



## Religion and violence at Harpers Ferry (1859)

*In October 1859, white abolitionist John Brown led about 20 men, white and black, in an armed raid of Harpers Ferry, Virginia (present-day West Virginia), where a federal armory was located. Brown was already an outlaw, wanted by law enforcement, but also admired by many northerners, for acts of armed resistance to slavery that he had performed in Kansas and Missouri. The Harpers Ferry raid was meant to be the first strike in a guerilla war against slaveholders in the southeastern states, a war that Brown envisioned would be waged by a growing army of escapees from slavery operating out of the Appalachians under his leadership. Brown's raiders seized the Harpers Ferry armory and took local whites as hostages, leading to a standoff with white militias mustered from surrounding communities; but few enslaved blacks rallied to the raiders, and the raiders were overpowered when federal troops reached the town. Among those killed during the fighting were two of Brown's sons. Brown was captured alive, tried by the state of Virginia, and hanged in December 1859.*

*Abolitionists' reactions to the Harpers Ferry raid were mixed, but many glorified Brown as a warrior for God and a Christian martyr. Brown himself—a New England-born Congregationalist, who had once aspired to be a minister—cultivated his image as pious warrior and martyr through widely reported interviews and speeches he gave following his arrest and through the many letters he wrote from jail before his execution. The texts collected here show different ways that Brown and his supporters invoked religion to legitimate the raiders' resort to violence and to frame the raiders' own violent deaths—Brown's execution, above all—as Christlike martyrdom. These texts also illustrate how the glorification of Brown and the Harpers Ferry raid intensified the sectional conflict over slavery, which two years later would escalate into the Civil War.*

### **1. Osborne Anderson, a freeborn African American and Harpers Ferry raider who escaped capture, recalls prayers that were offered for the raid's success on the day it began** (events described: 1859; account published: 1861)

On Sunday morning, October 16th, Captain Brown arose earlier than usual and called his men down to worship. He read a chapter from the Bible, applicable to the condition of the slaves and our duty as their brethren, and then offered up a fervent prayer to God to assist in the liberation of the bondmen in that slaveholding land. The services were impressive beyond expression. [...]

On the Sunday evening of the outbreak, when we visited the plantations and acquainted the slaves with our purpose to effect their liberation, the greatest enthusiasm was manifested by them—joy and hilarity beamed from every countenance. One old mother, white-haired from age and borne down with the labors of many years in bonds, when told of the work in hand, replied: “God bless you! God bless you!” She then kissed the party at her house and requested all to kneel, which we did, and she offered prayer to God for his blessing on the enterprise and our success.

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### **2. In New England, white intellectual Henry Thoreau delivers, as a lecture, one of the first public defenses of John Brown and the Harpers Ferry raid** (October 30, 1859)

Captain Brown [...is] a man such as the sun may not rise upon again in this benighted land, to

whose making went the costliest material, the finest adamant; sent to be the redeemer of those in captivity; and the only use to which you can put him is to hang him at the end of a rope! You who pretend to care for Christ crucified, consider what you are about to do to him who offered himself to be the savior of four millions of men. [...]

Some eighteen hundred years ago, Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links.

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### **3. While in jail, awaiting sentencing, John Brown replies to fan mail from “E. B.,” a Quaker woman in New England** (October 27 and November 1, 1859)

[*E. B. to John Brown:*] Since thy arrest, I have often thought of thee and have wished that [...] I might console thee in thy confinement. [...] You can never know how very many dear Friends love thee with all their hearts for thy brave efforts in behalf of the poor oppressed; and though we, who are non-resistants and religiously believe it better to reform by moral, and not by carnal, weapons, could not approve of bloodshed, yet we know thee was animated by the most generous and philanthropic motives. Very many thousands openly approve thy intentions, though most Friends would not think it right to take up arms. Thousands pray for thee every day; and, oh, I do pray that God will be with thy soul. Posterity will do thee justice. If Moses led out the thousands of Jewish slaves from their bondage, and God destroyed the Egyptians in the sea because they went after the Israelites to bring them back to slavery, then surely, by the same reasoning, we may judge thee a deliverer who wished to release millions from a more cruel oppression. If the American people honor Washington for resisting with bloodshed, for seven years, an unjust tax, how much more ought thou to be honored for seeking to free the poor slaves! [...]

[*John Brown replies:*] Your most cheering letter of 27th of October is received, and may the Lord reward you a thousandfold for the kind feeling you express towards me, but more especially for your fidelity to the “poor that cry, and those that have no help.” [...] You know that Christ once armed Peter. So also in my case, I think he put a sword into my hand and there continued it so long as he saw best [...] I do not feel conscious of guilt in taking up arms; and had it been in behalf of the rich and powerful, the intelligent, the great (as men count greatness), or those who form enactments to suit themselves and corrupt others, or some of their friends, that I interfered, suffered, sacrificed, and fell, it would have been [deemed] doing very well.

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### **4. John Brown speaks in court on the occasion of his sentencing** (November 2, 1859)

This court acknowledges too, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here, which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament, that teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them. I endeavored to act up to these instructions. I say I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done, in behalf of his despised poor was no wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice and mingle my blood further with the

blood of my children—and with the blood of the millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments—I submit. So let it be done!

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**5. African American abolitionist Charles Langston defends Brown and the Harpers Ferry raid in a letter published in an Ohio newspaper** (November 18, 1859)

Does not the Holy Bible teach that it is the duty of the strong and powerful to assist the weak and helpless, that the rich should succor the poor and needy? Does it not command us to remember those in bonds as being bound with them? Does it not tell us to loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, and let the oppressed go free? Does not the Bible plainly say, “Whatsoever ye would that men shall do to you, do ye even so to them”? And further: “He that stealeth a man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death.”

Did not Capt. Brown act in consonance with these biblical principles and injunctions? He went into Virginia to aid the afflicted and the helpless, to assist the weak, and to relieve the poor and needy. To undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, to do to others as he would have them do to him. And above all, to put to death, as the papers tell us, those who steal men and sell them and [those] in whose hands stolen men are found. His actions, then, are only the results of his faithfulness to the plain teaching of the word of God.

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**6. A Kentucky politician argues, in an anonymous editorial, that Virginia governor Henry Wise should commute Brown’s death sentence** (November 18, 1859)

[T]here are many reasons why we think it expedient that his life should be spared. Not that we do not think he deserves to die, if ever a traitor and a murderer and a robber did; but it would place the South upon a vantage ground in the eyes of the whole world. It would show that the spirit of Legree<sup>a</sup> does not pervade our people—that, conscious of the rectitude and humanity of our institutions, we can afford to be magnanimous to the very Barabbas of our enemies. [...]

If old John Brown is executed, there will be thousands to dip their handkerchiefs in his blood; relics of the martyr will be paraded throughout the North; pilgrimages will be made to his grave, and we should not be surprised to hear of miracles wrought there as at the tomb of Thomas à Becket. The blood of this martyr would be as seed to this fanatical church, and as that of Joe Smith to the church of Latter-Day Saints. It could be called in attestation of the purity of their faith, and Governor Wise would be compared to Julian the Apostate [...]

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**7. An anonymous letter written from Bordentown, New Jersey, issues a death threat to Governor Wise** (November 22, 1859)

Sir: Allow me to say to you that if the infamous proceedings which a Virginia “court of law” has

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<sup>a</sup> *Simon Legree, a fictional character in the 1852 novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin, written by white anti-slavery activist Harriet Beecher Stowe.*

said should take place in the case of John Brown and his men, I myself will tell you to look well to the consequences, as the annihilation of the entire South will ensue at the hands of Northern men and freemen—men who are not to be driven by the planter’s lash but proudly advance, according to the will of heaven, to crush out tyranny. If you, contrary to the direct will of God, will not only hold slaves as chattel but murder—aye, murder—a man who is acting under the direct supervision of Almighty God, then I say the blood be upon your own head. Governor Wise, a man—no, not a man, a dastardly coward—shall suffer the sequence of his hasty actions in the matter. ☞ The assassin’s knife can yet reach his black heart, and there shall it be sheathed. [...]

Adieu from your sincere enemy,  
A Martyr’s Friend

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**8. A newspaper in Washington DC predicts that the widespread glorification of Brown will prompt southern states to move toward political independence** (c. November 25, 1859)

That the South can afford to live under a government, the majority of whose subjects or citizens regard John Brown as a martyr and Christian hero, rather than a murderer and robber, and act up to those sentiments or countenance others in so doing, is a preposterous idea [...]

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**9. White participants in a multi-denominational prayer service, held in New York City on the day of Brown’s execution, voice varying degrees of sympathy** (December 2, 1859)

Dr. Cheever<sup>b</sup> read a passage of scripture relating to Stephen’s martyrdom, drawing a parallel between John Brown and the apostle. He considered John Brown as God’s first martyr in this land for the anti-slavery cause.

Mr. Tappan made a prayer, speaking of Brown as a Christian martyr in the hands of an infuriated mob and praying that posterity would rise up and call him blessed. [...]

Mr. Fairbanks prayed, saying: It was sad that there were laws in the nineteenth century to put the Christian to death for obeying the laws of God. It was sad that the government was on the side of the oppressor and the unjust laws and [was] pledged to extend their power. He prayed that God would make John Brown’s death to call the attention of every slaveholder to the sin of slavery, until they should break every yoke and let the oppressed go free.

Dr. Ritter said he did not come here to exonerate John Brown and his associates, although he thought they were conscientiously wrong. He thought it a proper occasion to pray for John Brown, but he hoped they would say nothing that would lead it to be supposed that they did not

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<sup>b</sup> *George B. Cheever, the white minister of the Congregational church where the prayer service was held. “Mr. Tappan,” named in the next paragraph, is Lewis Tappan, a prominent white abolitionist. “Mr. Fairbanks,” “Dr. Ritter,” and “Rev. Mr. Sloan” are likely Dexter Fairbank, a member of Cheever’s church; Thomas Ritter, a physician; and James R. W. Sloane, a Presbyterian minister. All three were white anti-slavery activists. (Sloane’s statement that he wasn’t an abolitionist before that day is hyperbole.)*

know and believe that Brown and his associates were in error. They could praise Brown's heroism and honest aversion to slavery and pray for him consistently. He thought that the whole occurrence would tend to the overthrow of slavery. [...]

Dr. Cheever suggested the immediate time was the best for making the collection for Brown's family. While the plates were being passed, he took occasion to cite a passage from John Milton to sustain John Brown, ending with the following: They dispute as to "precedents, forms, and circumstances when the commonwealth nigh perishes for want of deeds in substance, done with just and faithful expedition." "John Brown's action," said Dr. Cheever, "stands unshakable in righteousness and truth." (*Prolonged plaudits.*)

Rev. Mr. Sloan said he had not believed that John Brown would be executed until he read it in the papers this evening. If proper demonstrations had been made, John Brown would be now alive. (*Applause.*) [...] Virginia's chivalry was nothing but a laughingstock. Virginia could be whipped easily. (*Applause.*) [...] He never was an abolitionist until this afternoon (*applause*); but now he had determined to be a rabid abolitionist and do all he could to humiliate the South. That insolent, oppressive, pauper people must be humbled.

Mr. Fairbanks suggested that the brother was out of order. The meeting was called for prayer.

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#### **10. A British newspaper reports on expressions of support for Brown made in northern states on the day of his execution** (December 2, 1859)

In most of the cities of the northern states, great sympathy was expressed for Brown. At Boston, the colored tradesmen closed their shops on the day of execution, and the colored people seen in the streets wore crape on their arms or crape rosettes on their breasts. In the evening, there was a large meeting of the colored people in Tremont Temple,<sup>c</sup> and many of the most prominent abolitionists of New England were present. One of the speakers said that the heinous offense of Pontius Pilate in crucifying our Savior whitened into virtue when compared with that of Governor Wise of Virginia in his course towards John Brown. Another speaker characterized Governor Wise as the modern Pontius Pilate. In some towns, the bells were tolled for "the sad event of the day"; and in many places, the colored people—as a class, very generally—suspended their customary business and spent the day in public meetings, in prayer, singing, and listening to addresses.

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#### **11. African Americans meeting in a black Baptist church in Detroit issue resolutions honoring Brown on the day of his execution** (December 2, 1859)

WHEREAS, [...O]ur much beloved and highly esteemed friend, Old Capt. John Brown, [...] boldly

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<sup>c</sup> Tremont Temple was a Baptist church in Boston, predominantly white but racially integrated and known for a commitment to progressive social causes. The speaker who said that Wise's treatment of Brown was worse than Pilate's treatment of Jesus was John Q. A. Griffins, a white politician then serving in the Massachusetts state legislature. The speaker who dubbed Wise a modern Pontius Pilate was white abolitionist Samuel E. Sewall.

and freely delivered up his life today as a ransom for our enslaved race, and thereby, “solitary and alone,” he has put a liberty ball in motion which shall continue to roll and gather strength until the last vestige of human slavery within this nation shall have been crushed beneath its ponderous weight —THEREFORE,

RESOLVED, That we hold the name of Old Capt. John Brown in the most sacred remembrance as the first disinterested martyr for our liberty, who, upon the true Christian principle of his divine Lord and Master, has freely delivered up his life for the liberty of our race in this country. Therefore will we ever vindicate his character, throughout all coming time, as our temporal redeemer, whose name shall never die [...]

[I]t was resolved that the several colored churches be dressed in mourning for thirty days and that an appointment be made for the preaching of the funeral sermon of our much beloved friend within that period.

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## 12. A Baltimore newspaper reprints an editorial from a Philadelphia newspaper, deploring Brown’s glorification (December 5, 1859)

How [...] can we understand the speeches which were made, in which Brown was held up to the world as a hero and a saint, in which he was compared with the great martyrs of liberty and his name pronounced one of the immortal names which will be held in everlasting and grateful remembrance? Now are we to be told in this nineteenth century, living in a civilized and professedly Christian land, and by ministers of the gospel too, that John Brown was a model man, that his character and conduct were worthy of approbation, that his bloodthirsty spirit should receive our sympathy, that his example should be held up to the imitation of the young—of our own children—and that his attempt to excite a servile insurrection and murder, when these are committed in the guise of philanthropy, are not crimes but exalted virtues? Are the teachings and example of the meek and lowly Jesus—of the Prince of Peace—to be superseded by the gospel of John Brown as promulgated and illustrated at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia? [...] It is an alarming evidence of the unsoundness of the public mind that such sentiments should have been uttered or received with approval; and we may well distrust the philanthropy which would thus confound all our notions of right and wrong and would canonize the man of violence and blood as a Christian saint and martyr.

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2. Henry D. Thoreau, “A Plea for Capt. John Brown,” in *Echoes of Harper’s Ferry*, ed. James Redpath (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 40-41, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hnlian>. Public domain, Google-digitized.
3. E. B. to John Brown, October 27, 1859, and John Brown to E. B., November 1, 1859, as reproduced in James Redpath, *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 348-349, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/fk9b56ds7j>. Public domain. An instance of *or* emended to *of* for intelligibility. A vocative *O* converted to exclamatory *oh*.

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5. C. H. Langston, “A Card” (letter to the editor), *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, November 18, 1859, 2. Digital scan available via Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers. Text is public domain in the United States because published in the United States before 1923. An instance of *man* emended to *men* to avoid a grammatical infelicity and to more accurately reproduce a biblical quotation. Sentence fragments retained from the source.
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7. “A Martyr’s Friend” to “Sir,” November 22, 1859, MS14-0062, John Brown/Boyd B. Stutler Collection Database, West Virginia Memory Project, West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture, and History. Transcribed from a digital scan available at <https://archive.wvculture.org/history/wvmemory/jbdetail.aspx?Type=Text&Id=1570>. The dangling *if*-clause in the letter’s first sentence replicates the manuscript. The printed icon of a pointing finger represents a hand-drawn version of the same symbol that appears in the manuscript.
8. Editorial, *Washington Star*, no date given, as quoted in *The Liberator*, November 25, 1859, 1. Digital scan available via Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers. Text is public domain in the United States because published in the United States before 1923. A typographical error in the source publication corrected. Brown biographer Oswald Garrison Villard erroneously referenced *Baltimore Sun*, November 28, 1859, as a source for this text, an error repeated by subsequent authors into the 21st century. Villard, *John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910), 568, 655 n. 38.
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10. “Summary,” *Liverpool Mercury*, December 17, 1859, 4. Digital scan available via the British Newspaper Archive. Text is public domain under British copyright law because more than 70 years have elapsed since the publication of this unsigned article.
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