

Feminist Sexual Ethics Project

Literature Review by Monique Moultrie

Cynthia Lynn Lyerly. "Religion, Gender, and Identity: Black Methodist Women in a Slave Society, 1770–1810." In *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*. Ed. Patricia Morton. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998, 202–226.

Cynthia Lynn Lyerly is an associate professor at Boston College.

Lyerly's chapter in the volume *Discovering the Women in Slavery* serves to highlight the religious experience of slave women as she argues that their gendered/racialized experiences within the early Methodist church reveals an untapped view of slave women's worlds. Researching both slave and emancipated women, she notes that black women's bodies were sites of negative imagery, yet imagery cast in religious terms; they were viewed as both "Jezebel," the evil Biblical seductress, and "Mammy," the pious antithesis to Jezebel, making religion a form of oppression (p. 203). Lyerly has found, however, that slave women seemed to embrace religiosity as a means of creating positive self-images and gender identities. For example, through churches they denied ownership of their souls (reclaiming some sense of self-control) and they "defined motherhood as a sacred relationship" and not just slave breeding for economic purposes (p. 203).

The slave women in Lyerly's research are found in early Methodist sources, yet to the Methodist ministers, slave women were black first and women secondarily so the research Lyerly uses has to be interrogated for racial and gender biases. Yet slave women's experiences cannot be overlooked because for a variety of reasons they "freely" joined the Methodist church. One major reason for becoming Methodist was completely unrelated to gender: many early Methodists openly opposed slavery (p. 204). Yet, there were other gender-specific reasons for choosing Methodism. For example, though they were denied power in the church, the supreme power for all Methodists was that of the Holy Spirit, a power that was open to all. Through oral testimony, Holy Spirit possession, singing hymns or shouting, slave women could demonstrate their own self-worth, concept of gender identity, and the ability to worship God in one's own way, thereby creating a sense of spiritual liberty, an undoubtedly important concept for enslaved women (pp. 212–213).

Churches also fostered a sense of sisterhood by extending the fictive kin relationships of the slaves, since in Methodism every female member was a "sister" and every male member a "brother." Practically speaking, the churches also provided opportunities for slave women to gather and meet one another, and from these church communities slave women created support networks that functioned during deaths, births, or any major life events.

Lyerly also notes that slave women who were mothers especially benefited from their church communities, since baptism offered a public forum to demonstrate to "whites their

affection, love, and concern for their children,” hence revealing to whites their humanity (p. 216). Being slaves, they had no recognized maternal rights to their children, but having their children baptized perhaps meant that God would watch over their children if they were separated and offered the hint of a family reunion in heaven for those who had been separated through the slave trade or death. Clergymen also served as allies for slave mothers; they advocated keeping families together since Methodists considered motherhood to be a “sacred office” (p. 218).

Lyerly is careful to mention that the slave women’s positive experiences in Methodism should not overshadow the everyday abuse that they endured and that was even condoned in the later years by the Methodist church (the church’s official position against slavery weakened over the years covered by Lyerly). For instance, the church did not speak openly against the sexual abuse of slave women by white men, and slave women were usually confined to “black classes” of worshippers to discourage them from viewing white women and men as their equals (p. 211, 214).

However, Lyerly is principally concerned with showing the ways that Methodism was beneficial to slave women. Thus, when Methodism offered slave women the ability to be “sanctified,” or attain perfect moral purity and absolute holiness, these slave women thereby had the opportunity to counter the sexually promiscuous imagery prevalent (p. 210). The creation of the pious Mammy imagery certainly eased the fears of whites, but Lyerly seeks to critique this imagery’s effect on enslaved women, even as they adapted it for their own benefit. Whether this benefit was physical emancipation or spiritual freedom, she illuminates black women’s religious experiences as areas for future research.

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