

Introduction

Reconfiguring Sainthood

I acknowledge no man in human form.

—John Brown, under interrogation at
Harper's Ferry, October 19, 1859¹

Following the lead of biographers and journalists, John Brown has often been portrayed in fiction and film as a white religious fanatic who was obsessed with the violent destruction of slavery. He is especially remembered for his failed raid at Harper's Ferry [West] Virginia, where he led a small band of white and black men in seizing a government armory in October 1859. Born in 1800, he spent most of his fifty-nine years in pursuit of business success, though failing for the most part to achieve his goals. In the decade prior to the Civil War, abolitionists intensified their attempts to aid and assist fugitive slaves and other blacks resisting the long reach of slavery into the North. But whereas most of them adhered to pacifism, Brown had steadily honed his belief in the forceful overthrow of slavery until he himself determined to lead the effort.

A deeply religious man and father of a large family, he believed that slavery was not going to relent in the face of political compromise or moral outcries from abolitionists. When pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces clashed in the newly opened Kansas territory in 1856, Brown and his family stood at the epicenter of the crisis as determined enemies of slavery and—as a minority within a minority—passionate allies of the black community. Though he and others fought fire with fire against pro-slavery terrorists who had initiated the fighting and excelled in cruelty, Brown's many detractors have increasingly emphasized his role in the violent Kansas conflict to the point of suggesting he was “the father of

modern terrorism.” Yet he is best known in history for the raid on Harper’s Ferry—though its underlying strategy and purpose are usually misunderstood and misrepresented in popular narratives.

After the failure of the raid, Brown and his surviving men were captured, tried, and hanged by the State of Virginia. Lionized in the North and hated in the South, he was a legend even before he climbed the gallows’ steps on December 2, 1859. After the Civil War broke out in 1861, a playful soldier’s song became associated with him, and “John Brown’s Body” became the fighting anthem of the Union army. At the time, however, Abraham Lincoln described him as the kind of “enthusiast” who “broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them.” But even Lincoln could not escape John Brown, whose spirit seems to have loomed over the country throughout the Civil War.²

John Brown has had zealous friends but far more enemies, many of whom deeply resent his militant role on behalf of black liberation. To this day, many white American scholars, writers, and clergymen overtly dismiss him for what they perceive as misguided zeal and religious fanaticism. But underlying their biased narratives is often the contempt of American racial scorn—the resentment that a *white man* would go to the point of killing other whites on behalf of black freedom. In the narratives of many scholars and journalists, terms like “fanatic,” “insane,” “violent,” and “obsessed” are commonly used to describe John Brown.³ These assessments have in turn informed standard history textbooks as well as popular films and novels, leaving the public with a hazy, sinister impression of the man who supposedly betrayed his race by going too far on behalf of black freedom. As one of my parishioners said when he heard about my interest in John Brown, “*Didn’t he kill people?*”

Perhaps John Brown has been all but forgotten by most African Americans today, but until recently he has been viewed with great admiration and affection, even reverence, by many in the black community. African Americans have always understood the reason for the dismissal of John Brown by white society, knowing that their liberation struggle has never been a priority on our nation’s agenda. Beginning with the founding fathers, freedom and justice for black people was never intrinsic to the American dream, nor was it even so for Abraham Lincoln, the so-called Great Emancipator. Brown, on the other hand, put black liberation first and foremost—not only as a political belief but as a personal ambition.

As black people have long realized, their famous ally is considered fanatical and insane largely because he presumed their humanity in a society North and South that categorically dehumanized them. White Americans have long glorified “violence” and “fanaticism” when it pertained to their nationalistic interests. For instance, the expansion of white settlers into Mexican territory and the establishment of Texas in the nineteenth century was largely premised upon the expansion of black enslavement. In contrast to Brown’s efforts to liberate slaves at Harper’s Ferry, the violent efforts of pro-slavery settlers culminating in the bloody Alamo incident of 1836 is commonly perceived as heroic and noble, even though the famous white insurgents were occupying land belonging to a government and nation that prohibited slavery.

Speaking to his organization after making the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964, Malcolm X raised the issue of the white American perception and portrayal of John Brown. Speaking about potential white allies (which he now welcomed), the Muslim leader suggested that a good litmus test would be to ask them what they thought of the famous abolitionist. “You know what John Brown did? He went to war. He was a white man who went to war against white people to help free slaves.” Malcolm continued:

White people call John Brown a nut. Go read the history, go read what all of them say about John Brown. They’re trying to make it look like he was a nut, a fanatic. They made a movie on it, I saw a movie on the screen one night. Why, I would be afraid to get near John Brown if I go by what other white folks say about him.

The movie that Malcolm saw “on the screen one night” was probably *Santa Fe Trail*, released in 1940 (six years before he was incarcerated). With an all-star cast including Raymond Massey, Olivia De Havilland, Errol Flynn, Van Heflin, and Ronald Reagan, *Santa Fe Trail* was based on a pro-Southern screenplay that minimized the evil of slavery while portraying Brown as a deluded religious bandit whose crimes far outweighed his fanatical devotion to black liberation. Malcolm went on to prison (and the prison library), and apparently read the prominent biographies of Brown too. As a “Black Muslim,” he was neither free nor willing to acknowledge the positive contributions of certain whites, but as an independent leader, Malcolm could speak his mind on the common belief that John Brown was crazy.

But they depict him in this image because he was willing to shed blood to free the slaves. And any white man who is ready and willing to shed blood for your freedom—in the sight of other whites, he’s nuts. . . . So when you want to know good white folks in history where black people are concerned, go read the history of John Brown. That was what I call a white liberal. But those other kind, they are questionable.⁴

But if Brown is misunderstood by modern scholars and writers, it is also because of his strong religious beliefs. However different their political and social views, even his nineteenth-century opponents had a better understanding of his religious world view than do many biographers and scholars today. That he considered himself “an instrument of Providence” smacks of delusion and fanaticism in modern and postmodern perceptions. That he likewise believed that all of the Christian scriptures reflect the same God at work in the history of redemption is likewise indigestible to most people in a post-Christian society. All the more reason, then, for a religiously oriented portrayal of the famous abolitionist. Indeed, such an approach suits him, as he might have put it, “midling well.”

Brown was a man of faith, and well read in the Bible and Christian literature. Like many Christians, he was converted as a youth, and he grew up in a theologically conservative, evangelical, and Calvinist home. Though his early intention to study for the ministry did not work out, Brown was a founding church member, Bible teacher, and a devoted layman throughout his life. Even after he committed himself full time to the abolitionist struggle, he remained a church attender and faithful Bible student. Furthermore, he and his family represented a unique strand of the abolitionist movement. A devotedly Christian people who believed the Bible to be the inspired and infallible word of God, they were also biblical egalitarians—radical dissenters from the racialist beliefs of many white Christians. The Browns applied the biblical doctrine of *humanity the image of God* to the frontier as well as the slave market, and were thus righteously indignant at the social, political, and ecclesiastical realities of a society steeped in white supremacy. Like many Christian abolitionists, the Browns understood the Golden Rule as a mandate to fight slavery by undermining it in overt and covert political acts, such as anti-slavery groups, participation in the underground railroad, and support of candidates who held similar opinions regarding slavery. John Brown’s war on slavery was undoubtedly an extension of the Christian legacy of his family.

As an evangelical Christian, he not only read the Bible as God's word, he read the Bible as *God's word to John Brown*. He believed that the scriptures continued to speak to life situations, radiating fresh truth and directives without obscuring its original and primary meaning. For him, God was speaking afresh on the enslavement of the African, and this was the ongoing theme of his devotional life. It guided his actions, guarded his values, and gave him strength. His piety was inseparable from his deeply felt call to destroy slavery. And though there is yet a need for studies of greater clarity and depth concerning his militant activities, my goal here is to present *the kind of man John Brown was* vis-à-vis his religious context and personal spirituality.

Though Brown's most successful biographer to date has recognized the centrality of religion in his narrative, he presents a negative interpretation of his Christianity—"the Calvinist tradition of an austere, implacable God who demanded the most exacting obedience from the sinful creatures He put on trial in this world." But this is a reading of Calvinistic Christianity from outside the theological and experiential boundaries in which Brown and many other Christians lived. Perceived as a Puritan "fanatic," his violent opposition to slavery is thus thought to be consistent with his belief in "the wrathful Jehovah of ancient Israel."⁵ These assumptions reflect an inadequate understanding of the theology and spirituality of the Protestant Reformation, a deficiency that is easily overlooked in the post-Christian era academy. But they also lend themselves to skewed political portrayals of John Brown. In fact, his vision was premised upon a thoroughly biblical spirituality rooted theologically and ethically in the teachings of Jesus and the apostles *as much as* the Hebrew prophets and Old Testament accounts regarding the slaying of pagan tribes.

History is filled with stories of men and women who have felt compelled, guided, protected, and empowered by forces beyond themselves. In the name of objectivity historians may strip away the supposed myths, superstitions, and biases of the spiritual and supernatural from biography. However, in the end they may strip truth away from the story too. As E. Harris Harbison advised, we should be sensitive to "the unpredictable and sometimes unbelievable redemptive forces in history." Perhaps we will then sense an inscrutable purpose "behind both the personal decisions and the vast impersonal forces of history." At least, a religious analysis should allow us to ponder and wonder more than dogmatize or doubt.⁶

If we are to study John Brown from a religious perspective, then we cannot afford to ignore or stigmatize his religious faith as fanaticism and delusion. Neither should we apologize for acknowledging the still, small voice that he believed he heard, and the forces that he may have sensed flowing around and through him. Brown's first biographers are often charged with having written panegyrics lined with appeals to God's purpose.⁷ The modern historian responds by saying that we are to strive for a neutral approach to the fiery abolitionist. We are also to reject any notion of sainthood.

In traditional religious terms, a saint is thought to be of an uncommonly holy character, virtually transcending the fallen human condition. This concept of sainthood evolved in the ancient church, originating with the Eucharistic veneration of martyred Christians. In time this veneration became cultic, forcing theologians to underscore the difference between worshiping God and honoring saints. Later, Protestant theologians pointed out that according to the Bible a saint was merely a believer—one set apart from the world through salvation in Jesus Christ. No longer seen as divine intercessors or holy models, saints were neither disrespected nor venerated by Protestants. Interestingly, this would have been the definition of sainthood employed by John Brown. Perhaps it is also a key to studying his life from a religious standpoint.

One would not claim John Brown to have been a saint in the popular sense of the term. He was clearly imperfect, as his story shows. As a husband, father, businessman, and soldier, he demonstrated his imperfections and would readily have acknowledged them in keeping with his belief in sinful human nature. But he was also a sincere and remarkably devout Christian. Of course, when it came to the subject of slavery, Brown could *burn*, and people who knew him saw the flame of hatred in his eyes, heard it in his voice, and felt it in his touch. Though he was hardly the only abolitionist to equate chattel slavery with sin, his struggle against slavery was far more personal and religious than it was for many abolitionists, just as his respect and affection for black people was far more personal and religious than it was for most enemies of slavery. Decades after his death, John Brown remained a bright light shining on a dark frontier of political betrayal and social rejection for many black people. Harriet Tubman, a leader whose spirituality has yet to be adequately considered, spoke of him in Christlike terms, so fond was his memory to her and her troubled people.⁸

All of this is to say that John Brown was very much a saint in his own way, if the term is understood in the Protestant sense. He was a sincere believer, however imperfect, also believing himself carried along by God's grace and mercy. By reconfiguring our notion of sainthood we find a fitting category for him. To study him as a Protestant saint we must weigh him in the balance of history, evaluating and criticizing him accordingly. Yet at the same time we should remember what William Roscoe Thayer once wrote, that we are "reporting from the heart of human life matters too sacred to be twisted in the narration to suit private opinion."

Upon his capture at Harper's Ferry, Brown was interviewed by a number of politicians and spectators, all of them curious to see and hear the bruised, bloodied, warrior who had opened the flood gates of tribulation upon the South. As he answered questions posed by his Southern captors, Congressman C. L. Vallandigham—the only Northern politician present—entered the room and interrupted the interview by asking, "Mr. Brown, who sent you here?" Being from Ohio, Vallandigham was probably just as determined to disassociate himself from the raid as he was to sniff out any hint of anti-slavery conspiracy among his bitter opponents at home. Like most Northern politicians in the antebellum period, Vallandigham was far more concerned about protecting Southern sensibilities and avoiding civil war than he was about liberating three million enslaved black people. "No man sent me here," Brown answered candidly. "It was my own prompting and that of my Maker, or that of the Devil—whichever you please to ascribe it to. I acknowledge no man in human form."⁹

John Brown gave his interrogators the prerogative to draw their own conclusions about him, but either way he assumed they would recognize the working of forces beyond himself. Whether those forces were supernatural is a question that cannot be answered by historical inquiry alone. However, recognizing the depth and value of Brown's religious life and the religious world around him may at least help us to better understand his story as a Protestant saint—a unique believer whose urgent, fiery devotion to human liberation in some sense counterbalanced the injustice and indifference of a whole generation of white Americans.