

## Christian Theology and White Ideology

NO TWO PERSONS better understood the complex interactive social-cultural and political nuances of the white attack on the black body than Ida B. Wells and W. E. B. Du Bois. Not only was Wells a pioneering leader protesting lynching, but she also daringly refuted the myth that it was black male desire for white women that precipitated these hideous crimes. she strongly insinuated that it was actually the reverse. In an 1892 editorial for her paper, *Free Speech*, she wrote: “Nobody...believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.”<sup>1</sup> Further exposing the hypocrisy of lynching, Wells brazenly noted:

I found that in order to justify these horrible atrocities to the world, the Negro was being branded as a race of rapists, who were especially mad after white women. I found that white men who had created a race of mulattoes by raping and consorting with Negro women were still doing so wherever they could, these same white men lynched, burned, and tortured Negro men for doing the same thing with white women; even when white women were willing victims.<sup>2</sup>

Du Bois too understood the “white” lie behind lynching. Affirming the findings of the Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching (1933) that black male rape of white women was only a subterfuge for the violent rampages against black men, Du Bois wrote, “white men have disguised themselves to impersonate Negroes and fasten crime upon them.”<sup>3</sup> As astute as Wells and Du Bois were about the duplicity involved in white violence against black bodies, they were equally perceptive concerning the relationship between Christianity and such violence. During her 1849 antilynching crusade in Bristol, London, Ida B. Wells was asked about the role of American churches in the fight against lynching. She responded, “American Christians are too busy saving the souls of white Christians from burning in hell-fire to save the lives of black ones from present burning in fires kindled by white Christians.”<sup>4</sup> Some seventy years later, W. E. B. Du Bois also expressed dismay concerning the white Christian response to white racist tyranny. Du Bois wrote, “We have curled our lips in something like contempt as we have witnessed glib apology and weary explanation. Nothing of the sort deceived us. A nation's religion is its life, and as such white Christianity is a miserable failure.”<sup>5</sup>

In their decries concerning the Christian response to black oppression, both Wells and Du Bois insightfully recognized the peculiar alliance between whiteness and Christianity. Their remarks point to the seemingly easy relationship between white culture and the Christian tradition. Du Bois aptly identified this alliance as “white Christianity.” What they both were in fact witnessing was the natural coherence between a platonized Christian tradition and white culture. It is this correspondence between platonized Christianity and white culture that has proven particularly devastating for the black body. [Chapter 4](#) will thus explore the comfortable yet disturbing connection between platonized Christianity and white culture. In this chapter, white culture is understood as that

culture—with its language, values, beliefs, and artifacts—that serves to secure white supremacy. It is a culture built on a specious belief in white people's superiority and the inferiority of those who are not white. In this respect, it is the lifeblood of white racist thought and practice.<sup>6</sup> This chapter will examine the link between white culture and platonized Christianity. An underlying assumption of this chapter is that eighteenth-century Enlightenment discourse provided the essential metanarrative that stimulated white culture and platonized Christianity's bond with each other.

The chapter will proceed by initially focusing on the emergence of “religious racism” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a Christian response to the Enlightenment challenge. It will specifically be argued that the compatibility with the theology of platonized Christianity, the Enlightenment narrative, and the ideological underpinnings of white culture made the advent of religious racism almost certain. This chapter will continue by looking at the role of platonized Christianity in shaping the collective theological consciousness of “everyday” white Christians. The section develops, as has been previously noted, that platonized Christianity found its most comfortable American home in the very influential evangelical Protestant tradition. The Great Awakenings will provide the prism through which evangelical Protestant theology will be examined. Again, the Enlightenment metanarrative will serve as the backdrop for understanding the development of this theology in relation to white culture. While this chapter by no means argues that evangelical Protestantism exclusively suborns white tyranny against black bodies, or that it necessarily leads to racist practices (for indeed many white evangelical Protestants have been in the forefront of racial and social activism), this chapter does recognize two important things. First, there are aspects of evangelical protestant thought, as it is platonized, that make it susceptible to collusion with white racism. Second, the vibrancy of this evangelical manifestation of platonized Christianity has uniquely impacted black lives.<sup>7</sup> In the end, [chapter 4](#) maintains that whiteness and platonized Christianity create an unholy alliance, even as whiteness and Christianity are incompatible, thus making clearer the dangers of platonized religious traditions for marginalized people in general and black people in particular. We will also by chapter's end move even closer to determining the allure of Christianity for black people as well as for me. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to note what will not be discussed in this chapter—namely, the role of Christianity in legitimating slavery.

The use of Christianity by the white slaveholding class to support the slavocracy is perhaps the most blatant example of Christianity's collusion with white culture. To be sure, the use of Christianity to support slavery exposes the dangers inherent in the classical christological tradition as this tradition ignores the ministry of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the various theological arguments used to justify the enslavement of African peoples (for instance, that enslavement was necessary to introduce the African “heathens” to the one true God of Jesus Christ) reveal the potential problems inherent in a closed monotheistic religion like Christianity as earlier suggested. Reinforcing this point, historian Forrest G. Wood astutely observed that Christianity's support of slavery was inevitable, given the implications of its monotheistic core. Woods says, “It is inherent in every monotheistic faith that there are only truth and error, good and evil.... Since the dark-skinned heathen obviously did not belong on the side of truth and good, the Christian assigned him...to error and evil.”<sup>9</sup> Given Christianity's profound involvement in justifying slavery, Du Bois was right in his assessment that “American Christianity was the bulwark of American slavery.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Christianity's role in maintaining slavery has long since been established and thus does not need to be reiterated in this book.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, as devastating for the black body as Christianity's sanction of slavery was, Christianity made an even more insidious bond with white culture. Platonized Christianity's concurrence with white supremacist ideology fostered a religious racism that continues to influence black lives when it comes to the black body, the bodies of others, and black faith. Let us thus continue [chapter 4](#) by examining the problem of “religious racism.”

## Platonized Christianity and Religious Racism

## *White Cultural Ideology and Enlightenment Discourse*

In order to fully comprehend how platonized Christianity gave way to religious racism, one must first have a basic appreciation of two things: the ideology of white culture and the prevailing narrative of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Thomas Jefferson helps us to understand both. Historian Winthrop Jordan insightfully comments, “Thomas Jefferson was not a typical nor an ordinary man, but his enormous breadth of interest and his lack of originality make him an effective sounding board for his culture.”<sup>12</sup> It is in this regard that Jefferson's remarks on black people are most instructive.

Because he believed that the enslavement of human beings violated the natural rights granted to them by their Creator, Jefferson was ambivalent, if not guilt-ridden, about his own personal involvement in the slave system. Though he “trembled” about how God looked upon a nation of slaveholders, he was not fearful enough to free his slaves.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, his disdain for slavery did not ameliorate his attitude toward black people. Jefferson steadfastly maintained that black people were irrevocably inferior to whites in all aspects, “body and mind.” He made his position clear in his “Notes on the State of Virginia.” In this 1781 essay, written in reply to inquiries made to him by the secretary of the French Legation in Philadelphia, Jefferson seems to take special care to comment on the intellectual and sexual capacity of black women and men. He says, for instance, that the appearance and passionate nature of the black female makes her so highly sexual that male apes prefer her to female apes. He declares, “as uniformly as is the preference of the Oran-utan for the black woman over those of his own species.” Jefferson goes on to ascribe to the black male lascivious ways similar to those he attributed to the black female: “They are more ardent after their female,” he says, “but love seems with them to be more an eager desire than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation.”<sup>14</sup> Jefferson continues by making clear that not only are black people driven by sexual passion but they also have no capacity for reason. He says:

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior.... They astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration... Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*] but it could not produce a poet.<sup>15</sup>

Influenced by the Enlightenment demands for scientific proof (to which we will return later), Jefferson offers that any conclusions concerning black people's inferiority “in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence.” Nevertheless, he continues, “I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind.” Jefferson essentially summarizes his assessment of black people when he says, “In general, their existence appears to participate more of *sensation* than *reflection*.”<sup>16</sup>

Even though Jefferson's views toward black people would come under attack from various quarters, Jordan notes, “Until well into the nineteenth century Jefferson's judgment on that matter, with all of its confused tentativeness, stood as the strongest suggestion of [black] inferiority expressed by any native American.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, Jefferson's comments also reflect several factors that figure in platonized Christianity's complicity in the emergence of religious racism. Let us now look to see how this is the case.

Jefferson's comments reflect the fundamental ideology of white culture. This is an ideology formulated to maintain the notion of white supremacy. To review what was earlier noted, the defining principle of this white supremacist ideology is the hyper/bestial sexuality of black women and men. They are considered, as Jefferson advises, an “ardent people.” White culture, in fact, depicts black men as rapacious predators—“mandingo bucks,” and black women as promiscuous

seductresses, “Jezebels.” This oversexed caricature of black people has allowed for the black body to be controlled and exploited in ways that have benefited white racist society. For instance, it permitted white slaveholders to rape black women with impunity, thereby increasing the slaveholder’s capital. Philosopher Naomi Zack explains:

black female slaves became objects of sexual desire to white slave owners because money could be made if they bred them, and more could be made if they themselves bred them. For a white slave owner to breed his black female slaves himself, he would have to have sex with them—ergo, the black female slaves were sexualized because they were literal objects of sexual desire, albeit primarily for monetary reasons.<sup>18</sup>

Essentially, white cultural hyper/bestial sexualization of black men and women allowed for white society to both control and profit from the black body, even if that meant rape, castration, and lynching. The hyper/bestial sexualization of black people and the reasons for it have been well documented so time will not be spent reiterating it here.<sup>19</sup> What will be examined, however, particularly in our effort to better understand the interplay between platonized Christianity and white cultural ideology, is another aspect of Jefferson’s comments. For not only did he suggest that black people were overly sexual—that is, “ardent”—but he also stressed that they lacked reason. His emphasis on their lack of reason was telling of the Enlightenment world of which Jefferson was a part. The Enlightenment “spirit” in fact provided the metanarrative that propelled platonized Christianity’s collusion with white culture in the development of religious racism, and so let us briefly examine it.

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment period, which began in Europe and spread to the American colonies, signaled a new age in the quest for truth and knowledge: the Age of Reason. This was an age where “reason” reigned. In 1784 Immanuel Kant pronounced the motto for the Enlightenment as, “*Sapere aude!* [Dare to know] Have courage to use your own reason!”<sup>20</sup> Unfettered reason was considered the key to human progress. One needed only to “Dare to know.” The only limitation on reason, and hence on human progress, was thought to be self-imposed. A truly enlightened person was one who freed him- or herself from the fetters of beliefs or systems of beliefs that were not themselves reasonable. It was in this way that religion came under attack, as we will see later. Important to understand for now is that reason was the standard of authority. As John Locke said, “*Reason* must be our last Judge and Guide in every Thing.”<sup>21</sup> Reason was the adjudicating principle in determining the merit of an argument, the validity of an area of study (e.g., psychology or religion), and the worth of an individual. If an argument was not “rational,” it was discounted as advancing any knowledge. If a field of study put forth claims that were not compatible with those reached by reason alone, then it too was discredited for being “unreasonable.” And if human beings were shown lacking in reason, and indeed incapable of growing in reason, then they were at best regarded as inferior beings, perhaps right above the beast, and at worst regarded as subhuman, in fact beast.<sup>22</sup>

For Jefferson, black people’s lack of rational “capacity” did not impeach their humanity, but it did strongly attest to their irretrievable inferiority. To reiterate, Jefferson cautioned that blacks were capable of “sensation” but not “reflection.” This distinction no doubt reflects John Locke’s influence on Jefferson’s thought. It is said, in fact, that Jefferson “worshiped” the thought of the Enlightenment thinker Locke.<sup>23</sup>

Locke argued against the notion of “innate ideas.” He maintained that all knowledge starts in experience. Experience, he said, produces knowledge by way of two “fountains”—sensation and reflection. Without oversimplifying the complexity of Locke’s analysis concerning knowledge and ideas, it is safe to say that according to his analysis, sensation represents a lower level of knowledge acquisition than does reflection. Sensation is knowledge derived strictly from senses. It is knowledge gained directly from “External, Material things.” Sensations have to do with the sensible world and how “particular sensible Objects, do convey into the Mind.”<sup>24</sup> Reflection represents a higher order of knowing. Reflection is knowledge acquired as a result of “inward operations,” of the mind, as Locke

put it, “Operations of our own Minds within.” Children, Locke said, are not capable of reflection. He said that reflection does not come “till [persons] come to be of riper Years; and some scarce ever at all.”<sup>25</sup>

For Jefferson, the ability for reflection never comes to black people. He said that they are incapable of such “inward”/rational operations of the mind. Again, this rational incapacity did not, for Jefferson, render black men and women inhuman, but it did render them inferior beings, particularly in relation to white people. The underlying assumption is that white people are the quintessence of rationality. In accordance with white culture, whiteness is essentially synonymous with rationality, while blackness is synonymous with irrationality and hyper/bestial sexuality. It was largely on these grounds that Jefferson confidently proclaimed that blacks, even with a change in circumstance, would never be equal to whites.

Without a doubt, Jefferson's arguments concerning black intellectual inferiority are convoluted, in that they sometimes seem to contradict his own views concerning the equality of all human beings in creation. Furthermore, Jefferson's views were widely criticized by opponents of slavery who believed that any sign of black intellectual inferiority was due to the condition of slavery, not to any innate lack. Needless to say, Jefferson's thoughts concerning black people along with the debate these thoughts incited require their own careful study beyond the scope of this book.<sup>26</sup> That notwithstanding, his comments about black people remain important to this study because they indicate the Enlightenment “standard” by which black people were judged, and the very avenue by which platonized Christianity found common cause with white culture.

To reiterate, Jefferson's pronouncement concerning black people's lack of rational ability reflected a chief assumption of white culture: whether for innate or environmental reasons, black people were a people governed not by reason but by emotion or passion (in the words of Jefferson, “sensation”). Black people were thus designated a people controlled by their bodies, not by their minds. In an Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment world, such a designation supported black people's continued dominated state. If, as John Locke said, “it is the *Understanding* that sets Man above the rest of sensible Beings, and gives him all the Advantage and Dominion which he has over them,” then white people, “rational beings,” must have dominion over black people, “sensible beings.”<sup>27</sup> Such a view is also consistent with the Platonic idea that certainly informed the Enlightenment spirit concerning the supremacy of reason. For Platonic thought, especially as expressed in Plato's *Republic*, requires that in an orderly society “body” people must be ruled by “mind” people. Thus, in Plato's republic, the philosopher, the embodiment of one governed by reason, was to be the king, the ruling force in society. In a world where white people are considered the paragons of reason and black people the models of passion, according to the Enlightenment spirit it follows that white people should rule over black people—mind over body/reason over passion.

What we find, then, as exemplified by Jefferson's comments, is how the ideology of white culture coalesces with Enlightenment thought in such a way as to guarantee white control and even exploitation of the black body. For while the Enlightenment obsession with reason led to recognition of the “unreasonableness” of religion (to be explored later), it did not lead to a similar recognition regarding the “unreasonableness” of white culture. Indeed, inasmuch as white cultural assumptions concerning black people could be supported by science, they passed the test of the Age of Reason. It was thus this interface between white cultural assumptions and Enlightenment principles that gave rise to scientific racism. In fact, Jefferson's caution in “hazarding” black inferiority presages scientific racism in that it begs for scientific investigation into the matter.

During the Enlightenment, science was king. It was the field of study above all others because it was thought to embody reason. For any claim to be taken seriously it had to be legitimated by science. Frederick Douglass astutely described this period as “an age of science.” He went on to say, “[Science] must explore and analyze, until all doubt is set at rest.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, the claims of white culture regarding black inferiority “willed” scientific validation. In this regard, the “Foucauldian” analysis of power is apt. It is important at this point to recall this analysis. Michel Foucault argues that power “wills” its own knowledge to sustain itself. Inequitable power produces certain forms of knowledge to validate the various inequities and structures of domination intrinsic to it. Accordingly,

inequitable white power rooted in notions of black inferiority necessitated scientific legitimation, thus the advent of scientific racism. Subsequently, various specious forms of science emerged that ostensibly “proved” black people's inferiority.<sup>29</sup> In many respects, owing to the spirit of the Enlightenment, science fueled and kept alive the vital ideology necessary for white exploitative abuse of the black body. The vitality of white culture is, thus, in many respects a legacy of the Enlightenment as the Enlightenment secreted the scientific racism that provided a “rational” canopy for white supremacist practices.

### *The Production of Religious Racism*

The Enlightenment would spawn another protector of white maltreatment of the black body. For, not only would white cultural ideology and the Enlightenment philosophy come together to generate scientific racism, but all three would intersect with Christianity to produce religious racism. Again, Jefferson's comments help us to understand how this occurred.

In order to support his claim that black people were incapable of reason/reflection, Jefferson attacked the intellect of various prominent black people. It is in this attack that the Enlightenment challenge to Christianity becomes clear, and it is also this attack that augurs platonized Christianity's role in the production of religious racism.

As Jordan aptly points out, for many—particularly those involved in the antislavery movement—Phyllis Wheatley provided proof of “the Negro's mental equality.”<sup>30</sup> She thus became the perfect target for Jefferson in making the case for black people's mental inequality. In his attempt to diminish her intelligence, Jefferson alleged that she was a product of religion, not reason; thus, she was not to be considered a poet.<sup>31</sup> He went on to say that Ignatius Sancho, a slave whose *Letters, with Memoirs of His Life* was published in 1782, “has approached nearer to merit in composition; yet his letters do more honor to the heart than the head...and show...strong religious zeal.”<sup>32</sup> In these assaults on black intelligence, Jefferson clearly criticizes religion. He implies that religion is antithetical to reason. Religion appeals to the heart (that is, sensations); hence it is suited for black people, a people defined by sensation. Many people may have thought that this was the reason why significant numbers of black people were converted to Christianity, as we will see later in the book. For now it is important to note that the characterization of religion as appealing to the senses as opposed to the mind made it acceptable for black people to display talents that resulted from “religious zeal.” Jefferson's estimation of religion is again representative of the Enlightenment spirit.

If science was the hero of the Enlightenment, then “religion was the principal villain.”<sup>33</sup> If religion was once considered the supreme arbiter of truth, with the advent of the Enlightenment, science was. Religion was deemed one of the chains around reason that needed to be broken. One of the guiding principles of the Enlightenment was that “man is an adult, dependent upon himself.”<sup>34</sup> Religion—in particular, Christianity—made “man” too beholden to God. In addition, religion—especially Christianity—was hampered by nonrational claims. With its emphasis on revelation, its belief in miracles, its story about creation, and its discussions of the supernatural, religion seemed often to defy common sense just as it went beyond what could be proven. Kant perhaps captured the Enlightenment attitude toward religion best when he wrote that there is much about religion that “prevents men from being, or easily becoming, capable of correctly using their own reason.”<sup>35</sup> Central to the Enlightenment agenda, therefore, was an assault on religion.<sup>36</sup> In view of that assault, the Enlightenment presented a special challenge to Christianity.

Christianity was put on the defensive. It had to prove itself “reasonable.” It had to show that its essential character was compatible with reason and thus could stand up to rational critique. One of the Christian responses to the Enlightenment attack was the appearance of essays that attempted to demonstrate that Christianity was in fact an “enlightened” religion. For instance, on the European scene John Locke published “The Reasonableness of Christianity.” In this essay he suggested that the Bible witnessed to a faith that did not contradict reason but rather established a rational moral religion. For Locke, the fact that God existed was a conclusion that could indeed be reached by

reason. In his “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” he had already stated that God's existence was “equal to mathematical Certainty.” He went to say, “it is plain to me, we have more certain Knowledge of the Existence of GOD, than of any thing our Senses have not immediately discovered to us.... I mean there is such a Knowledge within our reach, which we cannot miss, if we will but apply our Minds to that.”<sup>37</sup> As for Jesus, Locke asserted in “The Reasonableness of Christianity” that Jesus showed those who believed in him a way to a better, moral life. With respect to various Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, Locke found that they could not be supported by reason, just as he found no support for them in the Bible. Locke essentially epitomized the “rational” Christianity that emerged during the Enlightenment, not only in Europe but also in America. This was a Christianity that had to survive the scrutiny of reason. This was thus a Christianity that emphasized an impersonal God and morality. As religious historian Martin Marty noted, “in order for Christianity to survive in an Age of Reason it had to adopt a “new vocabulary” where “the mind mattered more than the heart, reason more than revelation, morals more than miracles, public virtue more than private salvation.”<sup>38</sup>

Benjamin Franklin as well as Thomas Jefferson reflected the “enlightened” approach to Christianity that emerged in America. They both advanced a kind of “public religion” that emphasized a “common morality.”<sup>39</sup> In a letter in 1790 to Ezra Stiles, then president of Yale, Franklin provided what he called the “fundamental principles of all sound religion.” He expressed them as follows: there was a God who “ought to be worshipped,” “that the most acceptable service we render to [God] is doing good,” and that the “soul of Man is immortal” to be treated justly in the next life in respect to conduct in this life. As for Jesus and Christianity, Franklin offered, “I think the system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see.”<sup>40</sup>

Jefferson's view of religion and Christianity was very similar to Franklin's. In accordance with Enlightenment demands, Jefferson stressed that the truth of religion would emerge after the scrutiny of “reason and free inquiry.” Presumably after subjecting Christianity to such a test, he concluded that Christian doctrines such as the Trinity were incomprehensible, in fact, “gibberish.”<sup>41</sup> But, like Franklin, Jefferson suggested that the truth of Christianity was found in Jesus and the simple life and morals that he put forth.<sup>42</sup>

In general, the Enlightenment explosion of reason no doubt overwhelmed Christian thinkers. Somehow they had to find a way for Christianity at least to survive the onslaught of critique, if not regain a measure of authority. What Franklin's and Jefferson's Enlightenment versions of Christianity indicate was that Christianity did indeed secure an authoritative space for itself during the Enlightenment. It did this by deemphasizing those aspects of the religion that pushed the envelope of reason while emphasizing the religion's moral precepts. Various interpreters of the Enlightenment have suggested that during an Age of Reason Christianity was able to find common cause with “disciples” of reason (i.e., philosophers) on the grounds of “morality.”<sup>43</sup> While this interpretation may in fact accurately reflect significant Christian responses to the Enlightenment, it certainly does not tell the whole story. The Enlightenment had a more insidious impact on Christianity. Indeed, the Enlightenment's obsession with reason coincided with an influential strand of Christianity in a way that allowed for the explosion of religious racism. Specifically, the platonized Christian tradition's exaltation of reason and detestation of the body permitted Christianity to claim authoritative space during an age absorbed with reason in another way, on the “backs of black people.” Let us look to see how this was the case.

As we have seen, the Enlightenment's valorization of reason imposed itself on Christianity in such a way as to force it to show its worth. Platonized Christianity was theologically well suited to this challenge. First of all, it shared in the Enlightenment's regard for reason. Within a platonized tradition, reason accords with the soul. It is the avenue by which one can become closer to God. Thus, within platonized Christianity, as previously argued, the mind is virtually divinized. Clearly, then, a fundamental theological assumption of platonized Christianity was commensurate with the defining principle of the Enlightenment. But this intrinsic compatibility did not necessarily manifest itself by way of theological apologia sanctioning the Enlightenment elevation of reason. It most

notably manifested itself in a more deleterious manner. For perhaps more significantly, platonized Christianity was not only able to find common cause with the Enlightenment in a mutual embrace of reason, but it was also able to team up with science. If the Enlightenment fomented an antagonistic relationship between science and Christianity, then the platonized Christian tradition amended that relationship. It was able to do this because it corresponded to something that the Enlightenment did not readily challenge and that science, the champion of the Enlightenment, legitimated: white cultural ideology as it pertained to black people. Hence, we see the confluence of white cultural ideology, Enlightenment thinking, and scientific racism spawning religious racism.

To reiterate, white culture asserts that blackness is virtually synonymous with hyper/bestial sexuality and thus correspondingly adversative to reason. Platonized Christianity asserts that sexuality is a cauldron of evil and opposes the human connection to God. As such, platonized Christianity maintains that sexuality encumbers reason, as the body/flesh encumbers the mind/soul. By maintaining the evilness of sexuality, platonized Christianity potentially provides a theological cover for any claims that people governed by sexual desires at the expense of reason are innately evil and need to be controlled. Platonized Christianity essentially suggests—commensurate with the Enlightenment spirit—that reason must be freed from the imposition of sexuality. The practical consequences of this thinking are deadly for a sexualized people, in this instance, black people. For platonized Christianity, at least implicitly, supports white cultural debasement of black men and women as well as white domination over them. But it cannot be stressed enough that perhaps most alarming of all is that, taken to its logical extreme, platonized Christianity suborns white attacks against the black body even though they may be fatal. For again, platonized Christianity demonizes the body and sexuality, thereby implying the demonization of sexualized people. Inasmuch as sexuality is considered evil, so too are oversexual black people. Therefore, if black people are evil by nature, then to eliminate them from society—as in to execute/lynch them—is a way of exorcising evil from a particular community. In the language of the Enlightenment, it is a way of freeing reason, that is, whiteness, from one of the obstacles that prevent it from flourishing, that is, blackness. Once again it becomes clear that platonized Christianity's theology of sexuality not only sanctions black people's dehumanization but also suggests their violent demise.

Unfortunately, platonized Christianity's support of white cultural ideology did not remain implicit. Perhaps driven by the aforementioned challenge of the Enlightenment to religion in general, and science's challenge to Christianity in particular, various Christian thinkers found it necessary that Christianity find common ground with science. Platonized Christianity provided an effective way for this to happen. The unquestionable common ground was race. Subsequently, though science consistently denounced various Christian fundamentals, such as the “monogenesis” of all human beings, Christianity supported science in its conclusions concerning blackness, even as that support might involve rethinking black people's place in the order of creation. It was in this way that religious racism was born. Before looking more closely at religious racism, it is important to note a certain irony concerning its development.

The authoritative space that Enlightenment philosophy theoretically granted to Christianity was moral space. Prominent Christian thinkers gladly accepted that space. And so it is ironic that what Enlightenment scholars theoretically advanced as Christianity's secure (hence reasonable) foundation—the moral ethic of Jesus—was in reality not the space that Christianity occupied. In actuality, Christianity did not stand on moral ground. It cannot be forgotten that even as Christian apologists, such as Jefferson, proclaimed the incontestable moral core of Christianity, they also supported slavery. Just as much an indictment of Christianity's moral authority, and more enduring in terms of its rhetoric, was the emergence of “religious racism.” Owing to a prevailing platonized Christian tradition, Christianity was able to make an immoral alliance with scientific racism in support of white cultural ideology and practices. Thus, while prominent statesmen like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were putting forth a “public religion” that could comfortably exist in an enlightened world, there was a subaltern level of Christian discourse being maintained that perhaps had more of an influence on the “everyday” white Christian. This was the discourse of

religious racism. This discourse, similar to Jefferson's notion of Christianity, conformed to the Enlightenment demands of science while also unabashedly supporting the conventions of white culture. Let us now look at “religious racism” more closely.

Science, in its attempts to show the reasonableness of white cultural assertions concerning black people's inferiority and the resultant dehumanizing treatment of them, proceeded to provide proof that black people were in fact of a different origin than white people. In doing this, science forthrightly challenged Christian claims concerning the single origins of all humankind. Various scientists argued that in the short span of time that the human species supposedly existed, it was virtually impossible for such a wide variety of human beings to have developed. Motivated by their desire to give proof of black people's intrinsic inferiority, if not inhumanity, prominent nineteenth-century scholars such as Josiah Nott and Louis Agassiz stridently argued—to the “surprise and dismay” of some—that there were an “*indefinite* number of original and distinctly created races of men.”<sup>44</sup> Such an assertion ostensibly provided a sound foundation for the enslavement and overall brutal treatment of black women and men. According to the logic of these “polygenesis” theories, such treatment was fitting for a people whose place in the human family was tenuous at best. Obviously the “science” of polygenesis accorded well with white cultural ideology. But it was not attractive to Christian apologists for black inferiority owing to one serious flaw: it contradicted biblical testimony concerning the origins of the human race.

As earlier mentioned, one of the ironies of platonized Christianity is its approach to the Bible. The platonized tradition is most typically manifested in fundamentalist versions of Christianity that maintain a “literal” approach to the biblical witness. Every word of the Bible is taken to be true because it is believed to have come directly from God. The irony is that this literal approach often does not translate into an appreciation of Jesus’ ministry. If the words and deeds of Jesus’ ministry were indeed taken literally, then platonized Christianity would be more apt to condemn—not sanction—oppressive ideologies. With this said, the platonized approach to the scripture is perhaps best understood as a “selective” literalism. It takes literally those aspects of the Bible that conform to and at least do not contradict a platonized hermeneutic, that is, a hermeneutic that reveres the soul and diminishes the flesh. Such an approach to the Bible was certainly operative for the outspoken Christian apologists of white cultural thought and practices. This meant that while platonized Christian thinking naturally cohered with white culture and, thus, found common cause with scientific racism in its legitimation of this culture, it parted company with science concerning the matter of human origins. On this matter, the truth of science and biblical truth were at odds. For a platonized Christian tradition, biblical truth was the only truth that mattered. And biblical truth said that all human beings shared common origins. Yet, platonized Christianity did not exist in a social, cultural, or historical vacuum. It was a part of an “enlightened” world. Therefore, in order for it to maintain any measure of authority and vibrancy it had to find some common ground with science, even on this matter of black origins. It cannot be stressed enough that the common ground was black inferiority. On this point, both scientists and Christians could agree. The task for platonized Christianity was to support this white cultural presupposition without contesting the “truth” of the biblical witness. The challenge was thus set for religious racism. Once again we turn to Thomas Jefferson to discern how the challenge was met.

It cannot be pointed out enough that Jefferson epitomized the duplicitous reality of Christianity as it found its way in a world defined both by the ideology of the Enlightenment and by white culture. Essentially, Christianity attempted to maintain its authority in relation to both. As pointed out above, it was a platonized Christian tradition that was best able to do this if it could overcome its disagreement with science about human beginnings. Jefferson showed how this was possible. At the same time that he touted Christianity's moral authority, he also affirmed white cultural ideology, thereby responding to science's attack on single human origins. As a way of settling the conflict with science, Jefferson offered that each “race” of animal was created not in completed form but with a divinely prescribed range within which it could develop. He explained it this way:

Every race of animals seems to have received from their Maker certain laws of extension at the time of their formation.... Below these limits they cannot fall, nor rise above them. What

intermediate station they shall take may depend on soil, on climate, on food, on a careful choice of breeders. But all the manna of heaven would never raise the mouse to the bulk of the mammoth.<sup>45</sup>

If we are to draw from his comments concerning animals in general to people in particular, then the implication is that black people were created with a range of capability beneath that of whites. To be sure, in his observations about animal formation Jefferson indicates the approach of religious racism: it is one that affirms that God relegated blacks to an inferior status without affirming multiple human origins. Religious racism achieved this by advancing one of two basic theses: that God cursed black people or that they were a part of the created order of beasts, not humans.

The idea of a divine curse was based on the Genesis story of Noah and his sons. In this story, Noah—after recovering from a drunken stupor—is told that his youngest son, Ham, the father of Canaan, gazed upon him while he was naked. For this offense Noah pronounced a curse upon Ham and his descendants, “Cursed be Canaan, the lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers” (Gen. 9:25). The transfer of the Hamitic curse to black people was primarily grounded in an erroneous notion that the name Ham signified “blackness.” This very notion that Ham was black, however, presented problems in relation to the text itself. Left unexplained was how Ham could be black, but his parents and his brothers were not. If it was argued that God made Ham black as the curse was pronounced, then it also had to be concluded that Noah anticipated the divine curse of blackness and named his youngest son accordingly. Not only did both of these understandings go beyond the story as presented in the Bible, but they also defied biological laws of science. Notwithstanding the seemingly insurmountable problems, the belief in the curse of Ham was pervasive and persistent. That this belief was so widespread points to the function it served. First and foremost, it suggested that black enslavement was divinely ordered. Consequently, that blacks were enslaved was the “fault” of God, not white people. But perhaps most significantly over time, the Hamitic curse provided theological justification for white cultural ideology. This curse affirmed that black people were an inferior people because they were a divinely cursed people. Moreover, the reason for the curse further supported the notion that blacks were innately a people moved by “passion,” not reason. For surely it was not lost on the believers in the curse that Ham succumbed to a base instinct by looking at his father, while the other brothers seemingly responded in a more rational manner by preventing themselves from looking at the naked father. Finally, the Hamitic curse, though challenged by science, still permitted Christianity to join with science in affirming black inferiority. Besides, the problems that science had with the particularities of the Hamitic theory were no more insurmountable than the problems Christianity had with theories of polygenesis. Obviously, more important than the particular problems that Christianity and science had with each other was their agreement that black inferiority was an unalterable given. As one black protester against religious racism observed, “white theologians were ‘wholly absorbed in cutting and trimming theological garments to suit their various patrons,’ patrons who were most often invested in upholding the tenets of white supremacy.”<sup>46</sup> Frederick Douglass also noted the lengths to which science or other fields of study would go in order to support notions of black inferiority. He said, “It is the province of prejudice to blind; and scientific writers, not less than others, write to please, as well as to instruct, and even unconsciously to themselves, (sometimes) sacrifice what is true to what is popular.”<sup>47</sup> Significantly, then, despite the vigorous critique that science and Christianity mounted against each other concerning the origins of humanity, both fields’ tenacious commitment to white cultural ideology made partners of those who might otherwise have remained enemies.

Another major way in which Christianity sanctioned notions of black inferiority was by suggesting that black people were not human but were in fact beasts. In 1867 Buckner Payne (who wrote under the pseudonym Ariel) released a pamphlet entitled, *The Negro: What Is His Ethnological Status?* In this essay, Payne refutes the curse of Ham by first simply stating, “That the negro is a descendent of Ham, the youngest son of Noah. This is false and untrue.”<sup>48</sup> After describing the “prominent characteristics and differences” between white and black people, he then takes great pains to show that black people could not have been the progeny of Noah.<sup>49</sup> He finally

concludes that though the Negro was on the ark with Noah, he “entered the ark as a beast,” and therefore concludes that black people are not human but “the noblests of the beast creation.” In calling black people “the noblests” of beast, Payne makes two things abundantly clear. First, their nobility is based on the fact that they have language, and therefore they are actually only “slightly” higher than baboons and monkeys. Second, and most importantly, that black people are beasts means that they have “no soul to be saved.”<sup>50</sup> Ironically, Payne's thesis received the most criticism from other Christian thinkers who were just as committed as he to the idea of black inferiority. The central problem they had with Payne's argument, however, was that it rendered black people “soulless,” thereby eliminating the possibility of conversion. It must be remembered that one of the mainstays of a platonized tradition is the ability to save wayward souls through conversion to another way of living. More particularly, one of the justifications of slavery hinged on “christianizing” the once “heathen” African. Payne, however, was not the only one to put forth such a thesis. Perhaps the most notorious of religious racists was Charles Carroll. At the turn of the century he produced two books, *The Negro a Beast* (1901) and *The Tempter of Eve* (1902), which basically affirmed—perhaps with greater detail and attention to scripture—Payne's argument.

In *The Negro a Beast*, Carroll takes special care to affirm the truth of “the Scriptural School of Divine Creation” and to denounce “the Atheistic School of Natural Development.” In this discussion he directly confronts the claims of science that heaven and earth are “the result of natural causes working without design to accomplish their formation.”<sup>51</sup> Leaving no doubt about his contempt for the Enlightenment's regard for reason, he says that reason actually gives no answer to the matter of creation. It is revelation, he argues, that provides the answer to the when and why of creation. Yet, while dismissing the authority of reason, Carroll consistently clarifies Christianity's compatibility with science. For instance, he says that the knowledge gleaned from revelation conforms to science. He puts it this way:

Reason gives no answer.... Reason is powerless to guide us, and it would seem that any further advance that we may attempt must be merely speculative; Revelation generously comes to our assistance with that sublime assurance that, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

Thus Revelation, in harmony with Science, and with Reason, emphatically confirms the teachings of each, that there is a God...a Creator...there was a definite plan of creation; a creation successive—extending through “six days.”<sup>52</sup>

After establishing the divine creation, Carroll goes on to specify the “Negro's” place in it. He specifically argues that through Adam and Eve white people are connected to God in a way that black people are not. He reinforces this point with an illustration entitled, “The Morning of Creation.” This illustration shows a decidedly white Adam and Eve in the Garden with a ray from “Heaven” connecting to them. In the ray are inscribed the words, “Direct Line of Kinship with God.” Beneath the picture is the question, “Where does the line of kinship between God and Adam and Eve connect with the Negro?”<sup>53</sup> Combining the testimony of scripture with the findings of scientific racism, Carroll gives an unmistakable answer to his question; black people are among the lower order of animals. He says, “Let us bear in mind that the Negro, the lower apes and the quadrupeds, all belong to ‘one kind of flesh,’ the ‘flesh of the beast.’”<sup>54</sup> Carroll ends his book with a resounding affirmation of Payne's position that the Negro is a soulless beast in his chapter entitled, “The Bible and Divine Revelation, as well as Reason, All Teach That the Negro Is Not Human.”<sup>55</sup>

Carroll goes even further in his next book, *The Tempter of Eve*. In this book he establishes not only black people's nonhumanity but also their intrinsic lascivious nature. He does this by identifying the tempter in the Garden as black. Different from others who had made similar arguments, Carroll argued that the tempter was “a negress, who served Eve in the capacity of maid servant.”<sup>56</sup> Through cunning, the “negress” tempter got Eve to distrust and disobey God, thereby causing both her and Adam to eat of the forbidden fruit. The penalty that follows Eve's, and subsequently Adam's, succumbing to temptation serves to strengthen the notion that black women

are oversexed seductive temptresses; thus, dealings with them are characterized by “matters of the flesh.” In the end, Adam and Eve recognize that which they were innocent of before, their nudity, and women are relegated to painful childbirth. Typical of Carroll, he supports his interpretation of the temptation with a graphic, racially charged illustration.

Carroll certainly was not the first, nor was he the last, Christian apologist for black inferiority to place black people in the Garden of Eden in the form of the serpent.<sup>57</sup> However, given the voluminous quality of his books, the numerous supporting illustrations, and the care by which he attempted to show that “scriptures were in absolute harmony with sciences at every point,” Carroll's books were undoubtedly the most comprehensive to be written on the subject. They certainly received significant responses from both the religious and scientific communities. For instance, Reverend W. S. Armistead wrote an equally voluminous tome, also replete with illustrations, refuting Carroll's claim that the “Negro was a beast.” Interestingly, however, even though Armistead painstakingly showed how Carroll's books corrupted the truth of both the Bible and science in declaring the Negro a beast, he made clear in his declaration that the “Negro was human” did not mean he considered Negroes equal to whites.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, what we find, regardless of the merits of Carroll's arguments, is that his books epitomize the way in which a platonized Christian tradition is able to sustain and generate dehumanizing portrayals of black women and men.

The emergence of religious racism bears witness to the troubling predisposition of platonized Christianity: the tendency to align with inequitable dominating power. As pointed out in the [previous chapter](#), given the platonized tradition's theology of the sexual body, it is inclined toward a coalition with oppressive power. In this respect, platonized Christianity's vilification of sexuality coincides with the manner in which unjust power dehumanizes those it subjugates, that is, by sexualizing them. Essentially, platonized Christianity emboldens oppressive power in its sexualized denigration of certain human bodies. It should also be noted that platonized Christianity's approach to the Bible makes its alliance with unscrupulous power even more possible. For again, this is an approach that virtually ignores Jesus' ministry of compassionate solidarity with the oppressed. In this respect, platonized Christianity eschews the moral foundation on which many based Christianity's authority in an age marked by reason. Most significantly, however, religious racism was virtually inevitable, given platonized Christianity's compatibility with two dominant cultural narratives: the Enlightenment narrative on reason and the white cultural narrative on black people. Moreover, with its production of religious racism, platonized Christianity was able to provide a sacred canopy for both white cultural ideology and scientific racism. Oddly enough, while religion was struggling to find its way in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, platonized Christianity effectively came into its own. It colluded with the discourse of both the Enlightenment and white culture to form an impressive configuration of “discursive power.” Essentially, the interplay between Enlightenment philosophy, white cultural ideology, and platonized Christianity ensured the continued violence against the black body.

Religious racism is one of the explicit ways in which platonized Christianity supported white tyranny against black men and women. Important to ask, however, is what kind of impact the discourse of religious racism had on “everyday” white Christians. Was religious racism simply a “scholarly” movement, or did it reach down into the pews, thus helping to shape the prevailing theological consciousness?

The extent to which the publications of religious racism reached “everyday” people is uncertain. Mason Stokes notes, “anecdotal accounts suggest that *The Negro a Beast* was widely circulated, particularly in the South.” In further support of its influence on everyday white Christians, he cites a door-to-door subscription campaign to distribute the book as well as resolutions passed by various white church bodies decrying its popularity.<sup>59</sup> If we draw from Frederick Douglass's remarks about the popularity of scientific racism, then we might also assume the same popularity for works of religious racism.<sup>60</sup> Whatever the actual popularity of writings like Carroll's may have been, what we know for sure is that there were numerous preachers who generally agreed with the various arguments that characterized religious racism, especially the Hamitic curse. Thus, it can be reasonably conjectured that whether or not they read the actual literature, numerous white Christians

were exposed to the arguments of religious racism. Moreover, given their already platonized theological consciousness along with their white racist ideology, they were certainly prepared to accept such arguments. For the expression of Christianity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, especially in the South, was evangelical Protestantism. As mentioned earlier, it was through evangelical Protestantism that platonized Christianity found its most comfortable home in America. Thus, shaped by an evangelical Protestant theology, white Christians were primed to accept not only the discourse of religious racism but also vicious attacks against the black people. Let us now look more closely at evangelical Protestantism as an expression of platonized Christianity, particularly as it regards the black body.

## **Platonized Christianity and Evangelical Protestantism**

### *The Great Awakenings*

By all accounts evangelical Protestantism erupted in America with the emergence of the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Great Awakenings. These Awakenings have defined the essential theological foundation for evangelical Protestantism. In so doing, these Awakenings represent the beginning of platonized Christianity's prevailing influence on the American theological consciousness. As been noted by many scholars of evangelical thought, not only did evangelical Protestantism emerge as a “quintessentially American faith,” but it continues to be the most significant theological influence on American life and culture.<sup>61</sup> It is for this reason that we will examine the Great Awakenings in terms of the theology they advanced. For in doing so we see even more clearly platonized Christianity's fatal flaws when it comes to the black body, even as we come to appreciate the collective theological consciousness that has perhaps allowed for Christian participation in acts as vile as lynching. Before examining this theology, however, we must first acknowledge some important caveats concerning this discussion of the Great Awakenings and the evangelical tradition to which they gave birth.

The Great Awakenings were a complex and rich phenomenon in American life and culture. While the First and Second Great Awakenings bore similarities to each other, they also were quite different. They were, for instance, both characterized by emotional gatherings fueled by spirited preaching. But, while mass meetings and large gatherings were typical of the First Great Awakening, smaller camp meetings typified the second. In addition, the First Great Awakening, which erupted around the 1730s, was centered in the New England colonies. The Second Great Awakening, often referred to as the “Great Revival,” emerged in the early 1800s. Its primary focus was the southern and western regions of the country. Some have gone so far as to suggest that it was the Second Great Awakening that “turned the American South into perhaps the most distinctively and self-consciously religious region in Christendom.”<sup>62</sup> It should also be noted that at the same time that revivals were flourishing in the South and West, a “new phase of the Great Revival” emerged in the North. This northern movement characteristically launched a series of social reforms based on central evangelical principles, to be examined shortly. The point is that the Great Awakenings “took many shapes, forms, expressions and colors.”<sup>63</sup> In this regard so too does the evangelical Protestant tradition that it spawned.

It cannot be stressed enough that while the evangelical Protestant tradition advanced the Great Awakenings' platonized theology, a theology that has fostered collusion with white racism, various aspects of this platonized evangelical tradition also prompted vigorous protests against black oppression. There in fact was no stronger voice of protest against slavery than the one considered the “father of modern evangelicalism,” Charles G. Finney.<sup>64</sup> The evangelical Protestant tradition is a complex tradition, theologically and otherwise. Its complexity is seen in that it maintains platonized notions that support black people's oppression even as it puts forward theological principles that

prompt it to contest that same oppression. It is no doubt because of the complexity of this tradition that black men and women have been attracted to it at the same time that they have been harmed by it.

This particular discussion of evangelical Protestantism does not pretend to capture the intricate depth of evangelical Protestant thought. What it does do is highlight that which lends itself to the support of black tyranny while acknowledging that the “racist” strands of evangelical Protestantism do not represent the whole of the tradition.

Most particularly, what this discussion does advance is that even in its diversity there was a common theology that characterized the Great Awakenings and accordingly continues to influence evangelical Protestant thought significantly. Moreover, this is a theology that lends itself to promoting attacks on certain human bodies, in this instance the black body. This discussion further recognizes the theology of these early revivals as that which has especially characterized Southern religion and is pervasive within the black faith tradition. As William Martin states in his study of the religious right in America, “It is difficult to overstate the impact of the Great Revival on the development of Southern Culture.”<sup>65</sup> Again, given the profound influence of revival theology on the collective theological consciousness of white Christians in the South (the home of slavery and lynching), along with its influence on the black Christian tradition (to be examined later), an examination of it is significant for this study. Once more, this Great Awakening theology reflects the advent of an influential platonized Christian tradition in America. Hence, by examining the theology of the Great Awakenings, even with broad strokes, we are better able to appreciate the practical impact of a platonized Christian tradition on the white consciousness and the black body. Let us now explore platonized Christianity as it emerged in the Great Awakenings.

What has come to be known as the First and Second Great Awakenings was indeed a series of revivals. The purpose of these revivals was to convert people to a “Christian” way of living. Preachers such as Englishman George Whitefield and American Jonathan Edwards led the revivals. Both of these men exemplified characteristic aspects of this revival movement. George Whitefield represented the “itinerant” aspect of the movement. He was an Anglican priest who came to the American colonies to raise money for an orphanage that he started in Georgia. As a leader of the First Great Awakening, he traveled through the colonies with his message for wayward people to convert to a holy, Christian life. Whitefield was considered by many to be one of the greatest preachers of his time. His style was reportedly very spirited and played to the emotions of his audience. One of Whitefield's contemporaries said that his voice and preaching style were such that he “could melt an audience merely by `pronouncing ‘Mesopotamia.’”<sup>66</sup> Needless to say, Whitefield's mesmerizing style accorded well with the intent of the revivals, which again was to convert.

If Whitefield was the “itinerant” Great Awakening evangelist, Jonathan Edwards was the “stay-at-home” one. He was considered a “religious thinker and evangelical preacher who towered above all the others.”<sup>67</sup> Edwards not only attempted to convert people from his New England pulpit but also provided scholarly reflections on the rationale and value of the revival movement.

Whether or not great numbers of people were actually converted to Christianity during this period of revivals is a matter of dispute. However, one population of people that is known to have been converted in significant numbers is blacks. Though we will return to this in the [next chapter](#), it is always important to bear in mind that black Christianity even in its diversity “is largely a product of Awakening style or revivalistic religion.”<sup>68</sup> For now, however, let us focus on the theological content of this movement. For again, it was through these Great Awakenings that platonized Christianity would come to significantly shape the theological consciousness of white and black Christians.

Perhaps the best way to understand the theology of this “revivalistic religion” is to recognize what its promoters claimed to be fighting against. On the one hand, their emotive style of preaching and the revival mode of taking the message directly to the people bespoke their belief that colonial churches had become too formal and learned. On the other hand, the message that they preached suggested what they believed to be the state of the times. According to many of the revivalist

preachers, America was in the midst of “evil times.” Tellingly for them, it was not primarily, if at all, slavery and other societal forms of white cultural oppression that made these times evil. Rather it was the “individual” spiritual decay of the populace, white and black. This spiritual decay was ostensibly characterized, in the words of Edwards, by “youth...addicted to night walking...frequent[ing] the tavern and engag[ing] in unspecified lewd practices.”<sup>69</sup> The spiritual decay that this evangelist claimed to define prerevival America was marked by a “worldly” lifestyle where people indulged in bodily pleasures. The preachers of the Great Awakenings responded to these times of “spiritual decadence” by naming such behavior evil and against God, calling for people to repent and thereby lead a more abstemious lifestyle. Such a lifestyle was considered more befitting a Godly people. The more prurient life was considered a sign of Satan's influence.

Jonathan Edwards expresses this theology in a 1741 sermon entitled, “The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God.” Edwards says that when the spirit of God is at work, “[it] operates against the interests of Satan's kingdom, which lies in encouraging and establishing sin, and cherishing men's worldly lusts.”<sup>70</sup> Edwards clarifies his point by drawing upon the First Epistle of John (2:15-16):

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world: If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him: for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but of the world.” So that by the world the apostle evidently means everything that appertains to the interest of sin, and comprehends all the corruptions of lusts of men, and all those acts and objects by which they are gratified.<sup>71</sup>

George Whitefield made a similar point in a sermon entitled, “Marks of a True Conversion,” when he simply said, “if we are really converted, we shall be loose from the world.”<sup>72</sup> Essentially, within this Great Awakening theology that came to shape evangelical Protestantism in America, the measure of one's salvation was marked by one's ability to be converted from the world. True piety was characterized by “self-denial” and resistance to bodily temptations, not the least of which was sexual pleasure. Jonathan Edwards, in fact, considered male genitalia, “a constant reminder of the ‘peculiar need’ of bridling and restraint.”<sup>73</sup> Another preacher of evangelical theology whose ministry actually predates the actual Great Awakenings, Cotton Mather, prayed that God would not hold against his children the act he participated in to conceive them.<sup>74</sup>

There are at least two main interrelated emphases of Great Awakening theology: conversion and “holy” living. The latter, of course, is a sign of the former. Both of these principles are upheld by what was believed to be the ultimate authority, the Bible. With these two emphases the platonized nature of this evangelical theology is clear.

Platonized theology tends to exploit the closed monotheistic core of Christianity by making very clear distinctions between those who are of God and those who are not. Those who are of God are Christians and accordingly lead a Christian, that is, pure, lifestyle. Platonized Christianity makes sacrosanct divisions of the world and its people. Commensurate with this platonized tendency, the preachers of the Great Awakening tried to arouse people to convert to a Christian life by admonishing them to remain virtuous in their living. Anything less than virtuous living was considered a betrayal of their Christian/Godly identity. Most importantly, unholy living would jeopardize their very salvation. Thus, characteristic of a platonized Christian tradition, the Great Awakening advanced a theology that was primarily concerned with freeing the souls of people from the evil doings of their bodies. On the whole, the theological content of the Great Awakenings was a platonized theology. Matters of body—that is, wanton and lustful behavior—were considered evil and an affront to God. People were therefore called to convert from their sinful/worldly ways to a more spiritual, hence sober, way of living.

As we will see, such platonized thinking had definite implications for the way black people were treated, especially as this thinking corresponded to white cultural ideology and its attendant practices. Thus, what we will find when examining platonized Christianity as it manifested itself in the Great Awakenings is jarringly similar to the way it was manifested in religious racism. In short,

the proponents of the Great Awakening had much in common with the advocates of religious racism when it came to the matter of race, no doubt owing to the fact that the same theology informed them both. This similarity begins with how they both generally responded to the Enlightenment's challenge and subsequent implications for response for black people.

### *Great Awakening Theology and the Enlightenment*

The revivals exploded onto the American scene almost simultaneously with the advent of the Age of Reason. It would at first glance seem that these two movements would be diametrically opposed to one another, given the Enlightenment disposition toward religion. Yet they were not. For while the revivals appealed to the hearts and emotions of people in order to effect conversion, reason was elevated as a marker of a converted life. Conversion meant nothing less than turning away from the “excesses” of the body, that is, lewd behavior, toward the virtues of the mind, that is, reason. Whitefield makes this clear in a sermon about the sin of drunkenness: “What renders drunkenness more inexcusable, is, that it robs a man of his reason. Reason is the glory of a man; the chief thing whereby God made us to differ from the brute creation.”<sup>75</sup>

Edwards went even further in trying to show the “reasonableness” of evangelical theology as he diligently attempted to show that reason and revelation actually cohered because they were both gifts from God. He preached, “GOD is the Author of all Knowledge and Understanding whatsoever.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, in addressing the emotional nature of the revivals, Edwards cautioned that the good convert would never “[lose] their rationality to enthusiasm.”<sup>77</sup> What we see in the early evangelical manifestation of platonized Christianity is similar to what we saw in religious racism—a strong concern to show the compatibility between Christianity and reason. The credibility of the early evangelical movement in an “enlightened nation” rested not simply on the authority of the Bible but also on its ability to show itself “reasonable.” It was able to do this because it fundamentally embraced a theology that for all intents and purposes sanctified reason.

It is interesting to note another aspect of the Great Awakening theology that was perhaps incidentally compatible with the Enlightenment spirit but certainly telling of a platonized Christian tradition. The Great Awakenings focused on the individual. The message itself was aimed directly at the individual without the mediation of church structures or clergy. Moreover, the message was not chiefly one of social transformation but one of individual salvation. In addition, even though the revivals would attempt to incite conversion “emotionally,” conversion was to essentially result from the individual's free choice, even if this was a circumscribed choice. For as noted by Martin Marty, the choice meant “you must choose Jesus Christ, must decide to let the Spirit of God work in your heart and—note well!—you may and must choose *this* version of Christianity against *that* version.”<sup>78</sup> The version to be chosen, of course, was a platonized version.

This emphasis on the individual and freedom was compatible with, if not reflective of, the Enlightenment's emphasis on the same. There was without question a “profoundly radical individualism at the heart of the Enlightenment.”<sup>79</sup> The individual was the center of truth and knowing as reflected in Descartes' credo, “I think therefore I am.” The rights of the individual to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” were to be protected. But most significantly, the individual was to be the arbiter of his or her own existence. This meant, for instance, that religion was not to be imposed on an individual by any civil or religious authority. Locke made the point in his *Letters Concerning Toleration* when he argued that the “care of the souls” is not to be the responsibility of any “civil magistrate...because no man can so far abandon the care of his own salvation as blindly to leave to the choice of any other.... All the life and power of true religion consist in the inward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without believing.”<sup>80</sup> In America, this individualism of the Enlightenment translated into “religious disestablishment,” whereby churches were expected to support themselves without governmental assistance. This philosophy of “religious disestablishment” accorded well with the attitude of revivalist preachers. They believed that individuals, not clergy or institutions, should be responsible for their own

spiritual lives.<sup>81</sup> Admittedly, the Enlightenment's acceptance of the individual's right to seek happiness and pleasure unquestionably conflicted with the evangelical emphasis on self-denial. Yet the shared focus on the individual certainly provided another significant point of contact between the spirit of the Enlightenment and the theology of the Great Awakenings. But more to the point of this discussion, the Great Awakenings' emphasis on the individual further indicated the platonized nature of this movement.

With its unique emphasis on saving the souls of individuals, Jesus' ministry to the oppressed and socially marginalized was clearly a subsidiary concern for the Great Awakening. To be sure, Jesus' ministry was not regarded as a primary exemplar of a Christian life. Instead, the emphasis of Great Awakening theology is more reflective of the Pauline tradition. One will recall from previous discussions that this tradition stresses the significance of leading a chaste life. Furthermore, as also mentioned earlier, the Pauline tradition provides one of the earliest examples of platonized Christianity. In general, a platonized approach to the Bible, drawing on Pauline texts, encourages a concern for the care of human souls but not necessarily for the sanctity of human bodies. The practical result of this selective platonized approach to the Bible was that it enabled the revivalists, with relative impunity, to focus their attention on individual salvation while virtually ignoring the inhuman social conditions to which black people were subjected. It did not, in other words, readily lend itself to an advocacy for the sanctity of black bodies. This leads us to perhaps the most disturbing similarity between the revivalistic theology and religious racism.

If religious racism explicitly affirmed white cultural notions of black inferiority, then the theology of the Great Awakening did so implicitly, particularly as it did not refute them. As has been well documented, evangelical preachers in the main did not protest slavery (except of course in the North where a slave economy was not central). Indeed, more often than not they affirmed the positive good of slavery by asserting that it provided for the evangelizing of Africans. Moreover, in order to gain access to the enslaved population, they also suggested to slaveholders that conversion to Christianity would not make the slaves eager for freedom, but quite the contrary, it would make them better slaves. Whitefield wrote, for instance, "I believe masters and mistresses will shortly see that Christianity will not make their negroes worse slaves."<sup>82</sup> The wider point, however, is that the theology of the Great Awakening did not compel a denunciation of white cultural thought and its accompanying practices. In many respects, the nature of the movement itself undoubtedly served to reinforce for some the notion that blacks were driven by "passion." For again, the emotive revival style appealed to the hearts of people not necessarily to their heads. That blacks would be attracted to this revivalistic movement, therefore, was probably no surprise to the many whites who believed them controlled by passion (we will explore later the various reasons why this movement was actually attractive to black people). "Religious zeal" as Jefferson had remarked, was certainly befitting black women and men. The Great Awakenings' emotional appeal, especially as it attracted black people, coincided with white cultural ideology. (The implication, in the illogic of white racist ideology, was that the whites attracted to the movement were attracted for reasons other than the emotional style of it.) There were also other practical implications for black people.

First, the belief that it was a pure soul that marked a Christian life and hence effected salvation no doubt served to exonerate many white Christians from any "spiritual" anxiety they may have had concerning their treatment of black people. They could, for instance, own slaves with assurance of their salvation as long as they believed in Jesus and led "chaste" lives. There were, of course, those who were at least troubled by the contradiction of being Christian and owning slaves. George Whitefield, himself a slave owner, did argue that inasmuch as slaves were spiritually equal to whites, they should not be treated cruelly. With that said, however, he also asserted that cruel treatment of the slaves could "have the positive effect of heightening their sense of their natural misery," thus prompting their conversion.<sup>83</sup> Characteristically, then, a change in a white person's soul did not augur a change in their attitudes toward black bodies. The Great Awakening theology that shaped their Christian consciousness certainly did not require such an attitudinal change. In this sense it makes it most remarkable that there were those evangelicals who did indeed advocate against slavery.

Second, even as this theology did suggest a certain spiritual equality, in that all souls were the

same before God, it was not forgotten—even by some of the preachers of this theology—that black bodies signaled inferiority. As Winthrop Jordan says, “the men who insisted upon this equality were always compelled either to disregard or to belittle the fact that however much the Negro's soul might resemble the white man's, his skin did not.”<sup>84</sup> Noting how these revivalist preachers never lost sight of the bodies of blacks, Jordan quotes one of the preachers as commenting, “while many of their sable faces were bedewed with tears, their withered hands of faith were stretched out, and their precious souls made white in the blood of the lamb.”<sup>85</sup> In effect, the whiteness/purity of their black souls did not rescue black people from the blackness/impurity of their bodies.

That black people were black regardless of the state of their souls also meant that they remained an “ardent” people. Indeed, there were those who protested the “integrated” revival meetings for fear that black men in their emotionally charged state might tempt emotionally charged white women, and thus “violate” white women's “chastity.” The pre-Awakening evangelical preacher Cotton Mathers, reminiscent of arguments put forth in the literature of religious racism, went so far as to suggest that the devil ordinarily showed himself on earth as a “small *Black man*.”<sup>86</sup>

Again, there were preachers of the Great Awakening who had more equitable views when it came to black people. They likely interpreted the idea of spiritual equality in such a way that it suggested an earthly equality between blacks and whites. Nevertheless, the point remains that such views did not naturally result from this platonized expression of Christianity. As shown above, the focus of platonized Christianity does not compel a concern for black bodies. In fact, it more readily provides for the devaluation of black people and hence vile treatment of black bodies. In many respects the theology of the Great Awakenings and that of religious racism were just different sides of the same coin, the coin of platonized Christianity. Thus, the discourse of evangelical Protestantism and religious racism complemented each other. It can be concluded that whether or not “ordinary” Christians in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America actually read the literature of religious racism, the theology that they were exposed to was enough to promote and sustain belief in black people's inferiority. Again, this theology of the Great Awakening revered the soul and reprovved the body, and accordingly divinized reason and demonized passion; at the same time, it did not challenge white cultural ideology. Consequently, this theology virtually sanctioned the vile depictions and vicious treatment of black women and men. Once again, what we see is that platonized expressions of Christianity partner well with power. In this instance, the theology of the Great Awakening was a natural ally to unjust white power.

### *The Implications of Evangelical Theology for the Black Body.*

What, however, does this suggest for evangelical Protestant theology in general? As said earlier, evangelical Protestantism—even with its “various historical twists” and “theological nuances”—is indisputably a product of these early revivals.<sup>87</sup> As such, it continues to advance the theology of the Great Awakenings. Thus, true to its evangelical moniker, its primary mission is evangelism—that is, converting people to a Christian way of living. The way of living that evangelical Protestantism promotes is a “holy” life free of the bodily temptations of this world. And of course, evangelical Protestantism continues to affirm the Bible as the ultimate authority providing divine truth. Essentially, evangelical Protestantism is a platonized Christian tradition. Consequently, contemporary evangelical Protestantism, even in all of its diverse expressions, carries with it all of the potential problematic tendencies in regard to unjust power.

Yet, it must be remembered that evangelical Protestantism does not invariably lead to white racist treatment of black bodies or to oppressive alliances in general. To reiterate, evangelical theology did in large measure provide the foundation for many antislavery advocates and antilynching activists. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that the substantial platonized character of this theological tradition makes it most susceptible to colluding with inequitable power in such a way that it supports the unjust, if not violent, treatment of various human bodies, especially black bodies (indeed the same can be said for nonwhite bodies in general). Such a collusion does not have to manifest itself in

an extreme form such as religious racism. It can be manifested in a more implicit manner, as in the case of the Great Awakening. In its silence on social issues or in its strident defense of the merits of “holy” living, evangelical Protestantism too often finds itself sanctioning the ideological rhetoric of dominating power. Furthermore, platonized/evangelical theology easily accommodates distinctions between evil/un-Godly people and good/Godly people, thus projecting a hostile relationality between groups of people. In addition, platonized/evangelical theology promotes an understanding of sexuality that provides a basis for distinctions to be made between various groups of people. Therefore, simply by putting forth a vigorous public defense of their views on sexuality, evangelical Protestants can easily provide sacred legitimation for oppressive ideology and practices. Though more will be said about this in the [next chapter](#), it is worth noting now the implications that platonized views on sexuality have for nonheterosexual persons.

Characteristic of patriarchal/heterosexist definitions, sexuality is often erroneously defined in relation to sexual/genital practices. Moreover, socially marginalized people are typically a sexualized people as we have seen in regard to black persons. The same is thus true for nonheterosexual men and women in a heterosexist culture. Hence, nonheterosexuals are characteristically essentialized according to their sexuality, which of course has already been essentialized in respect to genital activity. In short, nonheterosexuals are wrongly defined in relation to their presumed sexual practices. Within a platonized tradition this does not bode well for them. As a result of being characterized as a people categorically engaged in nonprocreative sexual activity, they are deemed un-Godly. It is in this way that platonized Christianity—that is, evangelical Protestantism—readily sustains social, political, and ecclesiastical discrimination against gay, lesbian, and other nonheterosexual persons (again more will be said about this with particular reference to black people).

Finally, in terms of evangelical Christianity, as suggested above, with its primary emphasis on the saving of souls, the actual treatment of human bodies is likely to get insufficient attention, if any at all. It will long be remembered that the justification given by a group of clergy for their lack of support of Martin Luther King Jr. during his fight for black civil rights was that it was the responsibility of ministers to “save souls,” not to become involved in controversial issues of social justice. It should come as no surprise, therefore, when various contemporary manifestations of evangelical theological Protestantism get mixed up with the rhetoric and practices of unjust power, whether by silence or direct involvement. In general, inasmuch as evangelical Protestant traditions substantially embrace platonized theology they will continue to be predisposed to troubling connections with unjust power. It is no wonder, then, that there was profound white Christian participation in the lynching of black bodies. For it was an evangelical Protestant theology that significantly shaped the theological consciousness of “everyday” white Christians during that period, as it perhaps continues to do today.

### *Crucifixion Revisited*

With this recognition of white evangelical Protestant involvement in the lynch-style execution of black men and women, we must briefly revisit the centrality of the crucifixion in evangelical thought. Just as it is pivotal to the Christian tradition in general, it is central for evangelical Protestantism in particular. Evangelical Protestants typically proclaim that it is through the death of Jesus that all who believe in him are saved. It is through “his Blood,” they often sing, that they are redeemed, that their souls are made “pure.” Given the aforementioned parallels between black lynching and Jesus’ crucifixion, one must at least continue to question the role that a strong belief in the redemptive nature of Jesus’ crucifixion might play in permitting Christian involvement in lynching. To be sure, evangelical Protestant thought allows for the demonization of black people. It is thus not too far a stretch to suggest that in the collective consciousness of white Christians lynching was a way of “saving” the collective souls of white people as they were able to rid their community of evil. In this regard, Orlando Patterson's earlier mentioned observations are borne out: the lynching of black people became a way for many Southern whites to further “redeem” the South.

Once again, René Girard's analysis concerning "sacrificial victims" seems fitting in that white society sacrifices black bodies to save itself.<sup>88</sup> At the very least it can be concluded that the confluence of whiteness and a platonized tradition that professes the redeeming power of the crucifixion has troubling connotations for outcast people, particularly for black people. So in many ways the comments of Ida B. Wells and W. E. B. Du Bois were prescient. For when they lamented white Christian acquiescence to the terrorizing of black bodies, they were actually giving voice to the easy accommodation that evangelical Protestantism makes not simply to whiteness but to unjust power in general. With cutting insight Wells put it plainly: this is a tradition more ready to "save the souls of white Christians from burning in hell-fire [than] to save the lives of black ones from present burning in fires kindled by white Christians."<sup>89</sup> Wells's comments are indeed supported by the observations of the 1933 report on Southern lynching. This report advised that "the individualistic theology" of a large segment of white Southern churches "leaves intact the views which provide a justification for lynching and other expressions of racial antagonisms."<sup>90</sup>

### *Critical Assessment of Platonized Christianity*

What, then, can be said about platonized Christianity? First and foremost, we must acknowledge that this tradition is real. It has played a very prominent role in American life and culture. It has indeed found its most comfortable home in evangelical Protestantism. From this context, it has significantly shaped the collective theological consciousness of America and consequently has affected the lives of many people.

Second, it is a platonized Christian tradition that is most responsible for Christianity's explicit and implicit involvement in white terror of black people. This tradition readily accommodates whiteness. As we have seen in our examination of religious racism and the Great Awakenings, the theology of platonized Christianity is compatible with the ideology of white culture. Therefore, platonized Christianity provides a natural sacred covering for white attacks on the black body just as it also allows for Christians to participate in these attacks.

Yet, as made clear in our examination of platonized Christianity's alliance with whiteness, this tradition is heretical. Platonized Christianity is not the whole of the Christian tradition. Nonetheless, this tradition has so insinuated itself into mainstream theological consciousness that it often appears to speak the truth of Christianity. But it does not. Despite its attentiveness to the Bible, it defies the very incarnational identity of the Christian religion because it allows for the degradation of what the incarnation establishes as sacred—the human body. Most particularly, in cooperating with unjust power (i.e., white power), it betrays the existential reality of the incarnation—that is, Jesus' ministry of compassionate solidarity with the oppressed. But especially it actually opposes the revelation of God's power in human history. Again, this is not a power that imposes itself on bodies and destroys them, rather it is one that empowers bodies, particularly those of the abused, in order to foster life.

Finally, regardless of its pervasive historical presence, because of its questionable historical alliances, it must be concluded that platonized Christianity is as dangerous as it is heretical. Of all of its troubling qualities there are two that make platonized Christianity most dangerous: the dualistic divisions it projects between people and its inherent propensity toward unjust power. Because of these two qualities, platonized Christian traditions invariably find themselves providing theological shelter for social, political, and ecclesiastical discrimination and inequality. Just as religion can embolden revolutionary change, so too can it sanction an unjust status quo. To be sure, platonized expressions of Christianity have certainly done this in regard to black people. Without a doubt, platonized Christianity and whiteness portend a blasphemous combination.

They come together in such a way as to provide a formidable witness to that which is anti-Christ. As seen in evangelical Protestantism, it has allowed for Christians to get mixed up in the vilest of human activity, the lynching of black men and women. And so while we may be able to conclude that it is not Christianity itself that is problematic for black people, recognition of platonized Christianity's compliance with whiteness does raise the question of its particular suitability for black people. What does it mean for black people to embrace a theological tradition (namely, evangelical

Protestantism) that is significantly a platonized tradition? This question will be taken up in the [next chapter](#).