Inside the Minds of White Southerners
The Role of Religion in Proslavery Pamphlet Literature in the Late Antebellum South

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Inside the Minds of White Southerners: The Role of Religion in Proslavery Pamphlet Literature in the Late Antebellum South

by

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INTRODUCTION

On January 6, 2021, white supremacist terror descended on the United States’ capital. Tens of thousands of supporters of former President Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C., to protest the certification of newly elected Democratic President Joe Biden. These extremist group members—self-identified as “loyal patriots” and “God’s warriors”—donned antisemitic apparel, flew Confederate flags, and hung a noose on makeshift gallows.¹ Belonging to far-right factions, these insurrectionists proudly flaunted symbols of their white supremacist ideology. Americans across the nation anxiously watched the violent event unfold on live television, mourned the loss of five individuals who were killed amidst the chaos of the day, and wondered how the country could be confronted with such violence and hatred. Others praised the bravery of the insurrectionists, insisting on the necessity of such radical measures to protect democracy in the United States.²

The Capitol raid does not stand in isolation as the only public and terrorizing display of white supremacy in twenty-first-century America. In 2017, far-right groups participated in the Unite The Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of Confederate statues from Lee Park. Similar to the Capitol insurrectionists, the radicals involved in the Unite the Right rally carried Neo-Confederate and Nazi flags, among other symbolic representations of their white supremacist positions. The number of different groups involved in the rally—the neo-Nazis, white nationalists, neo-Confederates, the Klan, and the modern alt-right—spoke to the pervasiveness of and support for such racist ideas in American society.³

The numerous overt displays of white supremacy in the United States in 2021 provide contemporary relevance for historical research on how white American individuals came to adopt such extreme positions. An examination of the deep-rooted belief in racial inequality internalized by Southern society in the nineteenth century helps to trace the historical development of white supremacist ideas. Looking to a past moment in which such beliefs stood unabashedly at the forefront of American culture offers insight into the present political climate in the United States. Specifically, analyzing the Southern white proslavery mindset in the decade preceding the Civil War provides the historical underpinnings of the contemporary belief in white supremacy adopted by so many twenty-first-century Americans.

In *American Slavery: 1619-1877*, Peter Kolchin explains, “The antebellum South was a slave society, not merely a society in which some people were slaves.” Kolchin points to the integral nature of slaves to the agricultural economy of the United States prior to the Civil War and alludes to the brutal racism that lay at the heart of American Southern society as a whole. Today, we look back on slavery in America, recognize the horrid atrocities inherent in the enslavement of human beings, and struggle to fathom how the institution persisted for so many years in a country founded on the ideal that “all men are created equal.”

The institution of slavery was simultaneously simple and complex. At its core, slavery could be defined using the chattel principle: the idea that human beings could be valued and sold as human property. However, the day-to-day realities of life under slavery differed immensely, especially with regard to the master-slave relationship. Some masters whipped, physically and

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5 Walter Johnson chronicles the commodification of human beings in the New Orleans slave market in the 1800s and explains how the chattel principle signaled that the identity of slaves could change alongside the rapid price change on the market. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Old Saybrook, CT: Tantor Media Inc, 2017).
sexually abused, and devalued the lives of their slaves.\textsuperscript{6} Other slave masters allowed their slaves the opportunity to earn overwork, which awarded slaves some financial agency over their lives even under such a coercive institution.\textsuperscript{7} The differing master-slave relationships of the time prompts a consideration of how white slave owners viewed the institution.

While significant national debate surrounded the morality of the institution of slavery in the thirty years prior to the Civil War, pamphlets disseminated in the South on the eve of the conflict portray the region as a perfect society with an ideal economy. This thesis analyzes three pamphlets to track the dominant line of proslavery thinking that emerged in the 1850s. Although several justifications for slavery existed in Southern discourse, pamphlets shared during this time reflected a consolidation of proslavery arguments. The authors seemingly offered “one-size-fits-all” defenses of slavery.

The Chapin Library at Williams College is home to an enormous collection of primary source material produced in the South in the nineteenth century prior to the Civil War. The fragile pamphlets in the Chapin have the power to connect the reader to the past. Picking up the stained, decomposing pages of a publication from two hundred years ago transports the reader backward in time and provides a window into the mind of the author at the moment of craftsmanship and publication of his words. I developed my central ideas for this thesis in early 2020 after being exposed to the deeply racist proslavery arguments pushed forth in pamphlets available in the Chapin. Shock toward the overt racism present in these pamphlets served as a powerful driver of my research. The Capitol raid on January 6, 2021, occurred one month prior


\textsuperscript{7} See Chapter 2 of Charles B. Dew, \textit{Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge} (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) for more information on the overwork system.
to immersing myself fully in the thesis writing process. This event further convinced me of the necessity of engaging in an intellectual history of the proslavery argument. The stakes felt higher, and the racism that America was in the process of confronting seemed even more important to understand. My first-hand exposure to a number of pamphlets available in the Chapin Library alongside my revulsion toward the terrorizing public displays of white supremacy in twenty-first-century American society inspired this thesis.

Undertaking a close reading of a selection of primary sources, this thesis grapples with the following questions: What does the intellectual defense of slavery suggest about how proslavery advocates viewed the institution in the decade preceding the Civil War? In what ways did proslavery pamphlet literature use religious rhetoric to spur support for the institution? This thesis investigates and questions the different regional forces that gave rise to proslavery ideology. For example, the South Carolina Lowcountry was far removed economically, geographically, and ideologically from the Texas-Mexico frontier. In what ways did proslavery advocates take these differences into account? How did biblical arguments espoused by preachers and the economic justifications for the institution morph into a line of “one-size-fits-all” proslavery thought?

To flesh out the nuances of white Southern proslavery argumentation, this thesis embarks on an intensive study of three pamphlets written by proslavery advocates in the decade preceding the Civil War. All three are part of the collection of the Chapin Library. The selected works include: Iveson Brookes’ “A Defence of Southern Slavery” (1851); a pamphlet including James D. B. De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” (1860); and Bishop Benjamin Morgan Palmer's 1860 Thanksgiving Day Sermon delivered at the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans. The following analysis will examine the religious-based logic that emerged in all three
of these pamphlets, investigate the centrality of that logic to the proslavery arguments expressed therein, and identify how the biblical defense of slavery contributed to the creation of a dominant line of proslavery ideology across the geographically and economically diverse Antebellum South. Alongside an analysis of the historical context of each document and how the author’s ideas fit into the proslavery arguments of their time, these chapters place the pamphlet writers in conversation with one another.

Individuals from all parts of the country produced pamphlets in the decade preceding the Civil War, and the main preoccupation in pamphlet production during this time was to sway public opinion in the all-consuming debates over slavery. A prominent U.S. historian and close student of the proslavery argument, Drew Faust, has noted that dozens of white Southern intellectuals spent virtually all of their time erecting a defense of slavery in the decades preceding the Civil War.8 Faust’s examination of five of the prominent proslavery thinkers led her to draw the following conclusion: “The men of mind who constructed slavery’s defense sought a plausible belief system for their society, a formula that would at once direct, explain, and justify the Southern way of life.”9 Faust suggested that white Southern intellectuals’ preoccupation with formulating proslavery arguments stemmed from their desire to explain fundamental truths about “society” and “the Southern way of life.”10 Ultimately, pamphlet writers believed that a constant and repeated sharing of their opinions would strengthen the proslavery forces’ hold on the South. James Henry Hammond, the Governor of South Carolina and a vocal proslavery advocate, gave voice to this phenomenon. He contended, “the more [the

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9 Ibid, 130.
10 Ibid.
slavery question] is discussed, the stronger we will become.”11 In the decade preceding the Civil War, the defense of slavery was the central preoccupation for white Southern intellectuals. Southern society “thought it needed its best minds at home during the increasing heat of the sectional debate” and encouraged the publication of proslavery pamphlets from prominent intellectuals, as historian Haskell Monroe explains.12 The works of Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer existed as part of a much larger body of proslavery ideology published at the time, and these men were three of the many Southern white intellectuals who spent significant time and energy refuting the claims of antislavery advocates in the decade preceding the Civil War.

It is likely that white slave owners used these pamphlets in the course of self-examination, given the multitude of pamphlets produced. This thesis, however, will not explore the self-serving nature of the proslavery arguments advanced by Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer. It might be true that slave owners publicly argued along intellectual lines in order to gain legitimacy and to secure profit from unpaid labor.13 Privately, these men may have possessed reservations toward the institution. Such a conclusion, however, cannot be drawn by a twenty-first-century historian without access to a broader collection of private correspondence. A collection of diary entries or letters to close friends, family members, and colleagues would need to be identified to offer a better insight into the true nature of these men’s personal beliefs.

Rather than utilizing these pamphlets to explain how the dominant line of proslavery argumentation came to be, my analysis of Brookes’, De Bow’s, and Palmer’s works regards them as expressions of proslavery ideology. The extant scholarship on the intellectual defense of

11 Ibid, 131.
12 Haskell Monroe, “Bishop Morgan Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address,” Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association 4, no. 2 (1963), 106.
13 While it is conceivable that a few Southerners doubted the institution, historians have only identified five white Southerners who expressed any reservations toward the institution, and none did so publicly. See Carl N. Dagler, The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974).
slavery devotes less space to proslavery pamphlets and the question of how representative they were of white Southerners’ ideas as a whole. As discussed in Clement Eaton’s *The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South*, most Southerners could neither read nor write, lived under a “dark cloud of illiteracy,” and likely could not access these dense pamphlets that dealt with the morality of slavery in both a theoretical and practical sense. The high illiteracy rate calls into question the extent to which proslavery intellectuals truly represented the general populace and limits the potential to make claims regarding the extent to which the works of Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer articulated proslavery sentiments in the South as a whole. Furthermore, this small set of three primary sources could not possibly form a sufficient evidentiary base to represent the breadth and depth of proslavery thinkers. The primary focus will not be on the impact of the pamphlets on Southern society nor the way in which the pamphlets broadly reflect the white Southern mind, considering the limited scope of this thesis. Rather, the close study of these three pamphlets offers a lens through which proslavery ideology may be understood.

Inexpensive to create and disseminate widely, pamphlets provided a way of gaining popular support for one’s political agenda in the nineteenth century. Most often, pamphlets sought to inform the public on a single subject. Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer all utilized pamphlets in this manner. Each of these men possessed a central preoccupation with responding to targeted attacks on the institution from antislavery advocates. Pushes for emancipation in Kentucky by Henry Clay and Alexander Campbell prompted Brookes to insert himself into the debate over the future of the institution within the state. Similarly, De Bow specifically addressed the white Southern non-slaveholder in an effort to refute an attack on the institution from Hinton Rowan Helper, an antislavery advocate who condemned the detrimental economic

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impact that Southern slavery had on white non-slaveholders. Last but certainly not least, Palmer encouraged Louisianans to secede from the Union following the election of President Abraham Lincoln, a presidential candidate who Palmer and other white Southerners believed posed a grave threat to the continuation of slavery. As these three pamphlets attest, the publication of pamphlets served the purpose of spreading political ideas to the public at-large.

All three pamphlet writers who I study in this thesis addressed audiences in states in which they did not live. A central preoccupation existed among white Southern intellectuals with creating a one-size-fits-all slavery argument. A Baptist minister from South Carolina, Iveson Brookes involved himself in the debate over the continuation of slavery in Kentucky—a state 400 miles away from his home. Kentucky had a much smaller slave population and a significantly higher white population of lower-to-middle-class yeoman families than South Carolina. Nevertheless, in “A Defence of Southern Slavery,” Brookes failed to acknowledge the distinct manifestations of the institution in Kentucky. The calls for the emancipation of Kentucky’s slaves by Clay and Campbell ultimately served as a pretense for Brookes to debate the institution. James De Bow also minimized the economic, geographical, and social differences of slavery across the Antebellum South. De Bow argued that slavery benefitted white non-slaveholders of the South, a diverse group of individuals that included merchants, mechanics, and agricultural workers, among others. Once again, in De Bow we see a prominent intellectual turn to pamphlet writing in response to a Northern attack on the institution. His work intended to sway Southerners who held little to no financial stake in slavery’s perpetuation to vote in favor of secession. While he acknowledged the different effects of slavery on white non-slaveholders across the South, he largely minimized the different circumstances of this population by offering a single defense of the institution. Finally, Bishop Morgan Palmer
originally delivered his defense of slavery as a sermon to his congregation in New Orleans. The publication of his work in pamphlet form and its dissemination across other slave states revealed that he believed his defense of slavery could extend to other areas also confronted with questions about the future of the institution. Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer all produced proslavery pamphlet literature that sought to influence individuals across the Antebellum South of the critical importance of slavery to Southern society.

The influence of Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer in the debates over slavery prompted the selection of these three specific sources for analysis. Each of these pamphlets was produced in key historical moments that challenged popular support garnered by the proslavery position among white Southerners: Brookes sought to influence the debate over the continuation of slavery in Kentucky in 1851, De Bow intended to spur white Southern unity in defense of slavery following efforts by abolitionists to fracture support for the institution in the late 1850s, and Palmer urged Louisiana to join the wave of slave states seceding the Union following the election of President Abraham Lincoln in late 1860. Significant engagement with these works in all corners of the country following their publication spoke to the influence of these three pamphlets. Each of these men produced their proslavery arguments in different settings at different times, but this thesis frames these works as tributaries flowing into the main river that constituted the proslavery argument that ultimately convinced white Southerners to fight to preserve the institution.

The individual works of Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer have received varying degrees of scholarly attention. Excitingly, this thesis is the first extensive study of Iveson Brookes’ “A Defence of Southern Slavery” and how his ideas related to the dominant line of proslavery argumentation of the 1850s. The following analysis shows Brookes to have been an influential
figure who is worthy of further scholarly attention. Unlike Brookes’ pamphlet, the proslavery and pro-secession positions adopted in De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” have been moderately studied in the historiography on proslavery ideology. Previous historians, however, have overlooked the instrumental role of religion in De Bow’s argument. This thesis will fill in the gaps in current historiography by analyzing the crucial importance of the religious undertones of De Bow’s defense of slavery. An abundance of scholarship exists on the undeniably most influential of these three pamphlets, Bishop Palmer’s 1860 Thanksgiving Day sermon. The availability of the text in the Chapin Library prompted the decision to include this source as part of a longer intellectual history, which has allowed for a better understanding of how the components of Palmer’s argument came into being. Importantly, these three pamphlets have yet to be explored in relation to one another as I do here.

The first chapter examines the role of religion in Iveson Brookes’ proslavery position in “A Defence of Southern Slavery.” Questions arose in Kentucky regarding the morality and economic sustainability of the institution of slavery in a key political moment in the late 1840s; ultimately, defenders of the institution deflected those criticisms and strengthened their reign over the state of Kentucky. An analysis of Brookes’ “A Defence of Southern Slavery” provides insight into the way in which religion contributed to the formation of a powerful line of proslavery ideology in the early 1850s. The use of religion allowed Brookes to frame his argument on moral grounds, and it offered to white Southerners an immensely satisfying argument: slavery was ordained by God and produced a more just and stable society for all.

The second chapter studies the biblical undertones of James D. B. De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South.” In late 1860, antislavery advocates disseminated literature that outlined the negative consequences of slavery for the Southern white non-slaveholder. This
antislavery argument tried to fracture the white Southern unity that would be necessary to vote favorably for secession. James De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” used religion to counter this attack. De Bow made a concerted effort to show the way in which non-slaveholders could carry out God’s work by making every effort to uphold slavery, which he depicted as God’s creation. Further, through his critique of the alleged religious impurity wreaking havoc in the North, he suggested the disastrous consequences of a free society on the South. In doing so, he sent the message to white Southerners that the continuation of the institution was necessary if spiritual disaster was to be avoided. Ultimately, the support of white non-slaveholders for the secession movement revealed the power of integrating religion into proslavery ideology to downplay economic inequality in favor of racial unity successfully.

The third and final chapter unpacks Bishop Palmer’s radical integration of religion with contemporary politics in his 1860 Thanksgiving Day Sermon delivered at the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans. As the secession movement gained traction, political tensions ran at an all-time high across the country. In late 1860, Louisianans grappled with the choice to join other Deep South states in secession or to remain a part of the Union. Many found their answer in Bishop Morgan Palmer’s biblical justification for secession. Most of the arguments in Palmer’s sermon—the idea of slavery as a God-endowed institution, the construction of slavery as a paternalistic institution, and the defense of slavery based on religious racism—had been employed by previous ministers in defense of slavery. None, however, had resonated so deeply. Palmer’s fiery presentation of his arguments in an accessible way at a particular time and place seem to have persuaded his community to swing in support of secession. The impact of Palmer’s sermon can be seen not only in its ability to influence Louisianans but also white people in other slave states. Ultimately, Palmer’s 1860 Thanksgiving Day sermon acted as a guide for white
Southerners at a tenuous time in American history; this guide offered the religious rationale necessary to justify their decision to secede in defense of white supremacy.

The centrality of religion to nineteenth-century Southern society laid the foundation for a focus on the biblical justifications for slavery in proslavery pamphlet literature. In *Religion in the Old South*, historian Donald Mathews explains how white Southerners “lived under the rule of religion” and tracks “the single most influential strain of religious activity in the South during the formative years before 1860—Evangelicalism.” The Antebellum South was overwhelmingly an Evangelical Protestant society, and religion guided white Southerners in their everyday pursuits. Therefore, it is unsurprising that proslavery advocates—even a statistician like De Bow—turned to religion to construct their defenses of the institution.

At critical moments for the future of the country, the words of prominent individuals contained in twenty-to-forty-page pamphlets carried significant weight, as represented both by the significant national debate spurred following the mass dissemination of the works and also by the success of the documents to mobilize Southern white support for slavery and secession. Pamphlets held sway over public opinion in the South. Fugitive slave narratives depicting the horrors of slavery never achieved the same influence. Indeed, white Southerners largely dismissed the latter as abolitionist propaganda. As a critical reading of Brookes’, De Bow’s, and Palmer’s works reveals, the combination of economic, political, and religious thinking served to strengthen the proslavery position and to push back against critics of the institution. Ultimately, this analysis offers an understanding of the contours of the racism that defined the South in this period and of the white supremacist position that persisted even after the abolition of slavery.

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16 Ibid, xiv.
In conclusion, piety and white supremacy continue to go hand-in-hand. The Capitol insurrectionists’ employment of religious rhetoric caused journalist Sarah Polsner to conclude that Christianity fueled the Save America rally on January 6, 2021.\(^{17}\) While storming the Capitol building, Christian-right activists saw themselves as carrying out God’s appointed mission to “let the church roar.”\(^{18}\) These individuals took a moment amidst the chaos and violence of the raid to pray “in God’s holy name” and to offer thanks to God “for allowing the United States of America to be reborn.”\(^{19}\) In her article titled “How the Christian Right Helped Foment Insurrection,” Polsner offered insight into how and why so many Americans believed that religion justified white supremacy. She discerned, “Trump’s white evangelical base has come to believe that God anointed him and that Trump’s placement of Christian-right ideologues in critical positions at federal agencies and in federal courts was the fulfillment of a long-sought goal of restoring the United States as a Christian nation.”\(^{20}\) Clearly, many white Americans today embrace the idea that religion justifies racial inequality.

At a time when both some elected officials continue to legitimize white supremacist ideas and also when the Black Lives Matter movement has brought racial inequalities to the forefront of American attention, an intellectual history of racial hierarchal thinking is particularly timely. The belief in white supremacy as God-endowed has roots that extend far back from the present day. An analysis of the proslavery pamphlet literature that emerged in the decade preceding the Civil War unpacks the fallacious religious underpinnings of such beliefs and helps the reader place white supremacy on a longer historical continuum.


\(^{18}\) Ibid.


The defenses of slavery provided by Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer emerged over a decade in various locations across the diverse Antebellum South in response to separate events. Importantly, all three pamphlet writers employed religious rhetoric as a key component of their proslavery argumentation. Taken together, these works constitute a multifaceted expression of the proslavery argument that dominated white Southern society. As this thesis will explore, it was the intersections between the many expressions of the proslavery argument that successfully strengthened the ideological stance of white supremacists in the Antebellum South in the 1850s and early 1860s.

My argument recognizes the moral repugnance of the debates over slavery, especially in their effect on the enslaved population. Blacks suffered immensely under slavery, and the decades of human enslavement constituted one of the darkest chapters in American history. In studying the proslavery ideology that predominated during the last decade before the Civil War, this thesis in no way justifies such beliefs. Instead, it aims to contribute a new lens through which the extent of racism in nineteenth-century America may be understood.
CHAPTER I

Ideological Conflict over the Morality of Slavery: Religion as the Driving Force in Iveson Brookes’ “A Defence of Southern Slavery” (1851)

The institution of slavery took various forms in small farms, large plantations, and city dwellings across the Antebellum South and did not produce equal economic benefits for all white Southerners. Notably, the economic engine of Kentucky was less reliant on slavery than the economies of other slave states that financially depended on unpaid labor. The enslaved comprised one-quarter of the total population in Kentucky, whereas the enslaved constituted a majority of the population in other slave states, particularly in the Deep South.\(^1\) Compared to many of the plantation states in other parts of the South, Kentucky possessed a much larger white population of lower-to-middle class farming families who did not directly profit from slavery.\(^2\) As a result, internal debates over the financial benefits of the institution in Kentucky raged throughout the late 1840s and early 1850s. These ongoing debates occurred in both newspapers and state conventions and revealed a central preoccupation in Kentucky about whether slavery ought to be permitted to continue within the state.\(^3\)

Antislavery proponents tried to capitalize on these internal debates and identified Kentucky as a prime target for their emancipation efforts. In 1849, Henry Clay, the founder of the Whig party and a two-time presidential candidate, and Alexander Campbell, a widely-respected ordained minister, both entered into the ongoing debates over the institution. These prominent individuals produced and disseminated antislavery literature arguing for the

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\(^2\) Ibid, 7.

emancipation of Kentucky’s slaves. The highly-regarded statuses of Clay as a politician and of Campbell as a religious figure allowed their words to carry significant influence across the country as a whole. Proslavery proponents perceived their pushes for emancipation as posing a legitimate threat to the continuation of slavery in Kentucky and published a prodigious number of works to refute their emancipation efforts.⁴

Iveson Brookes’ “A Defence of Southern Slavery” (6.14” x 9.21”)

The antislavery literature produced by Clay and Campbell prompted Iveson Brookes, a Baptist clergyman and Southern sectionalist, to issue a public response in pamphlet form. While several individuals responded to Clay and Campbell individually, Brookes was the only Southern intellectual to construct a defense of slavery in opposition to both Clay and Campbell. Published in 1851, Brookes’ “A Defence of Southern Slavery” included two extensive and scathing letters addressed to antislavery periodicals. The forty-six-page pamphlet dedicated the first twenty-six pages to “A Review of Mr. Clay’s ‘Letter on Emancipation’” and the final twenty pages to “Strictures on Mr. Campbell’s ‘Tract for the People of Kentucky.’” In responding directly to the respective approaches to emancipation in Kentucky by Clay and Campbell, he erected a thoughtful and multifaceted defense of slavery that included religious, social, and economic justifications for the continuation of the institution. Rather than a backward individual who embraced bare knuckles white supremacy, Brookes was one of many Southern intellectuals who believed that slavery improved American society and who used religious-based arguments to support his conclusions.  

A shared moral sensibility underpinned both the proslavery and antislavery arguments of Brookes, Clay, and Campbell. These men established moral authority for their beliefs both by using biblical touchpoints and also by emphasizing the paternalistic nature of their respective positions. Importantly, both the proslavery and antislavery advocates shared a conception of racial difference that at its core was violent and exterminatory. Not only did all three forms of argumentation focus heavily on ways of protecting the white population, they also

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communicated how their stances would benefit the enslaved people, whether that be to keep them enslaved, to send them back to Liberia, or to liberate them. The same ultimate goals to preserve the freedom and prosperity of the white civilization and to support the enslaved population were—at least in rhetoric—communicated by both sides of the slavery debate.

As this chapter will demonstrate, Brookes’ “A Defence of Southern Slavery” complicates how proslavery arguments should be understood. Previous intellectual historians rightly consider the Antebellum South to have been a morally-backward and inherently-cruel place. The dominant historiographical position exists that the Civil War resulted from the intense polarization of ideals between the North and South: the North fought for morality while the South defended their self-serving and unvirtuous ideology. This simplified understanding of the conflict has been subject to revision in recent historiography, and a close analysis of Brookes’ work provides further evidence to reject the dominant interpretation of the debates over the institution. As previously mentioned, Brookes, Campbell, and Clay embraced the same goals. These men, however, differed in their epistemological understandings of the institution. All three individuals interpreted the nature and virtues of slavery differently and represented those in their respective works strategically in an effort to convince Kentuckians as to the importance of slavery in the state. As these men did so, they utilized the same moral reference and spoke the same moral language. Ultimately, Brookes’ insistence on the virtues of slavery in response to concerns raised by abolitionists reflected an irreconcilable conflict over the morality of the institution.

This chapter constitutes the first in-depth look at Brookes’ “A Defence of Southern Slavery.” The following analysis intends to frame his work as an important contribution to

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proslavery literature, specifically in its presentation of a religious proslavery argument that deflected moral concerns over the institution. The chapter begins with background information necessary to situate both the political situation in Kentucky and also why Campbell and Brookes involved themselves in the slavery debates occurring in a state in which neither of the men lived. The chapter then moves into a discussion of how Brookes, alongside other prominent proslavery advocates, framed slavery as an institution established by God. In doing so, he pitted antislavery proponents against God’s creation. Importantly, he moved the focus of the slavery debate away from the value of slavery in Kentucky to the religious legitimacy of the institution for all of Southern society, including Kentucky. While his primary focus was to establish the religious legitimacy of slavery, Brookes also spoke to the social and economic virtues of the institution. This chapter analyzes the religious framework that Brookes uses to justify morally the social and economic consequences of slavery in Kentucky. Finally, the chapter concludes by placing the aforementioned analysis of Brookes’ “A Defence of Southern Slavery” in conversation with extant scholarship on the role of religion in proslavery ideology. Specifically, the analysis of Brookes’ religious justifications for slavery skews the dominant historiographical interpretation of white Southerners’ proslavery ideology as lacking any moral foundation.

Background: Political Debate in Kentucky

In addition to the state’s unique economic situation, the geographical orientation of Kentucky as a border state adjacent to both slave states in the South and free states in the North fostered significant debate regarding the future of slavery in the state in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Unlike many slave states in the Deep South that fought for the unfettered expansion of the institution up until the Civil War, Kentuckians actively and publicly discussed the possibility of
emancipation in the decades preceding the war. The Louisville Examiner regularly published antislavery editorials during the late 1840s and the early 1850s. Additionally, public servants addressed the prospect of emancipation in the Frankfort Emancipationist Convention in 1849 and again in the state constitutional convention that began later that same year and concluded in 1850. The Frankfort Emancipationist Convention included a total of 150 men and was the largest emancipationist meeting in the history of the state. Abolitionists continued to fight for amendments to the laws permitting slavery within Kentucky in the state constitutional convention. The economic situation in and geographic position of Kentucky as a border state between the North and the South help to explain why debate regarding the continuation of slavery occurred in Kentucky, a debate that did not have corollaries in other states across the Deep South during this time.

As Kentucky prepared to write and institute a new state constitution, Henry Clay and Alexander Campbell offered two different approaches to emancipation in 1849. Clay, a founding member and president of the American Colonization Society (ACS), raised funds through his organization to emancipate slaves gradually. Clay’s “Letter on Emancipation” was originally written as private correspondence and later published in the Louisville Journal on March 5, 1849. In his letter, Clay responded to the debates over the future of the institution in Kentucky. He argued for a form of gradual emancipation: the continued enslavement of black children, the hiring out of those slaves at adulthood, and the use of money from their hiring to outfit them and

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9 Eaton, “Minutes,” 541-42.
10 Ibid.
11 Willis, “History Kentucky Constitutions and Constitutional Conventions,” 315.
Clay’s proposed gradual emancipation was markedly different from Alexander Campbell’s push for immediate emancipation, which Clay believed would threaten the Union by bringing about change too drastically and too quickly. Not sharing Clay’s gradualism, Campbell pushed for immediate emancipation in Kentucky. In “A Tract for the People of Kentucky,” Campbell argued that slavery diminished wealth, political power, and morals of slaveholders, and he presented “slavery as being incompatible with a republican government.” As with Clay’s, Campbell’s letter was widely printed in Northern antislavery periodicals as well as a handful of progressive newspapers across the South. Clay and Campbell proposed two dramatically different forms of emancipation that prompted spirited political debate. If either form of emancipation was implemented, it would threaten the future of slavery in Kentucky.

Clay’s national stature as a politician and Campbell’s as a well-regarded religious figure likely compelled Brookes to respond to their respective approaches to emancipation in Kentucky. As a founder of the Whig party and a two-time presidential candidate, Clay was arguably the most important Whig politician from any of the slave states. He held the attention of the country as a result of his high political profile. His opinions “spread like wildfire” according to historian Joseph Rogers and were often revered by a large segment of the general public. In both Northern and Southern states, Clay’s views had an impact. Similarly, Alexander Campbell was

16 Importantly, progressive newspapers in the slave states were exceedingly rare, and the majority of such sources went out of business one or two years after inception. See Nye, “Freedom of the Press and the Antislavery Controversy” for more information.
a well-known minister whose words were widely-respected for their erudition and their meticulousness. His ideas were circulated across numerous congregations, including those of several different protestant denominations. Campbell further expanded the reach of his antislavery beliefs and pushed for institutional reform in *The Millennial Harbinger*, a journal that he created with the goal of fostering both the sharing of opinions on slavery from across the political spectrum and also an unfiltered debate over slavery. Given its format, his journal received submissions from an ideologically-diverse group of intellectuals from across the country and engaged both antislavery and proslavery advocates in written debates. As a result of his professional success, Campbell “became the first religious leader in history to be invited by Congress to address a joint session of the House and Senate” in 1850. Thus, the public profiles of Clay and Campbell and the respect with which the general public viewed their ideas were important factors in cultivating fervent antislavery efforts in Kentucky. Such efforts did not gain traction in other parts of the South. Ultimately, the fact that Brookes, a Baptist minister from South Carolina, felt compelled to write letters defending the institution and to respond to debates over slavery in Kentucky—a state 400 miles away from his home state of South Carolina—showed the perceived threat that Clay and Campbell posed to the integrity of slavery’s future.

Iveson Brookes’ background sheds partial light on the development of his proslavery stance and, specifically, on the contributions he made to the debate over the continuation of slavery in Kentucky. Born in North Carolina in 1793, Brookes did not own slaves throughout his

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20 Ibid, 12.
21 Ibid, 13.
childhood and originally opposed the institution, as evidenced by the works he produced throughout his early education pronouncing his “enmity to slavery.”

Historian Larry Tise describes the rapid change in Brookes’ ideological stance following his ordination and his travel throughout South Carolina as a domestic missionary in 1819. While the Baptist denomination previously had resisted taking an official position in the debate over the continuation and expansion of slavery, “the powerful influence of slaveholding members in the denomination and the traditional Baptist hesitancy to involve the church with civil action had quieted nearly all antislavery forces” by the 1830s—the period when Brookes became seriously involved in promoting religious justifications for slavery.

Tise attributes the rapid change in Brookes’ belief system to his opportunism as well as his relationship with Basil Manly, a Baptist minister and Brookes’ closest friend. Tise notes, “After months of correspondence with Manly, Brookes became convinced that the greatest opportunities for the future lay in the Baptist ministry and in a lucrative marriage.”

Brookes’ life trajectory molded him into a strong supporter of slavery. Over the course of his life, Brookes elevated his social status by becoming a minister and by marrying upper-class women. He achieved his life goal of economic prosperity by acquiring a network of plantations from the families of his three wives. Tise describes the letters that Brookes wrote to Northern antislavery periodicals throughout the late 1840s and the 1850s as “the productions of an enraged slaveholder revealing little of the optimistic and balanced thinking of his youthful years,” and as

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25 Ibid.


27 Tise, “Brookes, Iveson Lewis.”
the “characteristic statements of a die-hard Southern sectionalist who had learned to love the life of a slaveholding planter.”28 His religious affiliations, his own participation in the institution as a slaveholder, and the immense wealth that he procured through his use of slave labor explain his dedication to defending the institution. Both Brookes’ own life experiences and personal relationships had a deep impact on his evolving ideological stance toward slavery.

The publication of “A Defence of Southern Slavery” in 1851 propelled Brookes into the political limelight. As previously noted, Brookes wrote dozens of letters to antislavery periodicals beginning in 1835. None held as much acclaim as his 1851 letters. Importantly, the publication of his responses to Clay and Campbell amplified his message and established Brookes as a notable proslavery advocate worthy of national attention. Proslavery Southern intellectuals recognized the strength of his contributions to the debate over the continuation of Kentucky slavery, and Robinson and Carlisle, a printing press in South Carolina, printed his letters to Clay and Campbell in pamphlet form for dissemination across the country.29 The exact number of copies produced is unknown, but such publication undoubtedly allowed Brookes to reach a wider audience and revealed that his argument clearly resonated widely with many white Southerners. Given the pamphlet’s popularity, the elements of Brookes’ “A Defence of Southern Slavery” should be closely considered.

Religion: The Heart of Brookes’ Proslavery Argument

In his letters to Clay and Campbell, Brookes used religion to ground his defense of slavery and to serve as the main driver of his proslavery argumentation. Brookes described proslavery views as “the veritable opinions entertained on the same subject by the God of the

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
universe” and argued that “Any attempt, therefore, to refute them would involve an open conflict with the God of heaven, and lead to a rejection of his revealed truth.” His use of the words “veritable” and “truth” suggest that he saw slavery as a transcendental and fundamental right for those he deemed to be truly human. “Slavery is inseparably connected with Gospel Church government because, on Bible authority, slavery of some form must necessarily exist in every well-organized society,” he asserted. Brookes perceived slavery to be a structure established by God to improve human society and as a universal feature of all societies worthy of respect. As Clay and Campbell debated the value of slavery in Kentucky, Brookes returned the argument to the religious legitimacy of slavery. “God must have known fully...what is the character of slavery; and if he had seen it thus fraught with deadly evils, he would never have appointed the institution,” he wrote at the conclusion of his letter to Clay. He believed that God would not have established slavery yet for its potential to benefit mankind. Brookes saw the existence of slavery in itself to be evidence of the moral and social good that the institution provided to society.

Given that he viewed slavery as an appointment by a higher power, Brookes considered anyone who argued against the institution to be “enemies” of God. Brookes purported that he was not the only one aware of the impious and scornful nature of emancipationists’ attempts to interfere with God’s creations. He believed that God shared in his ridicule of such efforts. In his letters to Clay and Campbell, he asked of antislavery advocates: “Are they not all, whether few or many, fighting against the God of heaven? Lifting their puny fists in opposition to Him who sits upon his lofty throne and laughs to scorn the impious attempts of his enemies to frustrate his

31 Ibid, 6.
32 Ibid, 23.
33 Ibid, 11.
Brookes juxtaposed the “puny fists” of the emancipationists to the “God of Heaven...who sits on his lofty throne” to demonstrate both the strength and the moral superiority of proslavery convictions. He truly believed that God stood starkly in opposition to emancipationists and firmly on the side of proslavery advocates. Brookes went on to argue: “God knows better how to arrange for his creatures than they do for themselves; and every man should suspect himself of being in the wrong when he undertakes to find fault with God’s appointments.” Brookes called upon emancipationists to take a self-conscious look at the impiety of their beliefs. In Brookes’ mind, emancipationists would respect His establishment of slavery if they truly believed in God.

Brookes tested the arguments of Clay and Campbell against selective dictates of the Bible in an effort to frame slavery as ordained by God. Throughout his letters to Clay and Campbell, Brookes relied heavily on religious justifications for human bondage, referencing over ten different passages in the Bible. Responding to Clay’s push for gradual emancipation, Brookes cited the “Canaantish descendant of Ham, whom God authorized to be held in hereditary bondage” in Leviticus 25:45 to prove that slavery was established by God. Brookes’ use of this biblical passage aimed to reveal slavery to be a transcendental institution imbued with higher powers that persisted throughout history. He also cited “the case of Lott’s recapture from the combined forces of the four Kings and restoration to his liberty and possessions” by slaves of Abraham in Genesis 14:14 to make an identical point. Examining this biblical passage, Brookes insisted that “Mr. Clay will admit the practical tendency of slavery to the preservation

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid, 44.
36 Ibid, 5.
37 Ibid.
of liberty.” Brookes interpreted the Bible as revealing timeless truths. According to Brookes, references of the existence of slavery in the Bible served as religious justification for the institution itself. He looked to a past historical moment to reveal slavery to be necessary to the conservation of a free society. Brookes wholeheartedly believed that an application of the Bible to the real world would provide the path to an enlightened society and described the Bible as “God’s regulation of human responsibilities in regard to the relations of man with his fellow or his Maker.” Brookes believed God established time-honored ways for structuring society through the Bible and this biblical guidance offered a means for achieving a societal structure endorsed by God.

Brookes did not stand alone in his efforts to place religion at the heart of his proslavery ideology and to use the Bible as the main justification for the continuation of the institution. His sentiment mirrors that of many prominent proslavery ideologues of the time, including Edmund Ruffin, James Henry Hammond, William Gilmore Simms, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, and George Fredrick Holmes. Drew Faust analyzes the works of these men and identifies a common lens through which white Southern intellectuals viewed the legitimacy of slavery: “Its existence throughout time...imbued it with a kind of transcendence and legitimacy...history had become theological: whatever God had permitted to endure through the ages necessarily must accord with his purposes.” Ultimately, like these other men, Brookes used the Bible to place slavery on a longer historical continuum both to authorize its existence and also to speak to the necessity of its continuation.

38 Ibid.  39 Ibid, 6.  40 Faust, Sacred Circle.  41 Ibid, 119.
Contradictory elements in the Bible, of course, negate the possibility for a clear, incontestable justification of slavery to be drawn, and Brookes’ references to the Bible were clearly chosen to convince readers of the legitimacy of his worldview. Brookes believed that the Bible supported his ideological stance and that Campbell would have come to the same conclusion regarding the scriptural legitimacy of the institution had he aligned his own beliefs with the “true” nature of the Bible. He said, “[Campbell] does not attempt to combat the scriptural argument which sustains Southerners in the practice of slaveholding - which argument his reputation for the adherence to the Bible would not allow him to explain away as do some of the learned Doctors at the North.”

Brookes criticized Campbell for failing to use his religious expertise and to ground his argument in the Bible. Specifically, Brookes challenged Campbell’s interpretation of Paul I Corinthians vii 21: “Art thou called being a servant? Care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, choose it rather.”

Campbell pointed to several points in the scripture that allowed him to reconcile his antislavery ideology and contended that this passage implied the desirability of freedom from slavery. Brookes fought back against this interpretation and inquired: “Now are we to understand Mr. C. as advancing the doctrine that God’s commands must always be reciprocally applied in mutual obligations: As between master and servant the master is to obey the servant...?” Here, Brookes implied that Campbell distorted the true meaning of God’s words and applied his doctrine incorrectly. Brookes chose to ignore or brush off instances in the Bible that potentially contradicted his proslavery argument. Instead, he diverted attention to other sacred precepts that aligned with his stance. Brookes’ interpretation of the Bible constituted the principal basis of his proslavery defense; an analysis of his letters to

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42 Brookes, “A Defence of Southern Slavery,” 27.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
Clay and Campbell reveals how he was unrestrained by the weakness of biblical rhetoric as clear evidence for his proslavery argument.

Brookes’ Social Justifications for Slavery

While Brookes relied primarily on the religious legitimacy of the institution in “A Defence of Southern Slavery,” he incorporated the social benefits of slavery for both the enslaved and also society as a whole into his proslavery argument. He did so with a religious overlay, and the following analysis unpacks the specific way in which he used religion to refute directly Clay’s and Campbell’s claims regarding the social detriment of Kentucky slavery on blacks and whites. Ultimately, Brookes aimed to show that slavery operated according to God’s law.

In “A Defence of Southern Slavery,” Brookes further established his proslavery argument on the basis of racial inequality. Brookes made assumptions about blacks that reflected his internalized racism. He equated blacks with “beasts” and described the black race as “improvident,” “reckless,” and “primitive.”45 Blacks, he insisted, formed a stark contrast to white Kentuckians, whom Brookes described as “generous-hearted, courageous, and industrious citizens.”46 His use of these descriptors reflected his genuine belief in the different emotional and physical capacities of blacks and whites. In Brookes’ mind, these differences he insisted existed made Africans a fit candidate for bondage. The “Negro temperament,” he explained, was “congenial to the prophetic decree fitting the race for slavery.”47 Without a governing structure—a structure that whites had imposed through the institution of slavery—to guide them on the path to enlightenment, Brookes believed that blacks would suffer from the qualities inherent to their

46 Ibid, 19.
Brookes continually emphasized this point. “The negro race in their native state have shown themselves so improvident and incapacitated as to forbid their rise from a condition of savage barbarity, under their own management,” he claimed. Brookes purported that racial inequality supported blacks’ enslavement.

White proslavery and antislavery advocates alike shared Brookes’ deep-seated belief in racial inequality; these characterizations, however, did not lead Clay or Campbell to support Brookes’ conclusion that blacks should be subject to slavery. Importantly, Clay also emphasized the different capacities of blacks and whites in his contribution to the debate over the future of slavery in Kentucky. In his “Letter on Emancipation,” Clay alluded to the supposed “intellectual inferiority” of blacks. In the case of immediate emancipation, he believed, “Social, moral, and political degradation would be the inevitable lot of the colored race,” given their inability to compete with the white population in the United States. To prevent the disastrous consequences of emancipation, he proposed that Africa’s “children might be returned to their original home, [civilized], imbued with the benign spirit of Christianity, and prepared ultimately to redeem that great continent from barbarism and idolatry.” This assertion implied that American slavery had sufficiently uplifted blacks from their barbaric and idolatrous state. Importantly, Clay did not disagree with Brookes that slavery had Christianized slaves and morally improved blacks: instead, Clay insisted that freed blacks could not coexist peacefully in society with whites and argued for the exportation of emancipated blacks back to Liberia.

48 Ibid, 9.
50 Ibid, 3.
51 Ibid.
Campbell further reflected the belief in racial inequality but, unlike Brookes and Clay, did not embrace the notion of white supremacy. Campbell saw “knowledge as incompatible with slavery” and blamed enslavement for the lower intellectual capacity of blacks in American society.\textsuperscript{52} He understood the conditions of slavery to be an insurmountable barrier on the road to enlightenment for the black population. Slavery, he insisted, must be abolished to improve the condition of the black race and to make them more productive members of society. In his “Tract for the People of Kentucky,” Campbell argued that the emancipation of Kentucky’s slaves would be necessary to their “overall development.”\textsuperscript{53} If slavery were to be abolished in Kentucky, Campbell believed the political and social condition of society as a whole would correspondingly improve alongside the education and enlightenment of blacks. An iron-clad belief in black inferiority lay at the heart of Brookes’ proslavery argument as well as the antislavery arguments of Clay and Campbell; the inferences that these three individuals made as to what racial inequality meant for the future of slavery in Kentucky differed.

Brookes believed that slavery was an absolute necessity because it was a means of preventing blacks from withering away under the character flaws that he saw as inherent to their nature. He asked the question of Clay:

\begin{quote}
Have our slaves, then, in fine, been wronged in being raised, through the institution of slavery, to a condition of moral, intellectual, and civil improvement, and to a state of protection, comfort, and happiness never elsewhere, not in any period of the world’s history, known to any portion of the negro race?\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Brookes made the sweeping assertion that blacks’ lives under slavery constituted the best conditions that had ever faced their race. He understood slavery to be a paternalistic institution

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\item \textsuperscript{52} Alexander Campbell, “A Tract for the People of Kentucky,” \textit{The Millennial Harbinger} (Bethany, WV: May 1849), 2.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Brookes, \textit{A Defence of Southern Slavery}, 10.
\end{itemize}
that benefited the lives of the supposedly primitive Africans. The notion of “moral, intellectual, and civil improvement” through slavery resurfaced several times in Brookes’ letter. He described slavery as “a most merciful deliverance”\(^{55}\) that placed the enslaved population “beneath the protecting banner of the Constitution and laws of the most civilized portion of the world, and under the guardianship of owners whose Christian sympathy and personal interest combine to benefit [the enslaved].”\(^{56}\) In Brookes’ mind, the close relationship between slave owners and the enslaved allowed for blacks’ civilization in society and the edification of the enslaved about God’s precepts. Brookes believed that slavery established a governing structure for those who could not reach civil and religious enlightenment on their own.

Brookes insisted that blacks understood the social and religious benefits awarded to them by slavery. Brookes went so far as to contend that “the slaves, too, being protected in life, limb, and health, through the interest and friendship of the owner—having all their necessary wants supplied, and none or few of the responsibilities of life or cares of the world devolving upon them—are the most contented and happy class of people on earth.”\(^{57}\) Whereas economic considerations occupied significant energy for white slave masters, blacks, Brookes insisted, had a simple life under slavery that required no such preoccupations. He believed that the enslaved population appreciated the guidance of their white masters. The use of the descriptor, “friendship,” to qualify the relationship between enslaver and enslaved suggested blacks and whites mutually supported one another. Further, in his letters to Clay and Campbell, Brookes insisted on the “religious privileges” afforded to the enslaved population.\(^{58}\) In Brookes’ mind, the Christianization of the black population under American slavery uplifted the religiously

\(^{55}\) Ibid, 7.  
\(^{56}\) Ibid, 10.  
\(^{57}\) Ibid, 24.  
\(^{58}\) Ibid.
backward Africans, who, left to their own devices, would lack religious and moral conviction.\textsuperscript{59} Brookes identified the slave-master relationship as a necessary component to both the civilization and happiness of the black population and insisted that such a structure was appreciated by black enslaved individuals.

Brookes refuted the idea of abolition as freedom and, in doing so, argued that life under slavery was qualitatively better than the alternatives presented by Clay and Campbell. In response to Clay’s push for gradual emancipation, Brookes described the relative condition of slavery in the United States and of freedom in Liberia: “In America, [slaves’] food, clothes, medicines, and all other necessaries have been furnished without a thought on their part; and when sent to Liberia with high notions of freedom and exemption from labor...they [will] prove totally inadequate to sustain themselves.”\textsuperscript{60} He used the example of the “gloomy and blood stained Island of St. Domingo” to support his conclusion about the condition of the emancipated slave and the inability of the black population to support itself.\textsuperscript{61} He also sought to rebut Clay’s assertion directly that gradual emancipation would benefit the black population:

\textit{…when the shipment of the last remnant from Kentucky might be landed on the borders of the painted negro paradise, they would find it a dreary waste, plundered and robbed by the majority, who would have become amalgamated with the heathenish native, and would be worshipping snakes and alligators! That would be liberty with a vengeance.}\textsuperscript{62}

One of Brookes’ many critiques of gradual emancipation was his insistence that Liberia would offer blacks worse living conditions than the U.S. currently provided. The dire tone of his letter suggested that his intellectual opponents failed to recognize the true consequences of emancipation. Regarding the conditions in Liberia, he continued, “[Emancipated slaves] could

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 18.
\end{itemize}
not possibly enjoy a higher degree of safety and religious privilege on the exposed inhospitable shores of Africa, where a large portion would fall victims to the climate.”63 Brookes argued that emancipated slaves sent to Liberia would suffer physically and spiritually on the African continent, given the relatively poor quality of the land and the lack of organized Christian religion. His comparison of the quality of life for black people under American slavery and of life in Liberia sought to question what “freedom” looked like for the black population.

Brookes used similar method to construct his defense of slavery against Campbell’s push for immediate emancipation. He made elaborate claims regarding the conditions of life under slavery, noting that the paternalistic quality of the institution “[renders] their civil condition superior to that of any class of poor in any section of the known world.”64 In his letter to Campbell, he compared the living conditions of the enslaved population in the United States to the presumed quality of life for emancipated slaves in order to justify his proslavery argument. Brookes purported that the free black populations across the U.S. and British provinces suffered from “idleness, dissipation, and starvation”65 and languished “in squalid wretchedness—suffering for fire and clothing in winter—for food of wholesome quality both in winter and summer - and for spiritual instruction the whole time!!”66 Brookes aimed to show the emotional and physical burden of freedom on the black population. In doing so, he sought to call into question that emancipation would constitute true liberation. He also insisted, “The degraded state and squalid condition of the poor negroes in the so called free States, show them to be greatly injured, civilly and morally, by being thrown upon their own resources among the whites.”67 In

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid, 9.
65 Ibid, 35.
66 Ibid, 38.
67 Ibid, 7.
his refutation of Campbell, Brookes reiterated his belief that abolition should not be equated with freedom.

In his comparison of the institution of slavery to the conditions of emancipation, Brookes grossly underplayed the harm inflicted on enslaved people and, as a result, overstated the paternalistic character of slavery. His understanding of the institution as “freedom” completely ignored the brutal aspects of human bondage, including frequent sexual assault, regular physical abuse, and separation of family members.68 Indeed, he pushed back against the assertions made by Clay and Campbell regarding the horrors of life for enslaved blacks. He identified Clay’s and Campbell’s accounts as to the mental and physical abuse suffered by the enslaved population as “untrue and slanderous.”69 Brookes’ defense of slavery sought to emphasize the relative quality of life enjoyed under the institution and does not acknowledge the brutal qualities inherent to the enslavement and exploitation of human beings.

Brookes’ Economic Justifications for Slavery

Not only did Brookes’ defense of slavery suggest that slavery was better than emancipation for the enslaved population, but his argument also sought to prove the importance of preserving the institution for the economic situation in Kentucky as a whole. In doing so, he sought to portray the institution as a positive good that God intended. A close examination of Brookes’ economic justifications for slavery reveals his primary considerations to be those of white slave owners. He made a concerted effort, however, to unite all whites as bearing the same

interest and investment in the institution of slavery despite different economic situations that derived variable economic benefit from slave labor.

Gradual emancipation, like that supported by Clay, did not consider or account for the large financial impact of emancipation on slave-owning individuals or on the economy of Kentucky as a whole; Brookes sought to highlight this impact in “A Defence of Southern Slavery”. Brookes believed that ending slavery would lead to significant economic instability in Kentucky and argued for the financial unviability of Clay’s push for gradual emancipation. Not only would emancipation require compensation to Kentucky slave owners for their loss of property, which Brookes estimated would amount to 80 million dollars,\textsuperscript{70} but Brookes also worried about the effect that this loss of slave labor would have on Kentucky’s economy. If blacks were emancipated and sent back to Liberia, former white slave owners would lack the labor necessary to tend to the land: “The land, then, now cultivated by one hundred thousand slaves, must be brought into market, or lie as dead capital in the possession of those deprived of their laborers through the act of manumission.”\textsuperscript{71} Overall, Brookes estimated the institution of slavery in Kentucky to be worth 234 million dollars and foreshadowed the negative consequences of abolishing such a wealthy and stable institution.\textsuperscript{72} His proslavery argument primarily considered the economic impact of emancipation on white slaveholders.

Brookes also made a case for the benefits of the institution for white subsistence farmers. Importantly, Brookes’ insistence on the economic importance of slavery for the state of Kentucky did not directly address the large population of non-slaveholders who would potentially be better off not having to compete with crops subsidized by slave labor. He did,

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 13.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, 16.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 13.
however, examine the impact of gradual emancipation on the social order of Kentucky as a whole. Slavery, he insisted, established an economy that provided social stability and “a general spirit of obedience to law and good order.”\(^{73}\) He compared Kentucky to free states in the North that suffered without the governing structure of slavery: “How many cases of striking for wages and various outbreaks of riotous character have hailed from states where, according to Mr. Clay’s notions, a paradise should be expected.\(^{74}\) Brookes’ comparison of relative peace in Kentucky to the civil unrest in free states was meant to highlight the importance of the institution to preserving the social order of society as a whole. Brookes impugned Clay’s goal of gradual emancipation for its failure to consider the economic and social implications of abolishing a wealthy and stable institution.

Brookes used a similar line of argumentation, stressing the dire economic consequences of abolition, in order to paint gradual emancipation and immediate emancipation with the same brush; he sought to discredit both forms of emancipation by referencing economic arguments. Unlike Clay, Campbell did address the consequences of emancipation on the economy in his antislavery push. Brookes offered a summary of Campbell’s work: “the Institution of slavery [is] a ruinous incubus on Kentucky, as being a source of impoverishment to her people, and should at once be removed by freeing her negroes.”\(^{75}\) Campbell claimed that the institution of slavery diminished wealth. He argued that the poor quality of the soil, the significantly lower population density, and the lower amount of aggregate wealth in Kentucky, a slave state, compared to neighboring Ohio, a free state, proved the economic failure of the institution in Kentucky.\(^{76}\)

Brookes responded directly to these criticisms. Brookes identified poor soil quality and

\(^{73}\) Ibid, 20.
\(^{74}\) Ibid.
\(^{75}\) Ibid, 30.
\(^{76}\) Ibid.
population density as bad indicators of economic success given the intentional choice of slave owners to use more land for crop rotation. Brookes also proposed an alternative way to understand the discrepancy in output. He examined data as to the relative cost of labor in each state. In Kentucky, “the slaves ‘board’ amounts to perhaps, less than a dollar per month” whereas “the wages of the laborer in Ohio...may be counted at, perhaps, not less than from $15 to $25 per month.” The cost of white labor in Ohio far exceeded the cost of slave laborers in Kentucky: the board of the laborer in Ohio was 1,500-2,500% greater than the board of a slave in Kentucky, Brookes claimed. He also suggested that Ohio had to produce more in order to compensate for the high operating cost of a free labor economy. Insisting that the lower population density of Kentucky corresponded with fewer workers and, as a result, less overall output than Ohio, Brookes directly refuted Campbell’s claim that sparsely populated rural communities reflected the failure of the institution. Brookes completely ignored the reality that Kentucky slaveholders were able to generate more output for the same cost by not paying their laborers.

Brookes added to his economic defense of slavery by challenging Campbell’s argument about the effect of the institution on the population of Kentucky as a whole; in doing so, he provided a utopic view of slavery in the state. While Campbell understood the lower population density of Kentucky to represent the economic failures of slavery in the state, Brookes again challenged that immediate emancipation would lead to better overall conditions, explaining:

Density of population, and especially the crowding together of the inhabitants into large cities and numerous villages is far more unfavorable to correct morals, good society, and true respectability than residing in rural retirement in sparsely populated communities…[Slaveholding communities] are seldom or never molested with riots or other lawless movements of mobs.

77 Ibid, 31.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid, 33.
Here, Brookes compared the peace and tranquility in Kentucky with the sociopolitical instability present in the densely populated free states. He concluded that the existing agrarian conditions of Kentucky prevented social unrest and promoted superior morals to the industrial economy of free states.

**Conclusion**

John Daly’s *When Slavery Was Called Freedom* provides an apt way to understand the use of religious rhetoric in Brookes’ argumentation. Daly argues that religious rhetoric gave white Southerners—people who felt in their hearts that slavery was good but struggled to articulate why—a palatable and easy-to-understand framework for defending the institution. In constructing their defenses of slavery, Southern evangelicals sought to show how the institution “uplifted the American ideals of freedom and prosperity.” His work tracks how Southern evangelicals argued that slavery could complement the American ideals of freedom and prosperity. Northern evangelicals, by contrast, identified the way that blacks suffered under slavery as inherently against those ideals. Ultimately, as Daly discerns, both the North and South looked to the higher power of God to support their thinking, and religion formed a key element in establishing the morality of both the antislavery and proslavery defenses. Daly insists that the similarities in the tactics used by both the North and the South reveal a conflict over the perceived virtues of the institution, rather than a blatant disregard for morality on the behalf of proslavery advocates.

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81 Ibid, 72.

82 Ibid.
Daly’s analysis helps us to highlight the relationship between Confederate nationalism and religion in Brookes’ work. Brookes argued along moral lines and used religion to affirm his position. In doing so, he attempted to show the ways in which the day-to-day realities of slavery improved society for blacks and whites alike. At the conclusion of his letters to Clay and Campbell, Brookes summarized his arguments and explained the way in which nationalism and religion support the existence of slavery:

[Slavery’s] conservative influence in favor of republicanism does not consist chiefly in the fact of its curtailment of universal suffrage, but in the almost unobserved fact of its uniting capital and labor. It is this peaceful trait in the Institution of slavery that constitutes it a leading ingredient in the best social state. This conspicuously shows the wisdom of God in its appointment and its establishment among his favorite people; and dignifies Christ’s approval and continuance of it in his church as forming the best social condition of the Caucasian and Canaanitish races.  

While Brookes constructed a multifaceted proslavery defense and discussed social and economic factors that impacted his thinking, the majority of his two letters focused on the moral high ground that religion gave to the institution. An analysis of the role of religion in Brookes’ defense of slavery confirms that proslavery advocates did not disregard morality altogether, as suggested by various historians in their descriptions of the ideological conflict between the North and the South. In his defense of slavery, social and economic arguments were necessary but insufficient. Brookes sought to establish a morally-sound argument for the continuation of slavery. In conclusion, Daly suggests that white Southerners used religious justifications for the institution as the moral compass that led them to fight to defend their proslavery ideology, and a close reading of Brookes’ work lends further support to confirm this conclusion.

Ultimately, Brookes’ argumentation alongside that of other proslavery writers had political influence. Despite significant resistance, proslavery advocates triumphed in the public sphere.

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83 Brookes, “A Defence of Southern Slavery,” 44.
debates over the continuation of slavery in Kentucky. A result of the 1849-1850 state constitutional convention was the amended section three in the bill of rights in Kentucky, which reflected the idea of slaveholding as a human right.\textsuperscript{84} This state constitutional amendment tightened the legitimacy of slavery in a key border state and proved to be a significant victory for proslavery advocates, as it entrenched the institution into Kentucky for the following decade.

\textsuperscript{84} The amended section read: “The right of property is before and higher than any constitutional sanction; and the right of the owner of a slave to such slave, and its increase, is the same, and as inviolable as the right of the owner of any property whatever.” See Eaton, “Minutes and Resolution,” 52.
CHAPTER II
Cultivating Southern White Unity: Religious Motifs in James De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” (1860)

In the months preceding the Civil War, a sense of desperation arose among proslavery advocates to unite the geographically, culturally, and economically diverse Southern white population in defense of the institution. Approximately a quarter of Southern white families owned slaves in 1860, and antislavery advocates repeatedly called into question the benefits of slavery for the Southern population at-large.1 These abolitionists’ critiques of slavery fairly recognized that the vast majority of white Southerners did not financially benefit in a direct sense from the institution.2

Hinton Rowan Helper garnered acclaim as one of the most prominent of these antislavery advocates following the publication of his The Impending Crisis of the South in 1857. In his book, Helper persuasively argued that Southern slavery had a detrimental economic impact on white non-slaveholders. Scholars today consider Helper’s work to be one of the most effective antislavery works of the nineteenth century and point to the distribution of 500 copies per day of the book by Horace Greely’s The New York Tribune—the most influential newspaper in the country—during the 1860 presidential campaign to show its influence.3

The appearance of Helper’s The Impending Crisis of the South in 1857 and the amplification of his work by The New York Tribune in 1860 prompted James D. B. De Bow to

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offer a counterargument that focused on the benefits of slavery for non-slaveholders and slaveholders alike. In “The Non-Slaveholders of the South,” De Bow, a statistician, political economist, and the editor of the leading Southern business magazine, *De Bow’s Review*, sought to rebut the arguments circulating about the economic unnecessity of slavery to Southern society.\(^4\) He used his authority as the Superintendent of the U.S. Census in 1850 to refute Helper’s attack on the institution directly and to speak to the financial gain that Southern white non-slaveholders incurred from slavery.\(^5\) Specifically, he outlined what he saw as the positive good brought about by the institution for the white non-slaveholders of the South in a letter intended to be published and shared across the country as a whole.\(^6\)

In early December 1860, The Presses of Evans & Cogswell, one of the South’s oldest and most prominent printing presses located in Charleston, South Carolina, reprinted De Bow’s work in pamphlet form.\(^7\) “The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder” included James De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” alongside Reverend Henry J. Van Dyke’s “The Character and Influence of Abolitionism.” The first fifteen pages of the pamphlet were allocated to De Bow’s letter, and the remaining fifteen pages contained a sermon written and delivered by Reverend Van Dyke to his congregation at the First Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, New York. Reinforcing many of the same arguments in favor of slavery, Van Dyke’s sermon acted as a corollary to De Bow’s letter. Evans & Cogswell did not record the exact number of copies of “The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder” but likely

\(^4\) Ottis Clark Skipper, "J. D. B. De Bow, the Man," *The Journal of Southern History* 10, no. 4 (1944).
\(^5\) Ibid, 404.
\(^6\) Debates over slavery spanned the whole United States. Proslavery advocates recognized the centrality of the debates to American discourse and sought to spread their arguments to Northern and Southern regions. See May Spencer Ringold, "Robert Newman Gourdin and the ‘1860 Association’," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 55, no. 4, 1971.
produced several hundred, as suggested by the debate sparked by the document in all corners of the country shortly following its publication.⁸

“The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder” (5.7” x 8.7”)

De Bow’s letter fueled the secession movement. As historian Ottis Skipper explains, De Bow “had no superior in the nation” and used his expertise “to accelerate [the movements of his

⁸ Proslavery and antislavery advocates across the country including reverends, politicians, and professors, among others, cited the pamphlet in their own works. De Bow republished a number of articles that engaged with his work in De Bow’s Review. See Skipper, “J. D. B. De Bow, the Man.”
Its widespread dissemination at the time and its ability to resonate with those seemingly far removed from the institution—in particular, the poor white non-slaveholders of the South—made it an influential text. As a result, De Bow’s work has been the product of significant historiographical attention. Historians examine “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” as a lens into proslavery advocates’ understanding of the virtues of the institution and emphasize the ways in which De Bow foreshadowed the eventual military conflict by engaging in an irreconcilable ideological debate with antislavery advocates.

Extant scholarship, however, has failed to consider the religious elements of De Bow’s proslavery argumentation. While religion played a more subtle role than economics and politics in De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South,” a close reading of his text reveals the centrality of religion to his defense. De Bow used many of the same religious tropes that Iveson Brookes did in “A Defence of Southern Slavery.” He described the institution as God-endowed and framed attempts to interfere with the continuation of slavery as impious. De Bow’s emphasis on the compatibility of Christianity and slavery stands out as remarkable. Previous economists who argued for slavery focused almost exclusively on the financial necessity of the institution and made few, if any, references to religion. In De Bow’s work, his use of religious rhetoric allowed him to frame the economic and social repercussions of emancipation as unholy and immoral, as Brookes had done in his own work. Drawing on religion, he argued against class feeling in the South and for the power of race unity. Ultimately, the integration of religion into De Bow’s proslavery argument allowed him both to spread maximum fear about the effect of

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9 Ibid, 423.
emancipation on Southern society and also to cultivate Southern white unity in defense of slavery.

This chapter highlights the importance of the previously-unexplored religious elements of De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South.” To do so, the chapter begins by placing De Bow’s work in the context of the secession movement of 1860. The chapter then moves into a discussion of the religious components that undergird De Bow’s work. Through a comparison of De Bow to earlier proslavery pamphlet writers, this chapter tracks the role of religion in the development of the dominant line of proslavery ideology that emerged in the 1850s. De Bow utilized many of the same religious principles that other Christian proslavery advocates previously had. Although the language of the pamphlet itself may seem unremarkable, the fact that an economist and statistician like De Bow felt compelled to infuse his letter with a religious underpinning reveals the critical importance of Christianity in the ideological war over slavery that took place in pamphlet literature before the shooting commenced in April of 1861. Next, the chapter examines the ways in which De Bow strategically emphasized the financial and social implications of slavery to bolster his proslavery argument and to encourage Christian white sectionalism. A careful consideration of the wide-ranging discursive elements of De Bow’s multifaceted defense of slavery will help to explain the ways in which his text aided the secession movement. Ultimately, De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” supported the development of a proslavery ideology that could resonate with the white Southern population as a whole.

De Bow in the Secession Movement of 1860-1861

De Bow aligned his own work with the goals of his secessionist allies in South Carolina, a state renowned for being a flourishing intellectual hub. De Bow originally wrote “The Non-
Slaveholders of the South” as a letter addressed to Robert Gourdin, the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the 1860 Association. Historian Mary Ringold examined the founding documents of the 1860 Association, a political club founded in South Carolina in that very year. She discerned that the 1860 Association sought “vigilance against reaction from within and efforts to conciliate from the North; preparation, printing, and distribution of literature on critical issues; and an [inquiry] into state defenses.” A geographically-diverse group of Southern intellectuals concerned for the future of the country wrote to Gourdin and showed their support for the association by contributing money, volunteering their time, and—most notably—penning pamphlet literature. Such individuals included John M. Richardson who shared his hope that proslavery pamphlets would ignite his fellow Georgians to join the secession movement, and North Carolina Governor John Ellis who made the following promise in a letter to Gourdin: “I will do all in my power to second your efforts to disseminate information among the people on questions affecting their liberties.” The widespread circulation of correspondence between various intellectuals and the 1860 Association highlights the support for the secessionist movement created by what Ringold referred to as “the long arm of the 1860 Association.” Rather than for private correspondence between two proslavery thinkers, De Bow’s letter to Robert Gourdin was intended to be a part of the movement started by the 1860 Association to spur support for secession among white Southerners at a critical time for the country. Several

12 John W. Ellis to Robert Gourdin, quoted in May Spencer Ringold, "Robert Newman Gourdin and the "1860 Association".”
14 Ibid, 504.
15 Ibid, 506.
16 Ibid, 504.
pamphlets written by well-respected Southern intellectuals spread widely throughout the country during the secession movement of 1860 and 1861.

De Bow’s work was an especially significant piece of the greater body of proslavery literature given its ability to refute Helper directly. Helper’s work used 1850 Census statistics to argue:

The causes which have impeded the progress of the South, which have dwindled our commerce,...sunk a large majority of our people in galling poverty and ignorance, rendered a small minority conceited and tyrannical, and driven the rest away from their homes...and brought us under reproach in the eyes of all civilized and enlightened nations--may all be traced to one common source…—Slavery!  

The extent to which Helper’s The Impending Crisis of the South gained traction among Southern white non-slaveholders remains unknown, but proslavery advocates perceived his work as a legitimate threat to the continuation of the institution. Those found in possession of the book were arrested, and hundreds of copies were publicly burned. In direct response to Helper, De Bow stated his objective in “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” to refute “the infamous libels which the common enemies of the South have circulated against [non-slaveholders].” De Bow shared in many proslavery advocates’ fear of Helper’s work and sought to diminish any ability for the text to resonate with Southern society. The actions taken to quiet Helper’s voice revealed that proslavery advocates worried about the consequences of intra-racial hostility among Southern whites.

In The Impending Crisis of the South, Helper argued that class feeling in the South trumped intra-racial unity; in doing so, he sought to fracture white unity in defense of slavery.

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Helper insisted that slavery *only* benefitted the wealthy elite who owned slaves and that slave owners looked out for their own economic interests rather than those of the white population as a whole. He argued, “The lords of the lash are not only absolute masters of the blacks...but they are also the oracles and arbiters of all non-slaveholding whites, whose freedom is merely nominal, and whose unparalleled illiteracy and degradation is purposely and fiendishly perpetuated.”

Here, Helper argued that the Southern white non-slaveholders suffered alongside black enslaved individuals under slavery. In Helper’s mind, the lack of economic freedom and the lower intellectual capacity of illiterate poor Southern whites characterized that suffering. Helper identified slaveholders as the culprits responsible for perpetuating the unfavorable conditions of non-slaveholding whites in the South. This dynamic led him to question why non-slaveholding Southern whites should support the wealthy class of slaveholders who maintained their degradation. Instead, he advised that non-slaveholding whites should look out for themselves in the way that slaveholding whites do for themselves. Helper encouraged poor whites to seek “retribution against the treacherous, slavedriving legislators, who have so basely and unpatriotically neglected the interests of their poor white constituents and bargained away the rights of prosperity.” Ultimately, Helper sought to cultivate intra-racial hostility among Southern whites.

The intended audience of “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” showed De Bow’s recognition of the importance of uniting Southern whites. De Bow characterized the people he intended to reach: “The non-slaveholders are either urban or rural, including among the former the merchants, traders, mechanics, laborers, and other classes in the towns and cities; and among the latter, the tillers of the soil, in sections where slave property either could or could not be

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profitably employed.”22 Such individuals comprised a significant majority of the Southern white population. In fact, approximately three in four white Southerners did not own slaves in 1860.23 While the majority of proslavery literature produced at the time focused on the economic and social benefits of slavery for those who owned slaves, De Bow addressed himself to the large population of white non-slaveholders who lived and worked in the South. The choice to write to these individuals represented an attempt to spur white unity in defense of slavery. He overtly stated his intention, stating his desire “to influence the non-slaveholders, if the claims of patriotism were inadequate to resist any attempt to overthrow the institutions and industry of the section to which they belong.”24 In his letter, De Bow recognized the numerical significance of the white non-slaveholding population in the South and wanted to ensure their commitment to the institution in the event of a sectional conflict.

In short, De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” intended to convince the white Southern male population as a whole to defend slavery. He complimented the white non-slaveholder several times throughout the letter, referring to him as “a companion and an equal” to slaveholding individuals.25 In doing so, De Bow attempted to overcome any class feeling in the Antebellum South. Indeed, his message aligned with other prominent political figures who had come before him, including Colonel Richard Menton Johnson. Following a trip to Washington in 1820, Johnson had expressed his surprise and confusion to see white men in the role of servants to Northern congressmen. Johnson explained how, unlike in the North, “All white men [in the South] are on an equality; and every citizen feels his independence. We have

22 De Bow, “The Non-Slaveholders of the South,” 5.
no classes - no patrician or plebian rank.”26 He had claimed that a respect for those with white skin, regardless of economic status, existed in Southern society. In Johnson’s mind, whiteness overcame class differences, uniting all white people in Southern society. Like Johnson, De Bow insisted that slavery created a brotherhood of whites whose interests were aligned in spite of their different slaveholding statuses. If white non-slaveholders joined the proslavery movement, De Bow believed, “opulence would be diffused throughout all classes, and we should become the freest, the happiest, and the most prosperous and powerful nation upon the earth.”27 He saw white unity as mutually benefitting both slaveholders and non-slaveholders. By focusing on class feeling derived from white unity instead of the personal economic benefits derived from slavery, De Bow sought to unite all white Southerners in defense of slavery. Ultimately, while he specifically addressed non-slaveholders, De Bow spoke to both those who did not own slaves as well as those who did by highlighting the importance of white unity. The undertones of De Bow’s letter urged slaveholders to respect and cultivate a sense of white loyalty from non-slaveholding individuals in order to create a unified defense of the institution.

Religion in De Bow’s Proslavery Argument

De Bow weaponized religion in the ideological fight against antislavery advocates. He directly referenced “God” three times throughout his letter.28 His work spoke both to the devoutness of support for slavery and also the impiousness of abolitionists and of free societies seven times in his text. While De Bow’s pamphlet did not employ religion to the extent that Iveson Brookes did in “A Defence of Southern Slavery,” De Bow utilized many of the same

27 De Bow, “The Non-Slaveholders of the South,” 12.
28 Ibid, 4, 6, 7.
Like Brookes, De Bow viewed slavery as being ordained by God and, therefore, being imbued with a higher power. The very existence of the institution in itself provided justification for its continuation. He advised that the Southern white non-slaveholders should “be thankful that God has reserved them for a better fate” than the whites in the North and in Europe.29 Here, De Bow insisted that slavery was the fulfilled destiny of Southern society. Interestingly, De Bow showed disunity within the white population as a whole in his effort to instill solidarity among whites in the Antebellum South. He purported that God established differences between the whites in the South and those in other parts of the country and the world. In doing so, he suggested that white Southerners were deserving of the economic and social benefits they enjoyed as a byproduct of the institution, given their birth into a slave society created by a higher power.

Further, De Bow sought to show the impious nature of antislavery advocates. Similarly to Brookes who characterized abolitionists as “enemies of God,” De Bow referred to the abolitionist movement as an “attempt to reverse the laws which God has ordained.”30 In stark juxtaposition, De Bow described the support that the Southern non-slaveholders provided to the proslavery movement as devout. He wrote, “Upon the sure testimony of God’s Holy Book, and upon the principles of universal polity, [non-slaveholders] have defended and justified the institution!”31 By upholding the institution that God had created, Southern white non-

29 Ibid, 7.
31 Ibid, 6.
slaveholders served as faithful and devout servants to God. De Bow sought to spur outrage toward the abolitionists’ unholy interference in the fate of white Southerners.

In addition to highlighting the religiosity inherent in non-slaveholders joining the proslavery movement, De Bow underscored the impiety of the North to justify his defense of the institution. He wrote, “Adhering to the simple truths of the Gospel, and the faith of their fathers, [non-slaveholders] have not run hither and thither in search of all the absurd and degrading isms which have sprung up in the rank soil of infidelity. They are not Mormons or Spiritualists; they are not Owenites, Fourierites, Agrarians, Socialists, Freelovers, or Millerites.”

The language used to characterize the various political ideologies and religious movements popping up in the free Northern society—“absurd,” “degrading,” and “infidelity”—suggested De Bow’s disgust with the religious impurity of the free North. Highlighting his own repugnance served a productive purpose. Through his critique of the religious impurity that wreaked havoc in the North, he suggested what disastrous consequences a free society would have on religion in the South. The prospect of religious impurity would undoubtedly have struck fear in the minds of Southern white non-slaveholders. In his analysis on “the Christian South,” historian Donald Mathews discerned, “Evangelical Protestantism in the Old South enabled a rising lower-middle/middle class to achieve identity and solidarity, rewarding its most committed religious devotees with a sense of personal esteem and liberty.” The loss of religion would disrupt the sense of stability that Christianity provided for the lower classes of white Southerners. De Bow sent the message to white Southerners that the continuation slavery was critical to maintaining a Christian South.

33 Ibid.
A close analysis of the role of religion in De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” lends further support for John Patrick Daly’s analysis in *When Slavery Was Called Freedom* of how religion factored into proslavery ideology. Daly offers the following analysis:

By 1860, evangelical proslavery had popularized the South’s unique fidelity to the Bible and the founding faith of the nation. The Bible supported slaveholding; God supported the South. The formula was clear. Right made might. The South had to triumph. The region constituted a righteous remnant that would receive the blessings of Providence as it alone carried the uncorrupted truths of pure religion and constitutional liberty into a glorious proslavery future.35

While De Bow did not emphasize a traditional evangelical proslavery thrust and focused most heavily on the economic and social implications of slavery, he nonetheless incorporated this exact religious message into his defense. Advocates for slavery’s perpetuation, De Bow included, recognized the importance of using religion to emphasize the ethicality of the institution. Historian Larry Morrison describes, “The foundation upon which the slaveholding ethic and the proslavery argument was built was the scriptural defense of slavery. Nearly every proslavery pamphlet, or article, or speaker made at least some reference to a biblical sanction of slavery.”36 De Bow made a concerted effort to show the way in which non-slaveholders could carry out God’s work by making every effort to uphold His creation.

Reading De Bow’s letter as part of a longer intellectual history reveals the increasing importance of Christianity in proslavery ideology in the decade preceding the Civil War. Notably, De Bow’s articulation of a primarily economic defense of slavery emphasized Christianity in a way that previous economists who argued for slavery had overwhelmingly not. In the 1830s and 1840s, economists including Thomas Roderick Dew, James Henry Hammond,

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Nathaniel Beverly Tucker, and George Frederick Holmes offered professional opinions on the financial implications of slavery. These individuals made few, if any, references to religion in their own works. Even De Bow himself had previously refrained from incorporating any nods to religion in his numerous commentaries on slavery in *De Bow’s Review*. Ultimately, it seems as though De Bow recognized the power of religion and strategically incorporated religious rhetoric into his defense of the institution in an effort to appeal to the majority of white Southerners who were pious but did directly benefit economically from slave labor.

*The Amplification of De Bow’s Religious Message*

The publication of De Bow’s letter alongside Reverend Van Dyke’s “The Character and Influence of Abolitionism” in pamphlet form appeared to be an intentional choice by the 1860 Association both to spur further support for secession and also to use religion to deepen the authority of the proslavery ideology. Publishers of the pamphlet in South Carolina sought allies in the North and likely believed that including the work of a Northern preacher, Reverend Van Dyke, would help them to accomplish their goal of receiving validation on both sides of the North-South divide. A religious defense of slavery from a well-respected preacher could resonate with Northerners, who profited neither economically nor socially from an institution in the South, in a way that De Bow’s argument could not. In his speech given to the First Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn, Van Dyke explicitly stated his goal as to leave no room for misinterpretation: “I am here tonight, in God’s name, and by His help, to show that this tree of

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38 This conclusion arose from my own intensive study of the University of Michigan’s digital archives of *De Bow’s Review*. See *De Bow’s Review, 1845-1862*, Making of America Journals, University of Michigan Archives and Special Collections, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
abolitionism is evil and only evil, root and branch, flower and leaf and fruit; that it springs from and is nourished by an utter rejection of the Scriptures.” 39 He directly cited eight different Bible passages to support his conclusion regarding the nature of abolitionism and to show the foundation for his criticism in scripture. 40 In a markedly similar fashion to De Bow, Van Dyke framed slavery as God-endowed and abolition as impious. This chapter will not analyze in depth the extracts from Van Dyke’s speech because of its primary focus on De Bow’s defense of slavery. The side-by-side publication of De Bow and Van Dyke, however, was no accident. The 1860 Association clearly hoped that this pairing would have a significant impact on the audience of the pamphlet by amplifying the religious message presented in the undertones of De Bow’s letter.

De Bow’s Economic Defense of Slavery

In his efforts to encourage Christian white sectionalism, De Bow used his expertise as Superintendent of the U.S. Census in 1850 to counter Helper’s analysis of the 1850 census data in The Impending Crisis of the South. De Bow began his letter by stating his intention to offer “considerations affecting the question of slavery in its application to the several classes of population at the South, and especially to the non-slaveholding class who...were even more deeply interested than any other in the maintenance of our institutions.” 41 The rest of De Bow’s letter sought to provide evidence to support his bold opening claim that non-slaveholders held more stake in the institution than the slaveholders who reaped tremendous wealth from unpaid

41 De Bow, “The Non-Slaveholders of the South,” 1.
labor. He argued, “Without the institution of slavery, the great staple products of the South would cease to be grown, and the immense annual results which are distributed among every class of the community, and which give life to every branch of industry, would cease.”

Essentially, De Bow conjectured that the Southern economy would collapse without slavery, and non-slaveholders who tangentially benefitted from the institution—for example, merchants who sold goods produced by slaves and mechanics who worked to produce machinery for use on slave plantations, among others—would be left in significantly worse financial situations. De Bow’s argument implied that plantations would not be viable without slaves. He imagined no system in which poor white or freed black laborers could substitute for slave labor. He used the supposed impoverishment of the West Indies following emancipation from Britain as an example of the price associated with the abolishment of such a profitable and economically stable institution. De Bow alluded to the detrimental financial impact that abolition would have on Southern society as a whole to persuade his readers of the relative benefit of slavery for the white non-slaveholder.

Not only did De Bow insist that the entirety of the Southern economy depended on the stability provided by slave labor, but also he argued that the structure of the Southern economy led to greater aggregate wealth for the non-slaveholding population than the free Northern society did for working-class whites. He included a table provided by Tennessee Senator Andrew Johnson comparing the relative salaries in the slave and free states for identical professions. This table’s inclusion was an effort to show that the “non-slaveholder of the South is assured that the remuneration afforded by his labor, over and above the expense of living, is larger than that

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42 Ibid, 10.
43 Ibid, 5.
44 Ibid.
which is afforded by the same labor in the free States." The chart revealed that the daily wages of a bricklayer, carpenter, and laborer in New Orleans, Charleston, and Nashville exceeded those in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Toronto. Additionally, he offered a comparison of the value of foreign exports in 1859 brought about by Southern slave labor—$242,105,457—with the amount contributed from the Northern industrialists—$34,501,096—to demonstrate the productivity of the slave economy. He argued, “The world furnishes no instances of these products being grown upon a large scale by free labor.” Given the centrality of slavery to the economy of the South as a whole, De Bow insisted that abolition would lead to a decline in economic productivity for both slaveholders and non-slaveholders. Ultimately, De Bow maintained that the Southern slave economy led to a larger and more prosperous middle class than the Northern free economy did.

De Bow also insisted that the slave economy improved the quality of jobs for poor non-slaveholding Southern whites and offered less competition among the working class than was the case in regions of the United States where slavery did not exist. De Bow, alongside other proslavery advocates, believed that the industrial-based society in the North resulted in a lower quality of life for the working class. By contrast, the non-slaveholders of the agrarian South “have but to compare their condition, in this particular, with the mining and manufacturing operatives in the North” to support this conclusion. Not only did he commend the quality of jobs for poor whites in a slave economy based on agricultural production, but also he embraced the commonly-held belief that the Southern slave economy led to less competition with

46 Ibid, 10.
48 In his other De Bow’s Review articles, De Bow repeatedly referred to parliamentary studies of child labor in factories and mines in the North completed in early 19th century to criticize the conditions of an industrial economy.
immigrant labor than the Northern free economy. De Bow asserted that, “From whatever cause it has happened, whether from climate, the nature of our products, or of our labor, the South has been enabled to maintain a more homogeneous population, and show a less admixture of races, than the North.”\textsuperscript{49} He boasted that Southern states possessed 1.86 “foreigners” for every 100 “natives,” whereas the population of the Mid-Atlantic states and the Midwestern states possessed 12.65 and 19.84 “foreigners” per 100 “natives,” respectively.\textsuperscript{50} In sum, De Bow credited the structure of the slave economy in the South with successfully maintaining a homogenous white population.

In his economic defense, De Bow also emphasized the socioeconomic mobility for poor white Southerners made possible by slavery. In this assertion, he was correct.\textsuperscript{51} He underscored the potential for whites to improve their class status. De Bow pointed to the reality that half of the total rural populations of Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina were slaveholders to prove the dispersal of slaveholding across the South’s population.\textsuperscript{52} These numbers were clearly intended to signify the benefit of the institution to a large number of people. Further, he noted that half of the slaves in the South were owned by small slaveholders.\textsuperscript{53} De Bow used this metric to refute the idea being pushed by antislavery advocates that Southern slavery was an organized, wealthy aristocracy. He explained how non-slaveholders could become slaveholders over the course of a single generation: “Cheap lands, abundant harvest, high prices give the poor man soon a negro. His ten bails of cotton bring him another. A second crop increases his purchases, and so he goes on opening land and adding labor, until a few years his draft for $20,000 on his

\textsuperscript{49} De Bow, “The Non-Slaveholders of the South,” 8.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Slavery in the Antebellum South existed as the most diffuse slaveholding institution in terms of ownership in the history of the world. See Jay R. Carlander and W. Elliot Brownlee, “Antebellum Southern Political Economists and the Problem of Slavery,” \textit{American Nineteenth Century History} 7, no. 3 (2006).
\textsuperscript{52} De Bow, “The Non-Slaveholders of the South,” 9.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
merchant becomes a marketable commodity.” Rather than reserving wealth for the slaveholding elite, slavery provided a means of economic mobility for all white Southerners, De Bow insisted. Measuring status by landholding and slaveholding, he pointed to the model of aspiration for white non-slaveholders: “It is within my knowledge that a plantation of fifty or sixty persons has been established from the descendants of a single female in the course of a lifetime of the original purchaser.” De Bow disturbingly refers to the female slave as an instrument of reproduction and as a means of procuring wealth. The central preoccupation of De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” was to refute Helper’s critique of slavery as economically detrimental to the non-slaveholding population. He did so, in part, by attempting to convince the Southern white non-slaveholders of their potential to reap the economic benefits of the institution in the foreseeable future.

De Bow’s Social Defense of Slavery

Alongside his discussion of the positive economic consequences of slavery, De Bow described slavery as the perfect social structure for Southern society. De Bow’s wholehearted embrace of the widespread belief in the inequality of the races and his utilization of the rampant racism of the South to justify slavery were critical in his attempts to glorify the institution.

De Bow subscribed to the deeply-ingrained belief in racial inequality that allowed him, alongside all proslavery advocates, to justify the enslavement of black people. The shameless racism that stood as a fundamental premise of all proslavery arguments across the country in the mid-nineteenth century stood as the forefront of De Bow’s defense of the institution as well. Throughout his letter, De Bow continually insisted on the inequality of the races. De Bow argued

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
that the white man’s “blood revolts against [slave labor],” whereas blacks were fit to serve as lifelong slaves.\textsuperscript{56} Like Iveson Brookes, he suggested that there was a biological reason for racial difference between white and black people. De Bow insisted that even the poorest of the poor Southern whites who engaged in agricultural labor on cane, tobacco, cotton, and rice fields were genetically different from blacks. Even though these individuals carried out the same work and, at times, worked alongside one another, “the [white] non-slaveholder cheerfully retires when the occasion offers, his physical organization refusing to endure that exposure to tropical suns and fatal miasmas which are alone the condition of profitable culture.”\textsuperscript{57} Here, he showed a recognition of the economic diversity of the Antebellum South. Whereas Helper sought to fracture Southern white unity based on class differences, De Bow saw whiteness as a factor that united the white population regardless of economic status. De Bow attempted to frame the color of one’s skin as a factor that connected members of the Southern population despite their drastically varying financial situations.

Notably, unlike Brookes who emphasized the paternalistic nature of slavery throughout his letters, De Bow showed no recognition of black slaves as human beings in his text. De Bow solely focused on the slave as a “commodity” that could be exploited for profit.\textsuperscript{58} He felt no need to assuage moral concerns among Southern white non-slaveholders toward the exploitation of unpaid labor and the malicious treatment of black enslaved individuals. This represents a divergence from the majority of proslavery literature produced in the 1850s and early 1860s that heavily emphasized the paternalistic nature of slavery and sought to show how the institution operated beneficially in the lives of its chief subject. The omission of this paternalistic sentiment

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 5.  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 10.
in De Bow’s work seems to be explained by the context in which he penned his proslavery pamphlet literature. Specifically, De Bow wrote in response to Hinton Rowan Helper’s *The Impending Crisis of the South*. Helper stated his goal to write “not with reference, except in a very slight degree, to [slavery’s] humanitarian or religious aspects.” Helper deemed such a “sentimental or moralistic” abolitionist approach to be “ineffectual.” Instead, Helper argued that slavery degraded poor whites and only economically and socially benefitted the slaveholding elite. De Bow likely did not engage with the effects of the institution on the enslaved given that the work that he responded to also paid no attention to such consequences.

Instead, De Bow focused on the social implications of slavery on the Southern white non-slaveholder. To define the stake that white non-slaveholders held in slavery, De Bow shared his fear of the white degradation that would occur from the emancipation of black slaves. He offered a comparison of the North and South to substantiate his fear. Whereas “in Northern communities, where the free negro is one in a hundred of the total population, he is recognized and acknowledged often as a pest, and in many cases even his presence is prohibited by law,” black enslaved people comprised nearly half of the population of the South as a whole and, he went on, even constituted an overwhelming majority in certain major slaveholding areas. In Charleston and New Orleans, for example, black enslaved people outnumbered whites by 20:1 and 100:1 respectively. De Bow illustrated a dystopian world that would be created by emancipation. The wealthy slaveholders would emigrate to “escape the degrading equality which must result,” and non-slaveholders “would be compelled to remain and endure the degradation” associated with

59 Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South*, 3.
60 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
living alongside the black population as equals. “Low as would this class of people sink by emancipation in idleness, superstition, and vice, the white man compelled to live among them would, by the power exerted over him, sink even lower, unless, as is to be supposed, he would prefer to suffer death instead,” De Bow predicted. Slavery provided a social safety net for non-slaveholding white Southerners, and abolition threatened to remove that security. A life lived in a free society in which racial equality was enshrined by law was a life not worth living in the eyes of De Bow. Further, he spoke to the “disease and death” that would plague the impoverished white population in the case of emancipation. In effect, whites would be forced to live like slaves. De Bow argued vehemently that the white non-slaveholders of the South would pay the steep price of social degradation if emancipation occurred.

In his letter, De Bow embraced the common and widespread belief in racial inequality and used that sentiment as a primary justification for the continuation of the institution; such an argument had the potential to register with white Southerners regardless of class status. Historian Charles Dew provides an apt framework for understanding the notion of white superiority that structured Southern society and that permeated De Bow’s letter. He explained, “if you possessed a white skin, there was a floor below which you could not sink as a white person in the South. No matter how poor you were, four million black people would always be beneath you on the social ladder.” De Bow’s message recognized that Southern white society unconditionally embraced the idea of racial difference and measured class status based on the color of one’s skin. He did not acknowledge the existence of any intra-racial animosity brewed under the surface of Southern society as a result of financial disparities among slaveholding and non-slaveholding

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid, 6.
66 Charles Dew (Ephraim Williams Professor of American History) in discussion with the author, August 2021.
whites. Perhaps he saw the reality of Southern society for what it was: as historian Harry Watson explains, “Despite the importance of class tensions in southern politics, yeoman resentment of planter villages almost never led to direct assaults on slavery itself” and that “most non-slaveholders supported the Confederacy.” Operating under the seemingly correct assumption that race trumped class in Southern society, De Bow utilized racial inequality to spur white sectionalism.

*Following the Pamphlet's Publication*

De Bow’s pamphlet almost certainly aided the secession movement. Intellectual engagement with De Bow’s work reveals that his ideas possessed a reach far beyond South Carolina. Members of the 1860 Association amplified his message by spreading copies in all parts of the country and by citing De Bow’s work in their own proslavery arguments. Shortly following the publication of “The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder,” South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union on December 20, 1860. Almost immediately, six other states—Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas—followed suit. Ultimately, despite attempts made by abolitionists to fragment Southern white support for slavery, the non-slaveholding class voted in significant numbers in support of secession. While the direct impact of the proslavery literature on the decision of non-slaveholders of the South to vote in support of secession can never be measured, the results of state secession elections revealed that sufficient white unity had been achieved in defense of slavery to carry seven Southern states on a secessionist tide that threatened to destroy the Union.

69 Ibid.
In the following months, De Bow, recognizing the popularity of his own work, sought to utilize his letter as a means of increasing support for the secession movement. He republished his letter in January 1861 in his commercial magazine, *De Bow’s Review*. Based in New Orleans, *De Bow’s Review* had the largest audience of any Southern magazine beginning with its publication in 1845. The publication of “The Non-Slaveholders of the South” in his magazine represented a divergence from the content of his previous articles. In its fifteen years of operation, *De Bow’s Review* focused almost entirely on maximizing profit for slaveholders. For example, he sought to answer questions such as “Can cotton-seed oil or rosin be manufactured with advantage in Alabama?” Not only did De Bow’s latest article differ by addressing itself to the non-slaveholders of the South, but it also struck religious cords that had been previously underplayed. De Bow did begin sporadically to include articles from contributing writers that possessed a religious focus. For example, he published a Mississippian’s “Slavery: The Bible and ‘Three Thousand Parsons’” in the January 1859 issue. De Bow himself, however, had remained silent on issues relating to religion in his own work. He recognized the potential to utilize the popularity of his magazine to support his political goals and published his letter in *De Bow’s Review* as a means of expanding support for secession throughout the Southern states that had yet to embrace pro-secession ideology fully.

In “The Non-Slaveholders of the South,” James De Bow addressed economic, geographic, and ideological differences across the diverse Antebellum South by writing to the white Southern non-slaveholder. His work intentionally minimized serious differences that

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70 Skipper, “J. D. B. De Bow, the Man.”
71 *De Bow’s Review*, 1845-1862, Making of America Journals, University of Michigan Archives and Special Collections, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
72 James D. B. De Bow, “Can cotton-seed oil or rosin be manufactured with advantage in Alabama?,” *De Bow’s Review* 27, issue 2, August 1859.
73 A Mississippian “Slavery: The Bible and ‘Three Thousand Parsons’,” *De Bow’s Review* 26, issue 1, January 1859.
existed. Instead, he offered a view of slavery as a beneficial institution for *all* whites regardless of slaveholding status. Such a view had the power, he hoped, to unite the white population. Religion played a notable role in providing a moral veneer to his defense of slavery, and its impact should not be overlooked. The success of the secession movement revealed how proslavery ideology that argued against class difference and for white racial unity infiltrated Southern minds. An analysis of the dominant proslavery ideology in 1860 helps us understand the contours of the racism that defined the South in this period and, ultimately, the white supremacist heart of Southern society that continued to beat even after the abolition of slavery.
CHAPTER III

The Power of Religious Secessionist Argumentation:
Bishop Palmer’s Radical Integration of Religion with Politics (1860)

The proslavery arguments of Iveson Brookes and James De Bow are representative of the irreconcilable ideological wars over the continuation of slavery that were waged throughout the 1850s.\(^1\) While proslavery advocates attempted to convince the public of the integral nature of slavery to the economic, political, and social stability of the South, antislavery proponents sought to highlight the ways in which slavery was fundamentally incompatible with American ideals. “The battle of the minds preceded the battle of the bullets,”\(^2\) one historian has written, and such hostility over the slavery question primed the country for the eruption of military conflict.

Tensions continued to mount between these incongruous stances over slavery, and the election of President Abraham Lincoln on November 6, 1860, pushed these ideological debates to a critical impasse. Would the South, in essence, submit to defeat and accept the antislavery presidency that they believed Lincoln had promised or choose to secede from the Union and fight to maintain the institution at the core of Southern society?

As states across the South prepared for secession, Louisiana confronted this question. Uncertainty plagued the state.\(^3\) Some Louisianans insisted that Congress would prevent Lincoln from impeding on Southern measures, while others saw no other path forward and mobilized militarily for immediate secession.\(^4\) In the wake of Lincoln’s Republican election, Louisiana had an important decision to make as to the future of its involvement in the Union.

\(^1\) See Chapters 1 & 2 for further discussion.
\(^4\) Ibid.
Recognizing the incomplete support for secession within Louisiana in the weeks following Lincoln’s election, Bishop Benjamin Morgan Palmer entered the political debates over slavery for the first time in his career as a minister. He delivered his 1860 Thanksgiving Day sermon, titled “The South, Her Peril, and her Duty,” at the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans on November 29, 1860. In his sermon, Palmer passionately argued for secession on
religious grounds and sought to show the biblical support of slavery. He utilized his position as a respected Presbyterian minister to try to influence his community to join the secession movement.

Bishop Palmer seems to have succeeded in his efforts to unite his congregation in support of secession, and his impact did not end there. Immediately following the delivery of his ideas to his congregation in that sermon, New Orleans joined the secession movement. Historian Haskell Monroe describes the immediate aftermath of Palmer’s speech: “The drums beat and the bugles sounded; for New Orleans was shouting for secession.” Pro-secession advocates realized the extraordinary influence of Palmer’s war cry in Louisiana, and printing presses furiously began reproducing Palmer’s sixteen-page sermon in pamphlet form for distribution across the South. Tens of thousands of copies of the pamphlet were printed in Louisiana and its surrounding states in the following months. His sermon transformed Palmer into a secessionist icon overnight and captured the attention of Unionists and Confederates alike.

A dramatic shift was occurring in late 1860 in the mindset of vast numbers of white Southerners across several states that led them to join the fight for disunion. Any former hesitation these Southerners had held toward secession seemed to dissolve. Palmer’s sermon played a critical role in this process. This chapter argues that his sermon—a presentation of the secession argument that framed Southerners’ duty to uphold slavery and support disunion as religious obligations— influenced his community and other Southern states to join the secession movement.

5 Unknown writer to Thomas Cary Johnson, June 9, 1904, Johnson Papers, 219-20, quoted in Monroe, “Bishop Morgan Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address.”
To make this argument, this chapter begins with a discussion of Palmer as a religious figure turned political, before placing him in the historical context of Louisiana. The chapter then offers a close analysis of Palmer’s sermon and situates his work on a longer historical continuum of religious-based proslavery and pro-secession argumentation. Indeed, the majority of Palmer’s sentiments had been expressed previously. The relative success of Palmer’s sermon to influence the minds of white Southerners, however, highlights the importance of the particular context and manner in which Palmer articulated those ideas. Given the popularity of Palmer’s work in the South and its prominence in the country as a whole, a tremendous amount of scholarship exists that focuses on Palmer, and historians continue to study his contributions to the mobilization of Southern whites in the secession movement of 1860-1861. This chapter will engage with the works of previous scholars who have analyzed the religious presentation of his secessionist ideology, including Haskell Monroe, Thomas Cary Johnson, and John Wakylen. These individuals are foremost scholars on the history of the Antebellum South who lend their expertise to numerous journals that seek to understand better the society in which white Southerners lived. The chapter concludes by studying the impact of Palmer’s religious-based proslavery argument on the country as a whole.

Bishop Benjamin Morgan Palmer: A Minister Turned Politician

Born in South Carolina in 1818, Bishop Benjamin Morgan Palmer sprang from “a strong Southern heritage” and was “a true son of South Carolina, with the virtues and faults of that civilization,” as historian Haskell Monroe aptly describes.7 Palmer, an exceptional student,

7 Monroe, “Bishop Morgan Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address,” 105.
followed in the footsteps of his father and uncle who were both members of the clergy. He pursued a conservative education at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. At the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Palmer studied under Reverend Dr. James Henley Thornwell, the President of the College of South Carolina, the moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly, and a man who was widely considered to be the most influential Presbyterian minister in the nineteenth-century Antebellum South. Thornwell instilled “the Old School Presbyterian ways” in Palmer. This line of religious thought included the Regulative Principle of Worship (the idea that a strict reading and following of scripture should order a follower’s faith, religious practice, and life); the belief in Presbyterianism as the only form of church polity that the Bible teaches; the full subscription of the ordained to their church; the adherence to spirituality over social, economic, and political pursuits; and the efforts to foster genuine biblical revival. Recognizing Palmer’s extraordinary embodiment of these principles as well as his “brilliant oratorical abilities,” Thornwell selected Palmer to succeed him as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in the capital city of South Carolina. Thornwell’s professional guidance and close friendship impacted Palmer and opened opportunities for Palmer to succeed as a minister.

From 1843 to 1855, Palmer established himself as an accomplished theologian and mastered the Old School Presbyterian ways. Thornwell and Palmer co-founded the Southern

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9 Ibid.


14 Ibid, 308.

15 Ibid.
Presbyterian Review during this time, “a journal that became a leading orthodox and extreme sectionalist publication,” in the words of historian John Wakelyn.\textsuperscript{16} Through his roles as editor and regular contributing writer to this publication, Palmer developed his ability to articulate the way in which religion underpinned his political beliefs. His success at the pulpit in South Carolina and in his publications attracted prestigious offers to teach at other conservative congregations all across the country, including in Cincinnati and Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{17} Early on in his career, Palmer had clearly established his reputation. In 1856, he accepted a position as the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, where he forged his own legacy as a foremost Christian preacher.\textsuperscript{18} In these years, he became a prominent figure, a recognized moral leader who supported secession, and a Presbyterian who preached his politics from the pulpit.\textsuperscript{19} The scholars who closely study Palmer attribute his professional success to his religious upbringing, his association with Thornwell, his skills as an orator, and his strict adherence to Old School Presbyterianism throughout his career.\textsuperscript{20}

Throughout the late 1850s, Palmer’s First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans saw a significant influx in following.\textsuperscript{21} In the four years following Palmer’s arrival in Louisiana, the growth of the church to 500 members made the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans the third largest congregation in the South.\textsuperscript{22} His audience was not limited solely to the members of his congregation. White Southerners unaffiliated with the church also travelled to New Orleans to hear Palmer speak. He “preached regularly to hundreds who were not members of his own

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} These scholars include Jon Wakelyn, “Benjamin Morgan Palmer”(2013); Timothy Reilly, “Benjamin M. Palmer: Secessionist Become Nationalist”(1977); and Thomas Cary Johnson, Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1988).
\textsuperscript{21} Monroe, “Bishop Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address,” 105.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
flock, for travelers in New Orleans crowned his sanctuary,” according to historian Haskell Monroe. Both his audience and his reputation grew over the four years from 1856 to 1860. Palmer’s sermons gained favorable attention throughout the South as a whole, and many of his parishioners believed his sermons to be the best that the region had to offer.

He regularly used his religious position to advocate for political and social reform. Perceiving what historian John Wakelyn described as the “encroachment of the national church on Southern interests,” Palmer pushed for the separation of the Southern Presbyterian Church from the national entity. Additionally, he led the movement of Presbyterian support for secession. In the same years that he embraced secession, Palmer started a new ministry that was focused on preaching directly to slaves and on addressing slaveholders, exhorting them to use less violent tactics toward slaves. The continuous growth of the congregation suggested that the early signs of his integration of politics with religion were well-received among Louisianans.

Reverend Palmer garnered national attention as a result of his speeches, and scholars identify him as “second to [Reverend James Henry Thornwell] in influence among Presbyterians in the South.” Notably, Palmer received numerous invitations to speak from congregations throughout the country as a whole, including to congregations in New York and New Jersey. As a respected religious figure, Palmer influenced individuals on both sides of the North-South divide even prior to the deliverance of his Thanksgiving Day sermon in 1860.

While Palmer had a significant following prior to the deliverance and subsequent publication in pamphlet form of his Thanksgiving Day sermon in 1860, his contributions to the

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23 Ibid, 106.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Monroe, “Bishop Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address,” 106.
28 Ibid.
debate over secession transformed him into a national icon. Prior to that time, Palmer had chosen mostly to remain a bystander to the political debates occurring throughout the region over secession. In late 1860, however, the perceived urgency of the moment propelled Palmer to step into the fray, and Palmer’s “ferocious advocacy” to show how religion supported secession established his stature as one of “the South’s staunchest patriots.”

From the voluminous responses to Palmer’s sermon, writer Nick Weldon surmised that “he went viral, in an 1860 sense.” Palmer became a sensation overnight following the publication of his sermon, and his ideas circulated widely across American society.

Over the two years following his Thanksgiving Day Sermon, Palmer put his experience as an orator to work as he preached secession and rallied support for the war effort. Starting as a fervent supporter of the secessionist cause in sermons delivered to several of the largest Southern cities and to Confederate soldiers, he continued to throw himself behind the Confederate government throughout the Civil War. Palmer’s notoriety can be seen in the trips that Northerners made following the Civil War to witness “the big villain at play” in New Orleans. Even Northerners who vehemently disagreed with Palmer’s radical secessionist ideology sought to understand the man who had drummed up significant support among the white Southern population for his beliefs. Palmer’s secessionist activity cemented his legacy as “the preeminent Confederate orator.”

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32 Ibid.
Palmer’s influence on the country stemmed from his gifts as an orator. As historian Stephen Haynes explains, “Palmer’s notoriety in New Orleans and the Old Southwest (the territories of the lower Mississippi River Valley) rested largely on his reputation as an expository preacher. Palmer’s reputation as a Southern churchman *par excellence* was established in his fire-eating sermons of 1860-61.” Palmer used his moral stature to propagate his political ideas.

*Louisiana in the Secession Movement*

An analysis of the political climate of Louisiana in 1860 is a key element in helping us understand Bishop Palmer’s contributions to the secessionist movement. Many white Southerners believed that—with Lincoln as president—slavery possessed an ambiguous future. The contentious presidential election of 1860 concluded with the victory of the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, over the Southern Democratic candidate, John Breckinridge; the Northern Democratic candidate, Stephen Douglas; and the Constitutional Union candidate, John Bell. Lincoln communicated his stance as a free soiler throughout his campaign, meaning he opposed the spread of slavery. The Deep South misinterpreted Lincoln to be a passionate supporter of abolition. Radicals argued that, unless Louisiana chose to secede from the Union, the continuation of slavery within the state was in jeopardy. The poor support in the polls for Breckinridge in Louisiana indicated that the state had yet to assume a strong stance on secession. It seems fair to argue that, had the possibility of a Lincoln victory and abolition been considered a serious concern among the majority of Louisianans, the vote would have swung more strongly in favor of Breckinridge, who had committed throughout his campaign “to defend the South.”

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
The other two presidential candidates in the race split the vote with Breckinridge in Louisiana: Stephen Douglas received a large minority of the votes, and John Bell possessed support among voters in New Orleans specifically.  

The election results indicated that Louisianans had reservations about seceding from the Union. The surprisingly high number of votes for Douglas and Bell—men who “hoped to bridge the widening gap between the sections”—suggested that Louisianans feared the potential social unrest that would follow secession. Many Louisianans also worried about the economic implications of secession, in contrast with Carolinians and Georgians who possessed no such hesitations toward immediate secession.

Recognizing the urgency of the moment, Palmer delivered his Thanksgiving Day sermon in New Orleans just days after the conclusion of the 1860 election; his sermon sought to create white Christian support for secession within Louisiana. Palmer, along with other secessionists, worried especially about slavery being abolished. Ultimately, the split vote among the three losing candidates—Breckinridge, Douglas, and Bell—constituted a major concern for secessionists who understood that the economic viability of the South depended on the support of New Orleans. Given the state’s geographic centrality, Louisiana’s choice to secede had the capacity to alter the trajectory of the secessionist movement, not only within the state but across the South as a whole. As President Lincoln prepared to take office, Bishop Palmer recognized the importance of the moment for the future of the country and sought to increase support for secession among the Southern white population in order to preserve the institution of slavery.

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40 Ibid, 108.
41 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
Palmer’s Addition to the Pro-Secession Movement

Bishop Palmer and his parishioners saw religion as a critical component of the proslavery argument; religion had the capacity to unite the Southern white population at-large. The widely-disseminated pamphlet that includes Palmer’s sermon begins with two letters addressed to the reverend signed by forty-one members of his congregation requesting that he publish his sermon in pamphlet form. His parishioners pleaded, “for the nation’s sake, that the opinions of a representative man may be read and pondered.”44 Clearly, these supporters deemed him to be the epitome of the pro-secession argument. These published letters not only signaled the deep support for his ideas but also the perceived urgency of the moment. These letter writers applauded his work as “squarely up to the occasion” to countering the attacks on slavery from abolitionists.45 His followers hoped that the presentation of Palmer’s sermon—which these men considered to be “eloquent” and “sound”—would influence how others understood the debate over slavery. They insisted that his sermon “should be read by every citizen of the United States.”46

The inclusion of the correspondence between Palmer and his congregation served as a means in itself of spurring support for secession. The request from Palmer’s followers signaled to readers of the pamphlet that Louisianans sympathized with his remarks. These men claimed that the sermon was not solely reflective of one man’s beliefs but rather representative of the

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid, 3.
“heart of [the] community.”47 Including the correspondence was a deliberate choice to demonstrate the support that existed for Palmer’s ideas.

Bishop Palmer agreed to reproduce his work in pamphlet form in the hopes of influencing Southerners beyond his congregation. Bishop Palmer began by offering a brief response to the requests from his followers: “That two communications should be received from different sources, requesting my discourse of this day for publication, is sufficient proof that I have spoken to the heart of this community.”48 He understood that the religious presentation of his proslavery and pro-secession argument resonated with the community, especially given that the Antebellum South was a deeply religious society and that Evangelical Protestantism was “the predominant religious mood of the South.”49 He shared his hope that his words “may contribute something toward rallying our whole people to the issue that is upon us.”50 Obviously, Palmer’s allusion to “our whole people” was limited as his definition excluded blacks. He sought to unify Southern whites in defense of slavery. In a critical moment in which the future of the country was being decided, both Palmer and his congregation believed that his religious presentation of the proslavery argument had the capacity to mobilize Southern white Christians to unify in support of secession.

The Intersection of Old School Presbyterianism & Politics

The Presbyterian Church had historically prohibited engagement with political and social debates among its clergy, which makes Palmer’s framing of his secessionist rhetoric in religious terms a matter of critical importance. Until 1830, religion and politics remained in entirely

48 Ibid.  
separate spheres for Presbyterians, and the conflation of the two was taboo. As debates over slavery grew, a subset of Presbyterians recognized the extraordinary potential of a religious framework to influence the way that pious individuals understood society as a whole. This recognition precipitated the splitting of the Presbyterian Church in 1837 into the New School—those who believed in the church’s involvement in political activism through missionary organizations and attempted to proselytize sympathetic Presbyterians to their liberal causes—and the Old School—those who remained steadfast in their belief that a strict interpretation of the Bible should guide Presbyterians’ spiritual pursuits. This schism largely took place along geographical lines with Presbyterians in the Midwest, the Northeast, and the border states of Kentucky and Missouri adopting the New School approach and the Southern Presbyterians sticking to the Old School interpretation of their religion. Until the 1850s, the Old School Presbyterians, including Bishop Palmer, shared their belief that the church should remain silent on the issue of slavery.

Previous scholars have criticized the shift into the political sphere by Old School Presbyterians in the mid-1800s as hypocritical. The adherence to spirituality over social, economic, and political pursuits stood as a fundament of traditional Presbyterian thought that caused the major schism within the denomination in 1837. Old School Presbyterians saw the pursuits of New School Presbyterians in political activism as at odds with their religion. In the 1850s, however, Old School Presbyterians in the South entered the political sphere to discuss the ways in which the Bible supported slavery and secession. Given that three-fourths of the Old School Presbyterian clergy owned slaves, historian James Farmer insists that the shift should be

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53 Ibid.
seen as opportunistic. Richard Hughes shared Farmer’s skepticism of Old School Presbyterians’ involvement in politics. He argued, “White southerners effectively dissolved, for their own region, the natural rights/biblical synthesis that had formed the basis for America’s civic theology since the Revolution.” Essentially, Hughes believed that Presbyterians abandoned their religious convictions in their arguments for slavery and secession. Farmer and Hughes emphasize the way in which Old School Presbyterians could be seen as opportunistically and unauthentically utilizing their religion.

In his 1860 Thanksgiving Day sermon, Palmer insisted that his religious presentation of a political argument was both genuine and virtuous. Until the deliverance of his Thanksgiving Day sermon, Palmer insisted that he had never “intermeddled with political questions before” nor had he sought to influence the political opinions of his congregation. He reminded his followers of this fact prior to justifying his new involvement with politics. “At a juncture so solemn as the present,” he could not sit idle. He said, “It is not lawful to be still. Whoever may have the influence to shape public opinion, at such a time must lend it or prove faithless to a trust as solemn as any to be accounted for at the bar of God.” His dual duties of patriotism and religion, he insisted, compelled him into action. In a critical moment for the country, Palmer clearly felt it necessary to reinterpret the relationship between his religion and politics.

The Role of Religion in Palmer’s Sermon

57 Ibid, 5.
58 Ibid.
Throughout his sermon, Palmer emphasized the way in which a strict reading of the Bible can and should be used to influence political discussions; Palmer, like many Southern religious leaders of the time, put controversial moral issues to the biblical test, referencing twenty-one different Bible passages throughout his 1860 Thanksgiving Day sermon. The following close reading of Palmer’s sermon will tease apart the specific ways in which he utilized religion in his attempt to create Southern white unity in support of secession. Specifically, he constructed the institution as paternalistic, he insisted on the biblical duty of self-preservation for white Southerners to take immediate action to protect the institution of slavery, and he engaged in religious racism.

Palmer urged his congregation to put the political debates to a biblical test to determine the religiosity of secession. “It is the instinct of man’s religious nature, which, among Christians and heathen alike, seeks after God….All classes bow beneath its spell especially in seasons of gloom, when a nation bends beneath the weight of general calamity,” he preached. The election of Abraham Lincoln constituted a “season of gloom,” as his Republican presidency indicated to Palmer that the “Union of our forefathers is already gone.” In such a moment, Palmer insisted that it was natural to turn to religion to provide a path forward.

Palmer proffered the upholding slavery as a religious mission. Like so many proslavery proponents before him including Brookes and De Bow, Palmer believed the institution of slavery to have been endowed by God, and therefore he insisted it “should be left open to expansion, subject to no limitations save those imposed by God and nature.” Palmer insisted that God entrusted Southern Presbyterians “to conserve and to perpetuate the institution of domestic

59 Ibid, 3.
60 Ibid, 12.
61 Ibid, 15.
slavery as now existing.”62 Looking through the religious lens that Palmer provided, Southerners should see secession as their holy duty. Contrary to his description of slavery’s biblical grounding, Palmer characterized the abolitionist cause as “atheistic” and regarded attempts to interfere with slavery as being at odds with “godly prerogatives.”63 The righteous way for slavery to be overturned, in Palmer’s eyes, would be for God to do so himself. He described the abolition movement as an “unrighteous assault” on slavery that “availing itself of the morbid and misdirected sympathies of men….has entrapped the weak consciousness in the meshes of its treachery.”64 Palmer emphasized throughout his sermon that political entities should not interfere with slavery, since it was an institution endowed by God, and argued that the intrusion of the Unionists in Southern matters should precipitate Southern confederation.

Palmer used religion to argue that slaves thrived under the institution of Southern slavery in a way that would not be possible in a free society and, in doing so, established himself as a believer in the paternalistic nature of slavery; the positive good that he believed slavery represented morally justified the fight to maintain the institution. White Southerners, he argued, “know better than others that every attribute of their character fits [blacks] for dependence and servitude. By nature the most affectionate and loyal of all races beneath the sun, they are also the most helpless.”65 Importantly, Palmer’s description of blacks as “helpless” framed them as incompetent children “who can not fend for themselves.”66 Clearly, he viewed blacks as an inferior race. He ignored the atrocities of slavery and, instead, exacted the relation of master and slave to that of parent and child. Palmer argued that abolition “had sought to disguise its course

63 Ibid, 10.
64 Ibid, 8.
65 Ibid, 9.
66 Ibid.
in a cloak of ‘human rights’” and that abolitionists failed to acknowledge the harmful impact to the slave population that would coincide with freedom.67

This language of Palmer’s sermon diverged from Iveson Brookes’ and that of other proslavery advocates who came before him. Brookes also argued for the paternalistic nature of slavery but presented slaves as “beasts” who would suffer under their own “savage barbarity” in the case of emancipation.68 Like Brookes, Palmer believed that “freedom would be their doom,” but Palmer presented a different logic to support his conclusion.69 He insisted that abolition would strip slaves, who depended on their masters “for protection, for counsel, and for blessing,” of their social and spiritual support system.70 Palmer, therefore, urged Southern white Presbyterians to embrace their duty “bound upon us again as the constituted guardians of the slaves themselves” in the debate over secession. The relative success of Palmer’s sermon suggests that his rhetoric resonated with white Southerners, perhaps due to its ability to assuage their moral concerns about the institution.71

Accompanying his defense of slavery on moral grounds, Palmer preached that all societies should uphold the principle of self-preservation, “that ‘first law’ which is continually asserting its supremacy over all others.”72 He offered a glorified presentation of two races “living in peaceful harmony” and “tilling the rich soil of Dixie in contentment” in the South.73 While he had previously advocated for the better treatment of slaves in the *Southern Presbyterian Review,*74 he painted an idyllic picture of slavery in his 1860 Thanksgiving Day sermon. Notably,

67 Monroe, “Bishop Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address,” 112.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid, 8.
73 Monroe, “Bishop Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address,” 111.
74 Wakelyn, “Benjamin Morgan Palmer,” 308.
the ultraorthodox reformist mentality that Palmer had embraced throughout his career did not appear in his sermon. Not only did Palmer emphasize the social and spiritual importance of slavery as mentioned above, Palmer highlighted the economic benefits of slavery to the world as a whole. The unprecedented material production made possible by Southern agriculture had a wide-reaching impact, such that Palmer warned, “Strike now a blow at this system of labor and the whole world totters at the stroke.” This statement reveals how Palmer viewed the institution of slavery as a critical buttress of the world’s economy. Other proslavery advocates emphasized the economic, social, and political benefits of the institution, but none did so with Palmer’s religious overlay of self-preservation.

Additionally, Palmer used religious principles to argue that all societies have their own problems and must create their own solutions to fixing those problems. He pointed his finger at the North: “The so-called free states of this country are working out the social problem under conditions peculiar to themselves.” Outlining the problems in the North to be overpopulation, tension between labor and capital, and the replacement of humans by mechanization, he exclaimed, “God grant them complete success in the solution of all their perplexities!” He believed that the North should not involve itself in Southern matters, just as the South did not involve itself in Northern ones. While Palmer did not overtly acknowledge problems within the slave South, he called attention to the fact that - in the case that those problems did exist - God instilled the South with the responsibility to address those problems internally.

Many religious figures contributed to the secession movement. Likely one reason that Palmer’s sermon was influential was its accessibility to the general public. By focusing on

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75 Monroe, “Bishop Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address,” 112.
76 Palmer, “The South, Her Peril, and Her Duty,” 8.
77 Ibid.
Palmer’s rhetoric, scholars underestimate the power of the clarity of his message. Historians Stephen Haynes and Mitchell Snay fail to acknowledge the value of the way in which Palmer spoke in their respective analyses of his Thanksgiving sermon. Monroe credits the success of Palmer as a preacher to his “mental capacity, his tenacity, and the strength of his conviction on any point,” but he understates the clarity of his message. As previously discussed, Palmer’s ideas merely repeated the proslavery rhetoric that emerged in the decade preceding his sermon, including in Iveson Brookes’ and De Bow’s respective works. In comparison to Brookes and De Bow, however, Palmer delivered his remarks in a relatively conversational tone. Brookes and De Bow engaged with a number of the most highly-educated intellectuals as a means of reaching the public, whereas Palmer spoke to his parishioners. Historians have failed to highlight the impact of the accessibility of Palmer’s work as a contributing factor to the success of his work.

**Following the Pamphlet’s Publication**

The significant engagement with Palmer’s work across the country suggests that he had been correct in his assumption that his religious-based proslavery argument had the potential to achieve both of his goals: to spur white Southern support for the secession movement and to engage in ideological debate with abolitionists. The following analysis complements the scholarship by Haskell Monroe, Timothy Reilly, and Jon Wakelyn on the power of religion in Palmer’s secessionist argument. These historians note how Palmer framed the Presbyterian church as the moral authority for pro-secessionist ideology and, in doing so, successfully encouraged Christian patriotism in the Civil War years.

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Palmer’s sermon had an immediate impact within Louisiana. His sermon “fueled the frenzy,” as historian Julia Nguyen discerns. Another minister in Louisiana spoke to the influence of the Thanksgiving Day sermon within his community, stating that Palmer “confirmed and strengthened those who were in doubt; it gave directness and energy to public sentiment—so that perhaps no other public utterance during that trying period of anxiety and hesitancy did so much to bring New Orleans and the entire state of Louisiana squarely and fully to the side of secession and the Confederacy.” This minister credited Palmer with assuaging fears about secession and rallying the community at a time of uncertainty about the future. Local newspapers confirmed this minister’s analysis of the impact of the sermon. These sources complimented Palmer’s “patriotic position” and “masterly discourse,” and one editor commented that “the quality of the message justified bringing a secular topic into the pulpit.” Louisianaans enthusiastically endorsed Palmer.

If Palmer had any doubts as to how his message would be received, he must have been reassured by the widespread support of his community in the immediate aftermath of his sermon. As historian Timothy Reilly discerns, the New Orleans community regarded him as “the chief guardian of Southern political integrity and a high priest of proper religious orthodoxy.” Ultimately, the support for Palmer’s pro-secession ideology spread rapidly and quieted all opposing voices. “All the citizenry discussed his war-cry that afternoon and night. Hardly

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83 New Orleans Bee December 6, 1860, quoted in Monroe, “Bishop Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address,” 155.
84 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
another topic of conversation was to be heard in the city. He had spoken the quiet desires of many silent hearts,” writes Monroe.\footnote{Monroe, “Bishop Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address,” 115.} By bridging politics and religion, Palmer provided the moral grounding for the proslavery and pro-secession sentiments for white Christian Louisiana.

The results of the election of delegates to a convention that would decide whether Louisiana should secede the Union further reflected the influence of Palmer’s sermon on the state. On January 7, 1861, voters in New Orleans showed their support for secession by electing fifteen men who publicly supported immediate succession out of twenty delegates to the Louisiana secession commission.\footnote{Ibid, 117-118.} Monroe describes:

Perhaps the results of this election in New Orleans offer some indication of the effectiveness of the Thanksgiving sermon. Although the secessionists polled only a small majority in the state, not very different from the outcome of the presidential vote two months earlier, there was a remarkable change in Orleans parish….Nowhere else was the sudden transformation so evident, but nowhere else had people heard such a call for militant action. Perhaps he had been the decisive factor in moving the city toward disunion.\footnote{Ibid, 118.}

In his analysis, Monroe argues that Palmer’s sermon may have influenced the results of the January election. He expressed some hesitation about making the conclusive causal statement that Palmer’s sermon influenced the outcome of the election. He utilizes the qualifiers “perhaps” to soften his conclusion. My analysis diverges from Monroe’s on this point. The conclusion that Palmer had an important impact on the election results \textit{can and should} be drawn. As Historian Timothy Reilly more accurately concludes, Palmer caused “damage to the unionist sentiment” that “was irreparable in Louisiana and in other parts of the lower South where secessionist
support had been weak or unresponsive.” By combining the political with the religious in his 1860 Thanksgiving Day sermon, Palmer provided the white Christian population with the moral authority necessary to assuage their concerns about secession. Palmer “glorified the institution in its prime” and “skillfully interwove the question of race, economy, and political radicalism in his Southern dialectic in defense of God and family,” as Reilly determines. Without such a dialectic, it seems fair to argue that Southern white Christian support for secession would not have been achieved with such haste.

As previously noted, the results of the 1860 presidential election revealed that white Louisianians were hesitant about the prospect of secession. Palmer’s sermon acted as an impetus for secession. A seeming contradiction emerged in Louisianans’ support for the secession movement. Louisianans initially expressed their fears toward the economic consequences of disunion. In his sermon, Palmer does not address the financial concerns that much of the population seemed to possess. These same Louisianans, however, were ultimately convinced to join the secession movement by a religious presentation of the proslavery argument. Palmer seemingly resolved economic concerns over secession by presenting a persuasive religious defense of slavery in an accessible way at a particular time and place. In summation, historians may never know whether those who subscribed to religious arguments truly believed those justifications for slavery or simply looked for the best arguments that they could come up with to support their deeply-ingrained beliefs about racial inequality and the benefits of slavery to Southern society.

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91 Ibid, 291.
Palmers’ proslavery argumentation extended to other slave states as well. Like Louisianans, Mississippians found their own voice in Palmer’s rhetoric. A newspaper editor in Mississippi wrote “that now there was proof of the revolutionary maxim that ‘resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.’”92 White Southerners seemed desperate for a morally-justifiable way to validate their support for secession, and Palmer’s religious presentation of pro-secession ideology provided this justification. As Palmer’s biographer noted, “He was to become in the new and larger arenas not only a great religious leader, but in epochal moments the moral and political mouthpiece of the city, state, and section of his adoption.”93 His words deeply resonated with those white Christian Southerners who struggled to vocalize their support of the secession movement and had, until that moment, been unable to formulate the connection between politics and religion that provided them with moral authority for their support of disunion.

Beyond Louisiana, presses across the South recognized the potential capacity of Palmer’s sermon to sway public opinion. They swiftly began making and distributing copies of his sermon throughout the slave states. Scholars estimate that 50,000 copies of the pamphlet were produced in New Orleans alone in the months directly following its publication and that tens of thousands more were republished and intended for circulation throughout the South.94 The success of the pamphlet to spur white unity in defense of slavery and secession across the South as a whole could be seen immediately. A Presbyterian minister from Baton Rogue struggled to convince his parishioners to join the Union following their exposure to Palmer’s sermon.95 Ultimately

94 The exact number of copies of the pamphlet printed is a source of ambiguity within historiographical accounts. Citing the *New Orleans Daily Delta*, Thomas Reilly records that “More than 30,000 copies of the speech were disseminated throughout the South, alone” in “Benjamin M. Palmer: Secessionist Become Nationalist,” 289. Jon Wakelyn provides a higher estimate, stating, “Some 50,000 copies of the sermon were printed in pamphlet form and circulated throughout the South” in “Benjamin Morgan Palmer,” 309.
Palmer’s words reached all parts of the South, as newspapers in nearly every slave state referred to the sermon.\textsuperscript{96} The impact of Palmer’s sermon extended far beyond his immediate congregation; Palmer’s sermon undoubtedly contributed to the exponentially growing support for the secession movement that took place in the Deep South in 1860 and 1861.

Palmer’s proslavery argument became central in ideological debates over slavery and secession. Unsurprisingly, anti-secessionists along the Southern border and in the North began printing refutations to Palmer in large numbers. Monroe explains, “The criticism was loud and angry. Editors joined in condemnation and some of the leading clergymen of the denomination pronounced their shock at the extremity of the arguments of the little man from New Orleans.”\textsuperscript{97} Palmer engaged with anti-secession responses and produced a multitude of articles defending slavery, secession, and the South throughout the Civil War years.\textsuperscript{98} The newly-formed Confederate government—recognizing the success of Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day sermon and of Palmer as a public figure—called upon Palmer to write and disseminate more Southern secessionist propaganda.\textsuperscript{99} His clerical role seemed to provide a religious stamp of approval to the Confederacy. Clearly, Palmer had captured the attention of the South, and indeed the nation, through the presentation of the proslavery and pro-secession arguments by a prominent Presbyterian cleric.

The fervor with which the general public truly believed Palmer’s religious presentation of the proslavery argument remains an unanswerable question. This chapter, however, attempts to create the world in which white Southerners lived and takes their actions as an accurate reflection of their beliefs. Seven states in the Deep South seceded from the Union even before

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid, 115.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid, 117.
\textsuperscript{98} Wakelyn, “Benjamin Morgan Palmer,” 309.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid, 308.
the inauguration of President Lincoln. Four more states joined the Confederacy by early 1861. The evidence available suggests that white Southerners acted in accordance with their beliefs about the morality of slavery. Palmer provided ecclesiastical support for proslavery ideology that led white Southerners to risk war in all that it entailed to defend the institution of slavery and the racial order that slavery had built in the South.
CONCLUSION

Twenty-first century American society hears echoes of the white Christian nationalism that dominated Southern society in the 1850s. Several of the white supremacists who raided the Capitol building on January 6, 2021 carried “JESUS SAVES,” “JESUS OR HELLFIRE,” and “JESUS 2020” signs. Others held up wooden crosses, dropped to their knees to pray, and chanted Christian hymns throughout the day, revealing what Robert Jones, the CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, explained as “the comfortable juxtaposition of Christian and white supremacist symbols.” The rioters included numerous pastors and devout Christians who saw themselves carrying out God’s work to protect democracy in the United States. One such rioter, Diane McMichael, explained her rationale for participating in the Rally to Save America to challenge the certification of President-elect Joe Biden. McMichael “wanted to be here because I feel like the Democrats are slapping our Creator in the face: God Almighty” and “also, my Lord wants me here to fight for the unborn.” Alongside many of her fellow rioters, she saw herself on a divine mission to save Christian America.

Center-left reporting frames Evangelical Christians as being hypocritical and abandoning their ethics in their support of ex-President Donald Trump. Robert Jones confusedly noted that the Capitol raid constituted an “unholy amalgamation of white supremacy and Christianity.” In a CNN opinion piece, the Dean of Yale Divinity School, Gregory Sterling, similarly shared his disbelief toward the violence that unfolded: “I wonder how these self-declared patriots and

4 Jones, “Taking the White Christian Nationalist Symbols at the Capitol Riot Seriously.”
Christians—rioters, in reality—could square their racism-fueled attempt of a forceful takeover of our government….with the Bibles many of them carried.”5 Jones and Sterling are two of dozens of individuals who publicly have expressed their struggle to fathom how racism and Christianity could be reconciled in the minds of white Christian nationalists.

Placing white supremacy on a longer historical continuum provides greater clarity on how racism and white Christianity continue to go hand in hand in American society. An examination of the proslavery arguments in the decade preceding the Civil War reveals that Christianity has been a constant with white supremacy across centuries.

In late 1860 and early 1861, Southern whites across eleven states in the Deep South unified in defense of slavery despite any initial hesitations toward the potentially disastrous economic and social consequences of secession. All of this pace to secede seemed to be predicated on defending the institution of slavery. W.J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South* argued that the white Southerner “did not (typically speaking) think; he felt” on the eve of the Civil War.6 Extant scholarship concurs with Cash’s conclusion that these individuals believed in their hearts that slavery was a necessity. An examination of 1850s pamphlet literature arguing for slavery and secession - as I have done in this thesis - provides a way of understanding the white Southern support achieved in defense of slavery across much of the Antebellum South. The religious rhetoric in these documents seemed to resonate with all classes of white Southerners and helped to raise the defense of slavery as a universal impulse.

Earlier proslavery advocates throughout the 1830s and 1840s typically used pamphlet literature to offer their expert advice to the general public. Specifically, prominent political economists sought to engage with the financial necessity of slavery for Southern society, and

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popular politicians provided social rationale to defend the institution. The works of two of the arguably most influential individuals - Thomas Roderick Dew and William Harper - demonstrate this phenomenon. Dew, a professor of political economy at William & Mary, took to pamphlet literature to construct a defense of slavery following the debates over the continuation of the institution in the Virginia General Assembly in the early 1830s.⁷ In his 133-page pamphlet titled *Review of the Debate on the Abolition of Slavery in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832*, Dew outlined the economic and social ruin that would ensue in the case of the emancipation of Virginia's slaves.⁸ In brief summation, he argued that slavery was profitable for the state, unpaid laborers could never be replaced, and the practical difficulties of repairing the economy post-abolition were insurmountable. In doing so, he framed slavery as a necessity for Southern society. Notably, Dew made few references to religion in his extensive proslavery argumentation. Similarly, William Harper, the South Carolina Chancellor and an elected member of the House of Representatives, drafted a defense of slavery that framed the institution as a necessary moral evil and as a social good. In his *Memoir on Slavery*, he explained that slavery would preserve stability in Southern society while leading the South toward economic and technological progress.⁹ Both men sought to reconcile the moral ambiguity toward the institution by highlighting the political, social, and economic necessity of slavery. Notably, neither Dew nor Harper forefronted religion in their proslavery arguments and neither purported slavery to be a perfect institution.

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⁸ Ibid.
Whereas economists largely focused their proslavery arguments on the economic benefits of slavery and politicians emphasized the social benefits of slavery throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the dominant line of proslavery ideology that emerged in the 1850s saw an added emphasis on religion. These arguments combined the supposed religious legitimacy of slavery with economic, political, and social justifications for its continuation. The majority of the proslavery argumentation throughout the 1850s and early 1860s purported slavery to be free from faults, as was done in the pamphlet literature of Iveson Brookes, James D. B. De Bow, and Benjamin Palmer. These three men, among many other proslavery advocates in the 1850s, minimized the differences in the forms that the institution took across the Antebellum South and offered one-size-fits-all defenses of slavery. The perfectionist impulse seemingly took over, and white Southern intellectuals focused their intellectual energy on maturing the proslavery argument in anticipation of possible military conflict.

By the eve of the Civil War, any moral ambiguity that existed among white Southerners toward the institution seemed to dissipate. It is conceivable that some individuals doubted the exploitation of unpaid labor and the atrocious treatment of black enslaved people. In his exhaustive study of dissenting voices in the Antebellum South, however, historian Carl Dagler has identified only a handful of white Southerners who expressed any reservations toward slavery, and all did so in their private diaries rather than on a public platform. More commonly, individuals who initially resisted a wholehearted embrace of proslavery ideology swung in full support of the institution, as was the case of Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer. In his youthful years, Brookes publicly expressed his opposition to slavery on moral grounds. He transformed into a full-fledged advocate for the institution over the course of his life. An examination of his “A

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“Defence of Southern Slavery” reveals how religion provided the moral justification necessary for reconciling his proslavery ideology with Christianity and for joining the fight against antislavery advocates. Additionally, De Bow and Palmer resisted taking public stances on slavery and secession throughout the 1840s and 1850s. A statistician, De Bow concentrated the works he produced on objective economic measures. Palmer kept in line with other Old School Presbyterian ministers by refusing to incorporate political issues into his sermons. On the eve of the Civil War, both men abandoned their neutral public stances on the issue of the continuation of slavery and erected passionate defenses of the institution. De Bow’s “The Non-Slaveholder of the South” and Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Sermon both expressed undeniability that slavery was a moral, economic, and social good for Southern society. The publicly-held beliefs of Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer suggested zero reservations over slavery.

Importantly, Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer all showed a recognition of the particular times and places in which their arguments were drafted. As debates over the continuation of slavery in Kentucky raged in the early 1850s, Brookes erected a Christian defense of the institution. De Bow responded in 1860 to questions over the economic necessity of the institution for Southern white non-slaveholders. Finally, in late 1860, Palmer sought to unite Southern whites in defense of slavery in response to the perceived threat that President Abraham Lincoln posed to the future of the institution. All three of these proslavery advocates seized opportunities to defend slavery when such occasions presented themselves and did so in boldly religious terms. One should not underestimate the power of religion in infusing the variety of proslavery arguments presented in all three of the pamphlets as religion gave these proslavery ideologies an unimpeachable moral veneer.
While not all-inclusive, the arguments of Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer represented a culmination of the various proslavery positions adopted by earlier defenders of slavery. All three men integrated economic, social, political, and religious rationale for slavery into their works. To spur white Southern support for the institution, their arguments continually framed slavery as God-endowed, outlined the compatibility of slavery with the Bible, and explained the ways in which Southerners could carry out God’s work by fighting to uphold slavery. Further, Christianity allowed many proslavery advocates to argue for the paternalistic nature of the social and economic consequences of slavery: not only did slavery benefit the white Southern population as a whole, the institution uplifted blacks. Ultimately, these men utilized religion to pull at the heartstrings of white Southerners. Folding religious analysis in a major way into the proslavery argument seemed to appeal to the deeply-felt religious convictions of the predominantly Evangelical Southern white culture.

At the beginning of the Civil War, the white Southern support achieved for the secession movement demonstrated the deep impact of such religious-based proslavery arguments. White Southern sectionalists employed similar rhetoric that proslavery advocates did throughout the 1850s and early 1860s. On March 21, 1861, Alexander H. Stephens, the Confederate Vice President, argued for “the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition.” He identified the Confederacy as “the first Government ever instituted upon principles in strict conformity to nature and the ordination of Providence.” Similarly, Judge Alexander Hamilton Handy, Mississippi’s secession commissioner to Maryland, insisted, “Slavery was ordained by God and

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sanctioned by humanity.”13 White Southern sectionalists took to the battlefields armed with weapons and a deep conviction in the religious legitimacy of the institution that they were fighting to preserve.

Previous historians have largely overlooked the ability of religious-based proslavery arguments of Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer to assist in the unification of the ideologically, economically, and politically diverse Antebellum South. The extent to which white Southern unity could have been achieved in defense of slavery without the religious appeal could never be determined, yet religious rhetoric undeniably played a crucial role in strengthening proslavery ideology and carrying white secessionists forward into the Civil War.

Proslavery arguments such as those offered by Brookes, De Bow, and Palmer may well have played a role in convincing white Southerners of the religious, social, and economic importance of the institution to Southern society. There is no way to know for sure. That said, these proslavery advocates clearly employed religion in their arguments to diffuse any moral ambiguity that may have existed toward the exploitation of unpaid labor and the treatment of black enslaved individuals. In short, the extent to which white Southerners were ultimately swayed by the arguments of proslavery advocates throughout the 1850s remains open for debate.

But, by establishing the crucial role of religion in the dominant line of proslavery ideology that emerged in this decade, my thesis lays the groundwork for further research on the reception of such arguments made by prominent intellectuals in the late Antebellum South.

The deep-rooted belief in white supremacy has proven to be extremely consequential in American society. The 750,000 lives lost in the Civil War should be considered an immediate

consequence of the need felt by Southerners to defend the institution of slavery and the racial order erected on that institution. Ultimately, the victory of the Union in the Civil War sadly did not coincide with the acceptance of racial equality. In twenty-first-century American society, some white Americans continue to engage in violent displays of their white supremacist beliefs. The bloody and terrorizing Unite the Right and Save America rallies both speak to the enduring nature of this harmful ideology.

Ultimately, it seems as though understanding the way in which white supremacists morally justify their superiority will be necessary to combat the enduring belief in racial inequality and to mitigate the harmful consequences of those beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society. In his analysis of the Southern secession commissioners’ public letters and speeches, historian Charles Dew reflects, “I believe deeply that the story these documents tell is one that all of us, northerners and southerners, black and white, need to confront as we try to understand our past and move toward a future in which a fuller commitment to decency and racial justice will be part of our shared experience.” Robert Jones draws a similar conclusion from his analysis of the Capitol raid that “the violent disregard for the rule of law we witnessed is not the best of who we are. But if we’re going to heal our nation, we need to confess that it remains, still today, a troubling part of America’s political and religious heritage.”

In this thesis, I do as Dew and Jones advise. I confront the intellectual history of white supremacy and confess that my own moral repugnance of such ideology does not negate the

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worldview of so many white Americans. It is my hope that my analysis will help us to navigate the heated, bipartisan climate of twenty-first-century America and lead us on the path to a more inclusive and fair society for all.
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