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Bachelor's thesis

Religion in the face of adversity; an examination of Harriet Jacobs and Nicholas Higgins

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Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, an industrial novel set in a fictional Northern England factory town in the mid-1800s, and Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a slave narrative from the rural American South originating in the same time period, both depict relatively powerless characters inhabiting complex attitudes towards religion. Jacobs recounts her life and she, while devoutly religious, also considers a critical approach to religion as she recognizes how it is utilized by enslavers to suppress the enslaved and stifle their attempts at freedom. Gaskell's Nicholas Higgins opposes religion in favour of hard work and social struggle, while his fatally ill daughter, Bessy, looks to religion for comfort. This paper will examine the role of religion in the lives of these characters given their relative lack of power in their respective social structures. Although these characters look to religion as a possible source of comfort and assurance in the face of adversity, I will argue that their attitudes towards religion are more complex and show a willingness to make religion their own instead of simply accepting it as it is passed by religious authorities. In what follows, I will describe the religious attitudes of the characters in Jacobs' and Gaskell's works and connect them to the social context of religion in the time period in the American South and industrial Britain. Looking at these two rather different works together will give insight into the highly personalized attitudes to religion that the characters develop as part of their worldview. On this basis I will argue that similarities in circumstance does not necessarily lead to similarities in religious belief.

Jacobs' relation to religion

Jacobs' chapter "The Church and Slavery" indicates that slaveholders used Christianity to enable and legitimize the practice of slavery. Jacobs recounts a Church sermon which in essence attempts to validate slavery, claiming that the enslaved people are indolent and sinful, and need to obey their masters:

Instead of serving your masters faithfully, [...] you are idle, and shirk your work. God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you. [...] You must forsake your sinful ways, and be faithful servants. Obey your old master and your young master—your old mistress and your young mistress. (Jacobs, 1861, p. 67-68).

In this chapter, Jacobs sheds light over two points which influence her and her peers' religious life; firstly, the slaveowners are aware of the power dynamics at play between the enslaved and their devotion to their religious authority and hence know how religion can be used to

justify and enforce the practice of slavery. The sermons held by Reverend Pike are an attempt at just this; influencing the enslaved to remain faithful to the religion and in turn, to the slaveholders who control the religion. This leads into the second point of Jacobs' writings; the enslaved people are aware of this fact and are thus not very susceptible to the slaveholders' attempts at influence. In the first sentence of the chapter dealing with religion this is mentioned; "[After the Southampton Insurrection, the largest slave revolt in U.S. history] the slaveholders came to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters." (Jacobs, 1861, p. 66). By the dry tone it is clear that Jacobs and the other enslaved people are already very aware that murder is wrong, and that they know what the slaveholders are attempting to do in their endeavour to provide religious education.

Despite these obvious attempts at religious conditioning from the slaveholders' side, religion in itself is still important to the enslaved people, as Jacobs' writing onwards show that they experience deep, personal religious connections. Jacobs describes that the enslaved people favour what she calls "Methodist Shouts" over the services enabled and/or held by the slaveholders, in which the slaveholders can control what is being preached (and which by contrast are Episcopalian by denomination). "Methodist Shouts," as the name indicates, refers to a method of worship which entails vocal and enthusiastic involvement from the congregation (Jacobs, 1861, p. 68), a way of worship which is much more intimate and personal than simply sitting in silence on the pews and being preached to. Jacobs also shares anecdotes of a grieving mother who cries out for God to "[...] make her time short" after all her children have been sold to other plantations, leaving her alone (Jacobs, 1861, p. 69), as well as an old man whose strongest wish is to learn how to read so that he may read the Bible for himself (Jacobs, 1861, p. 71). The woman's wish for God to kill her illustrates how deeply faith runs within her; she wants to die and go to her perceived paradisiacal afterlife, rather than live on in the tangible world she already exists in. The old man's desire presents parallels to the protestant sentiments during the Reformation, in which Martin Luther argued that Christians should have personal access to the Bible via their own language, instead of having to trust a priest's translation of a Latin Bible. This shows how the enslaved wanted their own personal connection to and understanding of the scripture, instead of relying on the word of someone whose ultimate motive is to exploit them.

After the aforementioned slave insurrection, the enslaved people were also no longer permitted to go to their own church in the woods, which evidently was very important to

them: “[The church] was built by colored people, and they had no higher happiness than to meet there and sing hymns together, and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer” (Jacobs, 1861, p. 66). That church was destroyed shortly after the insurrection and the previously discussed sermons held and/or enabled by the slaveholders were soon implemented. All in all, it is clear that religion is an important aspect in the lives of the enslaved people. Jacobs herself is not exempt from this conviction. Several times throughout the book she prays; for her first mistress to survive sickness, for her daughter to be free, for God to keep her safe when she escapes (Jacobs, 1861, p. 11, 76, and 91 respectively), and multiple times throughout the book she prays to die because her sufferings are so great.

This strong religious conviction helps illustrate Jacobs’ own struggles with hypocrisy in relation to Christianity, in that she has a deep and devoted faith, but still has personal wishes which go against religious dogma. When her son was born, premature and ill, she first prayed for him to die, then for him to live, all the while battling with the paradox of being a Christian mother who wants her child to die, because she believes “Death is better than slavery” (Jacobs, 1861, p. 61). On this basis Jacobs appears to me to be a deeply devoted Christian, who in these conflicting moments was in deep distress and ravaged by grief and hopelessness, causing her to compromise with herself. This situation illustrates the struggles she has in aligning her Christian ideals with her personal interests. The two often seem to be at odds with each other, even in a person as devoted as Jacobs. Her struggle in interrelating her religious commitments and her private affairs seem to be at the forefront of several of her personal challenges.

Religion in enslaved communities

On the social plane, religion also fulfilled the role as that of a vital creator of community amongst the enslaved. As *Incidents* is an autobiography, it functions as a credible source for the actual conditions of the setting and time period in and of itself. Its sentiments are echoed in modern-day scholarship on the subject of religion in communities of enslaved people. As A. J. Raboteau writes:

The religious experience of the slaves was by no means fully contained in the visible structures of the institutional church. From the abundant testimony of fugitive and freed slaves it is clear that the slave community had an extensive religious life of its own, hidden from the eyes of the master. [...] The slaves made Christianity truly their own. (Raboteau, 1978, p. 212)

Like Jacobs, Raboteau emphasizes that what was preached to them in these sermons led by white clergymen was not of actual religious importance and did not carry the word of God. Rather it was a corrupt version of the gospel which only aimed to ensure that the slaves remained obedient and followed their masters' orders. Jesus and Heaven were rarely mentioned by the preacher unless they were used as bait to entice the listeners to obey their masters (Raboteau, 1978, p. 213-214), as discussed earlier, as well as to enforce the present power dynamic: "You slaves will go to heaven if you are good, but don't ever think that you will be close to your mistress and master." (Raboteau, 1978, p. 213).

Enslaved people would thus attempt to arrange and attend private prayer meetings, either in their own homes or out in the forest, in order to worship their gospel in a way that felt right and sincere to them. Raboteau shares an anecdote where an enslaved person was whipped to death for attending such a prayer meeting on a neighbouring plantation – and as it happens, the person who gave out this punishment was a Baptist deacon (Raboteau, 1978, p. 215). Jacobs, however, leaves it somewhat unclear whether or not such private prayer meetings were entirely prohibited in her community. In any case, it is evident that the enslaved when it was possible strongly preferred their own meetings over those held by the slaveholders – alone, they were free to worship in the way they wanted and hence they "[...] like their own meetings better." (Raboteau, 1978, p. 215). Religion thus fulfils a vital function as a sort of creator of community; private meetings held and attended by enslaved people created a camaraderie between individuals who were struck down physically, mentally, and spiritually in every other aspect of their lives. Religion and religious practice may thus have been the only arena in which they had any sort of independence and autonomy.

Religion fulfils this social purpose also for Jacobs herself as she is so deeply religious out of desperation, or at the very least, her desperation supports her religion. In her eyes, very few people are out to save her and those who are, are largely powerless against the system they exist in. This is exemplified at the end of chapter V: "In view of [the horrors of slavery], why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? [...] There are noble men and women who plead for us, striving to help those who cannot help themselves. God bless them!" (Jacobs, 1861, p. 32). If Jacobs could not believe that a god would save her (or at the very least, help her indirectly by helping the people who tried to save her), she would have had *no one* in her corner. All her peers are as powerless and desperate as she is. The people she is surrounded by in the South are either enslaved like her, enslavers such as Dr. Flint, or unwillingly caught in the system and unable to help, such as Mr. Sands. Religious belief thus provides a mental

refuge and a spiritual supporter, in a situation where everything and everyone else seem to work against her.

Higgins' relation to religion

Nicholas Higgins and his daughter Bessy Higgins of *North and South* represent compelling parallels and counterparts to Jacobs' religious discourse; while the bedridden Bessy is profoundly religious and spends large amounts of time contemplating and fantasizing about God and Christianity, Higgins takes up an almost hostile position in relation. This is made evident in chapter XI, where the main character Margaret Hale asks Higgins if he believes that God gave life to his daughter Bessy. To this Higgins answers "I believe what I see, and no more" (Gaskell, 1854, p. 91). Margaret, who is the daughter of a priest, is insistent throughout the novel on the importance and certainty of Christianity, which is to be expected, as Gaskell herself was deeply religious (and is also visible in the way Higgins towards the end of the novel only just starts to embrace some aspects of Christianity despite his previous convictions, displaying the necessary growth for an initially atheist character written by a devout Christian). Higgins responds to Margaret's emphasis in this same line, welcoming Margaret in his house and among his family "as long as hoo'll keep from preaching on what hoo knows nought about." (Gaskell, 1854, p. 91). Higgins thus draws a line in the sand immediately and wishes Hale welcome as long as she does not try to influence him or his daughters with her religious beliefs. Bessy is especially susceptible to Hale's tendencies because she sees Hale almost as an angel; "She freshens me up above a bit. [...] that face – as bright and strong as the angel I dream of [...]" (Gaskell, 1854, p. 138). In a time where Bessy is sick and weak, and not surrounded by many pleasures, Margaret's visits and conversations are a highlight for her.

Higgins' position on religion seems to be strongly influenced by his daily life, as evident in his answer to Margaret, that she should not preach on things she does not know anything about. Implicit in this is that Higgins sees himself as having more knowledge and experience on what he perceives as the dichotomy between religion and real life. Margaret is young and some might call her idealistic and naïve – in any case her manner and ways are shaped by the way she grew up. She had a joyful, easy, and unstressed childhood and upbringing, spent in London and in the pleasant, rural south of England. Coming to the northern industrial town of Milton represents a change in her life which she meets head on with the same kind of mild innocence – an attitude which Higgins lacks because he grew up in the rough North and was shaped by this environment. When Margaret speaks with Bessy and understands that she is

fatally ill, she tries to reassure her by reminding her who gave her her life. While Bessy is susceptible to Margaret's comments, and even quotes the bible in order to reassure herself that there is a god out there who will take care of her (Gaskell, 1854, p. 90), Higgins does not hesitate to show his disdain for religion, even if his daughter does not like it. "I'm loth to vex [Bessy], I am, but a man [must] speak out for the truth, and when I see the world going all wrong [...]. [...] leave a' this talk about religion alone, and set to work on what yo' see and know." (Gaskell, 1854, p. 91). In other words, because of his personal situation, Higgins cannot find it in himself to waste time and thought on something which cannot be proven to be true, and which has not helped him in his plights yet. In his mind, there is a disconnect between the religious concept of the goodness of God that is being preached to him, and the poverty, inequality, injustice, and other hardships he and his peers face in their daily life.

This perspective is also widened to include his worker community in Milton later in the second volume of the novel, when Higgins explains his view to Mr. Hale on why southerners are religious, while northerners are not: "[...] I reckon yo'd not ha' much belief in yo' if yo' lived here, [...]. I just say, where's the proof? [...] d'ye think their [his peers in Milton] first cry i' th' morning is, 'What shall I do to get hold on eternal life?' or 'What shall I do to fill my purse on this blessed day?'" (Gaskell, 1854, p. 226). Higgins points out that the northerners who were born and raised in Milton like him simply cannot spare the time and resources for something perceived as so fleeting and unconvincing as religion, when they have real and tangible issues in front of them that require their attention. This explains his at times antagonistic view of religion; he sees it as a waste that will not pay off.

However, Higgins' dislike of religion does not remove his wish for it to may be substantial for him, and how he wants to be able to believe in it. In the same chapter as he admonishes Margaret for preaching to Bessy, he also says to Bessy as he helps her upstairs: "I could wish there were a God, if it were only to ask him to bless thee." (Gaskell, 1854, p. 92). This shows that Higgins wants to believe and recognises the fact that if there were a God, maybe he would be able to save his daughter from a horrible fate, which he is unable to save her from on his own. The chapter including Higgins' reasonings for the northerners' lack of faith ends with Mr Hale asking him to stay and join him and Margaret in family prayer. "Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm." (Gaskell, 1854, p. 233). This is the last line of the chapter, and it highlights the fickleness of religion as a whole; despite one's belief (or lack of thereof) and previous fallacies, religion can still function as a gathering force and a creator of community, as

humans are social animals and will always search for fellowship with other humans. As illustrated by the non-believer Higgins as well as Mr Hale, who left his church because he morally could no longer pledge to its doctrine, one does not necessarily need to subscribe to the religious ideals or faiths in order to take part in and benefit from the communities which religion helps create.

Religion in industrial communities

Higgins' initially antagonistic sentiments towards religious discourse does to some degree reflect public attitude from the novel's real-life counterpart setting in working-class Britain, in that religious practice as a whole was in decline throughout the nineteenth century.

Christianity in Britain had, by 1854, the novel's publication date, by a significant degree established itself as a fundamental part of the country's society and culture, shaping many aspects of daily life. Most notably for the British public were the rites of baptism, marriage, and funeral, all of which take place in a church and follow a religious narrative. In addition to this the churches themselves functioned as a natural gathering place for their local communities, also for those who were not actively Christian (McLeod, 1984, p. 36). The church was in fact viewed as a sort of public domain, existing by and for the people in its parish, as illustrated by the conflict of church patronage (who would appoint the clergy) (McLeod, 1984, p. 36). Despite all these conditions, the public were not as devout believers as one might think, as evidenced by the decline in actual religious worship. Religious practice in working class Britain represented culture and a way of life, as much as (if not more than) it represented actual religious belief.

This religious decline was especially apparent in the 1880s and -90s, coinciding with the British rise of class-consciousness and the birth of the Labour party. McLeod argues that the former was a consequence of the latter (McLeod, 1984, p. 65), in that the workers began to see themselves as tangible agents of their own destiny, instead of blindly relying on a God which may or may not exist. In fact, Christianity, socialism, and Northern England formed tight ties to each other throughout the nineteenth century (Gilley, 1995, p. 53). In the late Victorian period, as public religious sentiments declined, even devout and practicing Christian members of the working class would turn to socialism and political action, rather than God and the church, in order to produce the societal changes they wished to see (McLeod, 1984, p. 37). This real-life convergence between religion and political ideology reflects Higgins' struggles to reconcile his and his family's dreadful conditions with the religious ideals which Margaret (and indirectly, parts of the society he lives in) attempts to impose on him. While his

fellow workers may be Christian at least in name, they strive for change in their workplace via strike, not prayer. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that they actively practice religion as well – however, one must remember that Gaskell has already characterised Higgins the Union leader as a non-believing proletarian, so it is natural to assume that his peers are of the same kind. This, as well as Higgins' earlier justification to Mr. Hale as to why Northerners on the whole are not religious, illustrates the similarities between Gaskell's fictional rendition of a working-class town, and the real-life working class communities of Northern England in the Victorian era. These similarities are especially prominent in the depiction of the intersection of religion and political ideology amongst the workers.

A joint examination of Jacobs and Higgins

Both Jacobs and Higgins display similarities and differences in their attitude towards religion, and this is especially clear in the way they handle religion in relation to their children, and to their own circumstances. Higgins does not see religion as something that might be able to help him in his daily life. To him, the concept of an all-knowing benevolent God is a pleasant fantasy, but that it in reality is a waste of time and effort which will not pay off. It appears that if it were true, if he had had tangible evidence that such a deity existed, it is quite possible that he would have become a devout Christian. Judging by his devotion to the socialist cause (of course, socialism was not a widespread term at the time, however the immediate sentiments of it and his objectives are the same in that he wanted a higher salary and to better his working conditions), when he believes something, he believes it fully and intensely. Jacobs, however, seems entirely convinced of the merits of religious belief – while she does take steps of her own to change her circumstances by escaping her enslavers, she always keeps her god in mind, praying for him to help her in her flight: “[...] [I] breathed a short prayer to God for guidance and protection” (Jacobs, 1861, p. 91). While she is certainly an active agent of her own destiny, as illustrated by her daring escape, she never casts aside prayers to God as a potential catalyst for the change she causes for herself.

While Higgins forsakes religion in practice as he instead focuses on what is in front of him, an area in which he entertains the prospect of an omnipotent being is in relation to the condition of his daughter, Bessy. He wishes relief for Bessy and knows that the existence of a God may provide this, but he cannot rely on that perception alone. In place of this he channels his paternal love for her in the way he helps and cares for her, for instance by taking her on walks and by indulging *her* religious convictions in letting Margaret come visit his home – despite not sparing any consideration for religion himself. He also seeks to create societal change

through the worker's strike and his Union dealings. While it is too late for his daughter as she is already fatally ill, in a broader sense his efforts may be able to prevent the same fate from befalling other people. In relation to her children, Jacobs prays fervently for them, but is less active in their fate than Higgins is for his child. Of course, Jacobs has considerably less choice in this matter, as any noticeable help she gives them might cause negative consequences for her entire family: "[...] when my master found that I still refused to accept what he called his kind offers, he would threaten to sell my child" (Jacobs, 1861, p. 74), as her enslaver Dr. Flint seems to harbour a specific resentment towards her. Jacobs wants to help her children, of course, but is limited in the ways in which she can hope to do this, thus most often resorting to prayer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, religion amongst the enslaved in the rural American South and amongst the workers in the industrial communities England are well-represented in Jacobs' narrative and Gaskell's novel, and these works also display the complex religious identities of several characters. Higgins, while externally antagonistic towards religion because he lacks the physical evidence needed for him to believe in it, does see its merits and wishes the concept was worth his time, as he intensely wants to provide relief for his sick daughter. However, he feels instead he must opt for societal change through workers' struggle. Jacobs and her enslaved peers, on the other hand, has adopted religion and God as a fact of life, illustrated by how it colours her thoughts and actions, for instance by how she prays for her children. At the same time, Jacobs is as active as Higgins is in striving to inflict change in her situations via her own doings, so her determination to better her conditions must not be understated. Jacobs also inhibits a critical approach to religion as it is organized by her enslavers, because she is acutely aware of how they attempt to manipulate her and her peers into submission. This also leads to internal struggles within her because she finds it difficult to reconcile the Christian message of loving thy neighbour with the practice of enslaving thy neighbour. All of this is to say that while Higgins and Jacobs both wish to see change happen in their harrowing conditions, and for their children to be safe, they do not inhabit the same view of religion as a way to do this; Jacobs always considers religion as a way out, while Higgins outright renounces the concept. Thus, although their environments are similar in terms of powerlessness and a wish for change, this does not by itself equate to similar religious beliefs.

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