African American Engagements with Edwards in the Era of the Slave Trade

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Between 1680 and 1760 several churchmen standing at least partly in the Calvinist theological tradition expressed views against the slave trade, colonial slavery, or masters’ abuse of slaves. Although the number of commentators is small, they inaugurated a tradition of thought and judgment that came to include a vigorous Calvinist-inspired abolitionism—one in which black people themselves were authors—that flourished from the 1770s to the 1810s. Little of the commentary before 1760 was explicitly antislavery by modern standards, but was important in the history of abolitionism and it has been little understood. The leading characteristics of this tradition were an acceptance of slavery as a social institution appropriate to a fallen world and, yet, a definition of just slavery that in effect undermined the legitimacy of virtually all colonial American slavery, both mainland and West Indian. Churchmen like Morgan Godwyn, Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein, and Jonathan Edwards never declared slavery immoral or unlawful, but they left New World slaveholders little ground on which to stand in defense of their practices.

Morgan Godwyn (1640–c. 1695), a minister of the Church of England, served in Barbados and Virginia from about 1666 to about 1680.1 Godwyn insisted that slavery was an acceptable form of social subordination and that Christianity would render slaves docile and tractable. Such ideas would reappear in the proslavery states in antebellum America. However, Godwyn was the most daring and persistent opponent of slaveholders in the seventeenth-century Anglo-American world.2 He criticized the current forms of slaveholding so thoroughly that virtually nothing would have been left of the institution had his recommendations for better treatment of slaves been followed.
Godwyn’s views on doctrine are unknown, but his family was noted for its anti-Catholicism and his father was graduated from Trinity College, Dublin, a Puritan institution. The younger Godwyn, however, took his degree in 1665 from Christ Church, Oxford, a college not known in the mid-seventeenth century for its Puritanism. In migrating to Virginia, he entered a colony marked by conflicts between slaveholders and Anglican ministers, some of the latter with Puritan sympathies. He praised the religion of the New England colonies and perhaps he assented to the predestinarian parts of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, but we cannot denominate him a Puritan. He seems to have disagreed energetically with local tobacco growers over their treatment of slaves, particularly the cruel punishments, sale of children away from parents, and unwillingness of masters to allow ministers to bring Christianity to the unfree. Some of the clearest commentary on the abuse of slaves as well as on the racist opinions of English settlers appears in writings that Godwyn began publishing in 1685. Mistreatment of blacks in England itself also caught his attention. He hoped for an amelioration of the conditions of slaves’ lives and an improvement of Christian faith and practice in the Church of England. Like abolitionists of a century later, he believed that the leaders of Parliament and of the Church of England possessed the political or moral authority to counter the slave traders and slaveholders.

Similarly, the reputable Puritan Samuel Sewall, a judge not a minister, granted in 1700 that at one time God may have decreed the enslavement of some tribes or societies, though he doubted that any scripture declared that Africans were to be cursed with slavery. But his objections to slavery, as did Godwyn’s, undermined New World slavery. Slaves can hardly be moral beings, he noted, and masters themselves were tempted to sin by the presence of slaves. Americans had no way of ascertaining, he continued, whether African captives were taken in just wars—those in favor of the Atlantic slave trade were claiming that those taken by victors in a just war were legitimately sold—and indeed had reason to suspect the pursuit of unjust wars that ensnared the purchasers of slaves in a web of immorality. Finally, Christians could not recognize the distinction between brother and stranger that had made certain people or groups liable to enslavement according to the Old Testament. “Ethiopians, as black as they are, seeing they are the Sons and Daughters of the First Adam, and Brethren and Sisters of the Last Adam, and the Offspring of God,” Sewall concluded, “ought to be treated with a Respect agreeable.”

Godwyn and Sewall represent a transition in Anglo-American thought that reached its conclusion less than a century after they flourished. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, enemies of the slave trade and slavery granted that enslavement had seemed legitimate both to Jews of the pre-
Christian era and to Christians themselves. Yet this legitimacy, abolitionists argued, was contingent upon both good and fair treatment of slaves and proper interpretation of the New Testament. Both the Atlantic slave system and a Reformed reading of Scripture suggested that the slave trade and New World slavery were immoral. At the beginning of this transition from a provisional acceptance of slavery and an abolitionist insistence on its illegitimacy, thinkers like Godwyn and Sewall eviscerated defenses of slave-trading and slaveholding by pointing out the great distance between the legitimate and the current forms of enslavement.

Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitien (1717–1747), born in West Africa, was taken as a young boy by slave-traders of the Dutch West India Company to Holland, where he was educated in languages and theology. Of course, Capitien relied on Calvin as well as referring to English Puritans. Capitien’s book, *Political-Theological Dissertation Examining the Question: Is Slavery Compatible with Christian Freedom*, has typically been understood as a defense of slave holders, but it actually pursues a strategy similar to that of Godwyn’s *Advocate*. Capitien argued that slavery resulted from humankind’s “degeneracy” and that it was not inconsistent with the Christian faith of both master and slave, since the Atonement freed the soul, not the body. He also pointed out that manumitting slaves who professed Christianity created an incentive for them to sin by fabricating religious convictions. “For all people, and consequently also slaves,” he declared, “can easily feign Christ’s name.” However, Capitien also asseverated that slave and master alike were free under natural law, that Christian kindness may lead owners to free slaves, and that Holland had ended slavery by law. Kindness, indeed, was obligatory, though under “divine law” liberation was only optional. Capitien concluded:

Slavery in no way contradicts Christian freedom—slavery, which indeed has been repealed here in the Netherlands out of some sense of benevolence or clemency or for political expediency, not because of divine law. From this it follows naturally that slavery does not impede the spread of the Gospel in those Christian colonies where it prevails right up to the present day. For this reason, a kingdom most amicable and pleasing to God can and should be built for both masters and slaves, educated in the better religious practices. This is what Paul recommends to Philemon (v. 16). And in this way slaves will certainly in the end be as prepared as possible for the will of their masters, as we read in Ephesians 6:5–8: *Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ.* On these lines, another passage will grow deep roots in the minds of those masters who have not cast off the character of a Christian gentleman (v. 9): *Masters, do the same to them, and forebear threatening, knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.*
Capitein never traveled to the New World, but he surely remembered the ships of the Dutch West India Company on which he sailed with many slaves. He would have known that the standard he drew from Philemon was irrelevant to slave-traders. Thus, Capitein’s proslavery thesis so separated legitimate enslavement from the realities of the Atlantic world that its slave system—purchase, transport, sale, and labor alike—was inevitably stripped of any justification.

The end of Capitein’s life—he died a missionary in West Africa—brings us to the height of Edwards’s theological career. The attractions and uses of Edwardsean religion for the first black abolitionists were many. Some parts of Edwardsean religion brought African Americans across the threshold into New England Christianity, while others allowed blacks to understand their own situation as part of Christian history as well as to argue for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery. The earliest black abolitionists believed that there was no antislavery and pro-black argument sustainable outside the Calvinist tradition. The initial attractions of Edwardsean religion deserve mention here, but the more substantial black approaches to Edwards and the New Divinity are the subject of most of the remainder of this essay.

First, several of the first generation of Anglophone black authors learned to read and write in American Calvinist households, which thus endowed their young servants or slaves with a species of property (in an older sense of a skill) that could never in the long run be squared with enslavement. Second, although Edwards himself was a slave owner, a number of those who affiliated themselves to his theology, along with others with a more general connection to Calvinism (heirs, like Ezra Stiles, of the “old Calvinists”) became leaders in eighteenth-century abolitionism.11 Third, the War of Independence drew from the New Divinity men not only a vigorous endorsement of the republican cause, which many blacks understood as a slaves’ cause, but also a statement about the effect of unfreedom on human life. It produced, the New Divinity men argued, melancholy and despair—not the worst states according to the Reformed tradition, but heavy weights upon one’s life. This argument about melancholy and despair certainly hit home for American slaves, and perhaps the fact that Edwards himself had wrestled with periods of anxiety and depression led him to a theology with which the enslaved could readily feel affinity. Fourth—and here is a general point about eighteenth-century Calvinism—blacks in various parts of the Atlantic world were attracted to Calvinist preaching. There were significant populations of black Huntingdonians in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone. Some black city-dwellers favored the preaching of moderate Calvinists like Ezra Stiles and Timothy Dwight, both of New Haven, as well as that of extremists like Samuel Hopkins of Newport and William Romaine of London, a leading Huntingdonian. The famed Wes-
leyan evangelical, Thomas Coke, bemoaned the successes of “the Calvinists” who were evangelizing the slaves of the West Indies and thus competing with his own Wesleyan brethren, who sometimes suffered “a Calvinistic missionary on each side . . . if not more than two.” And although the documentation is scanty, an examination of Richard Allen’s surviving writings suggests that at least early in his career even he was preaching doctrines friendly to the Calvinist tradition, although in retrospect we tend to associate him with the Wesleyan Methodists.12

The elements of Edwardsian religion meant either in and of themselves, or with some extension, that the slave trade and slavery were wrong and that a Christian society must be fair, free, and open for blacks and whites alike. The first generation of African American Christianity bloomed under the light of Edwards beginning about 1770, grew during the War of Independence and the trans-Atlantic agitation against the slave trade and slavery, then declined around 1820 as blacks began committing themselves to free-will religion. The second generation saw the establishment of new churches and denominations as well as a renewed battle against slavery, but it lost the Calvinist-inspired vision of its predecessors.

The early expressions of Godwyn, Sewall, and Capitein notwithstanding, Edwards provided the linchpin of abolitionism as it developed in the second half of the eighteenth century—his notion of disinterested benevolence. Edwards himself owned several slaves at various points in his adult life, but the Edwardsian understanding of virtue was elemental in early abolitionism, both black and white. Second-generation and third-generation Edwardsians like Samuel Hopkins, Levi Hart, Sarah Osborne, Job Swift, and Lemuel Haynes developed this abolitionism, even if in some cases only erratically. And prominent among black critics of the slave system were Ottobah Quobna Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano, John Marrant, and Phillis Wheatley, who were apostles of Calvinists like George Whitefield, William Romaine, and Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon. Benevolence figured more prominently in the writings of blacks who were closer to Edwards, but it was still prominent in those of blacks whose influences were more strongly Huntingdonian. If one is obliged to love others disinterestedly as creatures of God, then one is obliged to free the enslaved. Enslavement involved not only suffering, which might, after all, be ameliorated, as some of slavery’s defenders argued, but also melancholy and despair deriving from the very state of unfreedom. Indeed, this sense that slavery itself was universally wrong—something purportedly understood only by those who read the New Testament accurately—was essential to the first abolitionism, distinguishing it from the more common and less radical positions.13 Moreover, one of the advances black abolitionists made in the Edwardsian tradition was that slaves desire to be free not for themselves, not for selfish
purposes, but rather to achieve mental and civic states in which they could worship God properly. The enslaved could never be virtuous, they argued. And slaveholders could never have the reformed hearts demanded of them in the Edwardsean tradition.

The Edwardsean notion of divine providence struck a chord deep in the heart of nearly every early black Christian writer—and blacks came to be among the most vigorous proponents of an Edwardsean providentialism. One of the crucial texts of early black America is an apparently sympathetic autograph thirty-five-page commentary by Prince Hall on Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption*. Unfortunately its content is now obscure, but it is possible that this text—virtually the Holy Grail of early African American writing—may come available to scholars some day. Early in the twentieth century it was examined by several scholars who were interested in Hall’s social activity but not his religion. But we find providentialism everywhere in early black writing: God provided both evil and good, suffering and salvation, as part of a divine benevolent design. The injunction to the believer was to approach the divine mind, to seek to understand God’s reason for evil and suffering. Probably nothing more than this allowed black people to comprehend their experience and order their lives. It provided a vision of one suffering at first in ignorance, then achieving a self-determination arising from one’s understanding of God’s benevolent actions within one’s life. In this, Edwardsean theology shaped blacks’ self-understanding and provided them biblical models, including, above all, Joseph.14

Moreover, the Edwardsean understanding of the will allowed early black abolitionists to envision the end of slavery and the nature of a postslavery society. The reformed will was to guide individuals to do good, not for natural purposes or as an incidental result of other deeds, but out of a benevolent intent. Simply put, the early black abolitionists argued that essential to the end of slavery was the benevolent urge to be good to black people, in effect, to free slaves and to welcome blacks into American or English society as full members. Although the question of the will might seem too subtle for many modern observers, it was this more than anything else that separated eighteenth-century abolitionism from nineteenth-century abolitionism. Antebellum abolitionists, black and white alike, anticipated a degree of separation between blacks and whites that their predecessors never envisioned. William Lloyd Garrison himself abjured the goal of benevolent social relations as an impediment to the termination of slavery.15

Each one of these themes—virtue, providence, will—has been pursued in scholarship on early black authors and their abolitionist arguments. This essay emphasizes another feature of Edwardsean theology that appealed to blacks—typology. With good reason, black people became typologists. There
was a typological argument to be made against slavery that matched Edwards’s typologizing and that also answered the proslavery argument that the Old Testament authorizes slavery, albeit a benign variety. Eugene D. Genovese, for instance, has recently argued that nineteenth-century Southern Christian ministers, Calvinist and Arminian alike, defended slavery in good faith based on an accurate reading of the Old Testament. Defense, yes, but good faith, no—simply because the Southern argument abandoned not just Edwards but typological understanding. And this abandonment occurred not with a commitment to the higher criticism that was in the nineteenth century to undermine typologizing, but almost certainly because of a willed desire to efface an antislavery Bible. The typological argument against slavery, which was developed at length by black abolitionists like Quobna Ottobah Cugoano and Lemuel Haynes, was that the Old Testament had a spiritual meaning that was misapprehended by the Jews, then became available for a true understanding by Christians, even if they at large came to understand the truth only over time, most notably because of the Reformation. The Old Testament commentary on slavery was meant by God to be symbolic or figurative, referring to human impulses, including sinful ones, that should be controlled and subjugated to a virtuous life or to a God-fearing community. The laws governing slavery were spiritual, not social. Those laws never authorized the enslavement of persons, whether for good or bad treatment, and those who appealed to the Old Testament in support of slavery were improperly allowing the old dispensation to pollute the new.

It should come as no surprise in our time that the typological argument involved a swipe against Islam as well as against Judaism. Muslim slave-traders were active in the second half of the eighteenth-century, and they were the coastal middlemen responsible for the flow from Senegambia of slaves into the West Indies and North America. Not only did black abolitionists know this—indeed the diatribe against Islam is deep in their work—but also they accepted the eighteenth-century fallacy that Islam was an offshoot of Judaism with little relation to Christianity. Current translations of the Qur’an may have encouraged that view, but, in any event, it gave black abolitionists leverage against the slave trade and slavery, which could be seen as features of the Muslim world (and behind that, the Jewish world) imported into Christian America. That was in the eighteenth century potentially a very powerful critique of the slave trade and slavery.

Moreover, whatever else early black abolitionists believed of the Bible, they believed it to be a book of types and antitypes. Joseph, the model for many black writers, was a type of Jesus, but also a type of the black abolitionist. The Qur’anic Joseph, of course, differed from the Old Testament Joseph on a detail that was crucial for the black abolitionists: in the Qur’an
Joseph understood the divine will from the moment he was thrown into the pit, while in the Old Testament Joseph understood the divine will only much later in the story when he became the savior of his brethren. The latter accorded with the black abolitionists’ self-understanding—as when Olaudah Equiano moved from a slave-trading and slaveholding society, into the Middle Passage, then into the overseeing and the trading of slaves himself, and, finally, into abolitionism. Unlike the Qur’anic Joseph, Equiano never understood the divine will while he was in the dark pit of the slave ship.

That blacks understood the Bible as a book of types and antitypes explains much about early black texts and early black abolitionism. When John Marrant—now famously—described the talking book, the example he gave of its activity was Isaiah 53 and Matthew 26, which were thought to be typologically related in the figures of the suffering servant and Jesus. Indeed, we might recast the “talking book thesis” by noting that the texts themselves support, in addition to the idea that the book talked to white people, a notion that the book talks to itself—it is a book of types and antitypes—and that white people had merely learned to overhear the conversation. The Bible may have been a sign of power held by whites but not blacks, but it was also a book situating black people in history and divining their essential future. A commitment to typology also helps to explain the heavy reliance by nearly all early black writers on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah—Allen, Cugoano, Equiano, Haynes, and Marrant all relied on him—as well Phillis Wheatley’s use of Virgil. Isaiah was an important book for typologists, while Virgil had credence among the orthodox for seeming to have noted the birth of a child who could have been a type of Christ or could even have been Jesus himself.

Moreover, black people experienced themselves as types and antitypes in ways foreign to their white contemporaries. If we gather these various threads together—Edwards’s God, the slave trade, slavery, abolition, freedom, Islam, Christianity, Africa, America—we can understand that black people in the second half of the eighteenth century saw themselves as moving in a generation or two, sometimes, as with Equiano, even in one lifetime, from Old Testament to New Testament, from type to antitype. As abolitionists, they were living and breathing antitypes. Edwards’s typology represented that long tradition of interpretation to them, but Edwards himself could never have claimed such experience. His was always the world defined by the New Testament. Black abolitionists had traveled from the world of the Old Testament (Africa, Islam, the slave trade, slavery, all of which were then mentally linked in ways that today we may find unrealistic and even offensive) to the world of the New Testament (America, abolition, freedom, a hoped-for equality). The structure of the book of types and antitypes was the very form of their lives.
A number of scholars have noted accurately that Edwards expanded typology by finding types not just in Scripture but in nature as well as in other religious traditions. In the second half of the eighteenth century, blacks made a parallel move. Islam, for instance, although condemned as the religion of West African slave traders, was seen as prefiguring important elements of the lives of free blacks in America and England: a sense of honor, sagacity in trade, and, above all, a commitment to literacy directed to religious purposes. Early black authors were fascinated with characters who passed from ignorance to understanding of God’s will. Joseph was one such man, as were Nicodemus and Zaccheus, who were thought by some to have become followers of Christ. The transitions that such figures seemed to have made reflected the trajectory of the lives of the first black Christians of America and England. All scholars examining this generation would today accept that it lived in a world of signs. The signs included the types in which Edwards believed. James Albert Ukasaw Gronniosaw described them as “wonderful impressions.”19 If one type was the despairing slave longing for freedom, the antitype was the committed abolitionist. If another type was Islam (as, apparently, for Wheatley) or a polytheistic faith (as for Gronniosaw), then the antitype was Christianity. The miracles that many early black writers reported as having occurred in their lives were also part of the type–antitype relationship. But the antitypes were themselves signs of things to come, which were for blacks, the free as well as the enslaved, truer forms of faith, freedom, and equality.

NOTES

4. Morgan Godwyn, The Negro’s and Indians Advocate, Suing for Their Admission into the Church; Or a Persuasive to the Instructing and Baptizing of the Negro’s and Indians in Our Plantations (London, 1680).


13. For JE on a new, Reformed understanding that slavery counters God’s will, see Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards’s Defense of Slavery,” 38.


15. For differences between Garrison and earlier abolitionists, see Saillant, Black Puritan, 186–187.

17. For an example of antislavery typologizing, see Saillant, *Black Puritan*, 33–34.