

Revisiting Frederick Douglass and the Nineteenth Century Religious Imagination

Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds and John R. McKivigan
Indiana University Indianapolis

In 2012, the Frederick Douglass Papers began a series of interdisciplinary symposia on the life and times of the iconic African American statesman Frederick Douglass at its home campus at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. On its sixth biannual symposium, the theme "Race, Religion, and Politics in the Age of Frederick Douglass" and a date in October 2020 was selected. Like the rest of the world, plans that year were disrupted by the unprecedented effects of the Covid-19 Corona Virus pandemic. The symposium was rescheduled to be held in October 2021 but suffered the same fate. Finally, the Douglass Papers shifted the event's format to an online symposium and its papers were delivered on 16–17 February 2022. The following collection now being published in the 2023 issue of the *New North Star* are revised versions of four scholarly papers from that symposium, all examining aspects of Douglass's religious views. While Douglass's life and writings were marked by his relationship to American Christianity and a variety of Christian institutions, this collection will look at the depth and breadth of Douglass's religious influences and how these sources were critical to his political and social vision.

The first paper "'That Strange, Mysterious, Indescribable': The Powers of Soul in Frederick Douglass's Political Philosophy," is adapted from the 2022 symposium's keynote address by Nick Bromell, professor emeritus in the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Bromell works at the intersection of literary and cultural studies and philosophy. In his most recent book, *The Powers of Dignity: The Black Political Philosophy of Frederick Douglass* (Duke University Press, 2021), Bromell begins to unpack what Douglass might have meant when he claimed that "from this little bit of experience, slave experience, I have elaborated quite a lengthy chapter of political philosophy applicable to the American people."

Like all the authors in this symposium, Bromell emphasizes the critical and formative role personal experiences as a slave played in Douglass's religious as well as political development. Bromell also demonstrates how Douglass's autobiographical texts function as political philosophy, which is radical for Black writings to be elevated as a universal text to understand the shape and contours of human experience. As he contemplated social and political issues over the course of his life, Douglass's religious views, like those of other African American statesmen of the twentieth century, did not remain static. Bromell notes that in his post-Civil War addresses, Douglass did not thank God directly but instead the "faithful men and women, who have devoted the great energies of their *souls* to the welfare of mankind. It is only through such men and women that I can get any glimpse of God anywhere." For Bromell, such statements are evidence of an important "shift from theological and transcendent to more secular and immanent language [that] reflects the trajectory of Douglass's own development as a thinker." (36) He sees these early contemplative spiritual experiences as pivotal to creating Douglass's understanding of how much the established racist social order violated fundamental understandings of humanity or "soul" that would guide his future activism.

The remaining three essays in this collection were originally presented in a session entitled "Frederick Douglass and American Religion." Danjuma Gibson, Professor of Pastoral

Theology, Care, and Counseling at Calvin Theological Seminary and a licensed psychotherapist, delivered “Frederick Douglass: Fostering Psycho-Spiritual Resources for Resilience, Resistance, and Healing in the Age of Terror.” Gibson previously explored Douglass’s life in his 2018 book *Frederick Douglass, a Psychobiography: Rethinking Subjectivity in the Western Experiment of Democracy* (Palgrave Macmillan).

Gibson’s essay explores the unique nature of “psycho-social” Blackness. He argues that slavery had substantive impacts on the African American psyche that psychological theories based on the European experience cannot explain. Gibson connects his observations of Douglass’s inner struggles to contemporary problems facing African Americans today. He maintains that it is psychologically unhealthy for African Americans to be in a permanent state of rebellion against racism. One important technique Gibson finds that Douglass adopted to cope with this problem was “the act of articulating one’s life-story, and then reconstructing that story as often as needed [as] a potent counter-hegemonic strategy.” (47) Like Bromell, Gibson contends that Douglass believed that the capacity to imagine and to be creative was a sacred act, which makes us human and was most endangered by slavery.

A second scholar at the Douglass symposium to combine training in psychotherapy and religious studies was Heather L. Kaufman, a licensed therapist as well as a research associate with the IUI Institute of American Thought. Kaufman’s paper, “Numinous Encounters in Frederick Douglass’s Autobiographies,” also draws on her long affiliation with the Frederick Douglass Papers that has produced several coauthored books, the most recent of which was *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass: A Critical Edition* (Yale University Press, 2018).

Kaufman’s essay displays strong evidence that Douglass attributed key developments in his early life to divine intervention or providence. Kaufman analyzes some of the same experiences described in Douglass’s autobiographies that Gibson examines but through the lens that Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung labeled as a “numinous experience.” She shows Douglass repeatedly interpreting key incidents in his youth as the inspiration for deep spiritual or religious emotion (or practice).

The principal argument of Kaufman’s essay is that Douglass’s life exemplifies Jung’s central principle of individuation. Kaufman argues that “Incidents in Douglass’s life as a slave in which he experienced moments of profound, mystical insight are evidence of the divine at work in his life and these encounters have a numinous quality.” (56) Kaufman acknowledges that while Jung was tone-deaf regarding American racism, his theories can be helpful in explaining the psychodynamics of Douglass’s religious exploration. Her essay also draws repeated attention to early “moments of profound, mystical insight” that convinced Douglass that he was “destined by a higher power for freedom.” (56) In re-counting his life, Douglass emphasized key almost-mystical moments when he experienced the inner knowing, or “individuation,” that were central to his becoming a free man, intellectually as well as physically. She concludes that these numinous encounters “had profound psychological influences that propelled Douglass forward on his journey to becoming a free man.” (56)

The final article, “‘I Bow to No Priest Either of Faith or Unfaith’: Frederick Douglass’s Afro-Agnosticism,” is by Maurice Wallace, an associate professor of English at Rutgers University, who specializes in African American literature and literary theory. Wallace also is a scholar of visual culture and featured Frederick Douglass prominently in his 2012 book *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Duke University Press).

Wallace’s essay views Douglass's religious life from a new and quite different perspective. As the other authors do, Wallace uses Douglass’s autobiographies as key sources for his religious and theological orientation but does not always reach similar conclusions. For example, when examining the young Douglass’s conflict with “slave-breaker” Edward Covey, Wallace focuses upon one evening the young, enslaved man spent in the Maryland woods which he describes as Douglass’s “Gethsemane experience,” brooding over how a divine power could permit the injustices that the enslaved endured. The incident, set in the “deep woods,” draws intriguing parallels to maroon culture and allows Wallace to speak to the heterodox nature of Black spirituality compared to more orthodox white Christianity.

Wallace conjectures: “If Douglass did not testify to his irreligion as a young man, it is perhaps because he would have no language or leadership to express or understand it in a systematic way for many more years. Eventually, he’d entertain both.” (67) Wallace’s essay reveals how exposure to new intellectual trends like the philosophical writings of Ludwig Feuerbach and friendship with American atheist Robert Ingersoll caused Douglass to question traditional leanings in religious belief. In many ways, the older Douglass presents himself as a heterodox Christian, especially if normative Christianity was the robust nationalist, racist, and imperialist Christianity of contemporary white Americans.

Wallace finds that despite possibly harboring heterodox religious views, Douglass maintained highly visible public connections to traditional African American religious institutions. The traditional African American institutions of Douglass’s time were mostly likely Black Protestant churches or what has colloquially been referred to as the Black Church. His connection to the Black Church was not only a result of his childhood upbringing and proximity to Black Protestant spaces, but it more likely represented the outsized role that the mainstream Black Church played in the public and political sphere of the nineteenth century. Wallace notes that “Douglass kept faith and religious assembly far apart and thus saw no contradiction between his paratheistic musings and his ongoing engagements in and with Black American ecclesiality.” (74) As Gibson emphasizes the therapeutic values Douglass found in such connections, Wallace finds Douglass drawing cultural reassurance due to participation in such Black religious gatherings.

Wallace’s novel interpretation is supported by a wide base of evidence from Douglass's speeches, writings, and correspondence. His extensive documentation places Wallace’s new interpretation against existing scholarship and assists readers in rethinking the connection between Douglas and Afro-agnosticism in their own mind. This essay's conclusions both complement and contrast with those of the other essays in the symposium and should stimulate further study into Douglass’s intellectual life which the author desires.

The question of what it means to be human and how that might connect to religious experience resonates through all these essays. They all describe a highly introspective Douglass, at various stages of his life, pondering his personal experiences in the light of the evolving religious climate of the nineteenth century but also as a member of a race at first resisting and then triumphantly emerging from slavery. As these scholars all demonstrate, Douglass’s sense of personal identity and his later activism was heavily informed by the religious belief of his times. While shaped by his times, the sources that Douglass engaged were far more expansive than originally considered. His eclectic and often contradictory sources not only informed Douglass’s personal musings, but they were also a part of a larger public discourse throughout the nineteenth century on Afro political and religious models of belonging. Therefore, it is not surprising that the assembled scholars have introduced novel ways of interpretating Douglass’s canon and

challenged us to reimagine Douglass's critical contributions to American political philosophy and the western religious imagination.