

Ja'Marcus Ross

Capstone Seminar

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## Introduction

Being born and raised in the southern United States of America with a single mother who was a single parent of two boys I was nurtured in two small towns in southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas. Growing up in a single-parent household in a location that was so rich in history and is seen as a melting pot of African/African-American culture, my mother relentlessly educated me on the importance of understanding my cultural roots and the knowledge of being an African-American male. My great-grandfather was born in 1913, to a runaway slave who was born and worked on a plantation in the state of Arkansas in the 1800s. I come from a heritage of ancestors who were definite slaves in the South and have a mother who's well educated in our family slave history and the history of slaves in general. Growing up in a single-parent household, my mother also educated my brother and me on the Christian bible, emphasizing the person of Jesus Christ and his importance in our lives. My mother loosely identifies as a 'Christian' but she holds on to traditional Christian beliefs and values but with less care and little knowledge of theology and devout religious lifestyles. So as a young African-American male who comes from an ancestry of slaves and possesses knowledge of Christianity, I have always been intrigued by a passion for historical context/narratives that both slavery and Christianity have shaped.

Once I enrolled in college in the fall of 2020 I was introduced to the worlds of communication & religious studies and research, which influenced my desire to participate in both fields. In communication studies, I was exposed to media and how media works as a

discourse, and I was trained as a rhetorician to liberate marginalized communities. In my studies of religion, I was introduced to the various ways religion, or what Malory Nye labels in his book 'Religion: The Basics,' as 'religioning,' is performed in the world and how it has impacted all levels of life, both individual and societal(Page 8). These factors combined significantly increased my interest and desire to produce my research regarding my research object(RO) which is a sermon given by Thomas Bacon a White Christian preacher to Negro slaves and can be summarized down to how religion was used as a tool to normalize the perpetuation of slavery. For this project to deeply unfold I developed some research questions (RQ) that will help me analyze my research object. My RQ is as follows: 1) How did ethnocentric slaveowners and preachers manipulate Christian teachings to justify the institution of slavery, as indicated by the messages delivered by Thomas Bacon to enslaved Negro congregations? 2) In what ways does religious rhetoric employed in religious text serve as a strategic tool for maintaining social order within specific religious and cultural contexts?

In the further of this paper, I will provide a detailed literature review on other research from scholars and theorists who have similar, different, and confining work that either supports or may differ from my research. After the literature review, I will discuss my approach methodology which I will use to analyze my research object.

### **Literature Review**

There is no doubt that Negro slavery in America was the result of the long-standing racist and superior mindset Whites possessed against people of color. Although forms of prejudice and discrimination existed in different societies, the racialized concept of race, as we understand it today, developed during the era of European colonization and the transatlantic slave trade. Entering into the racism spectrum, George Kelsey in his book 'Racism and the Christian

Understanding of Man' stated, "Racism is a faith. It is a form of idolatry. In its early modern beginnings, racism was a justificatory device. It did not emerge as a faith. It arose as an ideological justification for the constellations of political and economic power that were expressed in colonialism and slavery. But gradually the idea of the superior race was heightened and deepened in meaning and value so that it pointed beyond the historical structures of relation, in which it emerged, to human existence itself". To understand the concepts of slavery and religion it is important to lay the grounds of racism as George Kelsey did. American Anthropologist Ruth Benedict contributed to the spectrum of racism but in a slightly different manner than George Kelsey. While Kelsey focused on slavery as a justificatory 'ideological device', Ruth Benedict suggested a more nuanced perspective which was defining racism as "the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to hereditary inferiority and another group is destined to hereditary superiority"(Race: Science & Politics). The similarities between Kelsey's and Benedict's approaches to racism are that both acknowledge that racism is the ultimate juggernaut for the superior to rule over the inferior. George Kelsey and Ruth Benedict contributions to racism supports my research because both authors emphasize that racism gave power to the White race to rule over the Black race especially during slavery.

Even though racism was the juggernaut that gave White slaveowners power over the Negro slaves, it was not the only thing that fueled the slaveowners. Instead they had even more power because of their utilization of religion as another source of power. Those in power have often utilized religion to maintain their authority, demonstrating the intertwined relationship between religion and power. Religion as a source of power is not a new concept and has been discussed, explored, and analyzed by many scholars. Starting with Karl Marx who viewed 'religion as an ideology' for the means of power and wrote on the relationship between social

classes and the material world. In his book, 'On Religion' Marx wrote that "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people"(Page 42). In other words, if it weren't for religion, the working class(slaves) would've seen their exploitation more clearly in terms of dehumanization. As Marx saw it, religion served as a particular tool within the oppressive and exploitative process. He argued that "religion, particularly Christianity was not in itself a bad thing, but it helped to facilitate that process of exploitation"(Marx and Engels 1957). Another contributor to how power works and the discussion of Marx's concept of religion as an ideology can be found in the work of French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. For Althusser as he wrote in 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus', "Ideology is conceived as a pure illusion, a pure dream, i.e. as nothingness. All its reality is external to it. Ideology is thus thought as an imaginary construction"(Page 108). While Marx focused on the social class, as explained by Panagotis Sotiris, Althusser focused on the idea that there are two forms of 'state apparatus' the first one being the 'repressive state apparatus' such as the army, police, prisons, courts, & government with the second being the 'ideological state apparatus' such as schools, the media, literature, & churches. These two forms enable the ruling group to exercise power over the population(Panagiotis Sotiris; 2009). As Althusser saw it, repressive state apparatuses work by force, violence, or threat, while ideological state apparatuses are diffused and heterogeneous. Although both approaches from Marx and Althusser have some similarities, they also differ in a slightly different way. They are similar from the perspective that both focus and point to the idea that a ruling or hierarchy class does exist. Differences between them are that Marx's concept of 'religion as ideology' provides powerful insight into how religion is used as a political justification and legitimation of inequality. While Althusser's concept of the two state apparatus

concludes with ‘man is an ideological animal by nature(Althusser page 116). Althusser also concluded that the two state apparatus worked through a process of interpellation. According to Serbian Political Scientist Dr. Rade Pantic,“The concept of ideological state apparatuses establishes a link between the ideological interpellation claim and that of the material existence of ideology. Althusser argues for his thesis that ideology has a material existence by pointing out that ideology is realized through practices that are located within ideological state apparatuses. According to his claim, what drives an individual’s acts are not her conscious ideas, but material practices and rituals inscribed in ideological state apparatuses, in which those acts are embedded”(Pantic 2015;106). In other words, for Althusser, interpellation is the process by which people act under ideology without realizing that they are being controlled.

Althusser’s input on interpellation is important for the context of my research in which I will discuss after I provide how his ‘two state apparatus’ has some limitations. The limitation lives within Althusser placing ‘churches’ under the ideological state apparatus and not under the repressive state apparatus. My reason for saying this is because, Europe during the Medieval period demonstrates how the Roman Catholic church and popery were the most powerful institutions that ruled through the acts of violence and force. Examples of power the roman Catholic church and popery obtained was, their ability to martyr citizens, force the sale of indulgences, and the tremendous political power of the pope. In the case of indulgences, scholar Elizabeth Tingle writes in her article, ‘Indulgences in the Catholic Reformation’, “indulgences were universal in Catholic Europe by the late-seventeenth century. Pardon's shorn of obvious abuses survived the Protestant Reformation to become again a widespread practice in the Roman Church”(Page 201). In regards to the indulgences and the power of the pope, Author David

Bagchi wrote in his book 'Reformation Theology', Luther's ninety-five theses not only challenged the extravagant claims being made for indulgences, but also questioned the value of indulgences at all and power the pope"(Page 43). Another example of these powers can be found in the article 'Reformation: 500' written by Amy Reardon as she states, "At the point in which Martin Luther entered history, the Catholic Church hovered over the Western world as grand matriarch. Secularism was unknown. Often referred to as "Christendom," society and religion were so intertwined that the legal punishment for heresy was death(martyrdom)(Page 53).

Circling back to Althusser's interpellation, this concept is significant because in the text of my research object the concept of interpellation can be seen in the form of how the Negro slaves were manipulated by the White preacher Thomas Bacon who used 'God' and biblical text as justification for his sermon. What I mean by this is that his sermon was overall based on the biblical scripture Ephesians 6:5 which states "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling"(NASB 1995). Many scholars have written on how this specific scripture was used in the context of slavery. For example, minister and activist Martin Luther King Jr, who was very familiar with scripture stated in his book 'Where Do We Go from Here', "Religion and the Bible were cited and distorted to support the status quo...The Apostle Paul's dictum became a watchword: "Servant, be obedient to your master"(Page 77). King.Jr then expands on how biblical theology became an ally for slave exploitation which is similar to what Marx claimed in his case of religion. An example of theology serving as an ally for slavery can be found in the reference Dr.King provided on 'Cotton Mather' who was an clergyman and author of many subjects. In one of his writings, titled 'Rules For The Society Of Negroes' Mather wrote, "If any of our Number, fall into the Sin of Drunkenness, or Swearing, or Cursing, or Lying, or Stealing, or notorious Disobedience or Unfaithful|ness unto their Masters,

we will Admonish him of his Miscarriage, and Forbid his coming to the Meeting, for at least one Fortnight; And except he then come with great Signs and Hopes of his Repentance, we will utterly Exclude him”(1693). The constant directions from White preachers and owners for slaves to 'obey your master' exemplifies interpellation, as slaves were ideologically influenced by biblical teachings, lacking a true understanding of the power dynamics embedded in their circumstances. The same applies to Cotton Mather's 'Rules for the Society of the Slaves,' as the power of the Christian church and Mather were ideologically controlling the Negro slaves by leveraging their influence through religion, while the slaves remained unaware of the power being exploited over them.

There are other contributors to how biblical scriptures were used to manipulate slaves, starting with biblical scholar Mitzi J. Smith. In a journal article where she gave a detailed summary on Lisa Bowens book 'African American Readings Of Paul' stated, “The representative texts are overwhelmingly, by design, friendly toward Paul. In fairness, the most significant challenges Black peoples faced during the historical periods covered were enslavement, dehumanization, and systemic and structural oppression, and all with the support of the Bible/Paul”(Smith; Page 437). Smith's work is deeply influenced and rooted in Lisa Bowens book African American Readings Of Paul. Understandingly so because Lisa Bowens is an African American theologian whose contributions can be summed to “proponents of slavery employed Paul’s words to justify slavery”(Page 54). Bowens then continue to explain that, “Slavery advocates’ distorted use of Scripture and the laws they implemented, which they believed to be sanctioned by the Bible, sought to prevent or limit enslaved Africans’ access to Scripture....Although sometimes slaveholders permitted Black ministers to preach to the enslaved Africans, more often than not White ministers preached to them, and the message they

proclaimed was ‘Slaves, obey your masters’(Page 60). The continuous tactics of slave owners controlling the Negro slaves and stripping them of access to biblical text and forcing upon them vague & repetitive sermons shows that they feared the religious/spritual growth of the slaves. Building on the idea that slave owners were apprehensive about the spiritual development of slaves, John B. Boles, in 'Masters & Slaves In The House Of The Lord,' notes that some viewed the Christian gospel as too precious to be simplified for Blacks, while others feared potential rebellions through collective preaching and worship’(Page 5). Both Bowens & Boles contribute to my conversation within these topics because they provide a full sense of how the slave owners ideologically power over the slaves.

### **Methodology**

For this research the methodology I will be using to analyze my research object will be the metaphorical principles of the Panopticon for social and institutional structures as implemented and applied by French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault. The Panopticon was originally founded by Jeremy Bentham, as Gillian Rose stated in the book ‘Visual Methodologies’, “was a building and suggested it could be used as the plan for all sorts of disciplining institutions- prisons, hospitals, workhouses, schools, and madhouses”(Rose 222). The panopticon can be depicted as one cell for each inmate with windows so that each inmate is visible to the overseer and each other, surrounding a large tower with undetectable windows, doors, and corridors(Rose 222). The point of the panopticon was for each inmate to conduct themselves in proper manner by disciplining themselves because they never know when they are being watched or not being watched. Foucault’s approach, which is similar to Bentham in terms of ‘automatic functioning power’, is coined as ‘surveillance’. Foucault argued that ‘since the panopticon was an efficient means of producing social order, it became a dominant form of



visuality' (Rose 222-223). Specifically through the lenses of Michel Foucault I will analyze the specific ways Negro slaves feared not 'obeying their masters', how they disciplined themselves and adopted the role of holding each other accountable for their behavior because they knew God was always watching. In other words in this research the Negro slaves are to be looked upon as the inmates while the Slaveowners and God are to the surveillance tower of the panopticon.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this research delves into the intricate interplay between racism, religion, and power during the era of American slavery. The metaphorical application of the Panopticon, as advocated by Michel Foucault, offers a lens through which to understand the surveillance and control mechanisms deployed by slaveowners. Unveiling the historical roots of racism and its entanglement with religion provides crucial insights into the oppressive dynamics that shaped the experiences of African-American slaves.

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