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**RELIGION AND THE BLACK FAMILY IN  
THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY, 1865-1877**

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A dissertation submitted for the degree of MPhil by Research

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## **Abstract**

### **Religion and the Black Family in the Mississippi Valley, 1865-1877**

The purpose of this dissertation is to discover the influence of religion in the black family in the Mississippi Valley in the Reconstruction period (1865-1877), specifically focussing on Louisiana. The contemporary controversy over the problems facing black families in the United States creates a need for reassessment of the historical development of black people, which this study aims in part to answer. Reconstruction was a transition period during which black people who had been slaves adjusted to free society, and it is a period important to understanding the consequences of slavery and the future of blacks in the United States. Religion is a route into the study of black family nature and structure, as the churches attempted to play a role in shaping black lives after emancipation. Slavery was viewed as detrimental to normal family development, and the attitudes of church leaders towards marriage, parenting, the treatment of children demonstrates the influence the church hoped to have over the black family. A comparison with another institution trying to influence black people as they became free in Louisiana, The Freedmen's Bureau, offers an insight into the position of the church in the black community, which has often been described as "unique". This study will examine the attitudes of black people, towards religion and family relationships, and show the true influence of institutions on black lives in Louisiana in Reconstruction.

The sources used in this study include the WPA slave narratives, newspapers, letters of the churches, baptism and marriage records and records of Louisiana's Freedmen's

Bureau. Through these sources it is possible to surmise that the black family was not weak when it emerged from slavery, and today's problems do not find their route in black people's inability to adjust to freedom. Religion was part of the process through which black people in Louisiana drew identity and autonomy. Louisiana is a state that illustrates the variation in black religion, because of the influence of Catholicism, and this prompts a reassessment of claims of homogeneity in black religion. By connecting the black family with black religion this study brings together distinct strands of thought on black history, with the aim of providing a different outlook on debates with resonance in America today.

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## **Abbreviations**

AMA	The American Missionary Association
Arch	Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, LA
CUCC	Central United Church of Christ, New Orleans, LA
FB Online	Freedmen's Bureau Online
FB Pamphlet	Freedmen's Bureau Pamphlet, LSU, LA
FWP	Federal Writer's Project, NSU, LA
LA	Louisiana
LSU	Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA
NSU	Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, LA
UNO	University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA
WPA	Work Project's Administration

## **Introduction**

The Civil War changed the fate of enslaved blacks in the American South. The War has been viewed as not only a social revolution, but as “America’s Second Revolution”. More recently and more accurately, historians like Eric Foner have seen the “revolution” of the Civil War as an unfinished revolution. While slaves were freed and given political rights, the positive effects of this were short lived, and it was not long before a “counter-revolution” occurred and white supremacy took over in the South.<sup>1</sup> The Reconstruction is consequently a very important time for the study of black history.

The story of the reconstruction of the South following the close of the Civil War has provided a seemingly exhaustible theme for historians...at times one gets the impression that the theorizing has reached a stage of abstraction in which the individual human beings upon whom Reconstruction was imposed have been completely lost from view.<sup>2</sup>

The study of the Reconstruction period has involved debates on politics and the change in the economic structure of the South. To study the effects on the people who lived through these years requires us to look beyond political allegiances and events. It is vital that the “individual human beings” are allowed to emerge, particularly the freed blacks

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<sup>1</sup> James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 5, 20

<sup>2</sup> William E. Highsmith, ‘Some Aspects of Reconstruction in the Heart of Louisiana’ *The Journal of Southern History* 13 (1947), p. 460

who have often been ignored unless referred to en masse, or as politically important individuals. There is a danger of looking on Reconstruction and the new freedom it brought for so many blacks as a very positive time. Because the Freedmen had moved up from being slaves, it is tempting to exaggerate the positive side of certain patterns seen.

Historians and sociologists have attempted to develop our understanding of the complex structure and nature of the black family. Edward Saveth has identified one of the major obstacles to the study of any kind of family history: the fact that there is no established technique for this study.<sup>3</sup> The wide range of approaches employed, the vast pool of sources consulted and the myriad conclusions reached on the black family attests to Saveth's theory. Saveth also believes that there has been more theorising than real research in work on family history, a fault which has led scholars to take the "long view" when it comes to family history. For example, most have concluded in one way or another that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have resulted in a "progressive disintegration" of the family.<sup>4</sup> In the study of family there is a tendency to generalise over decades of social, political and economic change, and across vast geographical boundaries. Family is something most people can relate to from personal experience, making objectivity difficult to achieve. Many academics have attempted to assess the family in history nonetheless. In the study of the black family in particular, scholars have reached very different conclusions about the family before and after the Civil War, assessing for the most part what went wrong, when and why.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard N. Saveth, 'The Problem of American Family History', *American Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2, (1969), p. 313

In the discussion of issues surrounding the contemporary black family, the outlook is almost always pessimistic. However, the complications that the contemporary situation creates for the study of the black family, also makes it extremely important to understand its history and development over time. The increasing number of black families headed by single mothers has led to the belief in the decline of the strength of the black family. There are more unmarried, young mothers among black Americans than other ethnic groups. Such factors have led to the perception of the black family as an essentially weak institution.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most emphatic exponents of the theory that directly connects the problems of today's black family and slavery, is Daniel Patrick Moynihan. *The Moynihan Report* of 1965 blamed slavery, reconstruction, urbanisation, unemployment and poverty for the black family remaining a matriarchal and weak institution. Moynihan's calculation that one quarter of all black marriages fell apart, one quarter of all black families were female headed, and that one quarter of all black births were illegitimate in America at the time of his report, was attributed to the treatment of black Americans in the past.<sup>6</sup> A more recent study of black family structure has reached similar conclusions, blaming the fate of blacks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for the current structure and problems. Donna Franklin cites slavery, northern migration and social isolation as defining factors while also seeing wider changes in societal values and gender roles as important.<sup>7</sup> Such studies are good examples of Saveth's "bigger picture" theory, however others have

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<sup>4</sup> Saveth, 'American Family History', pp. 315,317

<sup>5</sup> Donna Franklin, *Ensuring Inequality: the Structural Transformation of the African-American Family* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xxi

criticised the tendency to “blame” slavery for the economic and social problems facing American blacks today.

Studies of the black family have fluctuated dramatically over the past century, in the sources used, the interpretations made, and the conclusions reached. E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) concluded that the black family was a matriarchal institution, destabilised by slavery and, later, northward migration.<sup>8</sup> Since the publication of Frazier’s work, his arguments have come up against much criticism, and by the 1950s and 1960s historians were turning to economic explanations for the development of the black family since slavery. This view culminated in the 1965 *Moynihan Report*, which brought together statistics on the black family.<sup>9</sup> Subsequent historian’s reactions involved a rethinking of the sources used, including use of the records of the Freedmen’s Bureau and census data in the 1970s.

The turning point in the study of the black family came with Gutman’s work in 1973.<sup>10</sup> *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* argued against the ideas of matrifocality and the black family as a weak institution.<sup>11</sup> Using census data and Freedmen’s Bureau records, along with contemporary literary sources, Gutman found the double-headed, kin-related family to be common across the areas of the south he studied. This work overturned the findings and conclusions of Frazier and Moynihan, and took a fresh look

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<sup>6</sup> Lee Rainwater and William Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, M.I.T. Press, 1967), pp. 5,6

<sup>7</sup> Franklin, *Ensuring Inequality*, p. x

<sup>8</sup> Stanley L. Engerman, ‘Studying the Black Family’, *Journal of Family History*, 3 no.1 (1978), p. 78

<sup>9</sup> Engerman, ‘Black Family’, p. 79

<sup>10</sup> Engerman, ‘Black Family’, p. 79

at the relation between the treatment of blacks in slavery and their behavior after emancipation.<sup>12</sup> Gutman viewed the failure to make this connection as one of the defining faults of earlier work. Concluding that the adaptive capacity slaves learned and employed in bondage were taken out into the free world, Gutman sees continuity between slavery and freedom, and suggests that this is the fundamental strength of the black family as an institution.<sup>13</sup>

In a review of Gutman's work, Stanley Engerman is critical of Gutman's quantitative methods, for example his apparent ignorance of the bias typically inherent in plantation records.<sup>14</sup> Engerman also berates Gutman's generalisations across space and time, and does not see much of a break from Moynihan in Gutman's acceptance of the strong influence of economic factors in his discussion of the post war black family.<sup>15</sup> Engerman realises the importance of the questions Gutman raises, and the possibilities for future studies on the subject. An interesting facet of Gutman's work is his determination to weave together the quantitative data he collects with qualitative data, which he believes serves to set the former in context.<sup>16</sup>

The question of stability in the lives of black families from slavery through emancipation and the Civil War to the Reconstruction era has prompted several historians to examine this period in relation to black social structures and networks. The study of the black

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<sup>11</sup> Herman G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1976)

<sup>12</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, pp. xvii, 32

<sup>13</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, pp. xxi, 7

<sup>14</sup> Engerman, 'Black Family', p. 84

<sup>15</sup> Engerman, 'Black Family', pp. 98-99

<sup>16</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, p. xx

family in the period of Reconstruction has raised, and continues to raise, many questions. Gutman's work focuses on linking slavery and freedom, through the disruptions and continuities of family structure and stability.<sup>17</sup> Historians who see the Civil War as a watershed for the black family differ to some extent from historians like Gutman, who emphasise continuity. In his article of 1975, 'The Black Family in Transition: Louisiana 1860-1865', C. Peter Ripley outlines the disruption caused by the Civil War.<sup>18</sup> Using marriage records, registers of contrabands and church record books, among other primary sources, Ripley concludes that a strong family commitment and moral code was apparent among slaves, and in the war was challenged by forced separations imposed by Federal and Confederate authorities and planters. The level of stress placed on the black family brings the "continuity" arguments into dispute. Ripley suggests that the War was a crisis point at which the black family had to adapt if it was to survive.<sup>19</sup>

Joe Louis Caldwell's Ph.D. thesis on blacks in the Louisiana Delta from 1865 to 1880, has emphasised the disruption to blacks and black families caused by Union recruitment and the refugeeing of slaves during the Civil War.<sup>20</sup> Using federal census data, parish conveyance, marriage and notarial records, Caldwell has identified the ruptures of the War, whilst also acknowledging the aspects of slave life which survived slavery and the war, such as naming practices.<sup>21</sup> While many historians have seen the war as rupturing the black family, there are many aspects of black community life which survived slavery,

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<sup>17</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, p.xxi

<sup>18</sup> C. Peter Ripley, 'The Black Family in Transition: Louisiana 1860-1865', *Journal of Southern History*, 41 (1975), pp. 369-380

<sup>19</sup> Ripley, 'The Black Family in Transition', p. 378

<sup>20</sup> Joe Louis Caldwell, 'A Social, Economic and Political Study of Blacks in the Louisiana Delta, 1865-1880', Ph.D. Thesis, Tulane University, 1989, pp. 101, 103

<sup>21</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', p. 125



and the continuity debate surrounding this topic must look wider than simple family structure in determining the effects of war on the black community.

Historians have attempted to address the black situation in Reconstruction from a gender viewpoint. John Blassingame has made several assumptions about the place of women in black New Orleans, based on census data.<sup>22</sup> One of his more questionable arguments is that women in New Orleans refused to dominate their husbands because of the imbalance in the gender ratio. There were fewer black men than black women, and therefore, Blassingame believes, women would fear not being able to find another husband.<sup>23</sup>

While Blassingame does acknowledge that we cannot know the subtleties of household gender politics simply by looking at census data, he does assume that a male head of household is an indicator of "stability" in a family.<sup>24</sup> Blassingame argues that while the black family under slavery was not stable, the black family became a stable institution by 1880, attributing this to the values of missionaries which blacks were able to "learn" in this short period of time.<sup>25</sup>

Historians have looked more specifically at the black experience from the point of view of black women. Jacqueline Jones' study of black women, work and the family from slavery has uncovered black women's lives as having "unique burdens" and as existing within a "unique subculture".<sup>26</sup> Jones argues that the black family evolved into freedom,

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<sup>22</sup> John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans 1860-1880* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1973)

<sup>23</sup> Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, p. 94

<sup>24</sup> Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, p. 91

<sup>25</sup> Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, p. 79

<sup>26</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, Basic Books, 1985), p. 5

holding onto the mutuality and community of slavery, and sees this as a response to post-emancipation conditions in the south, mainly economic, rather than solely a product of past experience.<sup>27</sup> To reach such conclusions Jones used Freedmen's Bureau reports, census data and other official records along with memoirs and contemporary reports of conditions in the South. Tera W. Hunter later approached the black social situation after the Civil War by focussing on the lives of women in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>28</sup> Hunter also focuses on the restrictions imposed on women and their families by economic conditions, and notes the "fluid definition" of kinship in the black community, a point that serves to deconstruct the simplicity of seeing the black family as a double-headed, kin-related unit.<sup>29</sup> Jones and Hunter emerge from their discussions of women and families after the Civil War with a positive view of the adaptive capacities of the black family, and its ability to survive, basing this on community solidarity and mutual aid networks, often based around the black church.<sup>30</sup>

Noralee Frankel has studied black women and their families in Mississippi, during the Civil War era, using the pension records of black Union Civil War widows. The use of this source has allowed Frankel to readdress many of the old debates on the black family in the first years of freedom. For example, the pension records indicate that not all blacks were in favour of legalised marriage after the war, and Frankel surmises that attitudes formed towards the status of couples during slavery were more important, post-war, than

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<sup>27</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, p. 65, 68

<sup>28</sup> Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1997)

<sup>29</sup> Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, p. 37

<sup>30</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, p. 57, Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, p. 68

historians have previously recognised.<sup>31</sup> Frankel uses records of the Veteran's Administration, along with the more often used AMA papers, family papers and diaries, showing that a slight adjustment in the range of sources used can produce interesting results. Historians such as Frankel continue to suggest new routes into studying what is essentially a "hidden" history, and this kind of restructuring of source bases and critical approaches must continue. By attempting to discover how black individuals and families relied on the church in structuring their lives and relationships in Reconstruction we may begin to understand the relationship between this community institution and the black family.

The persistence of the themes of survival and adaptation in literature on the subject of the black family prompts us to ask whether they are indeed justified terms. Historians continue to be fascinated by the issue of whether blacks experienced continuity from slavery into freedom, and in studying the Reconstruction period it is impossible to avoid addressing this issue. Instead of becoming entangled in a stale debate, new and interesting approaches must be found in addressing the issue of the black family in Reconstruction, and black religion may offer a way to achieve this. By looking at the work which has been carried out, examining the theoretical problems involved in studying the black family, and looking at the nature of black lives in the Reconstruction, we may begin to discover some of the routes into studying the black family from new perspectives.

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<sup>31</sup> Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1999), p. xi

Viewing black religion as a key institution for black individuals, families and communities, it may become possible to reveal the forces shaping the structure and nature of the black family during Reconstruction. Gayraud Wilmore, in his study of the religious history of African Americans, has discussed slave religion in terms of its unique nature. Wilmore believes that for slaves religion was necessary, offering an invaluable connection to others, a comfort and mutual aid. In contrast, he believes white religion did not offer white people the same level of support, they treated religion as part of tradition and society's expectations of them.<sup>32</sup> If Wilmore's assertions are correct, then black religion is different from white religion in the social function it provides. The problems and hardships faced by black Christians both unifies and sets them apart as a group.<sup>33</sup> Such interpretations of black religion help us to understand why the terms "unique", "survival" and "adaptation" so often accompany accounts of black religion, and its evolution from slavery to freedom.

Timothy L. Smith believes that the forces under which blacks adopted religion in slavery affected the development of their religion. For example, he points to the need to morally justify black opposition to slavery, and to hope for deliverance, as shaping the formation of slave religion.<sup>34</sup> The motif of "survival" emerges in Smith's work, which uses sermons, testimonies, and accounts of spiritual experience to describe the topic of slave religion. The experience of ecstasy on conversion is viewed as demonstrative of the

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<sup>32</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (New York, Orbis Books, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 1998, 1<sup>st</sup> ed 1978), p. 101

<sup>33</sup> Washington, *Black Religion*, p. vii

<sup>34</sup> Timothy L. Smith, 'Slavery and Theology: The Emergence of Black Christian Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America', *Church History* 41 (1972), pp. 497-8

slaves' ability to go beyond and also understand their frustrations and anger.<sup>35</sup> Smith points to the church's role as a social teacher, in addition to being an outlet for emotions.<sup>36</sup>

Joe M. Richardson has examined the relationship between the black church and society. Richardson has used the papers of the American Missionary Association (AMA), government documents and church publications along with other sources, to discover how much of an effect an outside body such as the AMA had on the black church between 1861 and 1890. While Richardson points to many areas where the AMA tried to effect change in black family interaction, his final assessment is that they failed in their attempts to influence the black family. Efforts to instill a bourgeois code of ethics in a paternal manner, from domestic arts and raising children, to the responsibility of a man to work for his family were not well received.<sup>37</sup> Richardson believes the main failure of the AMA was that it did not recognise that black religion was based on joy and hope through collective action, not on guilt and denial.<sup>38</sup> To Richardson the unique, survival-based qualities of black religion were strong enough to survive the massive missionary efforts of the emancipation and Reconstruction periods.

Historians have compared black and white congregations to illuminate the discussion of the differences between black and white religion. James C. Cavendish's article on "Church-Based Community Activism", compares black and white Catholic congregations

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<sup>35</sup> Smith, 'Slavery and Theology', pp. 502-3

<sup>36</sup> Smith, 'Slavery and Theology', p. 510

<sup>37</sup> Joe M. Richardson, *The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (Athens, GA and London, University of Georgia Press, 1986), pp. 240-41

using a nationwide survey of United States Catholic parishes.<sup>39</sup> Cavendish's findings show that black churches were more likely than white to undertake social action, noting that individual parishes had more influence over this than denominations.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Cavendish's evidence refutes the idea that the black Catholic Church is very different from other black denominations.<sup>41</sup> This kind of information is particularly useful for the study of Louisiana, especially New Orleans, where there were large numbers of black Catholics. One cannot simply view the black religious community as homogeneous, across different denominations and different regions of the South.

William E. Montgomery has recognised the need to see the black church as non-homogenous, a tendency that may arise from viewing the black church as "unique".<sup>42</sup> In his work, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, Montgomery uses a variety of sources, including AMA papers and census reports from 1890 of church attendance, to examine the black Southern church from 1865-1890. Montgomery looks at the ways in which slave culture was "dynamic", and could therefore adapt to changes in circumstance.<sup>43</sup> He sees black religion as "malleable", and the evangelical religion blacks tended to adopt as having "revolutionary social implications". The malleability of black religion would certainly be tested by the changes of Reconstruction, in which other institutions would also play a role in black people's lives. One of Montgomery's fundamental arguments is that black religion was different from white religion in the South. Black people had fused

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<sup>38</sup> Richardson, *American Missionary Association*, p. 143

<sup>39</sup> James C. Cavendish, 'Church-Based Community Activism: A Comparison of Black and White Catholic Congregations', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39 (2000), p. 371

<sup>40</sup> Cavendish, 'Community Activism', pp. 371, 382

<sup>41</sup> Cavendish, 'Community Activism', p. 373

<sup>42</sup> William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1993), p. xii

elements of African tradition with Christianity during slavery, and in Reconstruction they would continue to develop a religion through designing a religion which suited their needs.<sup>44</sup> Self-reliance and independence would be vital for the development of black religion in Reconstruction.<sup>45</sup>

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, more commonly known the Freedmen's Bureau, was created by an act of Congress on 3 March 1865. The Bureau was designed to be a temporary solution to the Freedmen's problems, envisaged to operate for one year. The realisation of the demands of the task of administering to the Freedmen meant that the Bureau's operations would be extended, and official activities would go on until 1869, with some educational ventures continuing until 1872. The Freedmen's Bureau was established and operated during the period of Presidential Reconstruction, at a time when the President favoured the whites, and did not advocate land distribution to the Freedmen.<sup>46</sup> However, looking at the nature and activities of this organisation provides a valuable insight into the help being offered to the Freedmen by a secular institution, and in particular its attitudes to the black family, and its hopes for black society. By examining the records of the Freedmen's Bureau we can ascertain what their activities were and their opinions about the Freedmen and their lives.

The aim of this study is principally to address the question of what happened to the black family in Reconstruction. The debates on the black family involve discussions of

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<sup>43</sup> Montgomery, *Under Their Own*, p. 12

<sup>44</sup> Montgomery, *Under Their Own*, p. 25

<sup>45</sup> Montgomery, *Under Their Own*, p. 54

continuity, strength and weakness, and the structure of the black family. This study will address these debates, taking into account factors such as gender and differences between different regions of the state of Louisiana. In choosing to discuss the black family in this specific state of the Mississippi Valley, the role of institutions will be examined as a way to approach black individuals and their families. The church has been selected as one of the primary institutions of the black community, and will be studied to uncover the nature of the church's response to the black family in Reconstruction. As a basis for comparison, an important secular, government organisation, the Freedmen's Bureau, will be examined in its responses and aims in relation to blacks. The study will aim to show to what extent institutions tried to influence blacks, and the implications of this for the development of the black family. In the discussion of religion, gender and regional difference will again be taken into account, together with the important factor of religious denominations, and their relationship to social action. The overall aim in bringing the study of institutions into a discussion of the family is to assess the relationship between what the institutions are trying to promote to the black family, and to what extent the black family take up these values and rules for their own use. This discussion will contribute to debates on the black family and on the role of religion in the lives of black people in Reconstruction.

This study is limited to areas of the state of Louisiana, drawing examples from original research. Examples from other parts of the South are drawn from secondary literature to provide context and comparison. The research has been limited by the lack of

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<sup>46</sup> Robert H. Bremner, *The Public Good: Philanthropy in the Civil War Era* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 118, 119



availability of Protestant church records, although the Catholic records of Louisiana have been archived and made available for research. It is hoped that a balance has been struck in the material on religion in spite of this problem. The other main limitation on this study is time. A comprehensive study of the black family in Louisiana in Reconstruction would take years to complete, and therefore only aspects of the subject have been selected for attention in this study. It is acknowledged that this study relies on the assembly of a variety of sources. There is not one ideal source which allows the study of the black family in Louisiana during the Reconstruction, and the fusion of various sources has been attempted with the aim of building an accurate picture of black people's lives during this period.

The sources used for this study have largely fallen into two categories, the "official" and the "unofficial". The official records include secular and church marriage records, church baptism records, the records and publications of the Freedmen's Bureau, Methodist Episcopal Conference minutes, official church correspondence and newspapers. The unofficial sources include diaries, personal letters and the Louisiana Slave Narratives. The first group of sources enables the construction of the public and formal views of the church, the Freedmen's Bureau and society at large. The latter group allows us to assess the extent to which people in their everyday lives adopted the formal view. Scholars before have used the Freedmen's Bureau pamphlet *Address to Master's and Freedmen*. In Blassingame's *Black New Orleans*, the pamphlet is mentioned but is not given a great deal of attention.<sup>47</sup> It is hoped that such sources as have been used in the past have been used in a new and different way in this study, to open up new

perspectives on the black family. The use of the baptism records for St Augustine Church and St Louis Cathedral, is to the best of the author's knowledge, entirely original research.<sup>48</sup>

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One will introduce the state of Louisiana and then proceed to discuss the black family up until the end of the Civil War, looking at the effects of slavery, emancipation and the war itself on the progress of the black family. The second chapter will examine religion, and the role of the church in the Reconstruction of Louisiana, including the views of the church towards the black family and the differences between different religious denominations. The third chapter will focus on the influence of a secular institution, the Freedmen's Bureau, on the black family of Louisiana. Finally Chapter Four will show the black response to the institutions discussed, and assess their real impact on the black family in Reconstruction.

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<sup>47</sup> Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, pp. 84-85

<sup>48</sup> See Bibliography for references for all the sources used in this study

## **Chapter 1 – The Black Family in Louisiana at the End of the Civil War**

The study of Louisiana in the Reconstruction has been for the most part based on the state's politics, the varied policies of different leaders, and their effects on black people.<sup>1</sup> This study will focus on the social lives of black people in Louisiana in the Reconstruction years. In understanding these lives, some background knowledge of the state of Louisiana during the Civil War era is useful. Louisiana had a large number of sugar and cotton plantations, particularly in the areas of rich alluvial soil along the various rivers of the State. These rivers included the Mississippi in the Northeast, the Ouachita in the North and the Atchafalaya in the South West. The State was composed of a variety of groups from French and Spanish Creoles to Protestant hill farmers.<sup>2</sup> The Louisiana Delta region, defined as the parishes of Carroll, Tensas, Madison and Concordia, was home to some of the richest slaveowners in the United States.<sup>3</sup> In 1860 there were around thirty four thousand slaves in Louisiana.<sup>4</sup> In the Delta region blacks outnumbered whites, with eighty six percent of the population being black in 1870.

Louisiana's main urban centre, New Orleans, was a crucial cotton port linking the South to London and New York.<sup>5</sup> Described as the least American of the cities of the South,

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<sup>1</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', p. 82, Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 45

<sup>3</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', pp. 1, 461

<sup>4</sup> Howard White, *The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press), p. 7 footnote

<sup>5</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 45

New Orleans was home to a broad spectrum of nationalities and ethnic groupings.<sup>6</sup> In 1860 the population stood at 144000, and nearly half of these people were of foreign birth. 25000 of the New Orleans population were black, and 11000 were Free Person's of Colour (blacks who were free before the Civil War). New Orleans was home to the largest Free Black population of the South, also to some of the wealthiest, most educated people of this group.<sup>7</sup> The Free Blacks of New Orleans were involved in business and other occupations, and some owned property and slaves.<sup>8</sup>

The economy of Louisiana was heavily reliant on cotton and sugar production. This reliance meant that the economic success of planters and merchants was heavily reliant on favourable growing conditions. Floods in 1866 and 1867, and a caterpillar infestation in 1867, led to the ruin of the crops of early Reconstruction.<sup>9</sup> The economic reliance on slave labour led to changes in employer-labour relations after the emancipation, but as some historians have argued, black people faced very little economic change in freedom. Most blacks still worked as waged workers or sharecroppers for white landowners.<sup>10</sup> One change did occur in the size and nature of the plantations. From the disruption of War and occupation onwards, the plantations fell in number and size, dividing into smaller farms.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, p. xvi

<sup>7</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 45, 47

<sup>8</sup> Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, p. xvi

<sup>9</sup> Highsmith, 'Aspects of Reconstruction', pp. 461, 463, 467

<sup>10</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 106

<sup>11</sup> Highsmith, 'Aspects of Reconstruction', pp. 471, 477

In 1862, the Union Army reached the Mississippi Valley, causing upheaval, as many slaves fled to Union lines, while others were moved by their owners into the interior of Louisiana or to Texas to keep them from the enemy.<sup>12</sup> With the capture of New Orleans by General Benjamin P. Butler in April 1862, one third of Louisiana fell to the Union, with the remaining two thirds surrendering to the Federal Army at the end of the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> Reconstruction efforts began during wartime in the occupied areas, and Lincoln believed the success of his plans in this state would have much significance for the future of the South as a whole. The 1864 Constitutional Convention of the State, masterminded by Lincoln and General Butler, abolished slavery, radically reduced the power of the plantation parishes, and set up a free public education system.<sup>14</sup>

When the Federal Army captured New Orleans in 1862, one of the consequences was an influx of black people:<sup>15</sup>

Out near Lake Ponchartrain crude shanties sprang up where the unfortunate negroes lived “in water and mud and poverty” – bordering Gentilly, many huts of fugitive negroes and squatters could be seen – huts in which the dweller was never “out of the wet” and where he and his family subsisted on what they could get by stealing or begging.....the Freedmen’s Aid Association was in existence, but there was much to be done to the Negro

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<sup>12</sup> Caldwell, ‘Blacks in the Louisiana Delta’, Ripley, ‘The Black Family in Transition’, p. 372

<sup>13</sup> White, *Freedmen’s*, pp. 5, 6

<sup>14</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 45, 49

<sup>15</sup> White, *The Freedmen’s Bureau*, p. 6

population.<sup>16</sup>

As this excerpt from the *New Orleans Times* from 1866 shows, the city of New Orleans was badly affected by the trauma of the War and its consequences.<sup>17</sup> Impoverished black and white people came to the city in search of work and aid.<sup>18</sup> Overcrowded conditions led to outbreaks of diseases such as yellow fever and cholera.<sup>19</sup> Slavery had prevented the development of a system of public responsibility in the South. By 1868 there was still only two hospitals in New Orleans and a very poor water system.<sup>20</sup> The most crucial job of the politicians vying for power in Reconstruction would be to set up a successful way of dealing with the immediate social problems of Louisiana, whilst also dealing with the problem of the newly freed black population and their new status.

The public schools will be open to Negroes in all probability. By breaking everyone and reconstructing everyone on the black plan, General Philip Sheridan has been broken himself. He has been sent to Missouri and is to be replaced by General Hancock on the refusal of General George H. Thomas. The old city council is broken; a new one, white and coloured has been created by a military order. A new direction of the schools is to place the public

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<sup>16</sup> Northwestern State University, Watson Library, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, FWP Collection, Folder 114, From the *New Orleans Times* 30 October 1866

<sup>17</sup> Bremner, *The Public Good*, p. 117

<sup>18</sup> Joseph G. Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction: Louisiana 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge and London, Louisiana State University Press, 1982), p. 28

<sup>19</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 151

<sup>20</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 364

schools on a new basis next year, that of a mixture of the two races.<sup>21</sup>

As this letter of Catholic churchmen demonstrates, the government of Louisiana was dominated by the existence of military rule, in a system of government that Foner argues was unlike any the South had ever known. There continued to be bitter rivalry for control of the state, and tensions existed between the Army Generals and the Governors of the State, for example Democrat Governor James M. Wells. Wells took the post of governor in 1865, and attempted to rid the state of all officials appointed by military orders.<sup>22</sup> In spite of the inherent problems, historian Dawson believes that the rule of the army in Louisiana was imperative for the success of Reconstruction, and to ensure civil and political rights would be afforded to the freed blacks. This kind of rule was unprecedented in United States history, and the army faced the problems of not having a clear role, and the impossible task of patrolling all areas of the state at all times. Violent incidents such as the riot in New Orleans of July 1866 led to a heavy presence of troops in Louisiana, second only to that of Texas in this year.<sup>23</sup> Dawson outlines the stages of Reconstruction into phases, with the strongest army influence occurring between 1862 and 1869, and the decline of this influence being seen most clearly between 1870 and 1877. In 1868 Louisiana was readmitted to the Union, and it is arguably from this point onwards that military rule lost sway.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Old Ursuline Convent, New Orleans, Letter, Father Gilbert Raymond to Archbishop Odin, 31 August 1867

<sup>22</sup> Dawson, *Army Generals*, pp. 22, 29

<sup>23</sup> Dawson, *Army Generals*, pp. 1, 2, 3, 26, 39

<sup>24</sup> Dawson, *Army Generals*, pp. 3, 81

The political situation in Louisiana even before the Civil War came about has been described as “faction-ridden, corrupt and occasionally violent”.<sup>25</sup> New Orleans was an area of Unionist support, coupled with the South Eastern Louisiana sugar planters who traditionally supported pro-Union Whigs due to their reliance on national tariff protection. These Unionists did become divided into Conservative and Free State factions, over the process of emancipation and the treatment of former masters and freed blacks in its aftermath.<sup>26</sup>

While the years of Reconstruction were trying times for members of both races throughout the South, the period was especially difficult in Louisiana, where the negroes were numerically very strong and where the struggle between the various political factions was exceptionally bitter.<sup>27</sup>

Highsmith emphasises the unique problems of a state such as Louisiana. Louisiana, South Carolina and Mississippi were the only three states of the Confederacy that had a black majority population in Reconstruction.<sup>28</sup> Reconstruction and military protection allowed blacks their first chance to exercise their political rights, travelling to vote in elections armed for protection.<sup>29</sup> Blacks were commonly associated with the Radical Republicans, and the push for black equality in civil and political rights. Opponents tried to coerce blacks with bans on employment, and those who tried to entice blacks to

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<sup>25</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 45

<sup>26</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 45, 46

<sup>27</sup> Highsmith, ‘Aspects of Reconstruction’, p. 480

<sup>28</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 294



support the Democrats did meet with some success. In Rapides Parish, 1867, a group of blacks organised a Coloured Democratic Club in anticipation of the 1868 election.<sup>30</sup> The complex and unique political situation that existed in Louisiana in the Reconstruction years must be understood before we can begin to assess the circumstances under which black people were trying to rebuild their communities and their families.

My Ma had fifteen chillun, an' none of us had de same pa -  
ever time she was sold she would git another man. Dey didn'  
sell de man that she would be with...<sup>31</sup>

(Julia Woodrich, Ex-slave, Louisiana)

By 1865 the black family was at a vital stage in its development. As the above quotation illustrates, black family life in Louisiana was unstable under the institution of slavery, although its proponents described it as a "civilising" influence on the black people of the American South. Julia Woodrich faced an uncertain future as the sale and movement of individuals disrupted the process of family formation and stability. When black people emerged from slavery they began to rebuild their families and communities, but freedom was not a guarantee of stability. In Reconstruction the political structure of the American nation, and its ability to support the emancipated people into full citizenship, were to be

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<sup>29</sup> Highsmith, 'Aspects of Reconstruction', p. 484

<sup>30</sup> Highsmith, 'Aspects of Reconstruction', pp. 483, 487

<sup>31</sup> NSU, FWP, 19, Interview with Julia Woodrich by Flossie McElwee

tested.<sup>32</sup> The black family would also be tested in Reconstruction, making it crucial for us to understand the nature of the black family as it emerged from slavery.

Gutman has studied black family structure with regard to the transition from slavery to freedom. In his work of 1976 Gutman asserts his belief in the essential stability of the black family under slavery, and denies the matriarchy identified by earlier historians.<sup>33</sup> Gutman's theory can be described as one of continuity from slavery to freedom, of a secure, kin-related, double-headed family<sup>34</sup>. Gutman's theory encountered criticism in an article by Jo Ann Manfra and Robert Dykstra, based on a study of the Rowanty township, Virginia. This article agrees that there was an essential continuity in the structure of the black family from slavery to freedom, but disagrees with Gutman as to the structure itself. Acknowledging the very disruptive effects of slavery, Manfra and Dykstra see the black stepfamily as a common characteristic of the pre- and post-war black community.<sup>35</sup> The source base relied upon by Gutman, largely census and Freedmen's Bureau data, is very different to the single sociological survey of one township. Looking at different types of study, and the different conclusions they reach, allows us to understand the complexity of studying the black family at such a crucial moment in its history.

Another aspect, on which many historians agree, is the disruptive effect of the Civil War itself on black communities, families and individuals. Frankel notes the contradictions of

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<sup>32</sup> McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln*, p. 20

<sup>33</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, p. 8

<sup>34</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, p. xviii

<sup>35</sup> Jo Ann Manfra and Robert Dykstra, 'Serial Marriage and the Origins of the Black Stepfamily', *Journal of American History*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (1985), pp. 19-20, 36

a war that liberated the slaves, yet separated many black families further.<sup>36</sup> Union recruitment, refugees, the disintegration of the plantations, and the violation of law and order brought chaos to the lives of the newly freed slaves.<sup>37</sup> Emancipation was fraught with problems for ex-slaves, such as deciding whether to stay on the plantation or to leave to find loved ones or to start a new life somewhere else. Eric Foner believes that freedom gave strength to the black family, transforming its role and the relationships of family members to one another, and believes that the black family became patriarchal during the period following emancipation.<sup>38</sup> The same events and experiences are open to varied interpretations when academics are attempting to uncover the nature and structure of the black family.

This chapter will respond to the divergent views on the black family at the end of the Civil War, by showing the position of black families in Louisiana at this time. As survivors of slavery, war and emancipation, black men, women and children had faced hardship and change. The problems of separation, multiple partners and parenthood tested the strength of the black family. The relationships between men and women were magnified, as their relationship to the world changed. This chapter will attempt to assess the nature of the black family by 1865 and to show whether the Civil War really was a “crisis point” for the black family in Louisiana by 1865.

In 1865 the black family was an institution which had survived years of restriction and threats to its stability. Slaves lived and worked closely together on plantations, they spent

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<sup>36</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 16

<sup>37</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', pp. 101, 103

free time together and organised recreational and religious activities. In slavery the family was constantly under threat from the jurisdiction of the master, who might decide to sell slaves. These slaves were siblings, spouses and children of other slaves. In order to survive rupture, the black family became resilient through its flexibility. A male-headed household was conventional, but the black community did not see this as a prerequisite for family and community stability, or well being. By adopting an attitude which made the family flexibly patriarchal, the slave community strengthened the position of female slaves who might find themselves separated from, or without, a partner.

The fact that slave marriage was symbolic and not legal, meant that slaves could develop their own attitudes to remarriage and adultery. Remarriage was common, and the fact that marriages could not officially be dissolved meant that adultery was effectively sanctioned by the slave community. Stepfamilies became commonplace as a result of remarriage, and paternity was often ambiguous. The logistics of these factors when the slaves were free to find lost loved ones created a crisis for many blacks, but did not change the essential structure of the black family that was strong and dynamic by 1865. To understand the reasons behind the position of the black family by 1865 it is essential to examine the effects of the experience of slavery, the Civil War and emancipation on the black family.

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<sup>38</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 84, 86

In slavery, the construction and preservation of a private family life was one area of life in which slave men and women could find satisfaction and autonomy.<sup>39</sup> However, the stability of the slave family was also threatened by the nature of slavery:<sup>40</sup>

Us first belong to Baugolis, a Creole (?) He sho was a mean man.  
After he died us was auctioned off. My older brothers an' sisters  
was sold by deyselves but me, I was too young, I was sold along  
with my ma. We belonged to Guitlot. He was a Creole too – dats  
who we was sold to.

My sisters, Mary an' Jane, and Paul and Adam, was all sold an' sent  
off. We never is knowed where dey went.<sup>41</sup>

Separation of families was one of the principal burdens on the black family in slavery. The strain of not knowing where all but the youngest of her children were must have had deeply affected Julia's mother and her other children. As historians have analysed the structure of the black family, some have found that separation has been exaggerated in its frequency and significance to black family life. For example, Gutman sees most stories of separation as coming from two areas of the South, Mississippi and Northern Louisiana.<sup>42</sup> There were a great number of slaves in both areas, and it would be wrong to ignore the significance of the experiences of slaves in these states.

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<sup>39</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 8

<sup>40</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 10

<sup>41</sup> NSU, FWP Folder 19, Woodrich

<sup>42</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, p. 18

Slave owners had various motives for separating families. Before the War, separation was often dependent on the “value” of the individual. The narrative of Manda Cooper states that she never had any children, and was sold away from her mother and siblings. Cooper includes both these statements in one sentence, which may indicate that her failure to rear children affected her master’s decision to dispose of her.<sup>43</sup> Slaves who married across plantation boundaries faced separation throughout their relationship, and were probably at even greater risk of separation when the war began if they were owned by different masters. Manfra and Dykstra believe that force was the dominant cause of separation during slavery.<sup>44</sup>

The Freedmen’s Bureau Marriage Certificate returns for Concordia Parish, for 1864 and 1865, allow us to assess some of the causes of separation and their frequency for Louisiana. The Bureau recorded the previous connections of both partners who were being married, taking note of the duration of previous unions and the causes of their termination. The dominant reasons for separation are death, force, sale and agreement; less common are slavery, rebellion, ‘trouble’, desertion and disagreement. In some cases no reason is given. Table 1 shows the percentage of separations from previous partners of males and females being married. The most frequently cited reasons for separation are categorised, with the less common reasons and no recorded reason counted under “other”:

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<sup>43</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 109, Cooper

<sup>44</sup> Manfra and Dykstra, ‘Serial Marriage’, p. 33

**Table 1: Reasons for Separation**

REASON	SEPARATIONS CAUSED %
Death	50
Force or Sale	29
Agreement	7
Other	14

Most previous unions were ended by the death of the other partner. Manfra and Dykstra found that the greatest reason for “domestic instability” among blacks was the death of a spouse.<sup>45</sup> However, force or sale accounts for a greater number of separations than mutually agreed partings and all “other” reasons combined. Therefore, it may be concluded that a large number of slave unions were forced to end.<sup>46</sup>

The displacement brought about by the War separated many Louisiana families, to add to those already separated by slavery, as slaves were moved to the interior of the state or to Texas to keep them safe from Union troops who might try to free them.<sup>47</sup> Black men were recruited into the Union army from 1862.<sup>48</sup> This affected family unity as many wives and children were left behind on plantations, or fled to Contraband Camps to be nearer to their loved ones.<sup>49</sup> Black men were hired by the North and the South to contribute their labour to the war effort. In spite of efforts in Louisiana of Thomas

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<sup>45</sup> Manfra and Dykstra, ‘Serial Marriage’, p. 36

<sup>46</sup> Freedmen’s Bureau Online, Concordia Parish, Louisiana Marriage Certificate Returns, 1864-65, URL <http://freedmensbureau.com/louisiana/louisian.htm>

<sup>47</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 81, Caldwell, ‘Blacks in the Louisiana Delta’, p. 103

<sup>48</sup> Frankel, *Freedom’s Women*, p. 18

<sup>49</sup> Caldwell, ‘Blacks in the Louisiana Delta’, pp. 102-103

Conway, of the Bureau of Negro Labor, to go round plantations collecting information on serving men's families, many went unnoted, making it very difficult to reunite families after the war.<sup>50</sup>

Speaking of her mother, Manda Cooper told the Federal Writer's Project worker:

....she brought him more money having children than she could  
working in the field - none of us had the same father - they would  
pick the biggest nigger and tell her they wanted a kid by him and  
she had to stay with him until she did get one...<sup>51</sup>

The influence Manda Cooper's master had on his slaves breeding patterns reduced her mother to the status of a prize farm animal. While many historians have seen slave owners as generally encouraging monogamous unions, to create stability in the slave quarters and prevent resistance, the potential value of a "good breeder" was obviously priority in this case. For the offspring of such sporadic unions, family "stability" under slavery did not rest with a static, monogamous two-parent household. Frankel has pointed out that the labour of slave women included their role as mothers of new slaves, and, while most slaves chose their own marriage partners, cases did occur where masters intervened in this process.<sup>52</sup> Masters and slaves did not always converge in their opinions on marriage and monogamy. Historians like Gutman have looked to the length of slave

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<sup>50</sup> Ripley, 'The Black Family', pp. 372, 374

<sup>51</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 109, Cooper (author's own punctuation; this interview was written in continuous prose)

<sup>52</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 2



marriages to prove the strength of the union. Gutman found that nearly one in four men and women in their twenties had been married for between five and fourteen years. However, the length of time slaves were married did not always mean that the slaves themselves were not restricted in their choice, or did not have the choice made for them. Some women who were separated from their husbands, took new husbands for very practical reasons, such as to have essential help in the home, and in caring for other family members.<sup>53</sup>

The weak position of slave women is shown in relations that existed between free blacks and slaves, as a letter of the Catholic Church demonstrates. The application in 1860 of Cesar Seldom, as free man of colour, to marry a free woman of colour, was met with concern, as Seldom was already married to a slave. Seldom took legal action, the result of which was that no priest could be found who had performed the marriage between Seldom and the slave woman (it was not permitted to perform such a union); it was then confirmed that no union existed between them. Clearly there was no protection of the rights of the slave woman Seldom was rumoured to have “married”. Therefore we can see that multiple marriage was not reserved to slaves, and the weak position of slave women may have attracted the attention of free blacks such as Seldom, who knew how easy it would be to dissolve their “union” if the need arose.<sup>54</sup>

The fact that slave marriages were not legal is an important consideration when attempting to assess marriage in slavery. It was common for slaves to obtain their

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<sup>53</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York and London, W. W. Norton and Co, 1985) pp. 149, 150

masters blessing when they wanted to be “married”, but in some cases, the master was not involved:

Den sometime dey would go to de master to git his permission  
and blessings an he would say, “C’mon darky jump over dis brum  
and call yo’self man an wife.” Master might er gav some of dem  
darkies present or sumpin caise dere was er lot of darkies gwine to  
master. Shucks some of dem darkies didn’t care er bout master,  
preacher or nobody, dey just went an got married, married demselves.  
Don’t know how dey did it but dey did it dough!<sup>55</sup>

Elizabeth Ross Hite seems skeptical of other Louisiana slaves who went to the master to be married, suspecting their motivation to be the gifts they might receive from him. The men and women who acted independently are held higher in her esteem. As marriage was not legal, slaves and masters approved unions that were most clearly demonstrated to the plantation community in the decision of the couple to live together. In a similar way, the slave community, and the master, without legal repercussions, could sanction slave separations, whether instigated by the male or female partner. This process was often labelled “quitting”.<sup>56</sup> The fact that the slave community had their own name for the system of informal divorce, shows that this was a structure which was implemented and regulated from within the slave community.

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<sup>54</sup> Arch, Letter, Father Eleazor Vigonet, St James, LA to Archbisop Odin, 19 December 1867

<sup>55</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 19, Interview with Elizabeth Ross Hite by McKinney

Examining the relations of men and women is a possible way of gauging the strength of the black family by the end of the Civil War, and is also important in understanding the dynamics of the wider black community. Historians describing the black family have employed the labels “patriarchal” and “matriarchal”. There are some factors that explain why scholars such as Moynihan have concluded that the slave family was matriarchal. Deborah Gray White has argued that the nature of marriage in slavery meant that slave women paradoxically had more autonomy in marriage than free women. This was partly because neither partner controlled the property or basic provisions of the family. Gray White has acknowledged that women often helped to supplement their family’s diet by obtaining food from their master’s house or by fishing. Further factors insuring the perpetuation of female autonomy in marriage included “abroad marriage” where partners lived on different plantations and would only see each other once or twice a week at the most. In such marriages women had to be able to rely on other sources of help in everyday life, such as that of older children, extended family and friends.<sup>57</sup>

Foner believes that black men and women lived in an “equality of helplessness” during slavery, and that patriarchy developed in the black family during Reconstruction.<sup>58</sup>

While black men and women may have had more “equality” under slavery, the relationships of married men and women were not simple. Gray White has noted that both partners brought different strengths to a union, and refutes the idea that women were domineering:

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<sup>56</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, pp. 9, xii

<sup>57</sup> Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, pp. 153-155

Slave women did not dominate slave marriage and family relationships; they did what women all over the world have done and been taught to do from time immemorial. Acting out a very traditional role, they made themselves a real bulwark against the destruction of the slave family's integrity.<sup>59</sup>

While many black people may have aspired to the stability and respectability of a double-headed, male-breadwinner household, the economic and social circumstances did not allow this to become universal. The slave experience encouraged the development of a community that saw male-female relations as the norm, but did not rely on them for survival. Ann Patton Malone studied 19329 slaves in Louisiana for the period 1810-1864. Malone found that seventy-three percent of the slaves lived in simple households, with only 8.7% living with extended family members, and 18.3% living alone. The simple, nuclear-type households consisted of married couples, with or without children, or single parents with children. Most of these single parents were women.<sup>60</sup>

Child slaves took their mother's status, so that even if their father was free, the child would be a slave of their mother's master. Masters often saw a "slave family" as a mother and her children, and separation was far more likely to lead to separation of a male slave from his wife and children, than a mother from her children. Manfra and Dykstra estimate that over half of slave unions that ended resulted in the separation of

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<sup>58</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 86

<sup>59</sup> Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, p. 160

<sup>60</sup> Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619-1877* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1993), pp. 139, 141

fathers from children.<sup>61</sup> Frankel emphasises the fact that fathers had no legal status in slavery, and whether they were the real father of a child or not, they had to publicly claim their paternity for it to be accepted.<sup>62</sup> One of the major weaknesses of black fathers must have been the inability to prove paternity. If a woman wanted to get her children back from a partner from whom she had separated, she could claim they were not really his children.<sup>63</sup> The other side of this situation was the lack of condemnation of illegitimacy in slave communities. The role of the mother was given enough primacy so as to allow women to bring up children alone without censure, and hence the figures found by Malone.<sup>64</sup>

The difficulties faced by couples who were separated as a result of the war could be exacerbated if they had children. For example, Nicholas Thomas of Mississippi told his wife not to follow him to Union lines when he went to fight for the North. If she had done so, she would have had to leave their children behind, and Thomas did not want this. A paradox of separation of spouses is that it was often a conscious action, designed to keep families together.<sup>65</sup> In the movement of slaves to the interior during the war, children were sometimes separated from parents, as Thomas Seward sent one of his female slaves to Arkansas and kept her children in Mississippi.<sup>66</sup> This practice cannot be assumed to have originated in the war, when we have examples of slaves like Delia Garlic, who was working in Louisiana when the war broke out. Garlic was originally

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<sup>61</sup> Manfra and Dykstra, 'Serial Marriage', p. 34

<sup>62</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, pp. 126, 127

<sup>63</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 136

<sup>64</sup> Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, p. 159

<sup>65</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 20

<sup>66</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 17

from Virginia, but had been sold three times and had been separated from the rest of her family:

Babies was snatched from dere mother's breas' an' sold to  
speculators. Chilluns was separated from sisters an' brothers an'  
never saw each other ag'in.<sup>67</sup>

Attitudes towards children and their relationship to their parents would affect the stability of the black family. If a master at least respected the mother-child bond, some measure of stability was allowed. It is illustrative of the varied situations that faced slaves, that some children were separated from the rest of their families. Remarriage of a parent could also profoundly affect the situation of a slave child, as they found themselves with a stepparent and possibly stepsiblings. One of the major dilemmas created for blacks by forced separation, especially when the destination and fate of the removed partner was unknown, was the practical and emotional decision to take another partner, and in many cases create a stepfamily.

It is difficult to achieve a true understanding of what black men and women themselves felt to be acceptable and desirable in their marriage relations, and their position within households. It has been accepted that the black family in slavery was conceived in a different way to free white families, partly due to the non-legal marriage ties, and the absence of fathers in many cases. The stepfamily was an inevitable result of the ruptures

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<sup>67</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), pp. 7-8

of slavery. The Freedmen's Bureau marriage records for Concordia Parish include some interesting cases of stepfamily formation. For example, in 1865, Cato Walker, age forty-seven, of Kentucky married Ann Jones of Mississippi, who was only eighteen. Further to the age-gap of almost thirty years, Cato had nine children from a previous union of eighteen years, which had ended when his wife died. Of the seventy-five Concordia records, nine show an age gap of twenty to thirty years, and in each instance the man is the senior partner. Through seventeen of these unions stepfamilies were created, and while creating such units was probably problematic, living within such a unit seems to have been a desirable option for blacks of all ages as they emerged from their time as slaves.<sup>68</sup>

The Civil War was a crisis point for black individuals and their families. Separation, loss, reunion and remarriage placed demands on freed people to establish boundaries and set standards very rapidly. The Civil War was a crisis point in terms of the ruptures it was capable of causing in an already forcefully separated population of black slaves. The War brought freedom to these slaves, while exacerbating the social problems of the black community, and shaking this community's foundations as plantations disintegrated or changed hands. The transition from slavery to freedom was not smooth, and the burdens of the black family tested its limits.

Defining the strength of the black family is not straightforward, and those who have tried to measure it along lines of which model it fits into, such as patriarchal or matriarchal, do not account for the inevitable disruption of slavery, the War and emancipation. By 1865

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<sup>68</sup> FB Online, Louisiana Marriage Certificate Returns

the black family had survived a tremendous amount of strain, and therefore the institution of the family was a strong force within the black community. The black family set its own standards and did not emerge from slavery unequipped for a life of autonomy, because of the hardships it had survived as an institution, and because of the vital role it played in the lives of individuals. An understanding of the role of the church in the lives of blacks can illuminate the discussion of the black family, and the source of its strengths and aims.



## **Chapter 2 – Religion and the Black Family**

### **The Church in Reconstruction**

Culture gives people, or allows them to develop, a sense of themselves. It is the foundation of community awareness, a reflection of society's past as well as its present.<sup>1</sup>

Studies of slave culture in the American South have uncovered widespread religious practices and religion has come to be regarded as one of the most important survival strategies of the men and women who lived as slaves. By adapting white American Christianity, and mixing it with African traditions, slaves created what many have called a “unique” religion, which allowed them a measure of autonomy from their masters.<sup>2</sup> Peter Paris has viewed the black church as having a place of “institutional primacy” in the black community.<sup>3</sup> Wilmore has connected the functions of religion in slavery to the development of the black community over time, and has reached the conclusion that “religion has functioned closer to the survival needs of blacks in America than it has to those of whites.”<sup>4</sup> These assertions encourage the further investigation of the functions of religion in the development of the black community, and the increased understanding of the role of the church in the lives of black Americans.

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<sup>1</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Smith, ‘Slavery and Theology’, p. 497

<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985), p. xii

<sup>4</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion*, p. 23

The religion of blacks in slavery was both a reaction to imposed conditions and a part of those conditions, and as a result black religion as it emerged from slavery was not uniform or homogenous. Historians have discussed the motives slaves had for turning to religion, two of the most prominent being to relieve burdens and to cultivate hope.<sup>5</sup> Less often, the focus is on the significance of the religion imposed on slaves by masters. While some masters avoided teaching slaves about religion and the bible for fear of insurrection, or because they did not believe it to be worthwhile, slaves were often forced to go to church. Black exposure to white religion was dependent on the attitudes of the masters, which were variable.

Some slaves created their own religion that they practiced behind their master's back, and in opposition to white religion, which segregated blacks further from white culture.<sup>6</sup> The underground and secretive nature of slaves' religious practice attests to its nature as a form of protest. The creation of what Montgomery calls a "unique and genuine African-American religious system"<sup>7</sup> was a process which involved the adoption and rejection of different tenets of white Christianity and the fusion of African, non-Christian elements. Montgomery has refuted the ideas of historians such as Frazier and Stanley Elkins who have propagated the theory that enslaved blacks responded as concentration camp inmates to their fate as slaves, and thus discarded the beliefs they held in their former lives. Instead he argues that enslaved blacks did allow African culture to infiltrate and

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<sup>5</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion*, p. 33, Smith, 'Slavery and Theology', p. 498

<sup>6</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion*, p. 35

<sup>7</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 18

influence their religious practices.<sup>8</sup> Wilmore calls this “religious pragmatism”.<sup>9</sup> The differences between regions, plantations, masters and slaves, combined with the need to be pragmatic, meant that black religion was not uniform or homogenous when the slaves were set free.

There were white forces aiming to hinder and direct the development of black religion in Louisiana both before and during the Civil War. In New Orleans there were several cases of the authorities interfering with black religious activities. In 1853 twenty-seven blacks participating in a baptism service were arrested and charged for holding an assembly without the permission of their master or the Mayor. In 1865 the police were on standby to break up any black religious meeting that carried on beyond nine o’clock at night.<sup>10</sup> The fact that such restrictions were felt to be necessary suggests that black religion was seen as a threat to stability in the final years of slavery, and as late as the end of the Civil War in 1865.

The period following emancipation and the Civil War was viewed by missionaries as a great opportunity to “reform” the South through the education and religious instruction of the freed blacks. Concerns arose due to the largely uneducated black ministry of Louisiana<sup>11</sup> and Missionaries sought to teach blacks fidelity, self-reliance and chastity.<sup>12</sup> However, some whites were observant enough to note that the blacks were capable of self-help:

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<sup>8</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, pp. 15, 16

<sup>9</sup> Wilmore, *Black Radicalism*, p. 46

<sup>10</sup> Marcus Christian, *A Black History of Louisiana* (New Orleans, 1980), pp. 15, 16

<sup>11</sup> Christian, *A Black History*, p. 147

....we abolitionists had underrated the suffering produced by slavery among the negroes, but had overrated the demoralization. Or rather, we did not know how the religious temperament of the negroes had checked the demoralization.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a missionary who was in command of a black Civil War Regiment, observed black religion as a positive force in black lives. In order to assess the effect of black religion on societal structures such as the family, it is important to understand the nature of the black church as it emerged from the Civil War. The churches the black people belonged to, the process of segregation in these churches, their members and their leaders will now be outlined. This chapter will also outline the roles of the churches, and their aims and views, and will aim to assess how the church attempted to guide the black family and what the church can actually tell us about black communities, families and individuals.

During slavery Louisiana blacks worshipped within various denominations, which were not necessarily of their own choosing. The most common denominations of slaveholders in the South were Episcopalian, Methodist and Presbyterian.<sup>12</sup> For a study of Louisiana, Catholicism should be added to this list. Mrs Catherine Cornelius, an ex-slave who was born on a plantation in West Louisiana, was taken to an Episcopalian church by her

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<sup>12</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, p. 452

<sup>13</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 107

master, and said that all the slaves were baptised in this church.<sup>14</sup> The fact that slaves were being exposed to various religious denominations across one state, suggests that generalisations should not be made in the discussion of black religion, its origins and its role in black people's lives. An excerpt from the slave narratives from "Ma Liza" tells us:

We never did sing any hymns. I lived with my ma and the white folks and they was Catholics and they would not let us go to church and when I got a woman and went to the Baptist church.<sup>15</sup>

Louisiana is illustrative of the diversity of black religion at the end of the Civil War. Black religion is usually associated with Evangelical Protestantism, but there was a strong Catholic influence on many regions of Louisiana, particularly the south of the State. Not all blacks in the State converted to Protestantism when freed, although it is difficult to estimate the conversion figures due to a lack of sources.<sup>16</sup> While conversion after slavery was not a universal black experience, and a number of blacks remained in the Catholic faith, the Protestant denomination had wide appeal to ex-slaves. By 1880 there were sixty-one independent black churches in the Louisiana Delta region, providing religious guidance to over fifty thousand black people.<sup>17</sup> Reasons for the popularity of these denominations included their communal spirit, sense of social revolution, doctrine of hope in eternal life and their overall flexibility. Montgomery has identified the fact a

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<sup>14</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 19, Interview with Mrs Catherine Cornelius by Breux-McKinney

<sup>15</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 46, Folklore-Religion, Ma Liza

<sup>16</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, pp. 98-99

<sup>17</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', p. 157

“radical, earth-shattering conversion experience” was seen to be necessary to gain entry into heaven within these denominations, as appealing to blacks.<sup>18</sup>

There were differences between the Baptist and Methodist denominations. The Methodists were more tightly organised than the Baptists.<sup>19</sup> The Baptists were decentralised and had a democratic structure, and became the largest black organisation the United States had ever seen, outnumbering all the other black denominations combined, by the close of Reconstruction.<sup>20</sup> Census figures for 1870 do not separate religion by race, and the numbers of blacks in these churches are disputed, however one historian estimated that in 1871 there were sixty thousand black Baptists in Louisiana.<sup>21</sup> The majority of black churches in the Louisiana Delta states between 1865 and 1880 were of the Baptist denomination. In Carroll Parish, for example, only one of ten churches was Methodist.<sup>22</sup> One of the major reasons for the popularity of the Baptist denomination may have been its decentralised structure that allowed black preachers to set up their own churches with relative ease.

Black church affiliation was not based on chance, nor was it a replica of white patterns of church association, and it certainly

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<sup>18</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, pp. 19-22

<sup>19</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', p. 167

<sup>20</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 92

<sup>21</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', p. 168

<sup>22</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', pp.158-159

was not the result of white evangelisation alone.<sup>23</sup>

Black people, though restricted to particular denominations, did have a choice in their religion once they were free. Some, like “Ma Liza”, chose to convert to a denomination which suited their needs, but this cannot lead us to suppose that Catholicism was rejected by all Louisiana blacks. By 1875 a visitor to New Orleans noted that most of the blacks in the French Quarter were Catholic.<sup>24</sup> The French sections of New Orleans had a large population of black Catholics, many of whom were Free People of Colour before the War.<sup>25</sup> The Catholic Church viewed slavery as a political and not a moral issue. As long as slaves were “fairly” treated, and Masters exposed them to religious instruction, the Church did not get involved.<sup>26</sup> Randall Miller has pointed out that black Catholics were an anomaly in the American South, set apart from mainstream black and mainstream Southern culture.<sup>27</sup> In the period following emancipation and the Civil War, the difference between black Catholics and blacks of other denominations was made most obvious in the process of segregation. While the Catholic church blacks remained in biracial congregations, Protestant blacks and whites were actively seeking segregation.

Randy Sparks has traced the situation of the segregation of biracial churches as following two paths. One, whites forced blacks out, leaving them with no choice but to form their

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<sup>23</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 107

<sup>24</sup> Emily Clark and Victoria Meacham Gould, ‘The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852’, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (2002), p. 19

<sup>25</sup> Dolores Egger Labbe, *Jim Crow Comes To Church: The Establishment of Segregated Parishes in South Louisiana* (Louisiana, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1971), p. 18

<sup>26</sup> Randall M. Miller, ‘Slaves and Southern Catholicism’, in John B. Boles, *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South 1740-1870* (Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 1988), p. 130

<sup>27</sup> Miller, ‘Southern Catholicism’, p. 127

own churches, and two, blacks and whites co-operated to create separate churches for blacks.<sup>28</sup> An example from the Liberty Baptist Church of Mississippi demonstrates the latter trend. The white members of the church allowed the blacks to select their own minister, and they chose a black preacher who the church then licensed. The blacks were permitted to use the church meeting house on one Sunday of every month.<sup>29</sup> Even in the process of segregation, which is often seen as giving blacks autonomy, whites were still exercising control over black worship. Paradoxically, the white impulse to control blacks did not push them to keep biracial churches.<sup>30</sup> By 1870 the Louisiana Baptists had consented to the segregation of their church along racial lines.<sup>31</sup> In 1865 Wesley Chapel, the first black Methodist church in New Orleans, was established.<sup>32</sup>

The black Catholics of Louisiana became more distinctive and anomalous in the era of segregation. In August 1875 the *Louisianian* reported large numbers of black Catholics in New Orleans. These blacks did not leave the white-run churches, but chose to continue to worship within a church that has been criticised for not allowing blacks an influence in its policies. Black churchgoers often had to sit in separate pews from whites and black priests were not encouraged.<sup>33</sup> Miller has argued that black Catholics were “powerless” within the church, while also noting that enough blacks remained in the church to allow it to continue to be called a biracial institution.<sup>34</sup> The fact that blacks remained in the Catholic faith even when technically free to leave or convert, suggests

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<sup>28</sup> Randy J. Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi* (Jackson, Mississippi, University Press of Mississippi, 2001), p. 138

<sup>29</sup> Sparks, *Religion*, p. 139

<sup>30</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 109

<sup>31</sup> Caldwell, ‘Blacks in the Louisiana Delta’, p. 166

<sup>32</sup> Christian, *A Black History of Louisiana*, p. 11

<sup>33</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 83



that black Catholics were not necessarily dissatisfied with the Church, and that we cannot underestimate the variety of religious practices and beliefs of blacks after emancipation.

For slaves who had been excluded from institutional worship through geographical isolation or prohibition of worship,<sup>35</sup> freedom represented the first opportunity to experience church going. It is important to recognise that church membership was a choice, though a choice often affected by factors such as social pressure and geographical location. Living in an isolated, rural area might limit the choice of denomination greatly, while in a city like New Orleans there were several black churches of different denominations. However, in urban centres there may have been other limits on choice. For example, St James AME church was composed of free elite blacks, and excluded slaves.<sup>36</sup> Litwack has noted that in many of the cities of the South where there had been a free black population before the Civil War, like New Orleans, class and colour distinctions were more likely to influence church membership.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the criticism of the Catholic Church with regard to blacks, there were churches actively seeking black members. Father Gilbert Raymond of Opelousas, Louisiana, wrote to Archbishop Odin of New Orleans expressing his concern over the religious choices made by the Freedmen, and urging the need to provide for them to prevent losing them to Protestantism; "they choose the Baptist sect by preference". Pragmatism in religion comes to the fore once again. Father Cuny of Charenton, Louisiana, in 1867

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<sup>34</sup> Miller, 'Southern Catholicism', pp. 127, 151

<sup>35</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, p. 146

<sup>36</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 35

<sup>37</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, p. 467

writes to tell the Archbishop of a wedding he is soon to perform. The groom is a Catholic and the bride will convert from Methodism to Catholicism before the wedding. He adds to this:

Several others at Patterson and Franklin are about to join the Church.

A group of colored people of Charenton and notably from the Sorrel Plantation have already done so.<sup>38</sup>

While a woman about to be married is converting from Protestantism to Catholicism to be married in the Catholic Church, other former slaves are joining the church in some numbers. Individual motives and social influences could affect church membership and affiliation, as well as the practicalities of church location.

Montgomery has attempted to find reliable figures to show the extent of the so-called black “exodus” from the white churches, and to show how many ex-slaves participated in organised religion for the first time after emancipation. There is unfortunately insufficient data for this project to have been successful, and Montgomery suggests alternatively looking at examples from across the South to build up a picture of black affiliations and religious followings.<sup>39</sup> By considering evidence such as the letters of the Catholic Church, we can begin to form an impression of the relation of blacks to the churches they formed, joined, or remained members of, in Reconstruction.

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<sup>38</sup> Arch, Letter, Father F. Christophe Cuny to Archbishop Odin, 2 January 1867

<sup>39</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, pp. 98-99

Slave preachers have been viewed as central to the slave community. The preference for black preachers continued into freedom, despite the presence of white missionaries, often from the North, who tried to influence the formation of the new black churches. In 1867 the New Orleans Christian Advocate reported on the Freedmen of Bastrop, Louisiana:

A great many of them are now asking us to provide them with preaching. The Northern Methodists have sent them a preacher (Blackman)...but the more intelligent colored people are suspicious of him, and think he will get their money....<sup>40</sup>

While Northerners gave money and organisational assistance to the religious activities of some Freedmen, they were not always welcomed. The legacy of slavery, and the desire for autonomy, meant that blacks wanted to take guidance from preachers with whom they could identify, rather than from white strangers.<sup>41</sup>

By 1866 there were seven Baptist churches in New Orleans served by black preachers.<sup>42</sup> There were also “good men of native ability” in the Methodist Episcopal church including Scott Chinn and Pierre Landry. Some black Methodist Episcopal Ministers had been slaves.<sup>43</sup> The Methodists were encouraging black preachers, while aiming to

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<sup>40</sup> Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, *New Orleans Christian Advocate*, 18 May 1867, p. 5, ‘News from the Churches’

<sup>41</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, p. 463

<sup>42</sup> Christian, *A Black History*, p. 9

<sup>43</sup> Christian, *A Black History*, p. 17

maintain an educated ministry<sup>44</sup>:

....it is the duty of our church to encourage colored pastorates for colored people wherever practicable, and to contribute to their efficiency.

(Resolution of Methodist General Conference, Philadelphia, 1864)<sup>45</sup>

The Catholic church faced a shortage of priests in the antebellum period,<sup>46</sup> and the leadership of black Catholics suffered as a result. Father Louis Hoste of New Iberia, Louisiana, wrote to the Archbishop in 1867 about a group of blacks he had visited the previous day:

They are all free, all owners of land, with a school of their own, and well thought of by the whites. This school is seven miles from New Iberia and two miles from the chapel at Patout(ville). There are about 300 people...took the names of 35 children, 7 years and older. Only one had been to confession and that only once. Could they not say mass there sometimes during the week? They say they do not want to let them in the chapel at Patout although they pay as well as the others. The other pastor goes there only on Sunday morning and returns after dinner.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, pp. 101, 27

<sup>45</sup> Christian, *A Black History*, p. 16

<sup>46</sup> Miller, 'Southern Catholicism', p. 132

<sup>47</sup> Arch, Letter, Father Louis Hoste to Archbishop Odin, 21 February 1867

Father Hoste emphasised the respectability of the blacks when trying to expand the preaching available to them. There is a tendency to see the Catholic Church as opposing black priests, but another letter shows a request for a black priest being considered quite seriously:

They, Louisianians, born in the Catholic religion, being deprived of a church especially for them, believe that it would be fitting to form a congregation in order to erect one. They ask Odin to assist them and to send them a Negro priest. He will bring joy to all the Catholics of their people.<sup>48</sup>

This correspondence points to the need to reconsider both the black Catholics of Louisiana and the Catholic Church's attitude towards the blacks during Reconstruction. The vast differences between the practicalities of church formation in urban areas with a large free black population, and rural areas that relied upon visiting preachers and priests must be acknowledged. As we consider the roles and aims of the churches with regard to the Freedmen, we must bear in mind the distinctions between denominations, segregated congregations, different church members and leaders.

It has been acknowledged that the black church was more than a religious institution, playing educational, social and political roles. Historians such as James Cavendish and

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<sup>48</sup> Arch, Letter, P. F. Glaudin, Joseph Blanchard and Achille Glaudin (New Orleans) to Archbishop Odin, 23 January 1866

Wilmore have stated that black churches were more likely than white ones to engage in social action.<sup>49</sup> The reasons for this and the focus of the social action varied depending on the particular church, its leaders and its geographical region:

The negro population in this city is the largest in any city of the United States; and this, therefore, would appear the most appropriate field for the prosecution of the charitable designs suggested....Our people ought to take an interest in this subject not only as Christians, but also as citizens.

This excerpt from *The Morning Star and Catholic Messenger* demonstrates the charitable role the Catholic Church saw for itself in the city of New Orleans in 1868. Part of the motive for this activism was the need to keep blacks as members of the Catholic Church.<sup>50</sup> The article not only points to a responsibility to help the poor, but also to educate blacks.<sup>51</sup> In 1860 over ninety percent of the adult black population of the South was illiterate.<sup>52</sup> Along with providing formal social functions commonly associated with churches such as marriage, baptism and burial,<sup>53</sup> the church felt that it also had a role to play in educating the black population:

A race is to be educated. Formed in the image of God and endowed with those intellectual faculties common to man, four

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<sup>49</sup> Cavendish, 'Community Activism', p. 371

<sup>50</sup> Labee, *Jim Crow*, p. 21

<sup>51</sup> Arch, *The Morning Star and Catholic Messenger*, Volume 1 Number 31, 6 September 1868, p. 4

<sup>52</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 95

millions of Freedmen are looking to us for the means of mental culture....

The minutes of the Second Session of the Mississippi Conference of the Methodist Episcopal church in 1866 listed the limitations of the Freedmen's Bureau and of private schools in educating blacks, leading them to conclude that the church must fulfil this role.<sup>54</sup> However, there is a difference between the role the church saw for itself in the social lives and education of blacks and the role it was able to play in reality.

It is important to identify the link between politics and the black church when studying the black community's relationship to its institutions. Caldwell has developed the link between churches and white control of blacks by identifying a practice of some Louisiana landowning whites. By "donating" land for black churches to be built upon, for example on their plantations where they might employ several blacks, whites could ensure through the conditions of their donation that the buildings would not be used for political purposes.<sup>55</sup> The whites clearly recognised the church as a potential meeting place for black political activists, and the black church was known to contribute to the political activity of blacks by providing a meeting place and providing political leaders. Foner has argued that rather than encouraging passive behaviour in the realm of politics, the black churches actually "inspired political commitment".<sup>56</sup> Thomas Poole has identified the church as an ideal place for political action among blacks because it fostered self-

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<sup>53</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 83

<sup>54</sup> Dillard, *Proceedings, Second Session*, December 1866, p. 21

<sup>55</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', pp. 140-141

<sup>56</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 92, 94

determination and taught leadership skills.<sup>57</sup> The role of the black churches in instructing and encouraging political activism could be a dangerous one, as an excerpt from the minutes of the first session of the Louisiana Methodist Conference in 1869 shows:

J. M. Vance stated that there had been a great deal of animosity towards him on his charge, because he had taken it upon himself to influence and instruct the colored people as to their duty in voting. It had not been safe at all times to remain at his home.<sup>58</sup>

Educating blacks as to their political rights and responsibilities went hand in hand with teaching them to read and write, when helping them to adjust to freedom. The fact that the Freedmen lived in a hostile society made the role of institutions even more vital. In January 1865 J. M. Langston, a black orator, lectured at the Quinn Chapel in New Orleans on the 'New Relations and Responsibilities of the Colored Race'. The *New Orleans Tribune* responded positively:

Mr Langston is doing a noble work in arousing his Colored brethren to a proper sense of the new priveledges and responsibilities which are opening up to them. Now is the time for them to assert their manhood and to convince the world that they are worthy of a

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas G. Poole, 'Black Families and the Black Church: A Sociohistorical Perspective' in Cheatham and Stewart, *The Black Family: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers, 1990), pp. 36-37

<sup>58</sup> Dillard, First Session, Louisiana Annual Conference, January 1869



place among freemen.<sup>59</sup>

The need to prove their worth to the world was a demand made on the Freedmen when they least needed another challenge to face. The church was a place where Freedmen could gain confidence through collectivity and action, and could cultivate hope for the future, just as it had been in slavery. Not all churchgoing Freedmen had a grasp on their political potential, especially in remote areas of the State. However, there were other important ways in which the church could be said to be playing a part in the hopes and fears of the black community.

Poole has identified the role of the black church in emancipation as being to uplift blacks from slavery's degradation and to push the race towards full participation in Southern society. Part of the 'uplifting' of the race involved establishing societal norms and defining family values.<sup>60</sup> The role the black churches played in resolving family disputes and encouraging strong morality was important in enforcing the emotional stability of black family life.<sup>61</sup> Specific activities of the church can contribute to our understanding of the importance of religion in black people's emotional lives. These activities could include the reuniting of separated families. The Catholic Church was consulted for help in this matter, as demonstrated by a letter of 1866, from L. P. Duval of Texas to Archbishop Odin in New Orleans. Ms Duval sought Odin's assistance in the search for the children of an "old negro woman" who had lost some of her children seven or eight

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<sup>59</sup> UNO, WPA Transcriptions, *New Orleans Tribune*, 20 January 1865, 'J.M. Langston, The Colored Orator'

<sup>60</sup> Poole, 'Black Families', pp. 36-37

<sup>61</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 92

years before, because they were sold. The man who bought the children went to New Orleans, and they hoped Odin might be able to help them to track the children down.<sup>62</sup> As an important church leader, Odin was consulted on such a matter with confidence that he would be able to help reunite the black woman with her children.

The black church recognised the role of parents in securing the religious education of the younger generation, and thus binding the black community together:

....as heads of families do not forget nor omit the duty of gathering the household daily to hear the words of truth, and invoke the Great Parent to bestow upon all that blessing which maketh rich and addeth no sorrow.<sup>63</sup>

The connection the church saw between parenting and religious instruction is in part the factor that makes the church an excellent institution through which to study the black family. The role the churches perceive for parents is part of their attitude to parental roles, and also demonstrates their opinion of the daily role religion must have in black people's lives. Paris's study of the social teachings of the black churches assumes that "basic societal values are legitimated and preserved by a community's religious institutions".<sup>64</sup> The point of view, forms of expression and pragmatism of the church with regard to the Freedmen will be examined here.

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<sup>62</sup> Arch, Letter, L.P. Duval to Archbishop Odin, 30 December 1866

<sup>63</sup> UNO, WPA Transcriptions, *New Orleans Tribune*, 29 January 1865, 'Religious Department'

The response of the various denominations of Louisiana to the immediate circumstances of emancipation, and the political practicalities of Reconstruction, demonstrate the adaptability of the churches with regard to freedom:

Having learned to labor and wait we exhort them to patient continuance in well doing, for in due time they shall reap temporally as well as spiritually, the full reward of their patient toil and suffering. We enjoin upon them to procure at once employment for the coming year....and to lead quiet and peaceable lives in all Godliness and honesty.<sup>65</sup>

The Methodist Episcopal Church's advice to the Freedmen blended the practical with the spiritual. Immediate, practical action had to take precedence at a time of tumultuous change. In a political turmoil, the Freedmen could have hope, as long as they kept their heads down and led "quiet and peaceable lives". One of the slave narratives illuminates some of the problems faced by Freedmen who were trying to carry on with their lives alongside white people:

White people teached de school. Dere was religious people tryin to git de slaves to go to chirch but some kind of riders come along an

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<sup>64</sup> Paris, *Social Teachings*, p. xii

<sup>65</sup> Dillard, First Session, 1865

tol dem dat dey must not teach niggers.<sup>66</sup>

Elizabeth Ross Hite faced circumstances where some whites created, and others abhorred, opportunities for black education and worship. Freedom was not straightforward, and churches had to deal with opposition swiftly to remain vibrant and central to black communities.

In the face of white opposition, black churches were faced with the predicament of dealing with the problems and needs of the black parishioners, without attracting unwanted attention from an already skeptical white Southern community. Churches were aware that they could not rely on most whites to help relieve the condition of the Freedmen, even within their own denominations and churches. The American Missionary Association (AMA) was an organisation that aimed to provide relief and education to freedmen, but it continually emphasised that its role was only temporary. The AMA believed that blacks should ultimately be independent with regard to social care in their communities.<sup>67</sup> The AMA established the Central United Church of Christ of New Orleans in 1872. In 1876 one of its ministers wrote to the AMA Secretary:

The congregation is rapidly increasing....The church are a unit in everything. There is not one discordant element....Some of the white Congregationalists occasionally drop in ...but the spirit of caste is about as strong in New Orleans as it is in India and we

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<sup>66</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 19, Ross-Hite

<sup>67</sup> Richardson, *The American Missionary Association*, pp. viii, 66

must not look for anything from them...<sup>68</sup>

In addition to being unable to ask the white people for help, the church was compelled to maintain its strong moral image. In 1876 Reverend W. S. Alexander writes to the Secretary of the AMA about a parishioner, Mrs Mitchell. Mrs Mitchell joined the congregation some time previously but wished to become a full member of the church. Though an "active and conscientious" parishioner, Mrs Mitchell had lived with a man for twenty years without being married to him. In a later letter Alexander told the secretary he had refused Mrs Mitchell membership of the church, though he had informed her she could continue to attend. The Central Church had, it was claimed, never before allowed heads of families who are not lawfully married to join the church. Alexander quoted the Deacon who said, "it has been our aim and desire to make this a clean church", and he believed theirs was the only church in New Orleans that could make such a claim of 'cleanness'. This situation indicates the concerns of churches in Reconstruction and attitudes to those who are not lawfully married. It is interesting that Alexander believes the church was unusual in its strictness on this matter.<sup>69</sup> The response of the AMA to Mrs Mitchell's situation in the Central United Church shows that the organisation was trying to enforce values on a group to whom they were only providing temporary guidance and assistance, which might be considered paternalistic and possibly detrimental to independent black development.

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<sup>68</sup> Amistad, Central United Church of Christ Collection, Rev W. S. Alexander to Strieby, 29 February 1876

<sup>69</sup> Amistad, CUSs Collection, Rev W. S. Alexander to Strieby, 7 March 1876, 18 March 1876

A commentator in the *New Orleans Christian Advocate* anticipated the complete independence of blacks with pessimism:

It will be well if the negro can maintain the moral and religious teachings he has enjoyed. I have no hope of it myself, as he will have to keep himself, and has neither disposition nor capacity to ameliorate the conditions of his race.<sup>70</sup>

The negative views of whites in the response to the conditions of Reconstruction affected black religious development. While blacks were being asked to conform to white society, they were segregated and alienated, forced to accept the morals of the white church while becoming separated from them. This is the contradiction of integration, which has been recognised by Poole, at work.<sup>71</sup>

Within the restrictions of the Reconstruction period, it is possible to identify the aims of the churches with regard to the black family, aims which they might be prevented from fulfilling by practical problems. A general view has arisen, from the views of historians and contemporaries, that the Catholic Church made very little attempt to help Freedmen or to encourage them in to their church in Reconstruction. This conclusion has been based on the apparent lack of mission work of the Catholics to the Freedmen.<sup>72</sup> In 1871 Father Vaughan visited the Southern States to report on the situation of the black people.

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<sup>70</sup> LSA, *New Orleans Christian Advocate*, Volume XII Number 24, 30 June 1866

<sup>71</sup> Poole, 'Black Families', pp. 36-41 Poole states that separate black churches were established because of racism and yet segregation was designed to help black people towards "equality and assimilation"; the blacks were required to develop separately in order to integrate them, and this seems paradoxical (p. 40)

The visit highlighted the need for the Catholic Church to provide for the specific needs of the blacks, and to address the problems of priest shortage and the need for schools.<sup>73</sup>

The response of the Catholic Church to freed blacks would have been more fully open to white scrutiny, than that of segregated black churches. In 1866 Father Denece of Petit-Cailhou, Louisiana, wrote to Archbishop Odin to tell him of a mixed marriage he has had to perform recently, with no time to secure a dispensation.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the marriage records of South West Louisiana include several cases of couples of mixed denominations, who had lived together for some years, or who had previously been married civilly. While some blacks previously of another denomination were baptised Catholic in time for the ceremony, others are simply recorded as Protestant, and in one case both partners were Protestant. Priests may have been sought out to perform marriages in remote areas regardless of their denomination because of a shortage of clergymen. Some records say one partner was "non-Catholic", others "not baptized". A Protestant preacher had already married one of the couples. Unfortunately these records only give us snapshots of information and do not explain their significance. We can only speculate that their incidence may indicate that the conservative institution of the Catholic Church was more flexible and open to the particular needs of blacks in the Reconstruction period than has previously been supposed.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 82, Miller, *Southern Catholicism*, p. 131

<sup>73</sup> John T. Gillard, *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* (Baltimore, St Joseph's Society Press, 1929), pp. 36, 37

<sup>74</sup> Arch, Letter, Father Denece to Archbishop Odin, 14 June 1868

<sup>75</sup> Hebert, *Southwest Louisiana Records*, pp. 142, 107, 277, 160, 137, 290, 301, 303, 183, 189, 194, 198, 133, 132, 243, 261, 278, 285, 288, 290, 296, 107, 123, 126, 142, 147, 216

An article written by Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould on the black Catholics in Louisiana in the period 1727-1852, has identified a practice of the Catholic Church which increases our understanding of their pragmatism in the face of adverse circumstances. The Catholic Church viewed God parenting as “an effective form of fictive kinship” which helped to “recreate community and family bonds”. Gould and Clark argue that the existence of this practice provides a method of measuring the social action of the Catholic Church. The Archdiocese of New Orleans baptism records show instances where no parents are noted, but Godparents are recorded, and also cases where the mother is “unknown” but Godparents are noted.<sup>76</sup> The potential role of Godparents as fictive kin would have been very important to lost and orphaned children in Louisiana.<sup>77</sup>

The Catholic Church tried to establish rules and guidelines for the Freedmen, and struggled with some of the situations presented to them. A letter from Father Conrad M. Widman of Grand Coteau, Louisiana, to Archbishop Odin in 1868, relates the predicament of a former slave. Caius married another slave, Caia, around 1858. Their master refused to allow them to marry before a priest, so their marriage was merely a mutual decision to live together as husband and wife. Caia was sent to New Orleans during the War, and Caius entered military service. Caius learned that Caia was living with another man, and so took another wife himself, and married her in the Church. Caius felt remorseful, as he had intended to marry Caia. The Father is confused about the “validity of such marriages”. This case demonstrates the opposing forces of morality and

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<sup>76</sup> Arch, Walmsley Avenue, Baptism records for St Augustine Church, Vol 3-A, 1863 Pierre Octave, p. 101; Baptism Records for St Louis Cathedral, Vol 33, 1866, Celine Mary Perry, p. 168

<sup>77</sup> Arch, Baptism Records, St Augustine Church and St Louis Cathedral



pragmatism when unions had been made within a system where marriage itself was illegal and ill defined.<sup>78</sup>

The Catholic Church was critical of the interference of philanthropists in the South:

A remarkable interest is being manifested in the freedmen... by a certain class of individuals, whose interest in any country is not very great, nor calculated to add much to the welfare, materially, morally, or socially.... It may, however, be long enough to ruin the poor freedmen, for these would be philanthropists have proven, the world over, that they care little for the consequences to others so long as their own pockets are not in any way affected.<sup>79</sup>

The Catholic Church wanted to educate the blacks, as indicated by a letter of Archbishop Perche of New Orleans from 1877, which was sent to Archbishops and Bishops all over the United States, expressing that “an immense good could be effected” if black schools were set up.<sup>80</sup> While resenting the interference of external philanthropists, but encouraging the unity of the Catholic Church in helping the Freedmen, the Catholic Church appears to have been leaning towards a policy of self-help, from within the existing institutions of the black community, and realising its duty as such an institution.

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<sup>78</sup> Arch, Letter Father Conrad M. Widman to Archbishop Odin, 17 March 1868

<sup>79</sup> Arch, *The Morning Star and Catholic Messenger*, 19 April 1868, “Letter from Plaquemines”

<sup>80</sup> Arch, Letter, Archbishop Perche to Most Reverend Archbishops and Right Reverend Bishops (of the United States), Oct 1877

The family was central to Catholic society,<sup>81</sup> and the church supported the family. They hoped to encourage family bonds and helped the poor and sick when these bonds failed.

Paris believes that there is very little between the social teaching of the Baptists and Methodists.<sup>82</sup> An excerpt from the Methodist Conference Minutes of 1866 shows on of the aims of the Methodist church early in Reconstruction:

It is useless at this date to dwell upon the evils of intemperance, or array statistics upon the treasure it has wasted, the widows and orphans it has made, the crimes and sufferings of which it has been the occasion, or the bodies and souls it has sent to the grave and perdition.<sup>83</sup>

The Methodists aim to elevate the Freedmen to higher values, through temperance. The AMA also sought “evangelisation through education and acculturation”, with a focus on the sanctity of marriage, sexual purity, and temperance. Richardson believes the AMA failed because they did not recognise the vitality of pre-existing black institutions, did not approve of black ministers, and believed Southern black religion needed drastic change.<sup>84</sup> Protestant factions wanted to change black behaviour in a way that would raise the black family to white, middle class standards. The Freedmen, it was assumed, needed to be taught how to live in free society, and how to ‘fit in’ with whites.

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<sup>81</sup> Miller, ‘Southern Catholics’, p. 138

<sup>82</sup> Paris, *Social Teachings*, p. xi

<sup>83</sup> Dillard, Second Session, 1866, p. 23

<sup>84</sup> Richardson, *American Missionary Association*, pp. ix, 143-44, 147, 240-41

The difficulties predicted by the church in the task of helping the Freedmen in Reconstruction were not taken lightly, and would have to be overcome by finding effective methods of influencing behaviour and thought. The strongest tool the churches felt they had with which to influence the family in Reconstruction was the family members themselves. Newspaper articles urged parents to send their children to school to become part of the “great battle to be fought between Intelligence and Ignorance”.<sup>85</sup> The AMA saw important, distinct roles for mothers and fathers, emphasising the primacy of the double-headed family. They saw fathers as having an educational role, while mothers could instruct on the Bible and encourage religion in domestic and personal life.<sup>86</sup> The Catholic Church believed women had a special role to play in teaching values to children.<sup>87</sup> Women were often cited as being especially religious, and they were selected as the ideal people to inculcate religious values to children. R.E. Jones conducted a study on the plantation figure of the “Black Mammy” and one of his subjects relatives concluded:

....I have decided that, as these women were always the best and most religious Negroes, and were often with the children of the best families most of the time during childhood, they probably had a greater religious influence on the young life of the South than the preachers.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> UNO, WPA transcriptions, *New Orleans Tribune*, 4 February 1865

<sup>86</sup> Richardson, *American Missionary Association*, p. 145

<sup>87</sup> Clark and Meacham Gould, ‘The Feminine Face’, p. 5

<sup>88</sup> Amistad, R. E. Jones, A. C. Millar, Arkansas, to Robert Elijah Jones, 8 December 1938

The Baptists believed women had a role as “moral leaders”, but although women were seen as vital inculcators of faith and values, children were seen as a key link between the church and the black community at large:

As heretofore the preachers have found that in many places the only means of access to the people, of gaining their confidence, and sometimes even of getting permission to remain in a neighbourhood was for the preacher to give a large share of his attention to the children.<sup>89</sup>

Children could link newcomers to parents and were seen as being the most enthusiastic and open audience. Even when they were parentless, children were held in high esteem as perpetuating faith and values:

The home is doing great work and its influence is extending...when the children leave the institution one by one, either by marriage or the aid of friends, or to enter business pursuits...in its immediate vicinity the Home will become the mother of a wholesome Christian influence which cannot help affecting the future (illegible) of politics and morals.

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<sup>89</sup> Dillard, First Session, Louisiana Conference 1869, p. 18

Writing about a childrens home, S. S. Beiler used language which connected religion and the family very closely: “the mother of a wholesome Christian influence”. He believed that with children lay the future success of the values of the Christianity.<sup>90</sup>

The aims of the black churches in influencing black families in Reconstruction were connected with helping the black family to fit into a society where whites were ready to crush black success and attempts at organisation and participation. As Poole has argued, the church saw itself as a “primary transmitter” of values to the family following emancipation,<sup>91</sup> but also had to be pragmatic in such a difficult political and social atmosphere of change and adjustment. It was important to the different denominations to keep their members as well as to help the Freedmen, and both factors led the churches to demonstrate their flexibility.

The church in Reconstruction guided the black family into freedom with a firm idea of how blacks should act in order to be accepted by society as free men and women. “Clarification” and “conformity” are two terms used by Poole to describe the task of the church at this time. To clarify the rules and values of black society and to thus help black people to conform was the role of the church in Reconstruction.<sup>92</sup> Institutions such as the church had to work very hard to achieve such aims in the face of white opposition and disruption. The role of religion in the survival and adaptation of blacks to their circumstances began in slavery, and continued into Reconstruction.<sup>93</sup> By studying the

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<sup>90</sup> Louisiana State University, Joseph C. Hartzell Papers, S. S. Beiler to Joseph Hartzell, 30 Sept 1870

<sup>91</sup> Poole, ‘Black Families’, p. 46

<sup>92</sup> Poole, ‘Black Families’, p. 36

<sup>93</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion*, p. 46

black church we can discover what church leaders aimed to change with regard to the black family, their methods in achieving these aims, and the extent to which their aims could be achieved in the realities of the South in Reconstruction. The church may help us discover more about the black experience of Reconstruction, because of the link between religion and the realities of life.<sup>94</sup>

Before we examine in detail the responses of black people to the churches, and the reality of the effect of the church on the black family in Reconstruction, a study of a secular organisation also aiming to shape the family in Reconstruction will provide a comparison to the church. Montgomery has noted the problem with examining the influence of the church when it was offering similar advice to other, secular institutions. In the next chapter, the role and views of the Freedmen's Bureau will be discussed, allowing us to assess the accuracy of Montgomery's view.

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<sup>94</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion*, p. 22

## **Chapter 3 – Creating the Black Family**

### **The Influence of Secular Institutions**

While the government has no lands to give you, it will, through the Freedmen's Bureau, furnish you protection, schools for your children, and as far as possible, make provision for the aged and infirm, and will exercise a general care over you, until you can take care of yourselves, when Uncle Sam will say to all his black chickens, Now scratch or die.<sup>1</sup>

One of the major political responses to emancipation, was the perceived need to create an organisation to help the Freedmen adjust to their new position in life. Howard White has called the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau the first large-scale welfare legislation in the United States, and views the period of its operation as the first time a government agency had had so much power over so many lives.<sup>2</sup> The temporary Bureau was something of an "experiment in social policy".<sup>3</sup> Established by an act of government, the Bureau was created and run in close connection to the Army who were already occupying the South. The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana began its work in June 1865, and

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<sup>1</sup> LSU, Reverend M. French, *Address to Masters and Freedmen by Reverend M. French with a Marriage Code for Freedmen* (Macon, Georgia, Phoenix Steam Printing House, 1865), p. 6

<sup>2</sup> Howard A. White, *The Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1970), p. 8

<sup>3</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 142

continued to work among the Freedmen of the state until 1868,<sup>4</sup> although they continued to distribute money to Freedmen who had been in military service and continued some of their educational roles beyond this date.

The circumstances of the years 1865 and 1866 created huge need among the Freedmen.<sup>5</sup> Robert Bremner believes that the circumstances of the Freedmen deteriorated at the close of the War, for example the Contraband Camps were closed.<sup>6</sup> The personal condition of some slaves is illustrated by the narrative account of Odel Jackson, who lived in La Fourche parish, southwest of New Orleans:

After us was set free we most starved to death. I would slip  
around and eat out of people's slop cans, I would be so hungry.<sup>7</sup>

It was the task of the Freedmen's Bureau and Freedmen's Aid Societies to help the suffering. The Bureau aimed to help the destitute, the old and orphans, establishing various institutions for them while also taking control of military hospitals.<sup>8</sup> There were far more people in need than the Bureau could help, but the presence of this organisation, and also of Union troops, have been viewed as important factors for Freedmen in the question of where to settle after the War.<sup>9</sup> The Bureau relied on taxes, confiscated property, charity and army supplies to continue its role in helping the Freedmen. Along

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<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Records of the Freedmen's Hospital and New Orleans Area Field Offices of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869*, Introduction, p. 1

<sup>5</sup> White, *Freedmen's Bureau*, pp. 8, 67

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Bremner, *The Public Good: Philanthropy and Welfare in the Civil War Era* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 116

<sup>7</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 19, Interview with ex-slave Odel Jackson by McElwee

<sup>8</sup> Bremner, *The Public Good*, pp. 116, 117, Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 151



with the problem of funding, the Bureau faced a great deal of opposition and criticism that hampered its potential for success. President Johnson vetoed both the Freedmen's Bureau and the Civil Rights Act, but was defeated by a two-thirds majority in the Senate. Conservative whites saw the Bureau as a political tool, used by the Radical Republicans to promote themselves and northern business interests.<sup>10</sup>

The Bureau was intended to restore order to the South by helping the Freedmen to adjust to free society by finding homes and employment, and to offer a temporary source of relief to the impoverished and sick among them.<sup>11</sup> Part of the Bureau's role would be to establish and help to run institutions such as orphanages, asylums and schools. Overall the Bureau was a political institution set up to overcome a political problem, through social and economic supervision of the Freedmen. Inevitably the black family became the subject of the Bureau's actions and debates, and this makes it an interesting organisation to compare with the black churches, which also took on a social, supportive role in Reconstruction. By examining the leadership, personnel, activities, views and aims, and the effects of the actions of the Freedmen's Bureau in Louisiana, the role of such institutions in society may be further understood. The role of the Freedmen's Bureau may also be compared to that of the church with regard to influencing the black family in Reconstruction.

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<sup>9</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 26

<sup>10</sup> White, *Freedmen's Bureau*, pp. 8, 11, 20, 30, 65-66

The personnel of the Bureau, its leaders and agents, were crucial in determining the attitude and policies of the organisation. The Bureau's leadership consisted of a Commissioner, with Assistant Commissioners for the supervision of the individual States. Within Louisiana, the Bureau was divided into thirty-three districts, each with Assistant Superintendents of Freedmen, who were later called Agents. Restructuring in April 1867 resulted in seven sub-districts of the state, with each sub-district being supervised by a Subassistant Commissioner and his Assistant Subassistant Commissioners.<sup>12</sup> Bureau positions were given to men from the Army, as the government could not afford to have an agency totally separate from the Army operating in the South.<sup>13</sup> There were never more than nine hundred agents at work in the South, and the Bureau suffered from a chronic shortage of funding and manpower.<sup>14</sup>

The man given the task of leading the Freedmen's Bureau was General Oliver Otis Howard. Although Howard had been opposed to slavery, the President selected him partly due to the fact he was not connected to the Radicals. Howard promised to make a wide range of aid available in the South. Howard was criticised for a failure to keep up his records and to act within legal limits, while he was also admired because he was willing to "cut through the mass of red tape" to help the Freedmen as much as he could.<sup>15</sup> The implications of having such a man at the head of the government agency assigned to help the Freedmen were far reaching for the Radical politicians of the day who wanted to enfranchise and empower Southern blacks.

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<sup>11</sup> Bremner, *The Public Good*, p. 116, 117

<sup>12</sup> Williams, *FB Records*, Intro, pp. 1, 2

<sup>13</sup> White, *Freedmen's Bureau*, p. 9

<sup>14</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 143

The Assistant Commissioners of Louisiana are shown in Table 2. Thomas Conway was selected to begin the Bureau's operations in Louisiana because he had helped to organise black troops and labour during the Civil War. When Conway became involved with the Radicals and became embroiled in disputes he was removed from office. His follower, Fullerton, was conservative and closed down an orphan asylum, apprenticed the inmates to white masters, and ordered the arrest of unemployed blacks. Following Fullerton's month of Conservative action, the arrival of Baird saw the demise of Fullerton's policies. Baird, Sheridan and Mower all acted to get more power for the blacks, mainly via the franchise. Their actions successfully excluded some whites from the electoral roll of March 1867, a fatal mistake for public relations between the Bureau and the Conservatives of the State.<sup>16</sup> The political aspirations and ideas of the Bureau's personnel affected the nature of the Bureau.

**Table 2: Assistant Commissioners of the Freedmen's Bureau, Louisiana<sup>17</sup>**

Name	From			Until		
	Day	Month	Year	Day	Month	Year
Thomas W Conway		June	1865	3	Oct	1865
General James S Fullerton	4	Oct	1865	18	Oct	1865
General Absalom Baird	19	Oct	1865	7	Sept	1866
General Philip H Sheridan	5	Oct	1866	27	Nov	1865
General Joseph A Mower	28	Nov	1866	4	Dec	1867
Lt. Col. William H Wood	5	Dec	1867	2	Jan	1868
General Robert C Buchanan	3	Jan	1868	24	Aug	1868
General Edward Hatch	25	Aug	1868	1	Jan	1869

<sup>15</sup> White, *Freedmen's Bureau*, pp. 11, 13, 15

<sup>16</sup> White, *Freedmen's Bureau*, pp. 18, 23, 24, 26, 27, 30, Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 157-158

<sup>17</sup> Williams, FB Records, Intro, p. 2

To fully appreciate a comparison of a “secular” institution, engaged in social action for Freedmen, with religious institutions, it is necessary to realise that church and state were not entirely separate. Religious views were not prevented from entering the political arena from which the Freedmen’s Bureau originated. Commissioner Howard, converted to Methodism in 1857, was criticised for allowing his religion to emerge in his Bureau work.<sup>18</sup> The Bureau was also criticised for allowing religion to influence its recruitment policies. *The Morning Star and Catholic Messenger* asked in 1868 ‘Is the Freedmen’s Bureau a Missionary Bureau?’, because of the apparent dismissal of a candidate for a teaching post within a Freedmen’s Bureau school, when he revealed to his interviewer that he followed the Catholic faith.<sup>19</sup> The fears of the Catholics that the Bureau might discriminate in this way draws attention to the fact that within a non-denominational, government organisation there may be subtle influences at work, whether religious or political. In embarking on a study of the aims and views of the Freedmen’s Bureau, and their success it is important to recognise the effect individual agents and leaders could have. It is also important to realise that the personnel were not trained in social work, and that they faced a challenging situation when appointed to the Bureau assigned with the task of organising the Freedmen in the South in the years immediately following the Civil War.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> White, *Freedmen’s Bureau*, pp. 13-14

<sup>19</sup> Arch, *The Morning Star and Catholic Messenger*, Volume 1 Number 45, 13 December 1868, p. 4

<sup>20</sup> White, *Freedmen’s Bureau*, p. 84

An examination of the activities of the Freedmen's Bureau offers an insight into the influence that the Bureau could have over the Freedmen. The Bureau offered blacks practical help, but also performed a judicial role, mediating disputes. Created to help the Freedmen, Bureau agents were sometimes seen to be taking the side of the whites, particularly in economic matters:<sup>21</sup>

He will protect you and he will protect the master – the one just  
as much as the other.<sup>22</sup>

In their attempts not to excite opposition from whites, the Bureau were aware that they had to provide for the rights of white employers as well as black workers. Reverend French gave an *Address to Masters and Freedmen*, which was made into a pamphlet endorsed by the Bureau. Blacks and whites would hear this address, or read the pamphlet version, and from it discern the position of the Bureau in regard to both black and white rights. The Bureau tried to implement a system of free labour which would serve the needs of both parties, and through labour contracts, established the labour/employer relationship of Reconstruction, and also helped to regulate this relationship. The Agents investigated disputes between blacks and whites which were often related to labour, and they also reported on the economic condition of the Freedmen and of the plantations.<sup>23</sup> In addition to supervising the plantation workers, the Bureau helped Freedmen to find work,

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<sup>21</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', p. 193

<sup>22</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, p. 16

<sup>23</sup> Williams, FB Records, Intro, p. 2, Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 142

and assisted those black men who had served in the military during the War to claim pay and pensions.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to helping the Freedmen find work, the Bureau also helped to establish a system of education for the Freedmen. Working with charitable organisations to establish and maintain schools for Freedmen, and circulating publications such as the *Address to the Freedmen*, were two of the ways in which the Bureau tried to achieve this aim. The publication of pamphlets such as the *Address* did not directly educate the Freedmen in reading and writing, but aimed to teach the meaning of emancipation and social values. The pamphlet containing the *Address* was intended to be circulated as widely as possible. An advertisement at the back for a book version of the pamphlet said:

Every Freedman ought to have this Book to direct him for the present crisis; and to lay away for future reference.<sup>25</sup>

More immediately useful than education, a vital role of the Freedmen's Bureau was the distribution of food and clothes to the poor and destitute of the South. White sees this role as one of the primary reasons for the Bureau's creation. In Louisiana the problems causing high levels of destitution, apart from the displacement caused by the War, included cholera and yellow fever epidemics, bad harvests due to caterpillar infestations, floods and bad winters, the worst of these occurring in 1866 and 1867. The dire situation led to legislation for providing rations being passed, which allowed the Secretary of War

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<sup>24</sup> White, *Freedmen's Bureau*, p. 19, Williams, FB Records, Intro, p. 1

<sup>25</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, final page, advertisement (unnumbered)

a free hand in funding the crisis. Rations consisted of meat, flour or bread, meal, beans, peas, sugar, vinegar, candles, and salt.<sup>26</sup> Bremner estimates that by the end of 1865 the Bureau was providing fifty thousand people with daily food rations in the South.<sup>27</sup> The Bureau helped both poor black and white people in Louisiana, White believes that between June 1865 and September 1866 the Bureau allocated 612781 rations in the State, with 455290 going to the Freedmen.<sup>28</sup>

The correspondence of L. Jolissaint, the Assistant Subassistant Commissioner for Orleans Parish Left Bank from June to August 1867, shows the kind of people who were being considered for aid. In June Jolissaint wrote to the Assistant Commissioner to request aid for Freedman George Handy, who suffered an accident which broke both of his legs, and had a dependent wife and two children. George Handy's employer was caring for him and wrote to the Bureau to ask for help. Jolissaint referred the case to the Assistant Commissioner for "action or instruction".<sup>29</sup> The correspondence also includes a request to aid a white woman whose house had burned down. The woman had three children all under the age of fourteen.<sup>30</sup> The people to whom the letters of Jolissaint refer were in dire need of help. The Bureau helped family units, both double-headed and single-headed, black and white.

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<sup>26</sup> White, *Freedmen's Bureau*, pp. 65-67, 70

<sup>27</sup> Bremner, *The Public Good*, p. 117

<sup>28</sup> White, *Freedmen's Bureau*, p. 67

<sup>29</sup> Williams, Records of the Assistant Subassistant Commissioner for Orleans Parish Left Bank, Reel 1, Letters Sent May 1867-May 1868, Jolissaint to Sub Assistant Commissioner, 25 June 1867

<sup>30</sup> Williams, Reel 1, L. Jolissaint to Sub Assistant Commissioner, 25 January 1868, L. Jolissaint to Captain H. Warner, 27 January 1868

Another role the Bureau played in helping the Freedmen was the creation of institutions such as orphanages and hospitals. These institutions were designed to help the old, the sick, the destitute and dependent children.<sup>31</sup> New Orleans had one of the only professionally staffed hospitals for Freedmen.<sup>32</sup> In continuation of a service that had been carried out in the war, this hospital cared for patients from far and wide.<sup>33</sup> The Bureau in Louisiana received requests for transportation, which they would pay for those in most need. The Freedmen's Bureau also helped to supply food, medicine and funds to the four New Orleans orphanages between 1865 and 1868.<sup>34</sup>

The activities of the Freedmen's Bureau outlined so far have been practical and their clear aim was to get the Freedmen off the streets and into work. The Bureau played a paternal role in the early years of Reconstruction, and did help to influence the black communities in more subtle ways, through their role as adjudicators in disputes revolving around the family. The Bureau had a reasonable amount of power, and had separate courts for dealing with Freedmen's cases for a short period.<sup>35</sup> Many of the issues dealt with concerned either the custody of children or the reuniting of families.

While taking a large role in adjudicating disputes between blacks and whites, the Bureau agents had to submit reports three times per month pertaining to the moral and psychological conditions of the Freedmen, and had to report on the issues they had been

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<sup>31</sup> Bremner, *The Public Good*, p. 117

<sup>32</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p.151

<sup>33</sup> Williams, FB Records, Intro, p. 2

<sup>34</sup> White, *Freedmen's Bureau*, p. 79

<sup>35</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 149



dealing with.<sup>36</sup> Some of these reports and letters are illustrative of the influence the Bureau had over individual black lives.

In 1866 an agent in Carroll Parish, Louisiana received a request asking for help in reuniting black parents with their children, believed held illegally in Mississippi.<sup>37</sup> The task of reuniting families was not left up to the church, it is possible that people were so desperate for help that they would seek it out wherever they could find it. The Bureau was also singled out to help those who wanted to travel to be with loved ones who could take care of them. An example of this is the case of Elenora Summers, a Freedwoman who had an eight-month-old child. She could not work because she had to take care of her child, and wanted to go to Baton Rouge to be with her mother and two brothers. A crippled Freedman wanted to be transported to Texas, where he claimed to have a wife who would take care of him. Jolissaint requested his transportation, and believed on seeing letters from the man's wife, that the story was legitimate.<sup>38</sup> It would have been in the interest of the Bureau to have these Freedmen reunited with family members who could take care of them, reducing the need for rations and institution places for these individuals. The Bureau contributed to the reconstruction of the ruptured black family by encouraging blacks to help one another, and to be close to their kin and friends for mutual support.

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<sup>36</sup> Williams, *FB Records*, Intro, p. 4

<sup>37</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', p. 104

<sup>38</sup> Williams, Reel 1, L. Jolissaint to Lieutenant Lee, 13 January 1868, L. Jolissaint to Captain H. Warner, 20 January 1868

Foner has argued that the Freedmen's Bureau personnel became involved in the private lives of the Freedmen through temperance societies and lectures on the responsibilities men had to their families. While agents may have engaged in these activities, the scale of the destitution problems in Louisiana meant that they would have had very little time to deal with other matters.<sup>39</sup> However, that is not to say that in actions like transportation and distributing aid the Bureau could not impress its views. The views and aims of the Bureau concerning the black family became visible in certain aspects of their work.

As a general thing their moral condition is all that can be expected of them taking into consideration their former conditions. In some cases coming under my observation, the marriage relation is not properly regarded.<sup>40</sup>

The attitude of individual agents, such as Jolissaint would influence the aims and values of the Bureau as a whole. Opinions of the consequences of the time the Freedmen had spent as slaves were strong and varied. Jolissaint apparently felt that slavery had hindered the slaves, and that this merited giving them some leeway in their current social state of affairs. The Freedmen's view of marriage was something that the Bureau sought to change, in one of its attempts to alter the disposition of the black family.

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<sup>39</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 143, 146

<sup>40</sup> Williams, Reel 1, L. Jolissaint to Lieut. Col. Lucias, December 1868

*Special Orders No. 43*

...II. It is to be forcibly impressed upon persons living together as man and wife, that it is of the utmost importance that they should be legally married in order to make their children legitimate.

III. In pursuance of the foregoing the following named persons of Iberville Parish, La, having lived together for some time as man and wife it is to be understood that said persons should immediately take measures to fulfill the directions of the Government by solemnizing the marriage ceremony, or separate, and endeavour to make themselves respectable people.<sup>41</sup>

This excerpt from the Special Orders issued by the Bureau in Iberville and West Baton Rouge shows that the Bureau believed strongly in the legalising of the marriage bond. Some Bureau agents were of the view that slavery had damaged the black family, and believed that the Freedmen needed encouragement to live monogamous lives.<sup>42</sup> In 1864 a military edict, known as Special Order 15 was issued which commanded Bureau clergy to make Freedmen's marriages legal. This would include recording the unions and distributing marriage certificates.<sup>43</sup> By compelling couples to solemnize their marriage or separate in order to become respectable the Bureau demonstrated its opposition to couples living together without legally marrying, but also foresaw a possible change in the partners of some of the Freedmen.

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<sup>41</sup> Williams, Records of the Assistant Subassistant Commissioner for Iberville and West Baton Rouge Parishes and Predecessors, Reel 9, Special Orders Issued April 1866-April 1867, Special Orders Number 43, 21 August 1866

....the marriage of those, who were living together as husbands and wives on coming into freedom, is declared to be the lawful marriage....All whose marriages have not been solemnized by a minister of the gospel, or by such magistrates as the civil laws of the State authorise, will be required to have them publicly confirmed.<sup>44</sup>

Formalising slave unions was a priority for the Freedmen's Bureau, who stated that "The marriage relation among you must be as sacred as among the whites."<sup>45</sup> It is therefore possible to see the views of the Bureau on marriage as part of a larger movement to integrate the Freedmen in to white dominated Southern society.

The *Address to Masters and Freedmen* is a document which demonstrates that the Freedmen's Bureau, and those working for it, understood the complex situation created by slavery:

Hitherto your families, in many instances, have been scattered.  
Some of you, unfortunately, have two or more living wives, also,  
many a wife will find two or more living husbands.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Barry A. Crouch, 'The "Chords of Love": Legalizing Black Marital and Family Rights in Postwar Texas', *Journal of Negro History* 79 (1994), p. 335

<sup>43</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, p. 18

<sup>44</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, p. 8

The need for a set of guidelines in dealing with situations where couples had been separated, often against their will, was approached by the Freedmen's Bureau.<sup>47</sup> Along with the published address of Reverend French, was a 'Marriage Code for Freedmen', which decreed the following:

*Section I: Parties Eligible to Marry*

...2. All married persons, who shall produce satisfactory evidence of either the marriage or divorce of all former companions according to the usages of slavery, or of their decease, will be eligible to marry again.

3. All married persons, producing satisfactory evidence of having been separated from their companions by slavery for a period of three years, and that they have no evidence that they are alive; or, if alive, that they will never probably, be restored to them, may be allowed to marry again.<sup>48</sup>

The Freedmen's Bureau readily acknowledged that blacks might have several partners because of slavery. The key seems to have been to ensure that it was very unlikely another partner would turn up once remarriage had occurred. Provisions were made by the code in case such an event should occur:

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<sup>45</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, p. 8

<sup>46</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, p. 8

<sup>47</sup> For a breakdown of reasons for Concordia Parish, Louisiana, marriage separations see Chapter 1; Gutman calculates that in three districts in Mississippi, of the couples marrying before the FB in 1864/65, of those couples with a partner aged 40 or over, 37% reported a previous marriage ended through force. Gutman, *The Black Family*, p. 21

<sup>48</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, 'Marriage Rules', p.1

*Section IV: First Marriages and Reunions*

6. If a man living without a wife find two wives restored to him by freedom, the one having children by him, and the other not, he shall take the mother of his children as his lawful wife...<sup>49</sup>

Later clauses allow “release” from this obligation if the woman refuses to have anything to do with the father of her children.<sup>50</sup> There was an emphasis on the responsibilities of parenthood, but the Bureau also acknowledged that people might not want to reunite, for their own reasons, despite having children together.

Foner argues that patriarchy came about partly because of the influence of the Freedmen’s Bureau, who set wage scales in favour of a male breadwinner, and ensured that men signed labour contracts.<sup>51</sup> By looking at the Bureau’s discourse, it is possible to see that it is trying to impose patriarchal values on the black family, but the success of these doctrines would depend on more than a change in attitudes:

When a woman marries, she wants two things; she wants a good husband and a good home. After getting a husband, every wife should try to be worthy of his love, and make her society so agreeable to him, and her home so pleasant, that he will be more

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<sup>49</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, ‘Marriage Rules’, p. 3

<sup>50</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, ‘Marriage Rules’, Section IV Clause 11, p. 3

<sup>51</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 86

happy at home, than anywhere else.<sup>52</sup>

In this passage in Reverend French's *Address*, it is clearly expected that a woman will encourage her husband to be "good" and faithful, by providing him with a good home. This places a large part of the burden of family stability on the freed woman, who usually had to work to keep her family alive, while facing dislocation and uncertainty.

The attitude of the Bureau towards children and parenting focussed on securing stability. According to the Freedmen's Bureau Marriage Rules, if a mother died, her children had claim for means of survival on their natural father, whether or not he had another family.<sup>53</sup> The responsibilities of fathers were important to the Bureau, as seen in the case of Frederick Mullen who worked on a plantation in Iberville Parish. Mullen was called to report to the parish office of the Freedmen's Bureau because he was reported to have a wife with whom he had lived for five years, and to be the father of two small children, who were all living in destitution because he had deserted them. The solution is given to him when he obeys his orders and visits the office:

Frederick Mullen...will proceed to the residence of Ellen Mullen,  
and there take charge of his children; giving them the livelihood that  
humanity entitles them to.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, p. 10

<sup>53</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, p. 4

<sup>54</sup> Williams, Reel 9, Special Orders Number 48 and 49, 11 September 1866 and 12 September 1866

The rights of Mullen's children were given precedence, and the Freedmen's Bureau agents saw it as their job to impose his responsibilities upon him. No mention is made of Mullen's circumstances, or he and his wife's reason for separating in the first place, making it difficult for us to assess the situation fully. The record does, however, demonstrate that the Bureau tried to impress the responsibility of fathers.

Another case of disputed parentage appears in the letters sent from the offices of the Parish of Orleans Left Bank by Jolissaint. The Bureau writes to Mr Alfred Roman on behalf of Mr Benjamin Scott. Roman was said to have Scott's child, a ten year old girl called Virginia, and Scott wanted to send her to school. Jolissaint ordered Roman to take the child to Scott or to call at the office to have the situation investigated. A few days later, a letter was sent to ask a higher official what to do in this complicated situation. Roman had brought the mother of the child to the office, who he claimed to have lived with in slavery, and as a result Scott "cannot swear whether the child is his or not". Scott had another two of Roman's wife's children, and she claimed Scott's current wife was cruel to them and did not allow her to have any contact with them. Jolissaint's conclusion was that Roman's wife should have all the children:

In as much as the woman is the mother of the children and  
Scott only the disputed father I think the woman is entitled  
to have her children.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Williams, Reel 1, Letters of 14 June 1867, 17 June 1867



This case illustrates the primacy of the mother in cases of disputed parentage, and this is one area where men may have been in a weak position in Reconstruction and the reassembling of families. The view of Jolissaint is that the mother should have her children, since the man cannot prove he is the children's real father, even though the children have been in his care.

One case in which the child's rights are considered above the mother's was the case of Mary Jane. Mary Jane was abandoned by her mother and became a servant to a Mrs Lacost, who treated her "more as a child of her own than as a servant". Mary Jane's mother returned and tried to have her daughter arrested as a vagrant, in a bid to get Mary Jane away from her mistress. In this case Mary Jane was allowed, as apparently was her will, to stay with Mrs Lacost, someone who gave her a good home and treated her kindly. Blood ties are not necessarily given precedence in cases where the mother actions are felt to have jeopardised the wellbeing of the child. In this case the mother claimed that her child was thirteen, while the child herself and observers believed her to be eighteen.<sup>56</sup> It cannot be assumed that the Bureau would return a child to her mother in any circumstance. If the child was felt to be better off where it was, even if it was not with its kin, then the Bureau sought to leave the child where it was. This was not always in the interest of the black family, and such cases may be interpreted as evidence that the Bureau supported whites and the system of apprenticing.

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<sup>56</sup> Williams, Reel 1, Letters Received May 1867-September 1868, J.H. Jenas, Attorney to Jolissaint, 3 April 1868, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, March to December 1868 Jolissaint to Captain Lucius Warren, 10 April 1868

Black father Henry Cannon had his children removed from him and apprenticed as they were declared illegitimate on the death of his wife.<sup>57</sup> When Fullerton was Assistant Commissioner for Louisiana he made indenture compulsory for children with no other support, and closed an orphanage, apprenticing all the inmates out to whites.<sup>58</sup> White has seen Fullerton and those who agreed with his practice as “casually disposing” of children, keeping lists of people seeking children to work for them. Children were even sent to the North, which severely limited the chances of them ever reuniting with lost relatives. The scale of poverty and displacement with which the Bureau had to deal, may have meant that in some situations it was easier to leave children in an apprenticeship situation. Provided that the children were well treated, and they had no relatives, apprenticeship may have been seen as an appropriate solution. However, with a lack of manpower and resources it would have been very difficult for the agency to police employers’ behaviour towards apprentices. The Bureau was also setting dangerous precedents, by favouring whites in such situations. The Bureau publicly endorsed apprenticeship as a solution to the problems of the black family, suggesting that even when children had parents, they might have been better left where they were:

Many of them (children) are in good Christian families which love them, and are disposed to do well by them, and would be very glad to keep them, for a while at least. However much you may love them, however pleasant it would be to have them with you, still it might be an unkindness to them, to take them from their present

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<sup>57</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 139

<sup>58</sup> White, *Freedmen's Bureau*, p. 82

homes now. You have the right to do so, but it nevertheless might not be expedient.<sup>59</sup>

While the Bureau encourage Freedmen to consider the consequences of removing their children from families not their own, they do not deny the Freedmen's right to do so. This is important, because while the Bureau is seen to be supporting whites, its aim to help the Freedmen adjust to their new situation comes across. As slaves, black parents had no real rights, and one of the most important adjustments to be made after emancipation was to ensure the Freedmen realised their rights, politically, legally and in connection with their families.

The Freedmen's Bureau maintained an emphasis on the temporary nature of the organisation, and encouraged blacks to help themselves, as individuals and groups. The connection between the Bureau and the church is seen not only in the personnel, but also in the Bureau's enthusiasm for the church as a longstanding support agency for the Freedmen, a role the Bureau knew it was not designed to fill. Jolissaint sent letters to "pastors of colored churches" to enlist their help in finding a woman's lost children. A monthly report praises the Freedmen for acting to "improve their moral condition, their churches are well attended". The link between the church and the elevation of the Freedmen is made.<sup>60</sup> The Bureau also looked to local groups and benevolent societies to take on the task of providing relief to needy Freedmen.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, p. 9

<sup>60</sup> Williams, Reel I, Monthly and Trimonthly Reports, Jolissaint to Warren, 3 May 1868, Special Report to B. J. Hutchins, 13 November 1868

<sup>61</sup> White, *The Freedmen's Bureau*, p. 72

Overall, the aim of the Freedmen's Bureau was to encourage and enable the Freedmen to become independent of any outside help. Through hard work they would become dependent only on themselves, and the home was seen as central to Freedmen's chances of achieving this:

And you must have homes for your families. Where and how will you get homes for yourselves? If you refuse to work, or are idle, you will never have a home; but if industrious, economical and disposed to improve your time, making yourselves useful on the plantations, or in the blacksmith, carpenter or wagon shops of others, or of your own setting up....there will be full demand and good pay for your labor.<sup>62</sup>

The hopes of the Freedmen's Bureau were hinged on the willingness of the Freedmen to work hard and live sensible, temperate lives, be faithful to their spouses and responsible for the care of their children. In inciting the individual act of self control the Bureau aimed to control society itself as it underwent the transition from War to peace and as Freedmen began their new lives in the South.

The supervision of an external body over family life relied on the individual's willingness to share their experiences and ask for help with family difficulties. Cases where the Freedmen's Bureau are turned to for help in a case of desertion or abuse show the role of the Bureau in enforcing values, not only setting standards. These cases are also important for showing us how the Bureau interacted with the Freedmen. The Bureau ordered Oscar Launuse to pay Celestine Trudeau nineteen installments of five dollars towards the keep of their child in 1865. Launuse had only paid one of the installments he agreed in 1867, when the case was being readdressed. The Bureau were committed to long term agreements and decisions, despite the fact they are so often seen as transitory. Although Bureau operations ceased at the end of the 1860s, the few years in which they operated were crucial for women like Trudeau, who relied on their help in bringing fathers to realise their responsibility. Even if the couple was not married, as we may assume these two were not from their surnames and the husband's absence, the Bureau ensured parental responsibilities were met when they received complaints.<sup>63</sup>

Complaints to the Bureau were usually about the breaking of contracts, unfair treatment or desertion.<sup>64</sup> The Louisiana Bureau's records include records of complaints brought by women against abusive husbands. In July 1866 a Special Order was issued against Moses Hillian "having been found guilty of shamefully beating and assaulting his (so called ) wife Maria Hillian". Moses is ordered to leave Maria and not live with her ever again. He is also warned that if he does not keep the peace within the next three months

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<sup>62</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, p. 7

<sup>63</sup> Williams, Reel 1, Jolissaint to Oscar Launuse, 11 June 1867

he will face severe penalties. This case demonstrates the willingness of the Freedmen's Bureau to take seriously a case of partner abuse, though the term "so called wife" suggests the Bureau do not consider this couple to be legally married. This makes it difficult to assess if this order to separate would be typical procedure for legally married Freedmen couples. By 1868 the Bureau were still receiving complaints of abuse, reporting that an Alice Porter had complained that "her husband beat and abused her".<sup>65</sup> The fact that women saw the Bureau as an agency that would help them to bring their husbands to justice for the domestic violence they were suffering, shows that the church was not the only institution in the community policing the family and social behaviour. Some women might even have found it easier to discuss such matters with a Bureau agent than with a minister or a priest.

Cases of desertion appear in the Freedmen's Bureau records. These records include complaints of women against husbands who have left them alone to care for their children:

Lettie Innis complains that her husband left her, and refuses to support a child that she had by him, whilst her husbands brother wanted to turn her out of doors. She was told to remain where she was until the matter could be further investigated.

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<sup>64</sup> Williams, *FB Records, Introduction*, p. 5

<sup>65</sup> Williams, Reel 9, Special Order 40, 30 July 1866, *Journals of Business*, 11 August 1868

Lettie Innis faced destitution and homelessness, and turned to the Freedmen's Bureau for help, and they appeared to be willing to investigate the case. Though many cases appear where women are complaining about men, one record from the Journals of Business of the Louisiana Bureau shows a husband who has been deserted by his wife:

Alfred Williamson complains that his wife has left him and taken all their household goods, and they lawfully married, but his wife had destroyed the marriage certificate

The case was referred to the Civil Authority.

This case shows that men as well as women, saw the Bureau as an approachable institution in dealing with difficult family situations.<sup>66</sup> The fact that the Bureau could, in reality, offer so little real physical protection to blacks against violence, did not mean that they were not valued as an institution which could help the Freedmen, as seen in the numbers of cases involving personal family disputes.<sup>67</sup> The Bureau was a method by which the private could be made public and therefore become regulated outside the black community.

In addition to bestowing guardianship on whites, the Bureau used their power to entrust orphans into the care of blacks. In 1866 Anna Jane Lacy a black women of Iberville Parish, was made guardian of five children whose Freedmen parents had died.<sup>68</sup> The New Orleans Colored Orphan asylum housed some children reported to have a parent

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<sup>66</sup> Williams, Reel 9, Journals of Business, 11 August 1868, 30 July 1868

<sup>67</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 148, 150

still living.<sup>69</sup> The care of such children suggested hope that parents might still be reunited with children, or might suggest that the parents have abandoned their children. In either case, the Bureau supported institutions and individuals to take care of children whose parents had died, who were unable to look after them, or who were missing. The Freedmen's Bureau endorsed *Address to the Freedmen*, expressed the value of children in free society:

I must tell you how much more money a black baby is worth now than before... You see now, my friends, how much freedom has improved the price of your stock.<sup>70</sup>

By emphasising the value of children and adult Freedmen as human beings, the Bureau advocated a set of standards for life, promising future happiness through adherence to these standards. By encouraging such an attitude the Bureau may have hoped to decrease the cases of desertion and cruel treatment among blacks.

A study of the activities and aims of the Freedmen's Bureau, and of some of the effects of their presence in the Louisiana, makes it possible to construct some conclusions about the role of institutions in the lives of black people in Reconstruction. In the years in which the Bureau operated the church was not offering a unique service in its role as a standard-setter or in helping the family overcome problems and disputes. By offering practical aid

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<sup>68</sup> Williams, Reel 9, Special Order Number 41, 31 July 1866

<sup>69</sup> Williams, Reel 6, Miscellaneous Hospital Reports, Monthly Report of New Orleans Colored Orphan Asylum, 31 January 1868

<sup>70</sup> LSU, FB Pamphlet, pp. 20-21



in the difficult circumstances of the years immediately following the war, the Freedmen's Bureau offered a lifeline to families and individuals in need. In this role, the Bureau helped the black family to develop. In more subtle ways, through their role as adjudicators in disputes and their ability to reprimand absent and abusive spouses and parents, the Bureau found a role in shaping attitudes and setting standards. The negative impact of the Bureau is often linked to its temporary nature, and its concerns with negative opinions of whites. However, the Bureau's insistence on black self-help was not unjustified, they had to try to help the blacks become self-sufficient unless the South was to be occupied by Federal troops indefinitely. Furthermore, the number of black people actually helped by the Bureau was limited due to the scale of the problems in Louisiana, and help also went to whites.<sup>71</sup>

In a period when blacks resisted white interference in their personal and religious lives,<sup>72</sup> it is interesting that the Bureau was consulted on matters such as child custody and domestic abuse. This shows they did have some influence on the black family, and a role to play, in the control and structuring of black families in the years immediately following the war. The next chapter will show exactly how blacks responded to institutions offering a set of values and a means of controlling black family life in Reconstruction.

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<sup>71</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 153

<sup>72</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 147

## Chapter 4 – Adapting to Reality

### The Black Response

During slavery, black people responded to hardship through collective action, and while some hardships were removed in freedom, they were replaced by new and different challenges. Hunter argues that the “life conditions of freedmen always demanded acting in the interests of the collective, not the individual.”<sup>1</sup> By exploiting collectivity, the freedmen could improve their lives and strengthen their families. During slavery, it was possible for slaves to be part of more than one black community, for example in marrying someone from a different plantation.<sup>2</sup> Such circumstances may have eased the transition to freedom, especially for people who had to, or wished to move around. Foner sees the move away from the slave system as having detrimental effects for some groups. For example, he believes the workload of women increased, as they no longer had the help of collective childcare and task sharing that they had benefited from in the slave quarter.<sup>3</sup> Such comments raise the question of whether emancipation increased individuality and crushed collective action amongst the black community.

In Louisiana, collective action became a formal, organised activity within the black community in the Reconstruction years. In February 1867 the *New Orleans Crescent* reported an association created by blacks in Monroe to care for the sick and bury the

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<sup>1</sup> Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, p. 40

<sup>2</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 162

<sup>3</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 86

dead.<sup>4</sup> In 1866 Trevigne Hortensia of New Orleans wrote to Archbishop Odin to tell him about the Louisiana Association for the Assistance of Colored Orphans, which had been created by and for blacks, and was in the process of building an asylum.<sup>5</sup> The black community fostered self-help readily. Mutual aid other benevolent societies helped to provide for the sick, widows and orphans and others living in poverty. Black people also made arrangements for their future for example in putting together insurance for the event of their death, to provide money for their family and pay for their funeral. Hunter has found that funerals became public events because Mutual Aid societies organised them.<sup>6</sup> The creation of groups and networks helped the black community to survive by assisting those most in need and providing an opportunity for blacks to work together for their own communities. Frankel believes that collective action was vital in helping blacks to maintain their newly won freedom, and that it was a method of demonstrating their new autonomy.<sup>7</sup>

The black community created standards for itself<sup>8</sup> and helped the black family to realise its limits, and to form its public and private identity in freedom. Frankel sees the community as setting standards for family life, for example, determining sexual morality, what was acceptable in and out of marriage, and defining legitimacy and “unofficial” divorce.<sup>9</sup> Such decisions affected individuals in their private lives, but they were also connected to the public identity of the black community. Institutions such as the church were part of black communities, but it was also possible for individuals and groups

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<sup>4</sup> WPA Newspapers, *New Orleans Crescent*, 21 Feb 1867

<sup>5</sup> Arch, Letter to Archbishop Odin, 15 Dec 1866

<sup>6</sup> Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, pp. 70, 72

<sup>7</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 161

within these communities to exclude such institutions in situations affecting the family. Such individuals and groups might have turned to other “public” organisations like the Freedmen’s Bureau, or they might have dealt with problems amongst themselves. By studying the black family through Louisiana’s religious institutions, an insight into the nature and structure of the black family may be achieved. It must first be accepted that a portion of the private matters of the family remained in the homes and social groups of black people in Reconstruction. The influence of religion in black peoples lives must be studied, and observations of the black family in the Reconstruction period made to study the relationship between the two. By bringing together the reactions of black people to religion in their lives, and understanding how the black family was functioning at this time, the relationship between religion and the black family in Louisiana by the end of Reconstruction may be understood. This chapter aims to study these connected aspects of black community life in Louisiana during Reconstruction. The relationship between blacks and religion and denominations will be discussed first. Following this will come a discussion of the nature of the family in Louisiana during Reconstruction, including structure, the relationships of men and women, children and identity as seen in naming practices.

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<sup>8</sup> Caldwell, ‘Blacks in the Louisiana Delta’, p. 343

<sup>9</sup> Frankel, *Freedom’s Women*, pp. xi, xii

The slaves reshaped the Christianity they had embraced; they  
conquered the religion of those who had conquered them.

Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 1974<sup>10</sup>

The slaves both adopted and adapted the religion of white Christians in the American South. This situation has led to many debates surrounding the role of religion in black and white people's lives, the differences and the similarities. This debate has produced conclusions such as that of Wilmore, that "religion has functioned closer to the survival needs of blacks in America than it has to those of whites".<sup>11</sup> Joseph Washington Jnr has identified the main difference between the black and white Protestant churches as the black churches lacking a sense of real history and tradition. Washington sees black Christians as being excluded as full members of secular or religious communities.<sup>12</sup> The black churches that formed in the Reconstruction were young and inexperienced, and the Freedmen needed to be accepted into society. This left the churches with a dual task in Reconstruction: they had to offer the blacks the kind of religion they wanted, in order to secure membership, whilst also offering the outside world a picture of conformity and respectability. Because religion was vital to so many individuals emerging from slavery, and because of the fact that it had helped them through hard times, blacks probably had high expectations of religion organised by and for black people. In order to understand fully the implications of such expectations for the black community and the black family, the role religion played in black people's lives must be examined. This chapter will also assess the validity of Wilmore's emphasis on the importance of religion in the lives of

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<sup>10</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 22

<sup>11</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion*, p. 22

black people. This will also lead us to understand the role of black people in shaping their own religion, and therefore controlling its influence on their lives.

The churches relied on their members to allow them to stay open and to remain viable. Without anyone to influence, there was little use for theories and aims about the way the black family should operate. This two-way relationship included reliance on the part of black people as they emerged from slavery. A letter from J. P. Newman to William Hartzell outlines the relationship Newman perceives to exist between the black people and the church:

...Be kind to our colored people. They write me doleful letters.

....They write to me of their love for you + you can do much to hold them to the old church....<sup>13</sup>

The blacks in question seem to be attached to their church and rely upon it for help in the hardship they face. It is through this that Newman hoped Hartzell might “hold them” within the Methodist church, and not lose them to other congregations or denominations. Black people relied on the church for spiritual sustenance. The black Baptists sought full immersion baptism, and were seen as “supersticious” by some whites.<sup>14</sup> Religion continued to provide hope and emotional release beyond the years of slavery,<sup>15</sup> but the

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<sup>12</sup> Washington, *Black Religion*, p. vii

<sup>13</sup> LSU, Joseph C. Hartzell Papers, Letter to Joseph Hartzell from J.P. Newman, 7 May 1870

<sup>14</sup> LSU, Robert T. Parish Diary, 14 September 1861

<sup>15</sup> Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, p. 6

church and religious practice was also a method of remembering the past and those who had suffered in the years of slavery:

But God was in the plan just as He said He would be out of  
tribulations He brought us out of the dark valley and made us all  
free, and equal human beings...  
...You see even when slaves were tortured they never forgot to  
pray.<sup>16</sup>

The recollections of Victoria Williams, born a slave, suggest the relationship between slavery and religion that endured into freedom. Slaves often looked to religion for hope, and prayed for their freedom. For those who survived to the emancipation, these prayers were answered. It is perhaps not surprising that ex-slaves did not turn their back on the religious practices that had helped them through slavery.

Louisiana blacks looked to the church as a centre of their community. Caldwell has called the black church “one of the most durable social institutions in the Louisiana Delta’s black community”.<sup>17</sup> In rural areas where blacks might have to travel several miles to reach the church, Sunday gatherings were full day events, where news was exchanged and food shared. Caldwell also notes the sense of pride associated with church membership. The church granted respectability and placed its member’s within a

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<sup>16</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 46, Victoria Williams interviewed by Posey, 27 February 1941

<sup>17</sup> Caldwell, ‘Blacks in the Louisiana Delta’, p. 155

community network, where their needs could be shared and addressed.<sup>18</sup> Wilmore believes black people needed to attend church more than white people did because they relied more heavily on what they gained from the church, including mutual help and assistance.<sup>19</sup> Church membership and attendance basically offered black people the same rewards that they offered white people - social structure and a site for religious worship. In addressing Wilmore's claim that black religion functioned closer to black needs for survival than white people's religion did for them, it is important to recognise that the real difference lies in how black people acted in the situation facing them at emancipation. In freedom blacks could convert from the religion their masters had imposed, and could look for a church which functioned closely to their religious and social needs. Blacks could also, with the right support, form their own churches. White religion never faced such a rupture, and this is at the root of the "differences" perceived by scholars like Wilmore.

The move of the blacks out of the white churches, was a voluntary and popular movement, suggesting that black people wanted to make their religion specifically useful to them, and felt the need to remove themselves from white control. Montgomery has observed that the number of churches, and the number of people joining the churches, increased hugely in the Reconstruction period, and believes the influx of Freedmen led to a connection being made between the fate of the black church and the fate of the Freedmen in society.<sup>20</sup> Overall, blacks saw the opportunity to direct their own religion,

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<sup>18</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', pp. 136, 164

<sup>19</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion*, p. 101

<sup>20</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, pp. 97, 98



and to take pride in the fact they had done this autonomously from white control.<sup>21</sup> An example of this autonomy at work can be seen in the failure of the AMA to institute the Congregational Church in the South, as black people were too attached to their own denominations.<sup>22</sup> This attachment brings Washington's summary that black religion lacked a basis in any real Christian tradition into question. While no longer slaves, the Freedmen did not lose all bonds to the lives they had led as slaves, including their religious practices.

There were some essential differences noted by people living at this time between black and white devotion to religion, and its motives. Paul DeClouet, a Louisiana plantation owner, noted in his diary one Friday in 1866:

The negroes being very pious since they are free did not attend work today in order to attend church. I went to town with the ladies.<sup>23</sup>

The black workers on DeClouet's plantation appear to have exercised their right to abandon work for the sake of their religion, a choice they could probably never have made as slaves. DeClouet notes the apparent "piety" of the blacks since they have been free, which is interesting. Perhaps his slaves had been more pious than he had realised but had practiced religion in secret. The Louisiana Slave Narratives highlight some of

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<sup>21</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 89, Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 54

<sup>22</sup> Richardson, *The American Missionary Association*, p. 154

<sup>23</sup> LSU Alexandre E. DeClouet and Family Papers, Diary of Paul DeClouet, Volume 1 1866

the different religious practices of slaves that were seen as being strange by whites:

Does moanin' help you in your endeavour to follow Christ, we  
asked. It surely does, she replied, It helps the spirit along, when  
you are in pain it helps along lots jus' to moan and groan lak'  
I say.<sup>24</sup>

The emotional nature of Evangelical Protestantism encouraged many into the Baptist and Methodist congregations of the South. The verbal and physical aspects, such as moaning, are often stereotypes of black religion. This makes it easy to fall into the trap of believing only these denominations were useful to blacks, and that they fled from the Catholic church for such reasons:

I was just Catholic and pray in my house at nite. I never got that  
'legion that makes you shout and carry on.'<sup>25</sup>

Carlyle Stewart was Christened in the Catholic Church at St Patout while still a slave. He did not convert to Protestantism, and he seems to consider the vociferous nature of that branch of black religion with disdain. Marthy Ann Prim, born and raised in slavery in Mississippi, later moved to New Orleans and worked for the Fitzwilliam family. She was

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<sup>24</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 114

<sup>25</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 19, Interview with Carlyle Stewart, McDonoghville, LA by McElwee, 3 April 1940

a Baptist but converted to Catholicism through devotion to her mistress.<sup>26</sup> Another Louisiana ex-slave, Charity Parker claimed:

We was all christened Cath'lic, 'cause you took de religion of your marse and mistress...My maw, she was a Baptist, 'cause she had her religion before she came to de place. I sho' liked to go to confession. I'um a Baptist now, but I still like te Cath'lic faith. I was getting ready to make my Communion when de war broke out an' I was sho' disappointed....

Charity Parker fondly remembers the rituals of Catholicism. It is usually assumed that Catholicism did not appeal to black people, because it was too sedentary. Miller has pointed out that aspects of Catholic worship like the ritual and liturgy were emotional and moving.<sup>27</sup> While there was a high concentration of Protestant blacks in the South, this should not lead us to make assumptions about the personal nature of religion, and Louisiana demonstrates the possible variety in denominational influences. Circumstances had a heavy role to play in influencing the conversion (or not) of former slaves. Marthy Ann Prim and Charity Parker were influenced by people around them, in the case of Marthy her mistress, and Parker was influenced by her mother, who held on to her Baptist beliefs while serving a Catholic master who encouraged his slaves to adhere to Catholicism. While still only fourteen, Parker was separated from her mother who was

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<sup>26</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 19, Interview with Marthy Ann Prim by Posey, 2 March 1939

<sup>27</sup> Miller, 'Southern Catholicism', p. 141

left behind in Jacksonville while her master took other slaves to Texas. She underwent what she believed to be a conversion experience, in her own words, "I got religion". Although Parker was very young when she experienced her conversion, and younger still when she felt attached to Catholicism, there are few other sources that give this kind of insight into the emotions and forces surrounding conversion and adherence to denominations within black religion. The conversion process, and the influence of parents emerges in Henry Reed's story:

Was raised up with Crooles until 1865. When I got with the real American, I learned how to talk. You see, I was Catholic then, but am a converted man now. I belong to the Baptist church. I had a good maw, she was the cause of me being converted.<sup>28</sup>

Here the conversion instigated by the mother is part of a process of American assimilation. Reed was born in 1853 in St Landry Parish. The influence of his Creole owners on his religion and language was transformed with his conversion in 1865, at the young age of twelve. The fact that Reed's mother was felt to have "caused" his conversion shows that this impetus was coming from the generation above him, who had also lived under the Catholic Creole regime as slaves. The family was an agent for the different denominations and the black church, ensuring the commitment of younger generations to the denomination from a young age, as soon as they were free to do so.

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<sup>28</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 19, Interview with Henry Reed of McDonoghville, LA, by McElwee

One particular case from the Louisiana slave narratives illustrates the pragmatism black people could demonstrate in their religious lives. The section is entitled 'The Catholic Baptists', and is an account of the nieces of Antoine Brench, who died in January 1940. Brench was born in Point A La Hache, Louisiana, and because his parents died at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, so were never actually free, Brench continued to call himself a slave. Baptised a Catholic, Brench converted to Baptism when he went to New Orleans and found that he was not permitted to marry in the Catholic Church. Brench had two children, and had both of them baptised as Catholics, and they also became Baptist when they married. It is specified that they did this because it was what their father wanted, not because the Catholic Church would not allow them to marry. All relatives are thought to follow Brench's "double religion", and this includes the nieces relating the story. The son of one of the nieces has broken the pattern:

I don't know whether we will keep having two religions any more.  
My boy changed his, I told you, before he is married and he says if  
he has any children they gonner be baptized Baptist right away and  
stay that way, but you never kin tell. Maybe some of our other  
relations thought this way too, but when they had children they had  
them all baptized Catholics. No Uncle Antoine never hated  
Catholic Church, fact is maybe his relations before him did the same  
thing....<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 46, 'The Catholic Baptists', A Huguenot

Although we do not know how far back this tradition went, it is interesting that someone born in 1873 adopted such a practice that tied denomination to family ritual and perpetuated itself through this. There were few similarities between Catholics and Baptists in terms of the nature of their religious practices, and there was a unique situation at work in Louisiana, where many slaves were raised Catholic and came to Evangelical Protestantism later.

Syncretism is the amalgamation of different religious beliefs. Studies of slave culture have uncovered the syncretism of slaves who went to a white Protestant or Catholic church at the insistence of their masters, and who also followed a secret "slave" religion. Sometimes this slave religion fused non-Christian, African and supernatural beliefs with traditional Christian tenets that might have been learned in the white church. The conversions and experiences of the Louisiana ex-slaves studied here, suggests there is little reason to suppose blacks stopped taking on aspects of worship and religious practice from what are often seen as conflicting schools of belief. Miller has argued that black Catholics tried to make the faith work for them, to help them in their lives, and often found themselves working against the Catholic Church's agenda of social concern.<sup>30</sup> Much emphasis has been placed on the need for blacks to control their own church, and thus the Catholic Church has been viewed as restrictive for blacks, because they lacked opportunity to influence leadership. However, this implies that one must control ones religion in order to make it "useful". The fact that some Louisiana blacks actually liked Catholicism and did not convert, or raised their children into adulthood within it, may suggest that too much emphasis has been placed on who controls the church and not

enough on the real role of religion in the life of the individual. The ability of the church to serve individual spiritual needs could be as important as its role as a community centre and social agent in attracting black members.

The ability of the churches to implement their social aims in society was dependent on the reactions of the church members to these attempts at change. There was resistance to what was felt to be “white” or imposed religion. The AMA dwindled for a variety of reasons including the “ungrateful” freedmen they had tried to help, and their changing stance on issues to accommodate Southern whites.<sup>31</sup> Montgomery has identified the inability of missionaries and teachers from the North to influence blacks as being due to their essential racism and their paternal attitude to the blacks. The inability of whites, and blacks, from the North to recognise the significance of black religion, which they saw as “heathen” and too emotional, was one of their greatest failures in their mission to the Freedmen.<sup>32</sup> Observers did recognise the differences between black and white religion,<sup>33</sup> but chose to fight or dismiss them, not to work with them. While emphasising that blacks were ultimately responsible for their own destiny, missionaries were keen to be paternal and to try to “reform” them. This was not straightforward. The black people had usually already found God and religion, and they were attached to their own practices, making it very difficult for missionaries to “improve” the race through religion.<sup>34</sup> For example, Daniel Alexander Payne was high up in the AME church and was critical of the “folk” religion of lower class blacks that he fought throughout his career. Wilmore sees this as

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<sup>30</sup> Miller, ‘Southern Catholicism’, p. 128

<sup>31</sup> Richardson, *The American Missionary Association*, p. 25

<sup>32</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 44, Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, p. 458

<sup>33</sup> Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 25

proving the endurance of such religion.<sup>35</sup> The uplifting of the black race could thinly disguise a desire for blacks with their own agenda to progress in society.<sup>36</sup>

Limits to the changes the church could hope to implement also involved membership. The minutes of the 1869 Methodist Church Conference included a statement from preacher Joseph Gould saying that his congregation was mainly comprised of people working on nearby plantations. The people were prone to move to find work, and this meant that his congregation did not grow very much. Movement also suggests a high overturn of parishioners, perhaps limiting the influence Gould could really have on the individuals, who were effectively just passing through.<sup>37</sup> Other factors could put some blacks off going to church altogether:

I don't belong to no church. It costs too much money. In my young days I never had time to go to church.<sup>38</sup>

Ex-slave Verial Brown's interview shows the factors that might discourage church attendance altogether. Miller has argued that although many blacks left the Catholic Church, those who remained were highly significant. These black Catholics found, through their adherence to religion and attendance at church, communality that helped them in life. Miller believes slaves had always had to compromise, so compromise in

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<sup>34</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, p. 461, Montgomery, *Vine and Fig Tree*, p. 53

<sup>35</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion*, p. 260

<sup>36</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion*, p. 265

<sup>37</sup> Dillard, First Session of the Louisiana Annual Conference, January 1869, p. 8

<sup>38</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 19, Interview with Verial Brown by McElwee, 29 April 1940



religion was nothing new, and they were able to find significance and hope in their religion; "the church had promised no more".<sup>39</sup>

Because black religion has been seen as having a unique, survival role, it has been easy to allow the church to take the credit for the progress of the black race, in influencing social practices and norms. However, blacks were more firmly in control of their own destiny than to allow the church to take over their lives. One factor of continuity from slavery days was the tendency to syncretise, and take what was desired from different religions and belief systems. This is mirrored in attitudes to the family, which when examined in detail show the autonomy and distinctiveness of the black family in Reconstruction, now able to adhere to or defer from societal norms.

Frankel argues that in emancipation, the private became public, as issues facing the Freedmen such as marriage, moving about, choosing where to live and control of children became matters for public concern.<sup>40</sup> Previously the system of slavery had contained these matters. Blassingame believes that black people "could not be expected" to make any significant progress in the twenty years following emancipation.<sup>41</sup> While this statement acknowledges the hardship black men and women would face in Reconstruction and beyond, it is a statement which views black progress as a homogenous, group occurrence. Individuals and families made their own kind of progress at this time. While this progress did not reveal itself immediately, for instance

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<sup>39</sup> Miller, 'Southern Catholicism', pp. 151-152

<sup>40</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. x

in politics or economic advancement, the decisions made by black people concerning their personal lives show that emancipation and the Civil War, while very difficult for these people, were not necessarily setbacks to their “progress”.

An examination of the structure and nature of the black family in Reconstruction is required to further our understanding of the debates of historians about continuity from slavery to freedom, matriarchy and patriarchy, the move to formalise slave marriage and attitudes to children. Black attitudes to kinship and stepfamilies, and customs such as naming, offer an insight into some of the ways in which the black family was progressing at this time. The black family in Reconstruction was autonomous, and distinct to the white middle classes trying to “teach” them how to behave and act in their private lives.

In the chaos resulting from the end of the War and emancipation, problems caused by remarriage and multiple partners came to the fore. Manfra and Dykstra believe that by 1878 almost all marriages ended before the emancipation had been followed by remarriage.<sup>42</sup> Father Bellanger of St Michael told the Archbishop of a black man who had shown him a marriage license in his possession permitting him to marry a woman with whom he had lived for five years, and had three children. Another woman who had nine children by the man, and with whom he lived for a longer period, denied his right to remarry.<sup>43</sup> This kind of problem demonstrates the ambiguities of unions made in slavery, and the need to define marriage along clearer lines.

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<sup>41</sup> Blassingame, *Black New Orleans*, p. xv

<sup>42</sup> Manfra and Dykstra, ‘Serial Marriage’, p. 37

Historians such as Barry Crouch have seen the move to legalise marriage as being valued by blacks themselves. In his study of Texas, Crouch surmised that it was difficult for slave unions to be recognised in the eyes of the law, with the State's policy being very different from the Freedmen's Bureau's.<sup>44</sup> Gray White notes that thousands of slaves came before the authorities to have their unions formally recognised, and that there were mass ceremonies with as many as seventy couples being married at one time.<sup>45</sup> The Freedmen's Bureau marriage records show that between 1864 and early 1865, 4627 ex-slave black couples registered marriages in three districts of Mississippi.<sup>46</sup> In Concordia Parish, Louisiana, seventy marriages were recorded in this period. Most of the men marrying were soldiers who had served in the 63<sup>rd</sup> United States Colored Infantry of the 6<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Heavy Artillery during the Civil War.<sup>47</sup> These men had the status which may have led to an expectation that they would be married, as a continuation of their new found respectability as veterans of the War. This move to marry did not only happen at the end of the War. State Governments and Federal officials at the Contraband Camps had made it possible for ex-slaves to marry legally during the War years.<sup>48</sup>

The civil and church records of Southwest Louisiana show couples who had lived together for years being married by a priest at various stages. Mary Beck and Alexandre Arceneaux (who had lived together for twenty five years) married in 1860, and Sophia

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<sup>43</sup> Arch, Letter, Father S.M. Bellanger, St Michael, LA. to Archbishop Odin, 10 January 1867

<sup>44</sup> Barry A. Crouch, 'The Chords of Love: Legalizing Black Marital and Family Rights in Postwar Texas', *Journal of Negro History*, 79 (1994), pp. 334, 339, 341

<sup>45</sup> Gray White, *Ain't I A Woman*, pp. 77-78

<sup>46</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, p. 18

<sup>47</sup> FB Online, Concordia Marriage Returns

<sup>48</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, p. 18

and Thomas, slaves of Mrs J.B. Dejean married in 1862.<sup>49</sup> Some historians have perceived a rush to legalise or formalise marriage at the end of slavery, but it seems that personal issues rather than a desire to be just like white people directed such impulses. To formalise a union meant to confirm and celebrate it in the eyes of the community. The perceived rush to marriage has prompted people to think that slaves were unsatisfied with the state of their relationships in slavery. Indeed, informal slave marriages were not legal, but they were valid to husband, wife and the surrounding community. When freedom came, black people had the opportunity to legalise marriages, and to have them formalised in a church, but this was not an uncalculated move. A letter from Father Jules Bouchet of La Fourche, Louisiana to Archbishop Odin, demonstrates the situation of one black couple. Bouchet sought a dispensation for “disparity of cult” for two black people who wished to be married in the church. A judge had already married the couple. There were personal as well as legal reasons to marry, and in choosing who should marry you. If this couple was only interested in having a marriage made legal, they had achieved their aim when the judge married them.<sup>50</sup>

Ripley has assessed the Concordia Parish marriage returns of the Freedmen’s Bureau. He has looked at the separation causes as discussed in Chapter One,<sup>51</sup> and concluded that because the majority stayed with a partner until they were separated by death, the black marriages were stable. Ripley also believes that because some couples separated over

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<sup>49</sup> Reverend Donald J. Hebert, *Southwest Louisiana Records: Church and Civil Records*, vol 33 (Baton Rouge, LA, Claitor’s Publishing, 1984), pp. 126, 290

<sup>50</sup> Arch, Letter, Father J. Bouchet to Archbishop Odin, March 1866

<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of these records see Chapter One

issues like adultery, slaves had a similar moral code to whites.<sup>52</sup> There is a danger in applying our own sense of morals and marriage propriety onto people who lived in a very different time under extreme circumstances, and it may prevent us from seeing some of the interesting and distinctive traits of the black family.

Poole looks to people's attitudes to weddings as an indicator of the value slaves put on the family. When the Federal Writer's Project was interviewing ex-slaves in Louisiana, the tendency to connect ceremony and public demonstration of marriage with moral values re-emerged in an interviewer's comment on Shack Wilson:

On the wall of the general room in which Shack Wilson lives, hangs a framed marriage licence. As you look at it you are impressed that this man is a man of honor and integrity who follows as best he can, the footsteps of his meek and lowly Master.<sup>53</sup>

This kind of attitude places a great deal of emphasis on the legalising of the union as part of respectability and honour. Frankel believes that ex-slaves were not placing priority on legal definitions of their new status. Slaves had carried on as "married" couples for years, under a system that made viewed their union as illegal, and in freedom they did not feel that another ceremony or label would change their relationship:

Freedpeople based their conceptualisation of marriage on slave

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<sup>52</sup> Ripley, 'The Black Family', p. 377

<sup>53</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 19, Shack Wilson, Ex-slave, by Posey,

unions that had no legal standing but were acknowledged by the community, and on the legal system of marriage newly open to freed people after the war.<sup>54</sup>

Frankel has used the Civil War widows' pension records to make some new observations about the attitudes of black people to marriage. She notices a variety of responses to the opportunity to legalise marriage in freedom. Slavery's standards endured, for example in attitudes to the commencement and end of relationships, the sanctioning of adultery in certain cases and varied attitudes to the legitimacy of children. Specific terms for couples who began living together, "took ups", and the ending of a union, "quitting", demonstrate a community awareness of boundaries and codes of behaviour. These did not always follow white moral codes.<sup>55</sup>

The Methodist conference minutes for 1866 include a report from a preacher on the "domestic condition" of black people. He reported that "many" were living together without having been legally married, and was excluding them from his church until they remedied this.<sup>56</sup> The concern of this churchman indicates that not all Freedmen rushed to marry, or even saw a real reason to do so. One woman whose mother was a slave said:

I wuz never married, but lived with about eight different mens.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, pp. xi, 9

<sup>55</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, pp.xi, xii

<sup>56</sup> Dillard, Second Session, December 1866

<sup>57</sup> NSU, FWP, Folder 46, 'Religion'

The idea that a woman should rush to marry to ensure her respectability was not apparent in a letter a former slave wrote to her former master in 1867:

I am still single and don't think much about beaux. I don't think the men in these days of freedom are of much account. If I could find one whom I think a real good man, and who would take good care of me, I would get married.<sup>58</sup>

This woman was literate and probably quite well off, but she does represent a group of black women emerging from slavery who were not desperate to marry, and preferred to wait for a partner who they respected. If the right man did not come along she might not marry at all. Marriage was a union between men and women which was not considered lightly just because emancipation had legalised it for the first time. Freedmen and women who lived together after emancipation without being legally married did not perpetuate the wrongs of slavery, because they were living within their own community's sets of standards. These standards and responses to freedom would vary from place to place and between different economic groups of former slaves.

Caldwell has looked at the 1870 Federal Census to try to glean information about the structure of the black family in the Louisiana Delta. Caldwell found that 83 out of 484 black households were female headed, and two thirds of these female heads were widows, with children or grandchildren. The census takers had been told to pay special attention to the relationships between different people living together. Many black wives

of male household heads were noted as “not working”, but Caldwell believes most of them were doing some kind of paid labour. Caldwell also observes that the labelling of the black family as patriarchal has resulted from the assumption that the household head dominated the household.<sup>59</sup>

Ann Patton Malone’s findings for the Louisiana slave family show how emancipation changed the black family. Malone found that one third of families in the state were single parent families, and in the majority of cases that parent was the mother. In slavery men were more likely to be sold and to escape than women, and in the case of an abroad marriage the children were most often living with the mother. These facts affected the chances of a household being “headed” by a woman.<sup>60</sup> When slavery ended, the relationships between members of slave families changed in cases where husbands and wives had been separated and were now united, free to live under one roof.<sup>61</sup> Some female-headed families with absent fathers became “patriarchal” because the father and mother were now under one roof. It has always been assumed that the father dominated family life in such cases. These kinds of judgements, made with so little evidence, demonstrate the problems we face in studying black family history for this period. We have no idea what relationships between men and women were behind closed doors. Some perceptive scholars have taken time out from the focus on matriarchy and

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<sup>58</sup> Alice Dabney to former Master, 10 February 1967, in Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, p. 333

<sup>59</sup> Caldwell, ‘Blacks in the Louisiana Delta’, pp. 108-109, 111, 115

<sup>60</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, p. 141

<sup>61</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 83



patriarchy to note the interdependence of black couples in emancipation,<sup>62</sup> and as a result criticism of the patriarchy label has become more sophisticated.

Frankel has brought a fresh outlook to the debate over whether the black family was matriarchal or patriarchal following the Civil War, and believes that the black family was neither patriarchal nor matriarchal in Reconstruction. While acknowledging that the black family was generally male-headed, Frankel believes that black men did not have the economic, social or legal power to enable them to be true patriarchs.<sup>63</sup> Jones estimates that by 1870 in New Orleans there were fifty percent more black women than men aged fifteen to forty-five, making it difficult to imagine this community as wholly patriarchal. Frankel has emphasised the importance of seeing male/female relationships in the wider context of economic and social conditions, for example by acknowledging extended family networks as systems of support, we can see how single mothers were able to survive. Black women were at the lowest end of the economic scale, earning around sixty percent less than white women.<sup>64</sup> Women of the lower classes faced the double burden of working and running a home, and the study of this particular economic group can help us to understand the relationship between men and women at this time.

The reports of the Freedmen's Bureau on the indigent and destitute freed people in different Parishes show that single parent families were quite common among the poorest people. These reports came from Parishes to the Bureau, when the Parish did not have enough of its own funds to provide for these destitute people. 'The names, sex and age of

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<sup>62</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, p. 64

<sup>63</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, pp. xxi, 124

the Freedpeople are given, along with reasons for their destitution. A sample from the month of May 1868 for the Parishes of St Landry, Orleans and Jefferson, Caldwell and Washington, show the sex and position of black people with families in need of help.

In St Landry Parish, there are three families in need of aid, all the other candidates are elderly, single males and females. Of the three families two are female headed. Julia Black is thirty-two and has two children aged four and six, and is blind and destitute. Nancy Hilbert, sixty-two, has four children between the ages of six and twelve. Hilbert is described as a "widow with family and helpless". Because of her age it is quite possible these are her grandchildren rather than her children. The final family is male headed by a single father aged sixty-two, whose bones are decaying. This man supports three young children. There are single headed families in poverty, but they are male and female headed. The Washington Parish records for this month show twelve female headed single parent families, and just one male headed. It is concluded that female-headed single parent destitute families were more common than single male-headed ones.

The Orleans and Jefferson Parish records show a variety of situations where families are facing destitution. There are two female-headed families with five children, all under the age of fifteen. In the case of one of these families, the Temos, the reason for their situation is given as desertion by Leonette Temo's husband three months previously. There are three families headed by couples. In one of these cases the couple are older, aged seventy four and sixty eight, with three children in their care, between three and five years old. Again, they may be caring for their grandchildren. The Evans are young,

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<sup>64</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, p.74, Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, pp. xiii, 125

twenty six and twenty five, but Charles Evans has been sick for a long period, making it impossible for him to support his wife and two young children. These cases show the variety of situations, and ages of parents living with children. No indication is given in the case of the double-headed families whether the women are earning a wage, but if they are it is not enough to keep the family out of destitution. The amount of older couples caring for very young children is interesting, and we will return to this later, in a discussion of kin relationships.<sup>65</sup>

There were women in Reconstruction Louisiana who were facing the hardship of bringing up children and finding the means to support them, alone. Women did not have to be married to apply for aid. Some of the single female parents in the Freedmen's Bureau records are noted as being widows, others are not. This may be due to inconsistencies in record taking, but it is noted that a woman was deserted by her husband in one case, showing that there was an awareness of "other" situations. Jones estimates that five years after the War ended, most freed women were living in rural areas.<sup>66</sup> Most women had to work, and were excluded from the sphere of domesticity that better off white women could enjoy.

Work and parenting dominated the lives of freed women, basically ensuring the survival of their families. They had done this as slaves, the difference now was that in their freedom some had more choices, and may have had increased opportunities. In arguing

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<sup>65</sup> FB Online, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Louisiana Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, , Roll 33, Reports Relating to the Condition of the Freedmen, URL: <http://freedmensbureau.com/louisiana/indigents/indigent2.htm> (4, 5, 6, 10 and 11.htm also)

<sup>66</sup> Jones, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, p. 61

that black patriarchy could not develop in Reconstruction, Frankel cites the lack of control men had of their income or the activities of their older offspring, while emphasising that single mothers ability to work gave them freedom from unsatisfactory relationships with men.<sup>67</sup> The mother of Charlie Moses moved from farm to farm, as she did seasonal work.<sup>68</sup> While women did have choices, their power and autonomy were limited by the economic, social and political world they found themselves in. Much has been made of the limits on men, as they could not own land, own a weapon or enjoy equal Civil Rights, for example according to the Black Codes of 1865 Mississippi.<sup>69</sup> If men had no rights, women had even less. The threats of physical and sexual violence faced by the Freedmen makes it unsurprising that they often sought to live together in communities, as this offered protection. Men and women relied on one another like never before, and while households with two parents may have increased, it was not really possible to call the black family patriarchal at this time of change and uncertainty.

It is possible to see women, through motherhood and claims to support from the fathers of their children, as having benefited more from emancipation than men. Because men and women make up the family, it seems natural to compare their situations, but this may in fact be detrimental to finding out the true position of the black family after the Civil War. Whether the black family is matriarchal or patriarchal at this time seems less important than looking at the ways in which the black family overcame their problems and survived. In this, the black family's structure did not change in Reconstruction,

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<sup>67</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, pp. 125, 135

<sup>68</sup> Jones, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, p. 55

<sup>69</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 130

because it was performing similar protective roles as it did in slavery, modified for the hostile free world.

It was commonly thought that the negroes, when freed, would not care for their children, and would let them die for want of attention, but experience has proved this surmise unfounded. On the contrary, I suppose they take as good care of them as do the same class of people anywhere.

David G. Barrow, 1881<sup>70</sup>

The opinions of a contemporary observer that it was surprising that the Freedmen were perfectly capable of taking care of children illustrates the ideas people had about the nature of slavery and its effects. The treatment of children can help us to assess the nature and structure of the black family in Reconstruction, because the value placed on children is indicative of the strength of this institution, and also illustrates its best survival techniques.

The labour of the Freedmen's children was undoubtedly valuable to them, as a letter of ex-slave Jake to his former master suggests:

I have but two children, they are good size boys, able to plow and help me out a great deal.<sup>71</sup>

Rural families were often involved in sharecropping, when the potential labour of the whole family would become very important. The economic needs of the family might make demands on children particularly in the event of illness of a parent. As a general rule, the families in the Freedmen's Bureau destitution records do not have children above the age of fourteen, and it is suggested that men and women with children older than this may have been saved from destitution by the support of their older children's work. As Barrow suggests, these black families were not in an especially different position to white families of the lower economic stratum. One practice in particular did make things harder for the black family, a practice that Gray White believes "amounted to legal reenslavement". This practice was apprenticing.

Apprenticeship laws were designed to protect black orphans by giving them a guardian. Tera W. Hunter has pointed out that such laws prevented the reunion of many families.<sup>72</sup> In Louisiana, most of those apprenticed were males, usually aged nine years old and over. Boys were apprenticed until the age of twenty-one, girls until they were eighteen.<sup>73</sup> In the aftermath of the Civil War, authorities apprenticed the children of destitute Freedmen without their consent. Frankel believes that this practice shows the vulnerability of both male and female headed homes.<sup>74</sup> Maria Conway of Madison Parish, Louisiana, took it upon herself to indenture her children out until they were adults. Caldwell believes her motive was to ensure "that someone in the white community of Madison Parish had a

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<sup>70</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, p. 361

<sup>71</sup> Jake to Mas William, 5 February 1867, Litwack, *Been in the Storm*, p. 333

<sup>72</sup> Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy: My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997), p. 35

vested interest in their survival".<sup>75</sup> Some parents, particularly single women with no means of support, allowed their children to be apprenticed because they knew that they could not support them.<sup>76</sup> In some cases, apprenticeship was a cruel way of separating families, but in certain situations parents themselves may have seen it as an escape from poverty for their children, and a means of survival for their family.

Frankel notes that over half the black children who were apprenticed found themselves in this position due to the death of their parents.<sup>77</sup> The need to find long term solutions to the orphan problem would have been perceived as urgent by organisations running orphanages that were designed to be only temporary. The black community contributed to the care of orphans by taking on children who were not their own, and bringing them into their homes. The destitution records of Washington Parish show one single woman aged sixty two who had four orphans in her care. There are several cases of older adults taking care of very young children, suggesting they may be grandchildren, or they could be the children of friends or other relatives.<sup>78</sup> Foner believes that the practice of adopting the children of relatives and friends who had died or were lost was common.<sup>79</sup> This suggests that black people acted to strengthen the black family by keeping children within the community, rather than lose them to whites as apprentices, even if it was just until they reached adulthood. However, the apprenticeship laws were a barrier to the success of this form of self-help.

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<sup>73</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', p. 96

<sup>74</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 138, 145

<sup>75</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', p. 96

<sup>76</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 141

<sup>77</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 141

<sup>78</sup> FB Online, Reports Relating to the Condition of the Freedmen

<sup>79</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 84

Crouch believes blacks were as eager to have children considered to be “legitimate” as they were to have their marriages legalised.<sup>80</sup> This is not an easy claim to assess, as the two processes are interrelated. By marrying, the children the two partners had together would be legitimate in the eyes of the law. In the Catholic marriage records of South West Louisiana, there are records from 1868 through to 1870 which mention specifically that the marriage legitimises or recognises the children of the couple, even in cases where the children have died.<sup>81</sup> To some Freedmen, recognition of legitimacy was as important as the recognition of the marriage union and clearly children were a highly valued part of the black family.

What Jones calls the “ethos of mutuality”, originating under slavery, persisted into Reconstruction. Jones believes this was a “logical and humane response” to the conditions of these years for the Freedmen. The black community was composed of families, and the fluid structure of these families helped the adjustment and acculturation necessary to becoming free. The extended family was important to African American tradition, and the definition of the black family was much broader than that of the white middle class of the western world.<sup>82</sup> Separation, death and the nature of slavery may also have led to the wide definition of kinship, which facilitated family survival in the post-war South. By the early years of the Civil War, there were three generations of families living on some of the larger plantations.<sup>83</sup> Slaves also often knew a surprising amount

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<sup>80</sup> Crouch, ‘The Chords of Love’, p. 336

<sup>81</sup> Hebert, *Southwest Louisiana Records*, pp. 125, 135, 224, 255, 259

<sup>82</sup> Caldwell, ‘Blacks in the Louisiana Delta’, pp. 78, 79, Frankel, *Freedom’s Women*, p. xiii

<sup>83</sup> Frankel, *Freedom’s Women*, p. 3



about family members on different plantations,<sup>84</sup> and inter-plantation marriage would connect slaves further across plantation boundaries.<sup>85</sup> The idea of being able to turn to kin and others in the community for help was not alien to black people who were freed from slavery.

In questioning the nature of the black family, historians have looked at household composition, for example in census schedules, to see if families were nuclear, or if it was normal for extended family members to live in the black household. Caldwell found that twelve percent of Louisiana Delta households in the 1870 census were extended family households.<sup>86</sup> Caldwell has noted that social scientists refer to the presence of a husband and wife in a family as “stable” situation. The problem with this is that families might have gleaned strength from extended family that did not live with them, but who, for example, cared for children while they worked. Also, a single parent family where grandparents or an aunt or uncle also lived in the house might be more “secure” than a single parent, or even some double-headed families. This is based on assumption and conjecture, but the basic fact is that there is no concrete way to measure “stability” and it is very difficult to assess even today’s families from their composition and outward appearances.

Examining the Louisiana Freedmen’s Bureau records makes it possible to observe the composition of some of the poorest black households in the Reconstruction period. In the Abstracts of Rations issued to Destitutes for West Balon Rouge Parish in June 1867, only

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<sup>84</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, p. 140

<sup>85</sup> Frankel, *Freedom’s Women*, p. 162

three of thirty-six households noted have a composition that is not double or single parent plus children. In one there is a husband, wife, son-in-law, wife and three children. Another household is composed of a widow, her mother and her two children. The Plaquemine Parish records for the same period show examples of households with a widow, her grown up and young children, some households where more than one family live together, and one with three women and six children all living together. It is not possible to make judgements on the black family as an institution from these sample records, but they do allow us to see that there is variety and flexibility in the families most in need at this time.<sup>87</sup> The fluid notion of kinship meant that blacks would take care of children who were not their own.<sup>88</sup> A baptism record of St Louis Cathedral, New Orleans, from January 1866, which tells the story of Louise Demortier demonstrates this. Demortier found the child she brought to be baptised. Further to an adoptive mother, the female child had two Godparents.<sup>89</sup>

The demands of the postwar South probably encouraged black people to form into family groups, regardless of blood ties. As Manfra and Dykstra's study illustrates, black people did not have single marriages in slavery and multiple marriages in freedom.<sup>90</sup> An adaptive, survival-aiding method of family pragmatism was an aspect of the black family that originated in slavery and continued into freedom. Separation, forced and voluntary, broke ties, but remarriage created ties, not only for spouses but also for their children.

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<sup>86</sup> Caldwell, 'Blacks in the Louisiana Delta', p. 111

<sup>87</sup> Williams, Reel 10, Records of the Assistant Subassistant Commissioner for Iberville and West Baton Rouge Parishes and Predecessors, Miscellaneous Records 1864-1868, Retained Copies of Abstracts and Rations Issued to Destitutes

<sup>88</sup> Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, p. 37

<sup>89</sup> Arch, Baptism Records, St Louis Cathedral, p. 168

<sup>90</sup> Manfra and Dykstra, 'Serial Marriage', p. 33

Manfra and Dykstra believe children in slavery did distinguish between blood and step parents and siblings,<sup>91</sup> and this is significant to realising that remarriage was a common occurrence in a time of such disruption as the aftermath of the Civil War.

One aspect of control and autonomy which the black family expressed during slavery, and even more so when granted their freedom, was in the right to choose names. The naming of and by blacks in this period has fascinated historians, and names have been seen as vital to the identity of ex-slaves in freedom. From the simple addition of “Mr” and “Mrs”, to add respectability,<sup>92</sup> to the more complex issue of surnames, names are viewed as being very significant. In slavery names were a method of maintaining family stability in the face of the threat of separation and disruption. Some slaves kept their chosen names a secret from their masters. Kolchin has noted that it was common for slaves to be named after their fathers or grandfathers, due to the fact that male relatives were more likely to be sold away. Names could be a source of pride and identity, and being named after a father would make paternity very clear.<sup>93</sup>

Litwack has outlined the different approaches freed people had to surnames. Some ex-slaves had made themselves surnames during slavery, which they began to use openly after emancipation. Others created new names, discontinuing the use of their master’s surname (it was common for slaves to be given their master’s name as a way of identifying to whom they belonged). Giving your family a distinct, new name would have helped to define who was part of the family, and hence could have strengthened its

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<sup>91</sup> Manfra and Dykstra, ‘Serial Marriage’, p. 42

<sup>92</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 79

unity. A third category chose to retain the surname of their master. Litwack argues that the decision to do this may have been based on a sense of family heritage and identity, rather than affection for former masters, although the treatment masters had given slaves may have influenced the choice of whether to keep or reject their name.<sup>94</sup> Plantation manager Paul DeClouet, who employed blacks after the war, noted the names of the field hands he employed in his diary each year. By 1870 there is a change to noting surnames for the first time, as well as first names. Eleven of thirty-two workers are still noted by only a first name.<sup>95</sup> It is difficult to ascertain if this indicates reluctance by DeClouet to recognise their surnames, or if they did not take one. As DeClouet recognises other surnames, it seems they may have chosen not to take a surname.

The marriage records of Southwest Louisiana show various examples of name adoption. For example, two records show ex-slaves taking surnames from former masters. Silvestre Ellick married Clotilde Alcendor in 1866. Silvestre's parents were called Ellick and Helene, so this is an example of a surname taken from a parent's first name. This was a well thought out choice for a "new" name, as it still had grounds in the heritage of the family. Clarisse Rigg married Jacques Louis in 1868. Her surname was her father's surname, while Jacques took his from his father's forename.<sup>96</sup> A record from 1867 shows two freed slaves not using surnames. Surnames were useful when registering for aid, or to vote,<sup>97</sup> but perhaps they were not important to all ex-slaves for identity in freedom. The choice of which surname to take may have been straightforward to those who

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<sup>93</sup> Kolchin, *American Slavery*, p. 140

<sup>94</sup> Litwack, *Been In The Storm*, pp. 248-9

<sup>95</sup> Alexandre DeClouet and Family Papers, Paul DeClouet Diary vol. 5, 1869/70, Field Hands 1870

<sup>96</sup> Hebert, *Southwest Louisiana Records*, pp. 131, 133, 164, 229, 279, 293

connected it to establishing themselves and their families in freedom. The loss of master's names was symbolic of a loss of a way of life.

Louise Demortier wanted to call the child she found Louise Scheridan, giving the child her own first name.<sup>98</sup> It is possible Demortier chose the name Scheridan after General Sheridan, who was at the head of the Louisiana Freedmen's Bureau from 5 October to 27 November 1866. Sheridan was a great supporter of the rights of the Freedmen and so would have been popular among them. The spelling "Scheridan" may have been a mistake on Demortier's part or in the record keeping. Names could express political as well as family identity. Other examples of Freedmen names with political and emancipation connections include Alexander Hamilton, Deliverance Berlin, Hope Mitchell, Thomas Jefferson, and surnames such as Lincoln, Abraham, Franklin, Grant, Washington, Adams and Butler.<sup>99</sup>

Frankel sees great significance in the "universal" adoption of the fathers paternal surname by his wife and children in freedom. This can be taken to represent the shift in power relations.<sup>100</sup> However, as we have found ex-slaves not even using surnames, the real significance of black naming practice after the War was the freedom blacks now had to say who they were, and to choose who they would like to be identified with. Taking a father or grandfathers name could simply honour their memory, or be part of family

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<sup>97</sup> Litwack, *Been In the Storm*, p. 248

<sup>98</sup> Arch, Baptism Records for St Louis Cathedral Vol. 33 Part 2 (1865-1874), p. 168

<sup>99</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 79, Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, p. 249, FB Online, Reports Relating to the Condition of the Freedmen

<sup>100</sup> Frankel, *Freedom's Women*, p. 127

tradition.<sup>101</sup> The ability to choose names was an important step for the black family in Reconstruction, symbolic of their new autonomy and identity as free men and women.

By looking at how the black family changed and adapted in the post-war period it has been possible to create a fuller picture of the structure of the black family in Reconstruction. Attitudes to marriage, the relationships between and relative position of men and women, the position of women, notions of kin, and naming practices are all aspects of black community life which demonstrate the autonomy and distinctiveness of the black family. Jones has argued that the structure of the black family in the post-war years was a “response to postwar conditions” and not a direct result of slavery.<sup>102</sup> When we consider that there was outside pressure on the black family to conform, for example by legalising their unions, we can see that Jones’ statement is accurate. Reconstruction was not, however, a revolution in the slave family. Instead, freedom was the first opportunity for slaves to both solidify and experiment with their private lives, and their first introduction to the bureaucracy of life as free people, expected to adhere to societal norms.<sup>103</sup> The need for a strong black community, where the private was often made public, hampered some of the efforts of the black family to be autonomous, but they relied on a certain level of help in what was a very difficult time for blacks in the American South.

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<sup>101</sup> Caldwell, ‘Blacks in the Louisiana Delta’, p. 126

<sup>102</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, p. 68

<sup>103</sup> Caldwell, ‘Blacks in the Louisiana Delta’, p. 346

Looking at the real effects of the church and religion on black families and individuals, and looking at the actual nature and structure of the black family, it is possible to make some observations. The church was a strong community institution, which had to cater to black members' needs while also adhering to society's rules. The real 'unique' part of black religion was the flexibility of black people themselves, who learned to adapt the most useful parts of religion, sometimes living according to more than one religion. This demonstrates that black people expected religion to help them in their lives, but they were also determined to make it work for them. A state like Louisiana gives us a sense of the differences in black religion in different regions of the South. As Catholicism was a strong influence in this state, we see blacks continuing to live under this denomination in freedom, refuting the idea that Catholicism offered little to black people.

The relationship between religion and the family emerges when we consider the interdependence of different parts of the black community. People relied on the church as a social centre, while in private men relied on women, and vice versa. The dense interrelationships, and the complications brought about by slavery and the Civil War, means that Reconstruction cannot be viewed as a time when the black family was wholly settled into a 'normal' pattern. What patterns we do see emerging are based on a mutual sense of care in the community, fostering private family relations and self-regulation. While the black family did not need the black church to do this, it helped to have a spiritual and social basis for family activities. The black family in Reconstruction demonstrates autonomy and distinctiveness, and variation between different regions and different classes. In its dynamic, pragmatic nature, the black family was a strong

institution, attested to by the fact it turned to outside organisations like the church and the Freedmen's Bureau only when it needed them, for marriage, baptism, burial or relief. These agencies were there to help the black family but they were not allowed to interfere so far as to change the nature of the black family and community as self-forming and self-regulating.



## **Conclusion**

...the black family transmits values which are determined elsewhere; it is an agent, not a principal.

(T. B. Bottomore, Sociologist)

Gutman used this quote to argue that there was a generational link between blacks which was carried from slavery into freedom, and to refute the arguments of Frazier who believed that the black family collapsed at emancipation.<sup>1</sup> The ways in which people who were enslaved reacted to their situation has fascinated scholars for many years, resulting in a huge variety of conclusions on the effects of slavery on individuals. Debates on individual reactions have extended into discussions of the black family response to slavery and freedom. When the slaves were freed, some contemporary observers did admit that they had underestimated and misjudged black people during slavery. Unfortunately, others did not. Today, the tendency to “blame” slavery for the problems of the black family in American society among historians, sociologists and other observers may encourage complacency about race and social conditions, and responsibility for current problems. As the barriers of race continue to burden America, studies of the historical development of the relationship of blacks to the American nation must accept the potential significance of their views. If the perpetuation of the tendency to “blame” the past for current problems is to be avoided, it is vital to reinvigorate the study of black progress from slavery to freedom, and into the uncertainties and trials of

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<sup>1</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family*, pp. 7, 8

the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. In order to carry out this task, new approaches must be found to uncover the personal history of blacks in America.

We will never have the privilege of knowing the real personal views and feelings of individual blacks who lived through the Reconstruction period. However, we cannot ignore their story, and must find ways to uncover as much detail as possible about the black family at this crucial stage in their development. Much has been made of the role of black religion and the institution of the church in black society, as crucial to black survival from slavery to freedom. The black church has also been viewed as a “primary transmitter of values”, making it an intriguing institution through which to examine the black family.

The black family in Louisiana did not collapse on the dawn of their freedom. The black family continued to act in ways which supported individuals within the black community who needed help, and the black community in return regulated the black family. The importance of wide kin groups continued to be important to families who might need extra support, such as those with single parents, or with individuals trying to find lost family members. While, as in slavery, it was normal for men and women to live together, the presence of a male head could not always be relied upon due to death, separation and choice, and the black community did not require it. If the black family can be labelled as matriarchal or patriarchal at all, it must be described as a “flexible patriarchy”. Men and women were reliant on one another, for economic and emotional support. In many cases

neither partner could earn a family wage, and the trials of living in the hostile atmosphere of Louisiana in Reconstruction added to the interdependence of married couples.

The decision to legalise a pre-existing union was a personal one, affected by a variety of factors. These factors could include social status, religious belief or personal choice.

There was not a universal rush to marry at the end of the Civil War, though many couples took advantage of the new situation, and the presence of authorised officials to demonstrate their commitment to one another. The movement to legalise slave unions has been exaggerated, in contemporary and historical accounts.

There were other ways in which the black family could cement its identity in freedom. Names are a useful indicator of how the black family perceived its identity. Names were also a method of showing the rest of the community with whom you were, or wanted to be, identified with, be it a family member or political hero. The significance of names extends to showing the autonomy of the black family in freedom. This autonomy was made possible by a strong network of support, including extended family and the black community. Family members living in other houses may have been relied upon for important roles such as childcare, a fact that scholars who focus on the make-up of households indicated in the census books may miss. There is a tendency in such studies to insist that the presence of certain individuals make the black family “stable”, primarily the presence of a male head. Looking at younger members, and additional members might also indicate sources of support, and therefore possible routes to “stability”.

The Moynihan report claimed that the current problems of the black family originated in the institution of slavery, as the black family was always weak. The findings of this study refute this idea. The black family was structured during slavery, and relied on this strength from the troubles of slavery, through the War and into freedom. The Reconstruction was a period of transition and adjustment, during which the black family was able to adapt to new circumstances and solidify family ties through public rituals and private decisions, autonomously made, such as naming and legalising marriage. Later, the social and economic pressures forcing migration to the North would disrupt the patterns set in slavery that continued into freedom.

The role of religion in black lives, and the influence the church sought to have over blacks, is interconnected. The church acted as a social, community centre, providing spiritual and practical guidance for individuals and families, offering help through periods of difficulty. In regard to the family, the different churches held firm ideas on marriage and the way the black family should operate, but they were also pragmatic in Reconstruction, a time at which the various denominations relied on their members to survive and to grow. The black churches relied on the black people, and it is possible to see a two-way relationship between the black people and the church during the Reconstruction.

Black people sought emotional sustenance in their religion, as well as the social functions it offered. The different denominations to which blacks belonged were important in

Louisiana, where some blacks continued to attend the Catholic Church, even when they were free to leave it. The fact that blacks remained Catholic has been largely ignored by historians, and is especially vital for understanding the development of black religion in the South. There was not a universal unity among black Christians. The fact that blacks adapted religion to their own ends, for example through having dual religions and syncretism of different belief systems, demonstrates the dynamism of their religious lives. Blacks who were baptised Catholic might convert on emancipation, but still maintain aspects of Catholicism in their religious lives. It is clear that there was variety in the opinions of black people in Louisiana on religion and the role it should play in their lives.

By comparing the church with another institution set up to help the Freedmen, it is possible to see that the black church was not the only provider of social help in Reconstruction. Many blacks turned to the Freedmen's Bureau for aid, advice and help in private family disputes. In the process of adjustment following emancipation outside help would be required, and black people had limited options in seeking this help. The Freedmen's Bureau helped to reunite families and enforced parental responsibility. They also displayed conservative values, a necessity in keeping white support. The Freedmen's Bureau understood the complexities created by slavery and wartime separation, and created a set of rules for Freedmen to abide by. This practical advice also displays their theories on blacks and their position. The most controversial of the Bureau's plans for the black family's future was their encouragement of whites apprenticing black children. The Bureau did also validate black guardians of orphans.

It may have been easier for blacks to turn to the Bureau with their family problems, than to the church. There may have been more chance of the situation being dealt with practically by the Bureau, and with a minimum of fuss. It is possible that the presence of the Army in Louisiana helped to enforce the Bureau's authority, after all many agents were ex-soldiers. The consideration of the relationship between black individuals and the temporary institution they looked to for help and advice can help us to understand how they reacted to the efforts of the more permanent institutions attempts to shape the black family.

When the slaves were set free their relationship to the world changed. They were no longer commodities with a direct monetary value. There was no longer such an investment in the black family. Slave masters wanted women to breed as much as possible, and reproduction is one of the primary functions of a traditional family. There were obviously very positive effects of emancipation, such as the ability to reunite family members. However, the black family was now available for scrutiny and criticism by the white world. The question of how blacks would "cope" with freedom would be in part the measure of the success or failure of Reconstruction, and the Freedmen's Bureau was partly set up with this in mind.

Black people coped with freedom as they had coped with slavery, through imagination and their ability to adapt. The slave community had set standards that were more important to the slaves than any outside rules imposed by the masters. The black

community continued to dominate the black family, and the failure of missionary attempts to "reform" the Southern blacks attests to this. The black church did have an influence on its members, but was limited in its aims to dictate family standards because it relied on its members to be successful.

Although institutions could not take over the black family entirely, they did play a very important role in the lives of blacks in Reconstruction. Religion would continue to be a vibrant part of black society, as more black churches were set up. Emancipation was experienced by a massive number of people, but the individual must not be allowed to be lost in the story of this period. The real significance of freedom is choice and autonomy and the effect of this would be to strengthen the black family in a period of intense transition and pressure. The black family responded to freedom in different ways, and while maintaining standards, they displayed flexibility and adaptive qualities in trying to construct new lives for themselves.

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