.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>*The Life, Trial and Execution of Captain John Brown*, op. cit., p.95. Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp.xi-xvi.

### 3. John Brown's Interpretation of Christianity

Just as a consideration of John Brown's analysis of structural violence puts into perspective the contradictions of daily life in antebellum America so does his reading of Christianity. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, abolitionist and Brown supporter, said of Brown that he was "almost the only radical abolitionist I have ever known who was not more or less radical in religious matters also. His theology was Puritan, like his practice; and accustomed as we now are to see Puritan doctrine and Puritan virtues separately exhibited, it seems quite strange to see them combined in one person again."<sup>20</sup>

Higginson's portrait of Brown as a latter-day Puritan has been stressed by several historians, as if somehow Brown's theological stance was retrograde. Bertram Wyatt-Brown is of the opinion that "at a time when the Puritan's God was becoming a more benign, humanized, and sentimental figure, John Brown retrogressed theologically to the old tenets of Edwardsean hellfire and brimstone." What is missing from this type of assessment of Brown's understanding of Christianity is not only his critique of Christian justifications of racism, but the correlation he took for granted between believing in a God of justice and the necessary struggle against a racist society.<sup>21</sup>

Awaiting trial in a Charlestown jail following his failed attempt to capture the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Brown wrote that there were "no ministers of Christ here." Brown had hoped that he might be able to share his thoughts and feelings with

---

<sup>20</sup>These observations of Thomas Wentworth Higginson are found in a lengthy description of Higginson's visit with John Brown in North Elba, New York as contained in James Redpath's *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), p.69.

<sup>21</sup>Wyatt-Brown, "John Brown, Weathermen, and the Psychology of Antinomian Violence," *op. cit.*, p.429.

some of the local clergy, but felt that the ministers he encountered, irrespective of their professions of faith in Jesus Christ, denied the gospel in word and deed because they were apologists for slavery. He insisted that he would not "bend in prayer with them while their hands are stained with the blood of souls." This was not his first encounter with individuals who saw no incompatibility between being self-proclaimed Christians and defenders of the dominant social order.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most important religious movements of the antebellum period was the Second Great Awakening. While John Brown was an "Old School" Calvinist he, like many of his contemporaries, was not unaffected by impact of the Second Great Awakening, with its emphasis on a lived experience of Christian faith. He acknowledged "some experimental and saving knowledge of religion" and was willing to acknowledge the role revival meetings could play in the life of the Christian community. And yet, he had reservations about the extent to which human beings could live godly lives judging by the disregard people had for God's condemnation of the sin of slavery.

It has been argued that one of the consequences of the Second Great Awakening was the democratization of Christianity, most evident in a passion for equality that was expressed in an egalitarian spirit that infused both religious life and institutions. What Brown questioned was whether the egalitarian spirit manifested in a new evangelical enthusiasm did anything to diminish the prevailing climate of racial prejudice.

In the late 1830s the Brown family resided in Kent, Ohio and were members of the Congregational church. Under the church's auspices a series of protracted revival meetings was held

---

<sup>22</sup>Letter from John Brown to the Reverend James W. McFarland, November 23, 1859 as printed in *The Worcester Daily Star* 14/297 (December 20, 1859), p.1.

that involved a number of local churches. Kent was not only home to the Brown family, but to free Blacks and fugitive slaves who participated in the church's revival meetings and sat in segregated seating. John Brown was loudly vocal in his denunciation of the church's practice of racial discrimination, for it was a denial of God's love for all people. He asked the visiting African Americans to occupy the family's pew. The leaders of the church admonished him for violating what they deemed his "Christian duty" of maintaining the status quo. His son, John Brown, Jr., concluded that this incident was an illustration of "the proslavery diabolism that had entrenched itself in the Church."<sup>23</sup>

The hallmark of the Christian life for Brown was sacrifice and the self-giving of oneself for sake of others, rather than the living of conventional lives that were an accommodation to the dominant values of a racially divided society. Sacrifice and self-giving were most apparent when one lived out the Golden Rule which Brown interpreted as a willingness to grant others the same liberty as oneself enjoyed. Brown reasoned that he could not profess to believe in God if he did not heed the cry of the oppressed. He was most enamored of biblical prophets, like Jeremiah, who said that to know God was to practice justice. For all of his seeming Calvinistic rigidity he discerned that what God required was compassion, mercy, and humility. Most importantly, like Robert McAfee Brown, he realized that "concern for justice is not a human trait we project onto God; rather, concern for justice is a divine trait, and

---

<sup>23</sup>Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, *op. cit.*, pp.30-31.

Letter from Brown to McFarland, *op. cit.*, p.1. Letter from James Foreman to James Redpath, December 28, 1859 as found in the *A John Brown Reader*, *op. cit.*, pp.165-167. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp.9-11, 107. *A John Brown Reader*, *op. cit.*, pp.181-182.



to the degree that we embody justice, God takes form within us."<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Brown's life to grasp is his belief that he was an instrument in the hands of God for the liberation of enslaved people. Those who hold such beliefs are usually written off as religious fanatics. Gayraud Wilmore has made the important observation that while people such as John Brown have been viewed as "dangerous mutants in the evolution of white Christianity" Black Christians have depicted leaders of slave insurrections as "exemplary heroes of black history." To Wilmore, Brown grasped in a way not true if most White Christians, that the heart of the Christian message was "a bias for justice and the liberation of the poor that stood in stark contrast to the benign conservatism of the White church and its sanctification of Euro-American hegemony over the darker races."<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. An African American Assessment of John Brown

On December 2, 1859, the day that John Brown was executed, members of the Black community of New Bedford, Massachusetts, passed a resolution that "the memory of John Brown shall be indelibly written upon the tablets of our hearts, and when tyrants cease to oppress the enslaved, we shall teach our children to revere his name, and transmit it to the latest posterity, as being the

---

<sup>24</sup>Phillips, "Three Interviews with Old John Brown," *op. cit.*, p.212. *The Life, Trial and Execution of Captain John Brown*, *op. cit.*, pp.44-49. George B. Gill to Richard J. Hinton, July 7, 1893, as found in *A John Brown Reader*, *op. cit.*, pp.231-234. John Brown to John Brown Jr., August 26, 1853 as found in *The Life and Letters of John Brown*, edited by F.B. Sanborn (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1885), pp.45-51. John Brown, "Notes for a Sermon," Undated. Microfilm of the Boyd B. Stutler Collection of the John Brown Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio. Robert McAfee Brown, *Saying Yes and Saying No* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), p.47.

<sup>25</sup>Letter of George B. Gill to Richard J. Hinton, *op. cit.*, pp.231-234. *The Life, Trial and Execution of John Brown*, *op. cit.*, pp.45, 47. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Second Edition (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), pp.46, 169.

greatest man in the 19th century." These words of tribute capture vividly the extent to which the burden of the historical memory of Brown has been borne largely by African Americans.<sup>26</sup>

Benjamin Quarles has edited an impressive collection of writings by African Americans on John Brown that covers the period from 1858 to 1972. Quarles concludes that for Black Americans, John Brown "was primarily a symbol that gave them dignity." An appreciation of the legacy of John Brown can best be illustrated by an analysis of the way in which he was remembered by two noted African Americans: W.E.B. Du Bois and Reverdy Ransom.<sup>27</sup>

W.E.B. Du Bois maintained that his favorite work was his biography of John Brown. First published in 1909, John Brown was written at the height of legalized Jim Crow. Political, social, and economic disenfranchisement was the law of the land and between 1889 and 1946 approximately four thousand Black men, women, and children were killed by lynch mobs. Especially with the turn of the twentieth century lynching became a "weekly phenomena," and "mob assaults, comparable to European pogroms, against black communities became commonplace occurrences in both the North and the South." It was with good reason that Du Bois declared that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line."<sup>28</sup>

In the midst of the racial violence of the "progressive era" John Brown represented, to Du Bois, a White person committed to the creation of a society that was not divided along racial lines. Brown knew better than most Whites "the bitter tragedy" of the Black experience in America because he worked with Blacks in the

<sup>26</sup>Philip S. Foner, *History of Black Americans: From the Compromise of 1850 to the End of the Civil War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), pp.264-265.

<sup>27</sup>Quarles, *Blacks on John Brown*, op. cit., p.xiv.

<sup>28</sup>Manning Marable, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), p.66. C. Van Woodward, *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North/South Dialogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp.212-233. Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, op. cit., p.118. Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response*, op. cit., p.93.

attempt to forge an alternative social order. What impressed Du Bois about Brown was his advocacy of racial equality and his willingness to die for what he believed. He considered the message of John Brown to be that "the cost of liberty is less than the price of repression." To relate to African Americans as equals would cost "something in pride and prejudice." On the other hand, the cost of repression was to be measured not only in terms of the loss of wealth and progress, but in the perpetuation of human exploitation that resulted in "murder, and war."<sup>29</sup>

Du Bois believed that to remember John Brown is to recall that unlike most of his contemporaries he understood the "insolent system of human repression known as American slavery." Furthermore, Du Bois claimed that memory of the man is still a "warning to his country," because he realized that racism, like slavery, would "cost something—even blood and suffering, but it will not cost as much as waiting. And he was right." At the same time Du Bois held out John Brown as a symbolic representation of someone who could not be intimidated or silenced. To the same degree Black men and women would continue to protest against any form of human inequality, strive to develop to their fullest potential, and never forget a "white-haired old man" who spilled his blood "for broken and despised humanity."<sup>30</sup>

Reverdy Ransom was Du Bois' contemporary. Born in Flushing, Ohio, on January 4, 1861, he was to become an A.M.E. bishop and a prophetic witness for social justice. Graduating from Wilberforce University in 1886 Ransom served a number of churches in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and finally in 1896 became a pastor in Chicago, first at Bethel Church and later at the Institutional Church and Social Settlement House. From the beginning of his

---

<sup>29</sup>W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *John Brown* (New York: International Publishers, 1909, 1972), pp.10, 281-283, 287-288.

<sup>30</sup>Du Bois, *John Brown*, *op. cit.*, pp.289-292, 300-301.

ministry he actively challenged any form of racial discrimination and Du Bois maintained that his Institutional Church and Settlement House made a significant contribution to the Black community because "the church existed for the people rather than the people for the church."

At the time of the publication of Du Bois' biography of John Brown, Ransom was pastor of the Bethel A.M.E. Church in New York City where he established a mission, the Church of Simon of Cyrene, to meet the needs of the poor in the "Black Tenderloin" district of Manhattan.<sup>31</sup>

On August 17, 1906 Reverdy Ransom addressed the Second Annual Meeting of the Niagara Movement at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, on "The Spirit of John Brown." The Niagara Movement, founded in 1905 at the initiative of W.E.B. Du Bois, consisted of those within the African American community opposed to what they believed to be the accommodationist policies of Booker T. Washington and his followers. Advocating the principles of the "dignity of labor," "freedom of speech and criticism," "manhood suffrage," and the eradication of distinctions based on race and color, the Niagara Movement sought to "claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to freeborn Americans, political, civil, and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America." Ransom was active from the beginning of the Niagara Movement and Gayraud Wilmore

---

<sup>31</sup>David Wills, "Reverdy C. Ransom: The Making of an A.M.E. Bishop," in *Black Apostles: Afro-American Clergy Confront the Twentieth Century*, edited by Randall K. Burkett and Richard Newman (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1978), pp.181-204. Reverdy C. Ransom, *The Pilgrimage of Harriet Ransom's Son* (Nashville: Sunday School Union, n.d.), pp.1-118. Calvin Sylvester Morris, "Reverdy C. Ransom: A Pioneer Black Social Gospeller," unpublished Ph.D dissertation, Boston: Boston University, 1982, pp.15-16, 134-140, 168-170. W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Negro Church* (Atlanta: The Atlanta University Press, 1903), p.85. Mary M. Fisher, "Reverdy Cassius Ransom," in *The Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, edited by Rayford W. Logan and Michael R. Winston (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982), pp.512-513.

considered him "the unofficial chaplain of the Niagara movement."<sup>32</sup>

The Niagara Movement's meeting on August 17, 1906 was also a celebration of John Brown Day: "to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Brown's birth and the fiftieth jubilee of his bloody skirmish at Osawatomie, Kansas, over the issue of slavery in the territories." Among the one hundred or more participants were Lewis Douglass, the son of Frederick Douglass, Henrietta Leary Evans, sister to Lewis Sheridan Leary and aunt of John A. Copeland, two of the five African Americans who were with John Brown at Harpers Ferry. Also present were W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard T. Greener, and Mary White Ovington, who along with Du Bois, was one of the founders of the N.A.A.C.P.<sup>33</sup>

Reverdy Ransom began his address by stating that John Brown proved "how impotent and defenseless are tyranny, injustice and wrong, even when upheld by the sanction of law, supported by the power of money and defended by the sword." Brown was to Ransom a person of action rather than words who, because he clearly understood the incompatibility between the word of God and slavery, loved liberty and hated oppression and domination. What has made the name of John Brown immortal was that he attempted "to organize and arm the slaves to raise up and strike for their freedom."<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>Fisher, "Reverdy Cassius Ransom," *op. cit.*, pp.513-514. Wills, "Reverdy C. Ransom: The Making of an A.M.E. Bishop," *op. cit.*, pp.203-204. W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* (New York: Schocken Books, 1940, 1968), pp.87-92. Ransom, *The Pilgrimage of Harriet Ransom's Sons*, *op. cit.*, pp.162-163. August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1963), pp.178-179, 220. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, *op. cit.*, p.136.

<sup>33</sup>Quarles, *Allies for Freedom*, *op. cit.*, pp.3-6.

<sup>34</sup>Reverdy C. Ransom, *The Spirit of Freedom and Justice: Oration and Speeches* (Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1926), pp.14-19.

"The soul of John Brown goes marching on," Ransom asserted, in those African Americans who are "willing to fight for their rights" and make the Declaration of Independence a reality by striving so that all people could be equal. It meant that, like the shot first fired at Harpers Ferry, Black men and women must again be aroused to the battle cry of freedom. This was not a battle over racial inferiority or superiority, but battle for a commonly shared humanity and equality. Freedom for African Americans, Ransom declared, would only be possible to the extent that men and women were willing to bear the pain and suffering necessary to overcome racial hatred. Thus "like the ghost of Hamlet's father, the spirit of John Brown reckons us to arise and seek the recovery of our rights."<sup>35</sup>

The audience gave Ransom a standing ovation and all were deeply moved. Mary White Ovington insisted that "Mr. Ransom delivered an oration which one wished that Phillips and Parker and Beecher might have heard." W.E.B. Du Bois shared the day with Reverdy Ransom and like the latter spoke of the spirit of John Brown. He believed that John Brown embodied "the spirit of justice, that hatred of a lie, that willingness to sacrifice money, reputation, and life itself on the altar of right." He encouraged the assembled audience to "not falter" in the days that lay ahead, but to strive as had Brown for a world in which human equality was the watchword of all.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup>Ransom, *The Spirit of Freedom and Justice*, *op. cit.*, pp.23-25.

<sup>36</sup>Quarles, *Allies for Freedom*, *op. cit.*, pp.9. W.E.B. Du Bois, "We Claim Our Rights," in *W.E.B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Address, 1890-1919*, edited by Philip S. Foner (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), pp.170-173.

### Conclusion

Peter Hodgson has written an analysis of the possibilities for liberation in the United States by taking as his point of departure the imagery about a new birth of freedom that Abraham Lincoln developed in his Gettysburg Address. While it is obvious that Lincoln has become a central part of the religious and political imagination of many Americans it could be asked whether we might envision ourselves and our country differently if we began instead with John Brown.<sup>37</sup>

The noted historian Lerone Bennett, Jr. is of the opinion that "it is to John Brown we must go, finally, if we want to understand the limitations and possibilities of our situation. He was of no color, John Brown, of no race or age." This is true because Brown dedicated his life to the struggle against racism and the overturning of a social order that divided people along racial lines. Brown made it clear that our cherished political language of liberty and freedom would forever remain shallow and hollow if in the name of freedom and liberty we denied equality to African Americans. Brown made an important discovery about our historical perception of ourselves, namely, that our continual emphasis on freedom has "diverted attention from the bondage of unequal relationships."<sup>38</sup>

A grappling with the historical significance of John Brown is not as important as wrestling with his exposure of the "repression and concealment of the reality of others." Concealment in this case is an inability to deal with the experience of the African

---

<sup>37</sup>Hodgson, *New Birth of Freedom*, *op. cit.*, pp.39-41.

<sup>38</sup>Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Negro Mood and Other Essays* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1964), p.100. Davis, *Revolutions*, *op. cit.*, p.17.

American community. Because of it we have been unable to tell "a true story" of the American people; a story that obviously extends to all Americans who have been treated unfairly—as others.<sup>39</sup>

If Brown is an exception to Joel Williamson's observation that Whites have generally not understood the burden of color, it is only because he made a conscious effort to do so. He linked his own life with those of African Americans and died in the process, for their liberation. In truth, racism will remain the American and Christian dilemma insofar as the question of racial justice is removed from our personal and collective agenda as individuals and as a nation. We can rightly take issue with violence as a means of overcoming violence, for we witnessed all too much violence in the decades following Brown's death. One way in which we can be faithful to his memory, and at the same time struggle to break the "spiral of violence," is to remember that the violence which surrounds us is rooted in unequal social structures. While we might be born into a world of violence, nothing must diminish our affirmation of the God-given worth and dignity of all human beings as children of God.

---

<sup>39</sup>Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p.154.