

Quick, Timely Reads

Mystics for Skeptics

John Brown – Puritan Mystic

By Rev. Charles Brock, M.Litt
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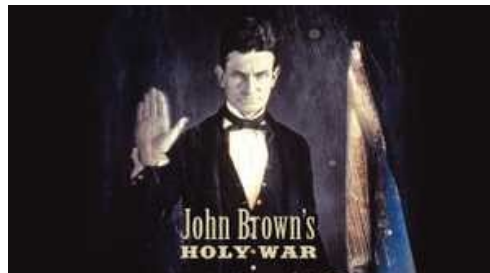
Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society's Board of Trustees.

John Brown was the person who “sparked” the Civil War, according to African American historian W.E.B. DuBois and several other commentators. It happened over several years. From the 1850s, Brown and his family were dedicated to overthrowing slavery in the United States. They traveled all over the East and Midwest advocating their doctrine of abolitionism and were aided by some big money and heady intellectuals in the East including – to name a few – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and the well-known known Boston preachers Henry Ward Beecher and Theodore Parker. Strangely, Puritan Brown appealed to the liberal Unitarian and Transcendentalist New Englanders. Thoreau said, “A man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles – that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse but carrying out the purpose of a life.”[1]

Brown was not a college man but a farmer. He studied for the ministry, but his funds ran out. He then worked as a tanner, a postman, lay preacher, and a “boss-conductor” for nine years of the Underground Railroad in Crawford County close to my home. He knew the Bible, much by heart. He was a mystic with the certainty that he was called by God to do his will. “He would say that the Lord had directed him in visions what to do; that for himself he did not love warfare, but peace.”[2]

Of the many kinds of mysticism, this is one that strongly motivates its recipients. We have seen it before in Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Francis of Assisi, and Joan

of Arc. But it need not involve visual or auditory experience or experiencing a physical or spiritual transforming presence of God but is a co-ordination of wills. Moses the mystic did what God wanted him to do. He walked with God doing God's will. Brown wrote: "Holiness does not consist in mystic speculations, enthusiastic fervors, or uncommanded austerities; it consists in thinking as God thinks, and willing as God wills." Brown was close to Moses as a deliverer. "I had a strong impression that God had given me powers and faculties, unworthy as I was, that He intended to use for a similar purpose." [3] He also wanted a more equal distribution of wealth.



Advertisement for John Brown's Holy War – PBS

According to Brown's biography on Wikipedia: "A religious man more than anything else, Brown believed he was raised up by God to strike the death blow to American slavery. He also believed that in all ages of the world God had created certain men to perform special work in some direction far in advance of their countrymen, even at the cost of their lives. He believed that among his earthly missions was to free the American slave ... and it must be performed. He was very strict in his religious duties and he regarded this as sacred. 'I am an instrument of God.'"[4]

Wrote Truman Nelson of Brown: "Did not my Master Jesus Christ come down from heaven and sacrifice himself for the race and should I, not worthy to lace his boots, refuse myself? If my bleeding body or my hanged body can tell the slaves that there are white men in this country that love them, let it be." [5]

At Brown's trial for sedition and insurrection after Harper's Ferry raid, he was asked by his inquisitors:

"Who sent you?" "No man sent me – I acknowledge no master in human form. We came to free the slaves."

"How do you justify your acts?" "I hold to the Golden Rule, 'Do unto others as ye would that others should do unto you,' applies to all who would help others to gain their liberty."

"Do you consider this a religious movement?" "It is in my opinion the greatest service man can render to God."

"Do you consider yourself an instrument in the hands of Providence?" "I do." [6] Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry was the culmination of a few very active years of fighting mainly in the Midwest. Brown and his sons went to Kansas to help keep it a free state after it was constantly being invaded by the Missouri slavers and border ruffians. They were a rough bunch who burned down Lawrence, Kansas, and perpetuated many crimes against the free state settlers. Brown took revenge and participated in five murders at Pottawatomie. He was known as Osawatomie Brown or Old Brown by senators and others because of the small place where he

camped during his raids on the slavers. In that time, he was rather old as an active warrior as well.

The major raid in 1859 was at Harper's Ferry, the largest arsenal in the United States, and was carried out with a small contingent. Brown thought that by capturing the weapons and arming the slaves in the area he would help start a more general revolt. Also, he wanted to show to the nation an example of what was needed after the failure of negotiations between North and South.

Lincoln had his problems with John Brown, who was one of the many religious types who sponsored immediate abolitionism. Said Lincoln, "They are utterly lawless – the unhandiest devils in the world to deal with – but after all their faces are set Zionwards." [7] He also said the Harper's Ferry raid was the work of an unbalanced mind. It was absurd to the slaves. "An enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them. He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution." [8]

After Brown was captured by Robert E. Lee and Jeb Stuart at Harper's Ferry and a large contingent of the army, he had time before his trial and from his jail cell to answer a large correspondence. One person – "a conservative Christian" – mentioned that he seemed to have authority from on high. Brown wrote: "I am conscious that you do me no more than justice. I cannot feel that God will suffer even the poorest service we may any of us render to him or his cause to be lost, or in vain I do feel, dear brother, that I am wonderfully strengthened from on high. May the same grace enable me to serve him in a *new obedience* through my little remainder of this life." [9]

To another writer Brown said, "the scaffold has but few terrors for me. God has often covered my head in the day of battle and granted me many time deliverances that were almost so miraculous. And now, when it seems quite certain he intends to use me in a *different way*, shall I not most cheerfully go?" [10] Like the early Christians, he was a happy martyr.

But Brown's last words haunted his contemporaries and indeed may discomfit us too. Brown was well read and knew that the last words of prominent people are valued. On the morning of December 2, 1859, Brown gave his jailor the words he wanted to be remembered by:

"I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think, vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done."

He was hanged shortly after.

What do we make of John Brown today? He fits into a role of a mystic, but was he a screwball? Many have seen him that way, and the huge mural in the Kansas State House does give that impression with his wild eyes and holding a rifle in one hand and the Bible in the other. Some say that anyone who would invade the main arsenal of the United States with only a couple dozen men knew he could never win and was crazy as a coot. Or did he think God would intervene? [11]



Huge Mural at Topeka, Kansas, in the Capitol Building

Brown never claimed that God would see him through no matter what he tried. But was his final act so strange? Might I suggest it can be explained in a couple of ways. First, he wanted to show the slaves that, in all their terrible suffering, somebody really cared and was willing to stake his life on them. Second, he wanted to make revolt an example for others, including slaves, to follow. Third, he did want to start the Civil War, and at that, he succeeded. He was sick and tired of the vagaries of the comings and goings of the government, especially under President James Buchanan, Pennsylvania's only president until Joe Biden. Though there were many other factors in the origin of the war, Brown was a crucial player.

Brown was a hero to the Northern troops, and one of their main marching songs was about Brown sung to a tune that Julia Ward Howe later expanded into *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*:

John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
His soul goes marching on."
Chorus: Glory, glory hallelujah, his soul goes marching on.

"He's gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord,
His soul goes marching on."
Repeat Chorus

As Michele Norris wrote, we still have a long way to go to acknowledge what slavery and white supremacy have done to America. "The United States does not yet have the stomach to look over its shoulder and stare directly at the evil on which this great country stands. That is why slavery is not well taught in our schools. That is why the battle flag of the army that tried to divide and conquer our country is still manufactured, sold, and displayed with defiant pride. That is why any mention of slavery is rendered as the shameful act of a smattering of Southern plantation owners and not a sprawling economic and social framework with tentacles that stamped almost every aspect of American life. ... A tourist from a foreign land might well conclude that the Confederacy had actually won the Civil War based on the number of monuments, buildings, and boulevards still named for heroes of its defeated army. The real truth of our shared history was a casualty of that war and, like any wound left untended, the results can be catastrophic."^[12] Hence the need for Critical Race Theory.

John Brown helps us see who we really are, and what we should aspire to be. Mystics can be strange, but necessary.



A U.S. Capitol rioter carries the Confederate flag on Jan. 6, 2021.

Slavery was America's original sin. I end with some wise words from West German President Richard von Weizsäcker referring in 1985 to a nation that has tried to handle its nefarious past a lot better than we have. "Anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risk of infection." [13]

Mystics with an overriding sense of justice can help lead the way today as Brown did in his time.

End Notes

1. H W Brands, *The Zealot and the Emancipator – John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, and the Struggle for American Freedom*, Doubleday, New York, p 130
2. WEB DuBois, *John Brown*, edited and with an Introduction by David Roediger, The Modern Library, 2001, p 94
3. Ibid p 222
4. Wikipedia, *John Brown*
5. Truman Nelson, *The Old Man – John Brown at Harper's Ferry*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2009, p 38
6. DuBois ibid p 208
7. Andrew Marantz, *The Left Turn – Are we on the verge of an ideological realignment?* New Yorker, May 31, 2021, p 39
8. Brands, op cit, p 260
9. Nelson op cit p 262
10. Nelson op cit p 263
11. While traveling through Kansas, I found the "Beecher Bible and Gun Church" near Topeka. When I asked the meaning, thinking the NRA was making inroads, I was told that when Rev Henry Ward Beecher sent guns to Brown, he had to mark the cartons "Bibles" because of interstate commerce laws regarding the transport of guns.
12. Michele L. Norris, *German faced its horrible past. Can we do the same?* Washington Post, June 3, 2021
13. [1] Richard von Weizsäcker, President of West Germany, in 1985 marking the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II

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