THESIS: Many of the US slaveholders incorrectly interpreted religion to “prove” that slavery was a concept sanctioned by God.

TOPIC SENTENCE: The idea that the United States slavery system was “holy” was engrained in the minds of Americans by “advertising” it everywhere.

TOPIC SENTENCE: The beliefs of religion itself were also used in the argument for US slavery.

SUBTOPIC: The Puritans believed that only those with the closest relationship to God were actually Christians and would make it to heaven, and all the others were “of the world” and really were not of much purpose.

SUBTOPIC: “Slaveholding Not Sinful” pamphlet

TOPIC SENTENCE: These “minorities” were regarded as heathens for their different beliefs.
Religious Interpretation

Since perhaps the beginning of human existence, many people of the most successful societies in the history of the world have used other humans as slaves to accomplish their tasks for them. In some cases, these societies embedded the idea of slavery in their very foundations. Usually the division between slave and free was determined by economic or social status. However, the United States decided differently. Divisions were made between people with different skin color and cultures. In order for this to be deemed acceptable to those with accurate moral compasses, supporters of slavery looked to undisputable sources for proof. As a result, many of the US slaveholders incorrectly interpreted religion to “prove” that slavery was a concept sanctioned by God.

The idea that the United States slavery system was “holy” was engrained in the minds of Americans by “advertising” it everywhere. It was extremely common to name vessels after biblical references with names such as “Jesus of Lubeck’ and “John the Baptist”, and to have those ships blessed by preachers and the like. (Smedley 81) By naming all the “equipment” after biblical things, this would surely make it seem that slaveholders were carrying out God’s will. It didn’t stop at the ships. Even slaves were sometimes given new biblical names like Peter or John, all in the spirit of making things seem as if they were of a holy nature, carrying out God’s plan. Even the preachers played a special part in validating slavery.

These preachers, both Anglican and Puritan, had a powerful influence on the colonization process. From their pulpits and in their publications, they exhorted the public to become involved in the colonization of the New
World, a region seen as a new Canaan. And the commercial companies and promoters of colonization encouraged the clergy to advertise their schemes. (81)

With such encouragement from the word of God, and even the teachers of it, who could reasonably argue against slavery at this point and still retain their Christian reputation? No one. Such solid, unquestionable statements from these “holy” leaders made it impossible for anyone to argue against the concept of slavery. Anyone who dared voice their opposing thoughts were sure to be damned, just as one might end up being labeled a “terrorist” these days.

The beliefs of religion itself were also used in the argument for US slavery. The Puritans believed that only those with the closest relationship to God were actually Christians and would make it to heaven, and all the others were “of the world” and really were not of much purpose

Their theology relinquished the vast majority of souls on earth to be damned forever. Only the select few would ultimately enter the glorious kingdom of God. These were individuals who adhered strictly to Puritan ideals of proper behavior and who laid clams to personal salvation through faith. Knowledge of Christ, including a personal relationship with him, were prerequisites. In their strict division of the world into the saved and the damned, there was no explicit, or intrinsic, requirement of tolerance and understanding of others. And there was no commitment to humanistic values that might have inhibited or curtailed the excessive cruelty dispensed to the damned. Instead, the Puritans developed the very
convenient belief that all sinners, witches, and savages who opposed the word of God deserved the atrocities inflicted upon them. They were a fitting retribution for their opposition to the civilizing efforts of Christianity. (81-82)

Of course, many of the slaves brought over from foreign lands had their own culture, customs, and beliefs, which certainly did not agree with the Puritans. As a result, these foreigners were considered “of the world” and a waste to society. Still other religious people pointed to recent events and epidemics and proof that God’s will is for the slaves to be of a lower echelon than the US citizens. Famines and diseases, which were more common among the types of people used as slaves, would be pointed out as God’s attempt at thinning a population, or punishing them for their savage, rapacious, sometimes “heathen” ways.

Indeed, many of the so-called “minorities,” especially the Native Americans and African Americans, were regarded as evil heathens for their non-Christian beliefs in other gods and spirits, as well as what was considered by many Christians as immoral customs and behaviors such as the amount of clothing they wear, sexual ambiguity, and their social guidelines.

The Puritans and their church leaders soon concluded that if the savage could not be saved from himself, his extermination would be a worthy enterprise in the sight of the Lord. This notion of a God-given right to mistreat others, especially for private gain, runs through much of Western culture, and after the emergence of capitalism it became especially acute in North America. (82)
With such a negative image about the enslaved peoples, it was much easier for the devoted, sometimes well-intentioned Puritans to accept the fact that slavery was the appropriate thing to do. After all, wouldn’t it be better to treat such heathens with malice and let it be known to them that they are inferior, rather than appear to accept their culture and other beliefs to make it seem as if they approve of their ways? Puzzled as to what they should do, many of the people defaulted to following the crowd, and the crowd was very eagerly buying slaves and putting them to work. To cast aside any remaining doubt that this was a “moral” thing to, Reverend Samuel B. How published a pamphlet called “Slaveholding Not Sinful” in which presented the argument: “God took Abraham, a slaveholder, his children and his bought slaves into covenant with himself without expressing the slightest disapprobation of his holding slaves.” (How 2)

In these ways, and many others, the concepts of religion have been used to incorrectly prove slavery to be moral and logical. Vessels and even slaves were named after biblical references to give the illusion of God’s blessing, and many of the religious people fought endlessly to prove that slavery was condoned by God. God’s word was twisted and skewed to fit the message the slaveholders wanted to hear. With the strict beliefs of the Puritans, no one dared question such interpretations of God’s word lest they be strictly punished and labeled immoral. After all, who would want to be immoral?
Works Consulted


How, Samuel B. Slaveholding Not Sinful. New Brunswick, NJ, 1855.