

# Nat Turner: The Complexity and Dynamic of His Religious Background

by

Jakobi Williams, Ph.D.

[jakobiwill@uky.edu](mailto:jakobiwill@uky.edu)

Assistant Professor

Department of History, University of Kentucky

The following is a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Afro-American Studies, completed in 2002 at the University of California at Los Angeles, originally titled "A Panic In All This Country": Nat Turner's Complex And Dynamic Religious Background".

## Abstract

The following reading will examine Nat Turner and the revolt by employing Thomas R. Gray's *Confessions* and accounts of Nat Turner's visions to try to show that Turner not only relied on revelations in an African Christian manner but also utilized divination in a pre-Christian African religious manner. The purpose of the analysis will be to demonstrate that Turner manifested significant African religious retentions, reflecting a tense balance between these two religious aspects. His revolt is seen as an attempt to reconcile this tension. In addition, this approach will display why understanding Nat Turner's complex and dynamic religious background is important to understanding him and the revolt.

This paper will first address the merger of African Christianity and pre-Christian African religious practices to exhibit its relation to Nat Turner. Then it will discuss why most scholars have overlooked Turner's African religious background. Finally, it will show evidence of Turner's use of pre-Christian African religious divinations in conjunction with African Christian revelations by examining Turner's visions and the *Confessions*. This unique approach to studying Nat Turner and the revolt will postulate new critical methodologies that not only acknowledge but also utilize the historical and religious milieu from out of which Nat Turner emerged.

## Introduction

*As we came back the way that Nat led his army,  
Down from Cross Keys, Down to Jerusalem,  
We wondered if his troubled spirit still roamed the Nottaway,  
Or if it fled with the cock-crow at daylight,  
Or lay at peace with the bones in Jerusalem,  
Its restlessness stifled by Southampton clay.<sup>1</sup>*

Scholar Peter H. Wood has noted in his article, “Nat Turner: The Unknown Slave As Visionary Leader,” *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, that Nat Turner’s motivations contained a core of African beliefs and practices. Wood’s declaration was not followed up. This essay is an attempt to explore Wood’s initial affirmation by reexamining primary sources of the revolt. Moreover, Mecal Sobel has documented in her work *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*, dynamic African retentions in Virginia during slavery. The obvious problem here is that scholars on one side of the discourse concerning slavery during Nat Turner’s era discuss African retention and scholars on the other side of the discourse talk about Turner’s revolt but the two sides never meet. This essay will attempt to create a synthesis of the two sides.

Therefore I will examine Nat Turner and the revolt by employing Thomas R. Gray’s *Confessions* and accounts of Nat Turner’s visions to try to show that Turner not only relied on revelations in an African Christian manner, but that he also utilized divination in a pre-Christian African religious manner. Correspondingly, the purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate that Turner manifested significant African religious retentions, reflecting a tense balance between these two religious aspects wherein his revolt is seen as an attempt to reconcile this tension. In addition, this approach will also outline why understanding Nat Turner’s complex and dynamic religious background is important to understanding him and the revolt.

Specifically, I will address what scholars have documented in both Gabriel Prosser’s and Denmark Vesey’s conspiracies and Nat Turner’s revolt by comparing and contrasting the events to show their commonalities and differences. Second, I will highlight the role of Christianity and African religious retentions in these events to demonstrate that Turner’s revolt contained Christianity and African religious retentions. Next, I will address the merger of African Christianity and pre-Christian African religious practices to exhibit its relationship to Nat Turner, and discuss why most scholars have overlooked Turner’s African religious background.

Finally, I will articulate the provisional approximations of Turner's use of pre-Christian African religious divinations in conjunction with African Christian revelations by examining his visions and the *Confessions*. Thus, this approach to studying Nat Turner and the revolt should postulate new critical methodologies that can acknowledge and utilize the historical and religious milieu of the life and essential meaning Nat Turner.

Many scholars have declared that the discussion on Nat Turner and the revolt has been exhausted. I strongly disagree. There is still plenty of room for reanalysis. Scholar Michael Johnson serves as a prime example. Johnson published an article in the *William and Mary Quarterly* entitled, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators." In this article, Johnson convincingly argues that Denmark Vesey did not organize a rebellion but rather he was a victim of a conspiracy orchestrated by the Mayor of Charleston, S.C., James Hamilton Jr. to discredit his political rival Governor Thomas Bennett Jr. and to advance his own career.<sup>2</sup>

Johnson relied on the court transcripts of the Vesey trial unlike virtually all historians before him who relied on the Official Record Report. These findings helped him to combat the scholarship of three biographies that were published in 1999, one of which as a result of Johnson's research has been taken out of print by the University of North Carolina Press.<sup>3</sup> Michael Johnson shows that discussion of historical events is never over. My essay is in this spirit and will provide a new approach to the discourse on Nat Turner and the revolt.

## Historiography

Since 1831 and aside from the numerous news and magazine accounts immediately following the revolt and execution, many scholars have written extensively on Nat Turner's Revolt. Every piece has its biases, unique approach and interesting insights. Thomas Gray's, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, printed shortly after Turner's execution is extremely biased. Gray, who was a slaveholder from Southampton County, Virginia, portrays the revolt as "slaves engaged in 'cruelty and destruction,' they were a 'fiendish band,' 'remorseless murderers,' men 'actuated by. . . hellish purposes.'"<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Wentworth Higginson's, *Black Rebellion: A Selection from Travellers and Outlaws*, written thirty years after the revolt, at that time was the first work on Turner's Revolt since 1831. Higginson depicts the revolt under the guise of Thomas Jefferson's definition of "Man's Duty to Man," which he argues that Turner's actions towards his oppressors were not only justifiably reasonable but also declares that Turner fought for liberty and freedom and not for vengeance.<sup>5</sup>

John W. Cromwell's, "The Aftermath of Nat Turner's Insurrection," *Journal of Negro History*, displays the atrocities inflicted by the white population upon people of color following the revolt. Cromwell asserts that Turner's revolt should be ranked along with the greatest reformers, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, of his day.<sup>6</sup> Herbert Aptheker's, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* and the chapter on the revolt in his book, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, are excellent sources that approach the revolt from a Socialist perspective.

By far the most useful sources on Turner's revolt is Henry Irving Tragle's, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831*, which is a compilation of primary source material. The sources consist of letters, correspondences, diaries, trial records, and census records. In addition, Stephen B. Oates', *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*, is the most scholarly unbiased illustration of Turner's revolt. It is well written, clearly developed and supported by the facts presented. Nevertheless, all of the aforementioned failed to look beyond Turner's obvious Christian background and recognize the presence of his African religious retentions.

Scholars such as Kenneth Greenberg has demonstrated that Turner's mother and grandmother were African born and passed down their beliefs to Turner in his work, *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*.<sup>7</sup> Peter H. Wood has noted that Turner's religious background consisted of both Christianity and African religions that were braided together in his article, "Nat Turner: The Unknown Slave As Visionary Leader," *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*.<sup>8</sup> Both have acknowledged that there are African religious retentions present but both fail to contend with or explore this fact and what it entails.

There are scholars who have addressed the issue that not all of the enslaved converted to Christianity and that those who refused to convert formed religious communities by combining their traditional African religious beliefs with those of their fellow enslaved. In his book, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, John Thornton calls this phenomenon "African Christianity."<sup>9</sup> Eugene Genovese uses the term "Black Christianity" in his book, *From Rebellion to Revolution*.<sup>10</sup> Mecal Sobel calls this observable fact the "combination of African and Christian ethos," in her book, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*.<sup>11</sup> With the exception of Sobel, these particular scholars have failed to apply this concept to Nat Turner's revolt.

## **Background of Nat Turner's Revolt**

The Fall season of 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia, is arguably the most controversial time period in the region's history. Nat Turner, a well-known religious enslaved man of the area, led a revolt against slaveholders and the institution of slavery. A band of approximately sixty enslaved people brutally murdered and maimed almost every white person they encountered during the revolt. In the middle of the night, these enslaved persons ambushed their sleeping enemies, slaughtering entire households, even infants.

Nat Turner was deeply religious and faithful to God. He had several revelations that he interpreted as instructions for him to lead his people out of bondage. Thus, Turner led the insurrection believing that he was fulfilling his duty to God and that God was on his side. Turner's first revelation occurred during early 1825 while he was at his plough. This revelation consisted of a "Spirit" that told him, "Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you".<sup>12</sup> Later on in this decade, Turner had other revelations:

He envisioned "white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened. . . ."; he discovered "drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven"; and he "found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters, and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood. . . ." Finally, the Spirit visited him once again and "said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that [he] should take it on and fight against the Serpent. . . ." <sup>13</sup>

Turner interpreted these revelations as his duty to God to rise up and overthrow his oppressors. He accepted his duty and waited for God to give him a signal to strike and do what he understood to be the work of God. After witnessing a day-long eclipse of the sun and moon on August 13, 1831, Nat Turner was convinced that God had given him a sign to lead his people out of bondage.<sup>14</sup>

On August 21, Turner and his most trusted compatriots, Hark Travis, Nelson Williams, Samuel Francis, Jack Reese, Will Francis and Henry Porter, conducted a secret meeting in the woods near Cabin Pond where they ate supper and decided to rise up against the slaveholders of Southampton County, Virginia. The revolt began at 2:00am on August 22. The first victim of the revolt was his slaveholder, Joseph Travis. Nat Turner used a ladder to enter the upper story of the house, once inside; he snuck down the stairs to let in his band.

Turner's men insisted that he strike the first blow so he struck Mr. Travis with his hatchet. Startled, Travis leaped from his bed and called to his wife. Immediately, Hark split Travis' skull with an axe while one of the other men killed Travis' wife.<sup>15</sup> The men then proceeded throughout the house and killed Travis' two apprentices Putman Moore and Joel Westbrook.<sup>16</sup> After leaving the house, Turner remembered that they did not slay the infant, so he sent two of the men back to the house to do so.<sup>17</sup>

From here the revolt moved from plantation to plantation, gathering recruits, grabbing guns and powder, taking horses and killing whites at each stop.<sup>18</sup> Between 2:00am and sunrise, Salathiel Francis was killed at his home next, and then the revolt reached Mrs. Piety Reese's home where she was killed along with her son William. For some reason, Turner decided to pass the homes of Mrs. Harris and the Newsome family.<sup>19</sup>

Just prior to sunrise, Turner and his band reached Wiley Francis' plantation. Francis had somehow been informed of the revolt and convinced the enslaved housed on his land to defend him and his property. As a result, a confrontation ensued and Turner decided to withdraw without attempting any violence. Now sunrise at 5:31am, the band's next target was Mrs. Elizabeth Turner's home. She was killed along with her neighbor Mrs. Newsome and the overseer Hartwell Peebles.<sup>20</sup> From here the band divided into two groups.

Nine mounted men, including Turner, went to Mrs. Catherine Whitehead's home where they killed her, her son Richard, her mother, her four daughters, and her grandchild. It was Mrs. Whitehead's daughter Margaret that Turner would later claim as the only person whom he actually killed. The remaining six men of the group attacked Henry Bryant's plantation, where they killed him and his wife, his child and his mother-in-law. Next, a portion of the band headed to Richard Porter's home where they discovered that he and his family had fled. So they continued to Nathaniel Francis's plantation and killed the overseer Henry Doyle and two young boys. Then they proceeded to the home of Howell Harris who had also fled, but they did manage to kill Trajan Doyle on a nearby road. On a road near the Francis house they killed Mrs. John K. Williams and her child.<sup>21</sup>

From here Turner led a portion of the band to Peter Edwards' home, which was empty. What Turner did not know was that at daylight the news of the revolt had spread and panic-stricken whites had fled their homes. In nearby Jerusalem, hysterical crowds were preparing for attack and had sent couriers to beg the Governor to send troops.<sup>22</sup> Nat Turner met up with the rest of the band at the plantation of Captain John T. Barrow, who had been killed by the time Turner arrived. Mostly mounted on horseback, the band numbered nearly forty.

Following the discovery that Captain Newitt Harris's home was empty, the band killed Mrs. Waller and ten or more children in her home, and then killed William Williams, his wife and two small boys in their home. Next, they reached Jacob Williams' plantation, where Mrs. Williams, her three children, the overseer's wife Mrs. Caswell Worrell and her two children, and visitor Edwin Drewery were all killed.<sup>23</sup>

After Rebecca Vaughan, her niece and her son Arthur were killed in their home, Turner and his band, numbering between fifty and sixty and all mounted, decided to ride towards Jerusalem. It was about mid-day when Turner and his band had split again (one portion went to attack the Parker plantation) that they met confrontation against a small militia of about eighteen men who were guarding the main road to Jerusalem. Shots were exchanged but there were no fatalities.<sup>24</sup> Turner and his men chased the small militia for about two hundred yards but halted when they saw white reinforcements approaching. After the revolt, members of this militia stated that Turner and his band could have easily routed their small group and marched straight into Jerusalem if Turner had continued to pursue them.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Turner's band was severely diminished. He and his remaining forty men took shelter for the night at the Ridley home. A false alarm during the night caused 20 of these men to flee.<sup>26</sup>

At daybreak, August 23, 1831, Turner attacked Dr. Simon Blunt's plantation but was defeated by Blunt and the enslaved whom he sought to free. Hark and several men were captured and one or more were killed. After this battle, Turner and his remaining band had a battle with the militia near Captain Newitt Harris' plantation and were defeated. Nat Turner managed to escape and elude capture for more than two months.<sup>27</sup>

The revolt lasted two days and fifty-five white people were murdered. Militia units from Norfolk, Richmond, and Portsmouth, Virginia helped to suppress the revolt, but not before Southampton County, Virginia became an area of unrest and retaliation. Nat Turner's revolt of the enslaved had a profound effect on the relationship between the enslaved and slaveholders in Southampton County, Virginia. Before the revolt, many slaveholders were cruel while others were passive. Some enslaved people were loyal and others rebellious. Overall, slaveholders were under the impression that they had complete control over the enslaved population and over the "peculiar institution" of slavery. Surprised Southampton County slaveholders plunged into a state of panic that resulted in tremendous changes.

Panic and paranoia engulfed slaveholders and other white residents in Southampton County after Turner's revolt. Positive and friendly race relations in Southampton County, Virginia between the enslaved people, free black people, and white people became rare after the revolt. The once stable and comfortable white society of slaveholders now viewed the enslaved and free black population with distrust and hatred. The few passive slaveholders and friendly white people became cruel and vengeful towards all enslaved people, even towards those most loyal and trusted, and toward free black people.

There are four ways in which Nat Turner's insurrection of the enslaved changed race relations and disrupted the social order in Southampton County, Virginia. First, slaveholders and southern whites in general, became afraid of the potential for violence of the enslaved and free black population. Strange that they should be alarmed, when the people they enslaved were so "contented and happy"! But so it was.<sup>28</sup> A woman from another part of Virginia wrote:

*The half cannot be told of the distresses of the people. In Southampton County, the scene of the insurrection, the distress beggars description. A gentleman who has been there says that even here, where there has been great alarm, we have no idea of the situation of those in that county. . . I do not hesitate to believe that many Negroes around us would join in a massacre as horrible as that which has taken place, if an opportunity should offer.*<sup>29</sup>

Another Virginian stated:

*I have not slept without anxiety for three months. Our nights are sometimes spent in listening to noises. A corn song, or a hog call, has often been a subject of nervous terror, and a cat, in the dining room, will banish sleep for the night. There has been and still is a panic in all this country.*<sup>30</sup>

Second, slaveholders accused the free black population of influencing the enslaved people who had revolted. For example, after the events of 1831, the free black population was targeted by slaveholders and other white people, simply because it was free and living near the enslaved, but not because they had participated in the revolt. Between 1847-1848, Lydia Maria Child conducted an interview with Charity Browery, a 65 year-old house servant from North Carolina who states, "In Nat's time, the patrols would tie up the free colored people, flog 'em, and try to make 'em lie against one another, and often killed them before anybody could interfere".<sup>31</sup>

In 1842, Harriet Jacobs, a woman who was enslaved during Turner's revolt, states:

*The dwellings of the colored people, unless they happened to be protected by some influential white person, who was nigh at hand, were robbed of clothing and everything else the marauders thought worth carrying away. All day long these unfeeling wretches went round, like a troop of demons, terrifying and tormenting the helpless. At night, they formed themselves into patrol bands, and went wherever they chose among the colored people, acting out their brutal will.*<sup>32</sup>

Numerous free black people fled the County, but those who remained were forced to live with the elimination of the right to a trial by jury to keep them under control.<sup>33</sup>

Third, most slaveholders and white residents also blamed Turner's revolt on the religious and literate enslaved people in Southampton County, Virginia. Virginia's Governor John Floyd wrote to Governor James Hamilton of South Carolina that he blamed "Yankee peddlers and traders" for spreading a type of Christianity that undermined slavery. He also blamed northern preachers and southern white women for teaching the enslaved how to read the scriptures which further damaged the social order in Southampton County, Virginia.<sup>34</sup>

To regain order in the County, white vigilantes took it upon themselves to prohibit the enslaved population from reading, writing, and practicing religion, until new laws that did the same were incorporated into the "slave codes" of Southampton County, Virginia. James Curry, a formerly enslaved person, states that, "Before Nat Turner's insurrection, a slave in our neighborhood might buy a spelling or hymn-book, but now we cannot."<sup>35</sup> Charity Browery gave this account:

*On Sundays I have seen the negroes(sic) up in the country going away under large oaks, and in secret places, sitting in the woods with spelling books. The brightest and best men were killed in Nat's time. Such ones are always suspected. All the colored folks were afraid to pray in the time of the old prophet Nat. There was no law about it; but the whites reported it round among themselves, that if a note was heard, we should have some dreadful punishment; and after that the low whites would fall upon any slave they heard praying or singing a hymn, and often killed them before their masters or mistress could get to them.*<sup>36</sup>

Harriet Jacobs asserts that the enslaved were no longer able to practice religion without supervision. Jacobs contends:

*The slaves begged the privilege of again meeting at their little church in the woods, with their burying ground around it. It was built by the colored people, and they had no higher happiness than to meet there and sing hymns together, and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer. Their request was denied, and the church was demolished. They were permitted to attend the white churches, a certain portion of the galleries being appropriated to their use.*<sup>37</sup>

Fourth, as a result of Turner's revolt, slaveholders and whites in general became more brutal and horrendously oppressive toward black people because of fear, hatred, and revenge.<sup>38</sup> The fact that Turner was a Godly man who murdered his uncommonly kind slaveholder encouraged this fear, hatred, and revenge.<sup>39</sup> Vigilante groups used Turner's revolt as a rationale to lynch, decapitate, torture, and inflict other atrocities upon the enslaved and free black population.<sup>40</sup>

A North Carolina correspondent contends, “The massacre of the whites was over, and the white people had commenced the destruction of the Negroes”.<sup>41</sup> Harriet Jacobs states:

*It was a grand opportunity for the low whites, who had no negroes(sic) of their own to scourge. They exulted(sic) in such a chance to exercise a little brief authority. . . Those who never witnessed such scenes can hardly believe what I know was inflicted at this time on innocent men, women, and children, against whom there was not the slightest ground for suspicion. Colored people and slaves who lived in remote parts of the town suffered in a special manner. . . Everywhere men, women, and children were whipped until the blood stood in puddles at their feet. . . others were tied hands and feet, and tortured with a bucking paddle, which blisters the skin terribly. . . No two people who had the slightest tinge of color in their faces dared to be seen talking together.*<sup>42</sup>

A correspondent of the *National Intelligencer* gave this account:

*We allude to the slaughter of many blacks without trial and under circumstances of great barbarity. . . . We met with an individual who told us that he himself had killed between ten and fifteen. . . . We [the Richmond troop] witnessed with surprise the sanguinary temper of the population, immediate death on every prisoner.*<sup>43</sup>

*The Constitutional Whig* (August 29, 1831) reports that white troops took part in “summary justice in the form of decapitation” and that these atrocities were not “inferior in barbarity” to the acts of the insurrectionists.<sup>44</sup> John Hampden, editor of *The Constitutional Whig*, criticized the slaughter of suspected rebels.<sup>45</sup>

Historian Stephen B. Oates, estimates that approximately 120 or more enslaved and free black people were killed as a result of the backlash by white people after Turner’s revolt. This is far more than the number of black people who participated in the revolt and far more than the white casualties.<sup>46</sup> Eventually, these atrocities ended, because slaveholders began to demand compensation for their property. Thus, white people changed their means of revenge from slaughtering black people in the streets to bogus and swift court trials and death penalties. Unlawfully quick court trials and death penalties were an example of the impact of Turner’s revolt on the government of Southampton County, Virginia. Approximately fifty enslaved and free black people were tried in the three weeks following the revolt. None of the accused who were tried during this period received time to mount a strong and adequate defense.<sup>47</sup> Governor John Floyd, slaveholders, and most white people in Southampton County, Virginia, blamed northern agitation for Turner’s revolt. In a letter to Governor James Hamilton of South Carolina regarding the causes of Turner’s revolt, Governor Floyd wrote:

. . . the Yankee population upon their first arrival amongst us. . . began first, by making them religious. . . telling the blacks God was no respecter of persons-the black man was as good as the white man-that all men were born free and equal-that they cannot serve two masters-that the white people rebelled against England to obtain freedom, so have the blacks a right to do. . . our females and the most respectable were persuaded that it was piety to teach negroes to read and write, to the end that they might read the Scriptures-many of them became tutoress in Sunday schools and, pious distributors of tracts, from the New York Tract Society. . . Then commenced the efforts of the black preachers, often from the pulpits these pamphlets and papers were read-followed by the incendiary publications of Walker, Garrison and Knapp of Boston, these too with songs and hymns of a similar character were circulated, read and commented upon. . . I feel fully justified to myself, in believing the Northern incendiaries, tracts, Sunday Schools, religion and reading and writing has accomplished this end.<sup>48</sup>

Floyd was compelled to revise and add state government policies in order to prevent a recurrence of the events in Southampton County, Virginia. On December 5, 1831, the Governor addressed his “*Fellow-Citizens of the Senate and the House of Delegates*”<sup>49</sup> with a message concerning Turner’s revolt:

*As a means of guarding against the possible repetition of these sanguinary scenes, I cannot fail to recommend to your early attention, the revision of all the laws intended to preserve in due subordination, the slave population of our State. . . all communities are liable to suffer from the dagger of the murderer and midnight assassin, and it behooves them to guard against it.*<sup>50</sup>

As a result, the slave codes and government policies incorporated to control the enslaved and free black population were revised and harshened. John W. Cromwell writes in *The Journal of Negro History*, “There was offered thereafter a bill to amend an act entitled ‘an act to revise under one the several acts concerning slaves, free Negroes and mulattoes.’ The important provisions of the bill were that the slaves and free Negroes should not conduct religious exercises nor attend meetings held at night by white preachers unless granted written permission by their masters or overseers.”<sup>51</sup>

In the revised slave codes, no free black person was allowed to acquire ownership of any of the enslaved people unless they were his or her immediate family.<sup>52</sup> In *American Negro Slave Revolts*, historian Herbert Aptheker writes:

*No free Negro was to possess weapons. If any Negro should commit assault on a white person with intent to kill, death without benefit of clergy was to be his punishment. No one was to sell liquor to or purchase it from a slave, and no Negro was to sell liquor within a mile of a public assembly. An act that went into operation July 1, 1832 provided that any Negro attending a seditious meeting or saying anything of such a nature was to be whipped not over thirty-nine times, while a white person so guilty was to be fined from one hundred to one thousand dollars.*<sup>53</sup>

Turner's revolt gained the attention of government officials in Southampton County, Virginia, forcing them to reshape and add specific laws that they relied upon for many years to come. Nat Turner's revolt also had a profound effect upon other slaveholding and non-slaveholding states. For example, several slaveholding states including Delaware; the Carolinas; Georgia; Florida Territory; Alabama; Mississippi; Louisiana; Tennessee; and Kentucky adopted slave codes and government policies similar to those of Southampton County with the hope that they could prevent any and all insurrections.<sup>54</sup> Turner's revolt not only affected the government policies of these slaveholding states but it affected the government policies of free states as well. For example, Governor McArthur of Ohio, "called the attention of his congress to the Southern crisis, and strongly urged prohibitive legislation restricting the influx of free persons of color who might seek asylum there."<sup>55</sup>

Benjamin Phipps eventually captured Nat Turner on October 30 at 12:00 noon. Turner was hiding near the Travis plantation. From November 1-3, 1831, Thomas R. Gray interviewed Nat Turner while he was imprisoned in the County Jail. Gray claims that Turner dictated his confession to him, which he published as Turner's *Confessions*. On November 5, Turner was tried and sentenced to be executed. At about 12:00 noon on November 11, Turner was hanged by Deputy Sheriff of Southampton County, Edward Butts and his body was eventually chopped up into 18 pieces.<sup>56</sup>

Nat Turner remains one of the most shocking, revolutionary, and controversial characters in both African American and American history. Nevertheless, Turner has been recognized as a patriot by abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and historian John W. Cromwell identifies Turner as a reformer.

In *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison describes Nat Turner's Revolt as an act of patriotism. Garrison states, "In all we have written, is there taught to justify the excesses of the slaves? No. Nevertheless, they deserve no more censure than the Greeks in destroying the Turks, or the Poles in exterminating the Russians, or our fathers in slaughtering the British. Dreadful, indeed, is the standard erected by worldly patriotism".<sup>57</sup>

Thomas Wentworth Higginson describes Turner as “a powerfully built person. . . with a face full of expression and resolution”.<sup>58</sup> He asserts that once the insurrectionists were encouraged to fight for their liberty, all one had to do was “show them sword or musket, and they grasped it, though it were an heirloom from Washington himself”.<sup>59</sup> These descriptions define Turner as determined to gain liberty, which relates to the founding fathers’ resolution to gain liberty. According to Garrison and Higginson, Nat Turner responded to his oppressed situation in a way that any American patriot would have reacted. Historians should take this fact into account in order to replace Turner’s controversial label with one of respect and martyrdom. Nat Turner’s Revolt must not only serve as a catalyst for liberation during the slavery era, but also be studied as an igniter of liberation movements of the twentieth century.

### **Comparison of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner**

Between the years 1800-1831 there were two major uprising conspiracies by the enslaved, and one major slave revolt in the Virginia-South Carolina antebellum region. In the two conspiracies, the first led by Gabriel Prosser (1800 in Virginia) and the second led by Denmark Vesey (1822 in South Carolina), many scholars have highlighted the role of Christianity and the retention of traditional African religions, but have failed to acknowledge that these same dimensions are relevant to Nat Turner’s revolt as well. Comparing and contrasting these three people and events will display their commonalities and differences, and will also stress the role that Christianity and African religious retentions played in them all.

Besides the fact that these events occurred in different eras, there is only one significant difference between them. With the intention of securing the freedom of as many of the enslaved as possible, each revolt had a different strategic aim. Gabriel Prosser sought to take Richmond and probably wait to see the outcome of the revolt and take advantage of any opportunities that emerged. Whereas Denmark Vesey wanted to take Charleston and eventually sail to Haiti, Nat Turner on the other hand, did not have a strategic plan beyond seizing the neighboring plantations. It is suggested that he may have wanted to take Jerusalem, the closest city to his area in Southampton County, Virginia. Yet, not having a plan proved to be his strength for it was less exposed to betrayal, which was the fate of both Prosser and Vesey.<sup>60</sup>

Conversely, there are numerous commonalities among these three people and events. For instance, all of them knew how to read and write and had special talents. Prosser was a blacksmith, and a skilled enslaved person. Vesey worked as a seaman, spoke several languages, and read political press. Turner was a field hand and preacher.<sup>61</sup> In addition, each revolt took place when antagonisms among whites were relevant. Prosser’s conspiracy was during undeclared war with the French. Vesey’s conspiracy was at the time of the Missouri Debate, which had a tone of anti-slavery sentiment.

Turner's revolt was after the tense constitutional convention in Virginia.<sup>62</sup> Genovese explains that Turner's revolt occurred, "in an atmosphere charged at once with rumors among white and black alike of renewed war with Britain and with hard evidence of anti-slavery disaffection among the whites of western Virginia."<sup>63</sup>

Each one of these men interpreted Christianity as proof that freedom is the right of all men. More importantly, all of them had to confront the African presence among their people. Gabriel Prosser recited the Bible at Sunday meetings in an effort to recruit the enslaved for his revolt. One of his recruits, George Smith, sought to enlist the African born enslaved as they were 'supposed to deal with witches and wizards and thus [would be] useful in armies to tell when any calamity was about to befall them.'<sup>64</sup> Denmark Vesey and almost all of his fellow conspirators were members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

One of his recruited conspirators, Gullah Jack, was identified by the enslaved as a 'sorcerer' who could not be 'killed or taken' and he gave the conspirators charms made of crab claws that were supposed to have magical powers.<sup>65</sup>

The appeal to African elements in the enslaved's religion bolstered morale among those who faced grim odds.<sup>66</sup> Both conspiracies not only reveal that the plotters believed that God approved of their plans, but they also display obvious continuing pre-Christian African religious traditions. Turner was a preacher but many scholars fail to acknowledge that Turner's revolt also contained a strong African influence, which can be located in Turner's complex and dynamic religious background.

## **Religion: African Christianity and pre-Christian African religion and its Retentions**

Nat Turner's religious conditioning and upbringing were extremely dynamic. For the most part, the substance and intricacies of African Christianity and pre-Christian African religions in the culture of the enslaved, which have an indelible place in the formation of Nat Turner, are undervalued. In order to understand Nat Turner's religious background, one must first understand the dynamics of the merger of African religion and European Christianity, which resulted in African Christianity, and its role in the "New World." Next, one must understand pre-Christian African religions in the "New World." Once these understandings are established, one must consider the roles that these complex and dynamic religions played in the development of slave religion and how this aspect of slave culture was responsible for the religious conditioning of Nat Turner.

What is African Christianity? What caused the formation of this particular religion and why? How is it relevant to Nat Turner? At first, European enslavement of Africans was only economic. Eventually, Europeans justified their participation in the slave trade by declaring that their economic interest was also evangelical. Europeans contained a demand for African labor, which also included the goal of converting Africans to Christians. The result was the enslavement of African people and the merger of African religions with European Christianity, a form of Christianity that satisfied both Africans and Europeans.

This merger of religions or as many scholars call it, “syncretism,” displays European influences of Christianity on Africans and also shows how the African background of enslaved African Americans affected their religious response to the “New World.”<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the dynamics of cultural change by way of being moved across the Atlantic or contact with Europeans affected African religion and philosophy. The dynamics of African and European “religious knowledge and philosophy” and the “reevaluation of basic concepts and sources of knowledge of both religions” to find common ground made this religious merger satisfactory to the “religious understandings” of both parties.<sup>68</sup>

This common ground is the concept of “revelation.” Christianity and African religions are constructed in the same way, through the philosophical interpretation of revelations.<sup>69</sup> A revelation, as defined by historian John Thornton is, “[A] piece of information about the other world, its nature, or its intention that is perceptible to people in this world through one or another channel. Revelations provide this world with its window on the other world. The information thus gathered is then basic data used for constructing a general understanding of the nature of the other world and its inhabitants (a philosophy), a clear perception of its desires and intentions for people to obey (a religion), and a larger picture of the workings and history of both worlds (a cosmology). It is thus through revelations that religions are formed, and it is also through them that they change.”<sup>70</sup>

The concept of revelation is the foundation of both African religions and Christianity and it is the glue that binds them together. Look no farther than the parallels between the two religions. Christianity is founded on a series of revelations, “a record of which was contained in the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>71</sup> For instance, Moses’ revelations formed the old Hebrew law, the revelations of Hebrew prophets produced the Old Testament, and the revelations of Jesus and the apostles created the New Testament. Catholics believe that the writings of the “Fathers and Doctors of the Church” were revelations in the form of “dreams, conjunctions of events, heavenly apparitions and the like were divine messages as well as the Scriptures.”<sup>72</sup>

African religions are also founded on a series of revelation, but most are documented through oral tradition rather than writings. Moreover, African religions are also made up of several other categories: augury and divination, dream interpretation, visions or hearing voices, and spirit possession.

Thornton describes each category as follows. “Augury and divination involve the study of events to determine otherworldly intentions. Dream interpretation relies on the notion that the other world can sometimes communicate through the unconscious mind.” Only people with “special gifts” usually experience visions or hearing voices. Spirit possession consists of “an otherworldly entity” that takes over a “human, animal, or material object and spoke through it.”<sup>73</sup> Later, the reading will further examine pre-Christian African religion and the category divination.

Once each group understood the basic concepts and sources of knowledge of each other’s religions, both recognized the concept of revelation and that both religions had much in common. Europeans immediately recognized African revelations and Africans had little trouble in recognizing the content of the Bible or Church histories of the Europeans as being revelations.<sup>74</sup> More importantly, both religions agreed on how to validate revelations. Both believe that only people with *special gifts* received revelations. If a person “demonstrated power of knowledge that would have been unavailable to him through normal physical laws, then this was taken as a sign that the revelation he reported did indeed come from the other world.” Thus, this person would be labeled as a prophet.<sup>75</sup>

In order to comprehend African Christianity, one must understand the dynamics of African Christianity. African Christianity is a form of Christianity in that Africans and enslaved Afro-Americans have accepted and accorded status and worship to a series of revelations by Christian saints. What makes African Christianity different from Christianity that is practiced by Europeans or Euro-Americans is the fact that African philosophy recognizes many other revelations as valid and never fully accepted certain points of Christian doctrine “(the primacy of discontinuous revelations such as the Bible or Apostolic Succession and the resulting attitude toward the Sacrament and the role of the papacy).”<sup>76</sup>

African Christianity can best be described as the complex exchanging, examination and evaluation of revelations conducted by Africans and Christians. The way revelations interacted and were validated determined the nature of African Christianity.<sup>77</sup> According to John Thornton, in order to fully understand African Christianity and its role in the culture of the enslaved, one must understand “the dynamic elements (revelations) rather than the more stable ones (cosmologies).” He continues, “Africans became Christians not because the priests or the converts sought to match or replace their cosmologies. Instead, they converted because they received ‘co-revelations,’ that is, revelations in the African tradition that dovetailed with the Christian tradition. The conversion was accepted because Christians also accepted this particular set of revelations as valid.”<sup>78</sup>

Understanding the background of pre-Christian African religion will further explain why the aforementioned was possible. Pre-Christian African religion does not rely upon sacred books or scriptures. Rather, the religion is recorded in the history, hearts and experiences of the people. African religion is pragmatic and realistic and is applied to situations as the need occurs. It is handed down from generation to generation. Changes may be brought about by necessity, where as practitioners change what's necessary to suit their situation.<sup>79</sup>

African religion has wrongly been identified as a superstition. John Mbiti, a scholar on African religion, has documented that African religion relies on beliefs that are based on “deep reflections and long experiences” rather than superstition or believing and fearing something without proper grounds.<sup>80</sup> He also contends that African religion must have the same respect as that occupied by Christianity and Islam.

Scholars have also falsely dubbed African religion as animism, which means “the system of belief and practices based on the idea that objects and natural phenomena are inhabited by spirits or souls.”<sup>81</sup> The African religious belief in the spirits is only one part of the religion, which contains much more than this belief. Furthermore, Scholars have erroneously defined African religion as paganism. Mbiti demonstrates that scholars have used the word pagan to refer to people who do not follow either Christianity or Islam.

More importantly, there are people throughout Europe and America who are wholly irreligious and are not described as pagans. African religious practitioners are deeply religious people and it is wrong to identify them or their religion as paganism.<sup>82</sup>

Divination and religious leadership are the most significant aspects of African religion that relate to Nat Turner. Divination is one of the most important aspects of African religion. It is the act of studying nature and events to foretell future events or reveal occult knowledge. A diviner conducts formal and informal acts of worship and attends to needs of the community. Normally, a diviner receives revelations through visions and dreams and usually are loners.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, they consult “spirits” to cure sickness and solve problems in the community.<sup>84</sup> Nat Turner embodied all of the aforementioned.

Religious leaders are equally important as those who practice divination and may be the same person. Religious leaders possess what is the best in a given religion. They embody the presence of God, the beliefs of the people, as well as their morale values. They are wise, intelligent, and talented, and have outstanding abilities and personalities.<sup>85</sup> Again, Nat Turner embodied all of the aforementioned.

There is also evidence of retention of African religious traits after converting to Christianity. Mbiti documents that those who convert retain many of their African religious beliefs. “Even when people are converted from African Religion to another religion, they retain many of their former beliefs since it is hard to destroy beliefs. Some of the beliefs in African Religion are like beliefs in other religions, but some are completely different. Beliefs have a lot of influence on people. . . Therefore, it is good to understand people’s beliefs well, because it is these beliefs which influence their behavior”<sup>86</sup>

It is such beliefs that influenced Nat Turner’s behavior. This is why understanding his religious background and conditioning is so important to understanding him and the revolt.

Much like Thornton, Mbiti argues that African religion, “prepared the way for the conversion of African peoples to Christianity”<sup>87</sup> Importantly, this does not mean that those who converted abandoned all of their former religious ideas and traditions. What this does mean is that the religious life of those who converted shows the combination of African religions and Christianity.<sup>88</sup>

This combination of religions helped the enslaved to adapt to the “New World” and to fight the dehumanization of chattel slavery. This form of religion both accommodated and compromised with the slaveholding community. At the same time, it helped the enslaved to form political messianism and revolutionary millennialism.<sup>89</sup>

## **The Aforementioned and its Relation to Nat Turner**

Historian Michael Gomez has documented that in Virginia, enslaved Africans were allowed to participate in revivals on their own terms. Meaning, they were allowed to respond to the Christian gospel in a way that was consistent with pre-Christian African religions. The enslaved African revivalist sang, swayed, danced, and went into trance.<sup>90</sup> “Europeans may have provided the skeletal framework of Christianity, but it was the African who introduced the ways of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>91</sup> Not all enslaved Africans and African Americans in Virginia accepted African Christianity.

Many chose to hold on to their traditional African religious beliefs. This was possible due to the fact that Virginia’s participation in the enslavement of Africans consisted of concentrating Africans of various ethnicities into three regions of the state. Historian M. Thomas J. Deschi-Obi has documented that, “differential regional import patterns combined with planter preferences created three ethnic zones in Virginia.”<sup>92</sup>

Historian Douglas Chambers has established that, “[t]he concentration of Igbo (and to a lesser extent, of Western Bantu) slaves in the central piedmont, of Mande/Malinke slaves in the Northern Neck, and of Akan/Akan-influenced slaves in the Lower Peninsula laid the foundations for the development of distinct African sub-cultures in Virginia.”<sup>93</sup>

Thus, Virginia plantations allowed enslaved Africans to form communities and retain their African religions and cultures. Gomez has noted that “it is much more likely that African religions were still practiced by a majority” of the enslaved population in Virginia.<sup>94</sup> While African societies could not be recreated in these Virginia regions, enslaved Africans certainly passed down their religion and culture to their children and grandchildren.<sup>95</sup>

In addition, plantations in Virginia consisted of the enslaved from all the nations on the Atlantic coast of Africa. The enslaved population, which was made up of various African ethnic groups, was thrown together in close proximity and acknowledged that there were different religious cosmologies and revelations present. In response to this dilemma, the enslaved population developed their different cosmologies into a new cosmology that consisted of their varying traditions.<sup>96</sup> Sobel has documented that the enslaved population in North America merged their religious differences to form a joint cosmology that she entitles, “The Enslaved African/American Sacred Cosmos,” that was neither Christian nor like any particular African cosmology.<sup>97</sup> Gomez has noted that the majority of the enslaved population in Virginia not only continued to practice African religions, but many of this majority “developed modifications, innovations, and syncretisms in African religious traditions on America soil.”<sup>98</sup>

This new African religious cosmology was based upon the common element of revelation and divination that is grounded in all Atlantic African religions. Nevertheless, Christianity may still have influenced the content of their African revelations. The practitioners of this new African religious cosmology were in constant contact with Christian slaveholders, missionaries and priests. Moreover, they lived among African Christians.<sup>99</sup>

Nat Turner was not only a product of the merger of African Christianity and pre-Christian African religions, but he also was not considered to be a threat to the peculiar institution according to the slaveholders of his day. According to the Fifth Census of 1830, the population of Southampton County, Virginia consisted of 6573 whites (3191 men, 3382 women), 1745 free African Americans (824 men, 921 women), and 7756 enslaved (4193 men, 3563 women) for a total of 16, 074.<sup>100</sup> Scholars have documented that slaveholders were fearful that the enslaved community, who clearly outnumbered them, might decide to rise up and revolt.

More importantly, they noted that rebels were more often African born than not. This was due to the fact that the African born were the least integrated of the enslaved community, which forced them to seek revolt against all odds.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, Edmund Ruffin has documented that the African born in Virginia rarely converted to Christianity.<sup>102</sup> Thus, as historian Eugene Genovese has noted, as a method to prevent slave revolts, slaveholders came to see Christianity mainly as a means of social control.<sup>103</sup>

These factors are what make Turner's revolt surprising and important. Turner was not born in Africa and he was well integrated into the enslaved community, thus, he was not considered a threat to the society of the enslaved. Turner possessed freedom of movement and social interaction and was well known in the community. His slaveholder, Joseph Travis, trusted him and even told him that he was intelligent and unfit to be enslaved.<sup>104</sup> He also interacted with both white and black Christians and pre-Christian African religious circles, all of which conditioned his religious upbringing.

Turner's childhood slaveholder, Benjamin Turner, was a Methodist who had prayer meetings at his home and Nat Turner was encouraged to attend.<sup>105</sup> He also integrated in African Christian revival meetings. Historian Stephen B. Oates documents that Turner's mother was from "Royal African blood", meaning that she was born in Africa.<sup>106</sup> Historian Peter H. Wood notes that Turner's mother and grandmother (his father's mother) were "both born and raised in Africa" and argues that both played a "major role in shaping" his complex religious "understanding of the way the world worked."<sup>107</sup> Turner interweaved all these religious backgrounds into one understanding and became a preacher of the enslaved community. He was not called to preach by a congregation but he did preach.

Nat Turner's belief that he was put on Earth for a special purpose began with the conditioning of his deeply religious mother and grandmother. Sobel notes that Turner was, "marked from birth as a person of spiritual potential. This was in a very African tradition, a tradition his mother Nancy, who had been taken from Africa only some five years before his birth, was not very distant from."<sup>108</sup> In addition, Sobel declares that in some cases in Africa, "events rather than ancestry determined the holy role. Birthmarks or birth-associated events were seen as portents of the path an individual should take."<sup>109</sup>

When Turner was about 3 or 4 years old, his mother overheard him describe events that had occurred before his birth, and thus, declared that he was destined to be a prophet.<sup>110</sup> According to both religions, this is a logical and justifiable observation. One day his parents noticed "certain marks" on his head and chest and told him that the marks meant that his presence in this world is "intended for some great purpose."<sup>111</sup> They also concluded that the "spirit was shown to be working through him."<sup>112</sup> Turner states in his *Confessions*, that the manner in which he became literate was a supernatural phenomenon.

The manner in which I learned to read and write, not only had great influence on my own mind, as I acquired it with the most perfect of ease, so much so, that I have no recollection whatever of learning the alphabet—but to the astonishment to the family, one day, when a book was shewn me to keep me from crying, I began spelling the names of different objects—this was a source of wonder to all in the neighborhood, particularly the blacks. . . .<sup>113</sup>

All of these pre-Christian African religious acknowledgments along with his African Christian observations helped to shape Nat Turner's complex and dynamic religious background.

## **Why Historians Have Overlooked Nat Turner's African Religious Background**

How have historians failed to acknowledge Nat Turner's African religious background? Historian Kenneth Greenberg has noted, "the comments that he would become a prophet or that he was unfit for slavery, marks on his head and chest, his ability to read without being taught, and finally the revelation instructing him to seek the kingdom of Heaven—these signs all seemed to point in a single direction: God had commanded him to lead his people in a great battle against slavery".<sup>114</sup>

Greenberg is correct in this respect, but at the same time, he simplifies Nat Turner and his situation. Scholars must first scale through the obvious surface to see Nat Turner clearly.

Turner's apocalypticism has wrapped scholars up in a tight web, which understandably makes it easier for scholars to only see Turner in this light.

If Nat Turner was not so messianic, scholars would have the energy and more importantly, the desire to locate his Africanisms, much like Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey were accorded.

It is suggested that scholars view Nat Turner through the window of Messianic versus pre-Christian African religions. This will allow scholars to see beyond Turner's apocalypticism and deep messianic faith. Scholars will become aware that in addition to Turner's African Christianity synthesis, he has a pre-Christian African religious belief as well. As aforementioned, these two religious aspects were always modifying each other in the enslaved communities in Virginia, as well as in Nat Turner. Within Turner and Virginia's enslaved society, conversation between African Christianity and pre-Christian African religions is how Turner's identity was erected. The two aspects together gave him his identity.

Before Nat Turner made up his mind that he was going to lead a revolt, the two religions were in conflict within Turner and the community. Therefore, the revolt was a result of the unbearable crisis and tension between African Christianity and pre-Christian African religion that were present in Turner and the community, along with the dehumanization of being enslaved. Once he decided to go through with the revolt, his two religious aspects reinforced each other and became explosive.

Yes it is true that he chose African Christianity over traditional African religion. As aforementioned and demonstrated by Greenberg, African Christianity failed Turner under the structure of slavery. This forced him to also rely upon the acts of divination that were taught to him by his mother and grandmother. As demonstrated by Mbiti, those who converted to Christianity did not and could not abandon their pre-Christian African beliefs. More importantly, every time Turner tried to reject his traditional African religious beliefs, they would return with more intensity. Consequently, Turner viewed the slaveholder as the source of the problem.

Turner concluded that the synthesis of the two religious aspects could not be confirmed in the community or within himself if slaveholders were present. Liberal political theorists would analyze the revolt as a cut and dry attempt at liberation. If scholars look much closer, they would see that Turner had a deeper understanding of what freedom meant. To Turner freedom was about how to be himself without having to choose between the two religious aspects. Moreover, being free he could honor both religious aspects or not have to select one with the exclusion of the other.

In other words, Nat Turner and his community were in an impossible situation. They could only practice in the open the religion approved by slaveholders or be what slaveholders wanted them to be. Thus, Turner concluded that the slaveholder had to be slain to at least try to resolve the situation within himself and the community. What he did not realize was that after the slaveholder was eliminated, the structure of slavery would still have been in place.

Nevertheless, Turner's two religious aspects are both in conflict and will not work without each other. It is neither Turner's affective pre-Christian African religious worldview nor his African Christian worldview that influenced him to revolt. Rather, it is the two religious aspects working both together and against each other simultaneously that make Turner truly revolutionary. When examining Nat Turner and the revolt, it is imperative that scholars look beyond the obvious monolithic white versus black conflict that result in oppression. Nat Turner's revolt was comprised of differentiations, pre-Christian African religions and African Christianity. If scholars reevaluate Turner's visions and the *Confessions* under this microscope, they will undoubtedly notice that Nat Turner's visible African Christian aspects (revelations) pushed him and his pre-Christian African religious aspects (divinations) pulled him to his solution, which was to revolt.

## Provisional Approximations of Divination in Conjunction with Revelations in Turner's Visions and the *Confessions*

Nat Turner had an uncommon ability to communicate his convictions with both African Christians and traditional African religious practitioners. This was made possible by his understanding of African spirit power that was recognized by both African Christians and traditional African religious practitioners.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, those of the enslaved population with whom he shared his visions recognized him as a prophet and “one who knew how to use spirit-power.”<sup>116</sup>

Understanding Turner's actions is very complex due to the fact that he relied upon both divinations in a pre-Christian African religious manner and his African Christian background to interpret his revelations. For instance, Turner states that in his first revelation, which occurred sometime during the early 1820s, a “spirit” appeared to him and stated, “Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you.”<sup>117</sup>

The revelation of being visited by a spirit and the belief of having contact with spirits is common in almost all African religions. Take Voodoo for instance. I use Voodoo as an example because Turner rejected Voodoo, but he embraced spirit and the belief of having contact with spirits in an overtly Voodoo or pre-Christian African religious manner.<sup>118</sup>

As another example, Nat Turner states in the *Confessions*, [F]or the avowed purpose of serving the Spirit more fully—and it appeared to me, and reminded me of the things it had already shown me, and that it would then reveal to me the knowledge of the elements, the revolution of the planets, the operation of tides, and changes of the seasons.<sup>119</sup>

He adds that after this revelation he received the “true knowledge of faith” and he was “made perfect.”<sup>120</sup> The wisdom that Turner refers to is a mirror image of that of the Dogon, which Sobel notes, “for whom spirit provided a full knowledge of all natural phenomena.”<sup>121</sup> Marcel Griaule has documented that, “in African societies which have preserved their traditional organizations the number of persons who are trained in this knowledge is quite considerable.”<sup>122</sup> Later, Nat Turner discovered “drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven”; and he “found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters, and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood. . .”<sup>123</sup> The former part of this statement is a revelation (African Christianity). The latter part is an example of divination (pre-Christian African religion). Turner explained the blood on the corn as “the blood of Christ. . . returning to earth again in the form of dew” (revelation) and the hieroglyphic characters as “the impressions of the figures that [he] had seen in the Heavens” (divination).<sup>124</sup> He showed his discoveries to white people, the enslaved, African Christians and pre-Christian African religious practitioners. He declared both to be miracles that confirmed his Heavenly visions.<sup>125</sup>

Nat Turner continued by stating that he healed and brought about the conversion of a white man named Ethelred T. Brantley, who was bleeding from his skin. To demonstrate his spirit power as a prophet, Turner proclaimed that he cured Mr. Brantley's by fasting and praying for nine days. Sobel points out that this is the same number of days, "used by Voudouists prior to initiation."<sup>126</sup> Moreover, according to Mibit's explanation of how to use divination, Turner relied on the use of spirit as used in divination "to help in the diagnosis of diseases and problems and their cure or solution."<sup>127</sup>

Finally, on May 12, 1828, a Spirit visited Turner once again and "said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that [he] should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first."<sup>128</sup> He interpreted this revelation as his time to fulfill his duty to God and liberate his people from slavery. More importantly, he interpreted it as his time to eliminate the problem that caused the conflict between the two religious aspects within himself and the community.

Nat Turner waited for a sign, which came in the form of a solar eclipse on February 12, 1831. Still hesitant he did not strike. During the month of August in Southampton County, Virginia, both blacks and whites conducted religious revivals that ran as long as a week or more.<sup>129</sup>

Gomez documents that these revivals were important because it allowed enslaved Africans to "participate as themselves" and it "afforded the African acceptance as an African."<sup>130</sup> White Southamptonites have noted that, as a result of these revivals, the enslaved community had more time for themselves than normal during the "August slack season," which is when Nat Turner launched his revolt.<sup>131</sup>

On August 13, 1831, a green-tinted sun appeared, which Turner interpreted in a divinational manner by reading nature, as another signal from God, and he decided that he could no longer put off God's command. Thus, on August 22, 1831 he organized a dinner at Cabin Pond with the men he trusted the most in the fashion of the Christian tradition of the Last Supper. Then about 2:00 a.m. the revolt began.

After the revolt was suppressed, Turner eluded capture for more than two months. He was eventually caught and put on trial. He was questioned about his visions and seeing spirits and Turner replied that the, "Spirit that spoke to the prophets in the old days" had visited him.<sup>132</sup> Thus, he plainly identified himself as a prophet who was capable of communicating with the other world.

When asked about his convictions and if he thought he deserved to die, Turner answered, “Was not Christ crucified?”<sup>133</sup> Hence, Turner clearly stating that he was Christ-like and intended to fulfill his duty to God, even if it meant his death. He was eventually hanged and his body chopped up into 18 pieces and put on display throughout the state. The irony of his execution lay in the fact that like Jesus before him, he was put to death in a city called Jerusalem.

## Conclusion

The enslaved in America not only brought their religion with them to the “New World,” they also brought their own preconceptions of justice and fought by all means, even revolt, to express their own view of social and religious relations.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, religion provided the enslaved with the ideological rallying point for revolt.<sup>135</sup> As a result, one may ask why revolts in America were infrequent. There are two significant explanations.

In the South, conditions in time and place were not favorable to revolts by the enslaved.<sup>136</sup> More importantly, the more enslaved who confided in a revolt increased the risk of betrayal.<sup>137</sup> Turner’s revolt took place at the appropriate time and he only confided in a small number of men whom he trusted. In fact, Nat Turner probably could have raised the masses of enslaved and oppressed free black people had he sustained his revolt for even a few weeks.<sup>138</sup>

I have argued that before one can attempt to analyze Nat Turner, one must acknowledge that his religious background consisted of the merger of African Christianity and pre-Christian African religions. As historian Peter H. Wood has noted, Nat Turner, like many first generation African Americans before and after him, was the “joint product of Christian and non-Christian cultures. . . it was the interweaving of the two over time into a single significant braid that gave Nat Turner his unusual perspective and intense vision.”<sup>139</sup> I have attempted to untie this braid in order to examine Turner’s religious background, conditioning, and upbringing. Nat Turner’s revolt was an attempt to reconcile the tension between these religious aspects within himself and the community.

In addition, I have utilized various sources and other documents to demonstrate, in general, pre-Christian African religious integration into antebellum Southampton County, Virginia. Moreover, I have addressed the existence of traditional African religions in Southampton County, Virginia during this time and I have attempted to analyze the African population of Southampton County and its religious environment. Hopefully, my research and examination of Nat Turner will eliminate his often referred to title of “religious fanatic” and replace it with that of “prophet.”

During the third annual meeting of the Colored Shiloh Regular Baptist Association of Virginia on August 7, 1876, delegates representing Cold Spring Church in Southampton County received a round of applause and “general felicitation.” The association, which consisted of approximately one hundred delegates from forty-five churches, acknowledged the Cold Spring Church delegates because the ‘church was located where Nat Turner first struck for freedom.’<sup>140</sup> With further research, I hope to find other examples of African American religious communities that recognize and acknowledge the prophet Nat Turner.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sterling A. Brown, “Remembering Nat Turner,” in *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. Michael S. Harper (Chicago: TriQuarterly Books, 1980), 210.

<sup>2</sup> Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (October 2001), v58 no.4, 915.

<sup>3</sup> Joe Wiener, “Denmark Vesey: A New Verdict—A Historian Questions Whether He Led A Slave Revolt, But His Heroism Stands,” *The Nation* (March 11, 2001) v274 no.9, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Black Rebellion: A Selection from Travellers and Outlaws* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 164-214.

<sup>6</sup> John W. Cromwell, “The Aftermath of Nat Turner’s Insurrection,” *The Journal of Negro History* (1920) vol. 5, in *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material*, ed. Henry Irving Tragle (Amhearst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 208-34.

<sup>7</sup> Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*, 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Peter H. Wood, “Nat Turner: The Unknown Slave As Visionary Leader,” in *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Leon Litwack and August Meier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 40.

---

<sup>9</sup> John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 254.

<sup>10</sup> Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979), 166.

<sup>12</sup> Greenberg, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Irving Tragle, ed., *Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), xv.

<sup>15</sup> Compiled by Workers of the Writer's Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia, *The Negro in Virginia* (New York: Hasting House Publishers, 1940), 179.

<sup>16</sup> Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material*, xv.

<sup>17</sup> Compiled by Workers of the Writer's Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia, 179.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>19</sup> Tragle, xv.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>22</sup> Compiled by Workers of the Writer's Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia, 179.

---

<sup>23</sup> Tragle, xvi-xvii.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>25</sup> Compiled by Workers of the Writer's Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia, 180.

<sup>26</sup> Tragle, xvii.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>28</sup> Harriet Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: First Mentor Printing, 1987), 392.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Black Rebellion: A Selection from Travellers and Outlaws*, 201-202.

<sup>30</sup> *The Liberator*, 28 January 1832, in "Nat Turner Rebellion: The Impact of a Slave Revolt on Southern Thought and Legislation, 1831-1832," William Farrar (Thesis, Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, 1964), 63.

<sup>31</sup> Charity Browery, "Untitled", interview by Lydia Maria Child (1847-1848), in *Black Rebellion: A Selection from Travellers and Outlaws*, Thomas Wentworth Higginson (New York, Arno Press, 1969), 190. Lydia Maria Child was a white novelist, abolitionist, and pamphleteer. She was the founder of the magazine, *Juvenile Miscellany* and co-editor of the *Anti-Slavery Standard*.

<sup>32</sup> Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl", 393.

<sup>33</sup> Greenberg, 22. Greenberg states that the American Colonization Society transported approximately 300 or one-fifth of the free black population in Southampton County Virginia to Liberia.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

---

<sup>35</sup>James Curry, "Narrative of James Curry," in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1977), 130.

<sup>36</sup>Charity Browery, "Untitled", interview by Lydia Maria Child (1847-1848), in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1977), 267.

<sup>37</sup> Jacobs, 396.

<sup>38</sup>Farrar, "Nat Turner Rebellion: The Impact of a Slave Revolt on Southern Thought and Legislation, 1831-1832", 55.

<sup>39</sup>Leon Litwack and August Meier, eds., *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 33.

<sup>40</sup>Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1975), 100.

<sup>41</sup> Higginson, 185.

<sup>42</sup>Harriet Jacobs, "The Memories of Harriet Jacobs," in *Nat Turner: Cry Freedom in America*, James T. Baker (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 49.

<sup>43</sup> Higginson, 186.

<sup>44</sup>Greenberg, 65.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>46</sup>Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*, 100.

<sup>47</sup>Greenberg, 21.

---

<sup>48</sup>John Floyd, "Governor Floyd's Diary & Correspondence: Letters Pertaining to the Revolt between 24 August 1831 and 19 November 1831," in *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material*, ed. Henry Irving Tragle (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 275-276.

<sup>49</sup>John Floyd, *Governor John Floyd's Diary*, in "Nat Turner Rebellion: The Impact of a Slave Revolt on Southern Thought and Legislation, 1831-1832," William Farrar (Thesis: Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, 1964), 88.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>51</sup>John W. Cromwell, "The Aftermath of Nat Turner's Insurrection", 386.

<sup>52</sup>Farrar, 102.

<sup>53</sup>Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 314.

<sup>54</sup>Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, n. 74, 315.

<sup>55</sup>Farrar, 110.

<sup>56</sup>Tragle., xvii-xviii.

<sup>57</sup>Greenberg, 71.

<sup>58</sup>Higginson, 166.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>60</sup>Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 48-49.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

---

<sup>64</sup> Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*, 166.

<sup>65</sup> David Robertson, *Denmark Vesey: The Buried History of America's Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 53. Sobel, 167.

<sup>66</sup> Genovese, 47.

<sup>67</sup> Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, 8.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>79</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann International Literature and Textbooks, 1991), 17.

---

<sup>80</sup> Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 18.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>89</sup> Genovese, 6-7.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of California Press, 1998), 252.

<sup>91</sup> Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 253.

<sup>92</sup> M. Thomas J. Deschi-Obi, "Engolo: Combat Traditions In African and African Diaspora History" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2000), 135.

<sup>93</sup> Douglas Chambers, "He Gwine Sing He Country: Africans, Afro-Virginias, and the Development of Slave Culture in Virginia, 1690-1810" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1996), 285-287.

<sup>94</sup> Gomez, 256.

---

<sup>95</sup> Deschi-Obi, “Engolo: Combat Traditions In African and African Diaspora History”, 137.

<sup>96</sup> Thornton, 263.

<sup>97</sup> Sobel, 58-75.

<sup>98</sup> Gomez, 254.

<sup>99</sup> Thornton, 266.

<sup>100</sup> National Archives and Records Service, Records of The Bureau of The Census, Virginia, 5<sup>th</sup> Census, 1830 in Henry Irving Tragle, ed., *Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 15.

<sup>101</sup> Thornton, 280.

<sup>102</sup> Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 183.

<sup>103</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 186.

<sup>104</sup> Greenberg, 1.

<sup>105</sup> Sobel, 162.

<sup>106</sup> Oates, 159, n.4.

<sup>107</sup> Wood, 40.

<sup>108</sup> Sobel, 162.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>110</sup> Greenberg, 1.

---

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>112</sup> Sobel, 162.

<sup>113</sup> Tragle, 307.

<sup>114</sup> Greenberg., 2.

<sup>115</sup> Sobel, 161.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>117</sup> “Matthew 6:33” in *Holy Bible*. “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all things shall be added unto you.”

<sup>118</sup> Sobel, 223.

<sup>119</sup> Greenberg, 47.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>121</sup> Sobel, 163.

<sup>122</sup> Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemeli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), xiv.

<sup>123</sup> Greenberg, 3.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>125</sup> Sobel, 164.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>127</sup> Mbiti, 127.

<sup>128</sup> Greenberg., 47-48.

---

<sup>129</sup> Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834-1869* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 87.

<sup>130</sup> Gomez, 253.

<sup>131</sup> Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834-1869*, 87.

<sup>132</sup> Greenberg, 46.

<sup>133</sup> Sobel, 166.

<sup>134</sup> Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, xvi.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>139</sup> Wood, 40.

<sup>140</sup> Crofts, 243.