



The Black Man of the South and the Rebels Charles Stearns (1872)

Charles Stearns was a white anti-slavery activist, originally from Massachusetts. Prior to the Civil War, he fought on the anti-slavery side of the “Bleeding Kansas” conflict; during the Civil War, he lived in the Colorado Territory. At the war’s end, he felt inspired by God to relocate to Georgia. There he purchased a plantation, with an idealistic plan to educate its black workers and run the plantation with them as a cooperative. When that plan failed, Stearns offered parcels of the land for sale to black families as an alternative means to support black economic development. Stearns struggled to manage his own holdings profitably, and after a few years he abandoned the venture and returned north.

In a book he published soon after leaving Georgia, Stearns painted for northern readers a bleak picture of the intellectual and moral underdevelopment (as he characterized it) of formerly enslaved African Americans. At the same time, he denounced white southerners as unrepentant rebels who were determined to keep African Americans in political and economic subjection. In these excerpts, Stearns gives a disapproving account of the religiosity of his plantation’s black workers, who were chiefly Baptists.

[“The greatest obstacle in the way of their improvement”]

I now come to the religion of the blacks, and truth will require of me great “plainness of speech.” A more melancholy misnomer than that of the Christian religion, as applied to the heathenish observances of the plantation blacks, cannot be conceived. [...] To see a race so thoroughly demented as to call insane yellings and violent contortions of body, totally disconnected from any kind of an idea, the Christian religion is melancholy indeed. I am constrained to say, “If the light that is in them be darkness, how great is that darkness.” It is hard to say that their false religion is the greatest obstacle in the way of their improvement, and yet honesty compels me to make the assertion. The so-called “saints” on my plantation were invariably the worst people I had: more dishonest, disobedient, lazy, less interested in education and in every other good thing than those they facetiously termed “sinner men.” [...] I tried to be charitable towards their religion, permitting them to hold their meetings at the close of ours, and I often remained to witness their unhallowed performances. But a regard for consistency led me at length to withdraw all support from their religious mummery; for such, and nothing else, are these so-called religious services on the plantations. [...]

In every department of life, they fail to apply the sublime principles of the Christian religion to their conduct. Indeed, they do not seem to comprehend the idea that religion imposes upon them any duties in reference to others and especially towards their employers. At the beginning of each year, our hands were required to sign a contract agreeing to perform certain specified duties, in return for which we agreed to pay them a certain sum of money. But it was almost impossible to make even the most pious ones realize that, after having signed this contract, they were bound to keep it sacredly [except] so far as it suited them so to do; and any attempt on our part to enforce its provisions was pronounced by them the acme of oppression—as worse than the “rebs” served them. In lieu of other penalties, we relied on fines for non-performance of duties, all of which were specified beforehand in the contract so that there could be no

misunderstanding in the matter. These fines were trivial, and some of them were as follows: “for profane swearing, 25¢,” “abuse of animals in their charge, 25¢,” “beating one’s wife, 50¢,” “refusal to work, 50¢,” “stealing, \$5.00,” and so on. But not one of them was ever paid without a solemn protest at its injustice. [Even i]f they had agreed to obey all our orders with alacrity and never to be saucy or impudent to their employers, still they could not comprehend why they should obey an order they did not like or why refrain from insulting us when so prompted. It was all oppression on our part whenever we attempted to enforce obedience, and God knows we were lenient enough towards them. One year, the colored preacher, in other respects a noble fellow, was the worst person on the place to obey our orders. He paid no attention whatever to our wishes, expressed or implied, unless the notion suited him. His idea was that he was to be the judge of the propriety of every order, and if it did not seem to him a reasonable one, he would disregard it entirely. Of course, a planter’s life must be a very delightful one under such circumstances. [...]

But the point now under consideration is the failure of the black people’s religion to make them obedient laborers. It must be continually borne in mind, in this portion of our work, that the object aimed at is simply to show the utter falsity of the pretensions of the blacks to be in possession of the religion taught by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Of course they were religious, as the Jews, Mohammedans, and Pagans were religious; but in no particular was their religion a counterpart of that religion whose fruits of holiness are declared by its founder to be the only test of its genuineness. The question may be asked: Why am I so anxious to prove this point? [Even i]f the religion of the blacks is a spurious one, why not leave them in the enjoyment of it so long as it suits their capacity? My answer is that first and foremost in the regeneration of any nation or people, must their religious institutions be molded into the forms of morality [...] Therefore, if you would reform the freedmen of the South, you must commence with their religion, and no efforts corresponding with the mighty interests at stake will ever be put forth to accomplish this task until the Northern people are made fully acquainted with the hideous evil here exposed. Northern teachers and laborers have an immense task before them; and it is my solemn conviction that unless it is resolutely undertaken, 25 years from today will find the schools and all Northern appliances for the regeneration of the freedmen swamped and swept entirely out of sight by the fearful waves of social vice engendered and taught by the religion of the Southern negroes. [...]

[“Exercises almost precisely like those of the heathen”]

Their religious exercises are of a novel character, and I will endeavor to describe them briefly. At about nine o’clock in the evening, they collect together [...] After all have assembled, the preacher in charge—a man, if possible, more ignorant than the remainder—[...] attempts to talk to them; but in these plantation meetings, it would puzzle a spectator to comprehend the meaning of a single sentence uttered, although doubtless they all have a meaning to the initiated. Often the preacher, who is usually one of the plantation hands, becomes very much excited, foams at the mouth, and stamps furiously on the floor, frequently striking the floor vehemently with the legs of the chair behind which he attempts to stand, so that your anxiety is aroused for the safety of both floor and chair. Some of them make somewhat sensible remarks, founded on what they have heard others say, but I have heard them speak when not one intelligent sentence was uttered through the whole of the discourse. [...]

The prayer is generally of great length and full of grandiloquent expressions, borrowed from some white brother or more talented colored one, strung together utterly regardless of their meaning and repeated over and over again an innumerable number of times, and the whole uttered in a tone [...] which is quite sure to arouse every tired sleeper on the plantation. This prayer, loud as it is, is sometimes half drowned by the utterances and groanings of others, so that sometimes it is almost impossible to tell who, in reality, is praying. Their meetings are usually continued until midnight and quite often until the break of day; for each brother having a "call to preach" is obliged to "clear his skirts of the blood of his hearers" at every meeting he attends, and as nearly every brother has this call, it is impossible for their meetings to be of much less duration.

Just before they break up—when "the Spirit is upon them," as they term it—they engage in a kind of Shaker dance which they term, singularly enough, "shouting." [...] A ring of singers is formed in an open space in the room and they, without holding on to each other's hands, walk slowly around and around in a circle, the back of the foremost one coming close to the front side of the succeeding brother or sister. They then utter a kind of melodious chant, which gradually increases in strength and in noise until it fairly shakes the house, and it can be heard for a long distance. This chant is responded to, at intervals, by a grand chorus composed of all the audience, for they are all singers, which response is almost invariably the same. The dancers usually bend their bodies into an angle of about 45 degrees and, thus bent, march around, accompanying their steps, every second or so, with a quick jerking motion, or jump, which I can compare to nothing else than the brisk jumping of a frog, only this is very regular [...] The performers also accompany the jerking of their bodies with a corresponding clapping of their hands and motion of their arms. The songs are mere repetitions of some meaningless sentences, not to be found in any hymnbook in creation but handed down by tradition from their ancestors, of whose ceremonies, in their native lands, these gyrations are supposed to be an imitation. Occasionally, one of the most zealous of the sisters throws herself up so as to nearly touch the ceiling over their heads, and then falls down helplessly into the eager arms of some stout brother who springs forward with alacrity to receive her.

I know of nothing similar to this dancing or shouting in the religious exercises of any other class of people. It is entirely unknown among the white Christians here. One of the leading members of a white church near here told me the other day that he had never witnessed it until recently, and he was so shocked with its seeming indecorousness that he had refused to aid the blacks in building a church unless they would agree to dispense with these performances. Many of the intelligent blacks here, and in Augusta, are also opposed to them, as they are to this whole system of "all-night" meetings. A Northern gentleman, who has spent two years upon the coast of Africa, after witnessing these exercises told me they were almost precisely like those of the heathen blacks in Africa, only that the latter did not allude to the one God of the Christians. Another Northern gentleman, who had visited the Fejee Islands, told me that these services resembled, very nearly, those of the cannibal worshippers on those ill-fated islands, only that ours were not followed by a feast on human flesh, as he had witnessed in the case of the islands mentioned.

Source: Charles Stearns, *The Black Man of the South, and the Rebels; Or, The Characteristics of the Former, and the Recent Outrages of the Latter* (New York: American News Co., 1872), 345-346, 363-365, 369-372, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/miun.ab15152.0001.001>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Italicized section headings added by Duffy. Additional paragraph and sentence breaks inserted for readability. An erroneous plural possessive converted to singular, and a seemingly erroneous instance of past tense converted to present tense. Spelling Americanized or modernized, except for names. Spelled-out numbers converted to numerals. Capitalization, punctuation, and the formatting of monetary amounts emended in line with modern conventions. Unnecessary use of italics for emphasis omitted.

The use of lowercase for the racial labels, *black*, *negro*, *colored*, and *white* reproduces the usage of the source publication. The capitalizing of *Pagans*, *South*, and *Northern* and the use of lowercase for “*rebs*” likewise replicate the source. The word *Christian*, inconsistently capitalized in the source, is consistently capitalized here. An instance of *spirit*, lowercase in the source, has been capitalized to clarify that the reference is to the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit.

These edited excerpts from Stearns’s book are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



© 2024 by John-Charles Duffy. Except as otherwise noted, this work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–Share Alike 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

All rights are reserved for the flag-shaped “Empire and American Religion” logo; if you alter this work, you may not reproduce the logo. Use of the Creative Commons license icon is subject to the Creative Commons Trademark Policy.