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SLAVERY, THE SLAVE TRADE AND THE CHURCHES

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ABSTRACT

The British did not initiate, but they came to dominate the Atlantic slave trade. Few expressed moral or ethical doubts about slavery. The Anglican church, was directly involved in slavery. When a Christian voice was raised against the slave trade, it was led by Quakers who also played a critical role in the campaign to end the slave trade.

KEYWORDS

Abolition, Church of England, Quakers, SPCG, John Woolman, Anthony Benezet, John Newton.

In 1807 most people agreed that the slave trade was an ethical and religious outrage. But if that was true in 1807, why had it NOT been the case in 1707? In fact few people raised their voice against the Atlantic slave trade until the mid-eighteenth century. There had been isolated objectors, but on the whole, the trade developed without any real sense of religious objection. It was almost as if the slave trade was morally neutral. All that changed, however, when the abolition movement took off, gathering to itself churches and sects, powerful theological criticisms and offering early evangelicalism a focus for its sense of outrage.

There had been, it is true, the occasional Christian denunciation of slave trading, most notably from early Puritans and Quakers: George Fox had denounced it as early as 1673. But as the trade grew, involving ever more people and industries to feed the slave ships, and as the material bounty from the slave colonies flowed back to Britain, such criticisms were drowned out by the sound of profitable trade. In the century before abolition in 1807, the British shipped more than three million Africans to the plantations. The suffering of the Africans on the ships and plantations were undeniable, but raised barely a whimper. Indeed godly men came to think of the trade as a simple fact of life.

To modern eyes it seems incongruous. God-fearing men going about their godless business. George Whitefield, an evangelist in America, did not approve of slavery—but he nonetheless owned slaves. The young slave captain, John Newton, saw nothing odd as he put his rebellious Africans in the thumbscrews before settling down to pray for a safe and profitable passage to the Americas. On another occasion, Newton discussed the concept of ‘grace’ with another slave captain, Alexander Clunie, on his slave ship, the stink of the slave decks fresh in their nostrils. Newton came to regret his slaving past, and is now more famous as a cleric and hymn-writer (‘Amazing Grace’) than a slave trader but his conversion was not so much a sudden revelation as a gradual dawning of true faith, and a rejection of his sinful past. And there had been nothing more sinful than his slaving days, though at the time neither he, nor thousands more, thought it wicked. At the end, he called himself an ‘Old African blasphemer’. Yet Newton personifies a broader, major shift; reflecting the national shift from unchallenged slave trading (in the 1750s) to Christian abolition by the 1780s. Britain, like Newton, changed its mind.

Through all this, the Church of England was, by turns, complicit and then transformed. By a quirk of inheritance, the Anglican SPCG (founded in 1701) had inherited plantations in 1710, mainly in Barbados from Christopher Codrington, a former soldier, government official and planter. The plantations and their resident slaves were managed like any other absentee plantation, their sugar-based profits flowing back to their owners—the Church of England. The slaves were branded (a common pattern in the islands) and there were occasional concerns expressed about their well-being. In 1760 the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote

I have long worried and lamented that the Negroes in our plantations decrease. Surely this proceeds from some Defect, both of Humanity, and even of good policy. But we must take things as they are at present.

And so it continued, until, at full emancipation in 1833, the church was compensated to the tune of £8,823 for their loss of their slaves on Codrington. Throughout, whatever the unease or discomfort, there was no sense that slave ownership was irreligious; it was a matter of rendering unto Caesar.

Of course, Anglican clergymen in the enslaved Caribbean were infamous for their indifference to the slaves, and for serving the planters and slave-owning class. And a serious attempt to minister to the enslaved did not emerge until non-conformist missionaries (led by Baptists and Methodists) made major headway in the early nineteenth century.

There is another parallel story which has a resonance down to the present day, but which generally goes unnoticed in the scrutiny of Christian involvement with slavery. Islam’s dealings with slavery forms an equally confusing story. There had been Islamic slave routes linking black Africa to the Mediterranean and Arabia long before (and long after) the Atlantic slave trade. Indeed the numbers of African slaves transported into the Islamic world was on a par with the numbers shipped into the Americas. But in the cases of both Islam and Christianity, whatever religious objections were raised (notably against the enslavement of co-religionists) they were ineffective against the economic importance of slave trading. Today, modern readers

might find it bizarre and outrageous that slave trading went unchallenged by either of these major faiths. But that changed, and changed quite dramatically, from the mid-eighteenth century, when a Christian voice was raised first against the slave trade, then against slavery.

What began as tiny shifts in the tectonic plates of British political life produced profound changes—and began with the Quakers, in Philadelphia and London. Their unease about slavery (and the trade) was expressed in a variety of influential tracts, notably by John Woolman and Anthony Benezet (both widely read in Britain). The American War of Independence (1776–83), however, forced American Quakers to be less assertive and more defensive based on a real fear that any criticism might seem treasonable. But everything changed, quickly, after the British defeat in 1783. Abolition's first major steps involved the experience of the British black community. Their legal struggle to secure full rights in England had been led for twenty years by that resolute but eccentric Anglican, Granville Sharp. The arrival in London of freed-slaves from the American war, and the dissemination of the language of equality from America (and, after 1789, from France) began to tug at the fabric of the slave system. Granville Sharp was a one-man industry, dashing off a string of pamphlets to prove that slavery was illegal in England, and that slavery at large was contrary to Christian tenets. His theological and legal arguments forced contemporary clerics to confront the awkward frictions between contemporary reality (the brutalities of slavery) and the evidence of biblical analysis offered by Sharp. Almost single-handedly, Sharp produced a major shift in religious and political attention. But he was greatly helped by the Quakers.

During the rise of abolition, the work of Quakers proved critical. For a start they had a national organisation, run from London, which was efficient and business-like. They were highly literate, with their own publishers and distribution systems, and offered support and accommodation to travelling sympathisers. Thus, when the first abolition organisation was formed in 1787, the Quaker core to that movement offered the abolition campaign a ready-made national system and propaganda machine. The Abolition Society (dominated initially by Quakers) was joined by a small band of early evangelicals, and the outcome was the launch of an instantly successful and widely based national movement directed against the slave trade. They wanted to end slavery but accepted that it was more realistic and feasible to tackle the slave trade. The pioneering group was tiny (twelve men) but, like the Quakers as a whole, it came to exercise an influence out of all proportion to its numbers. They set about pressuring the good and the great, winning over a string of powerful converts to the idea that the slave trade was fundamentally wrong—whatever its material benefits.

Important groups and organisations quickly swung behind abolition. The Quakers were already on side. John Wesley, persuaded by reading Quaker tracts, helped to align the growing number of Methodists against the slave trade. Baptists and Presbyterians similarly joined the cause, edged that way by American preachers and writers. But all, and more, were won over by the abundance of appalling information about the slave trade accumulated by the early abolitionists, most notably by Thomas Clarkson.

Clarkson's Cambridge prize-winning essay (published in 1788) on the evils of enslavement diverted him from a clerical career into a full-time lifelong devotion to abolition. He became the indefatigable foot soldier of the movement; criss-crossing the country, visiting the slave ports and ships, and accumulating volumes of information on and witnesses to the slave trade which he fed to the public in tracts, and to Parliament and its various hearings, in the evidence of witnesses. What he revealed was a story of scarcely credible violence and suffering—and all for British profit, and for the sugar to sweeten the nation's drinks and foods. This brutal information was devoured by an increasingly literate British people: the more they heard and read about the slave trade, the more they turned against it. Tens of thousands of men and women of all social classes signed abolition petitions across the nation in an unprecedented wave of popular feeling directed towards Parliament. Within two years of its foundation, the Abolition Society had become the spokesperson for a genuinely popular, national demand for an end to the slave trade. Parliament found itself under siege by abolition.

In Parliament of course, abolition was led by William Wilberforce, who had been nudged to adopt abolition by William Pitt and John Newton. As Wilberforce submitted his various bills to end the trade, the movement in the country as a whole was galvanized to bring popular opinion to bear on Parliament. As Wilberforce badgered and spoke in the Commons and in the corridors of Parliament, Clarkson drummed up national support. Year after year, after 1791, Wilberforce brought an abolition bill to Parliament. Sometimes it was passed in one House but not the other, though the Lords remained doggedly opposed.

Success was not guaranteed. There were powerful interests in both Houses determined to defend the slave trade. Merchants and shippers in London, Bristol and Liverpool, aristocrats with West Indian properties, all united in their belief that an end of the slave trade would bring economic collapse in the islands—and disaster for Britain. It was an economic defence of self-interest, but it was supported by the undeniable strength of slave-based prosperity. But their arguments were effectively overwhelmed, by the early 1790s, by the tide of abolition sentiment washing across the country. Abolition, moreover, was a moral and ethical force and increasingly took the form of the voice of Christian outrage. Abolitionists had in effect secured the moral high ground which they were never to relinquish.

It was, from the first, a form of grass-roots Christian outrage; local churches, chapels and ministers rallying their flock to direct their voice to Parliament. When the slave trade was ended in 1807, the British simply assumed that they had ended a blot on the nation's Christian conscience. But two facts stand out in retrospect. That sense of outrage was of very recent origins. And slavery itself survived.

Of course the abolition movement was wider than simply a mosaic of Christian activists. There was a variety of interests and groups which coalesced into the movement. A small band of London-based Africans lent their own distinctive voice to the arguments. And there was an important assertion of female complaint against the trade, allied to a female-led sugar boycott. In the background lurked the slaves themselves, and the fear of slave revolts (especially after the explosion in St. Domingue [Haiti] in 1791).

Success was delayed until 1807 for a complexity of reasons: internal political wrangles, changes of governments and ministers and, above all, the confusions created by the war with revolutionary France: wartime did not seem an appropriate time to be making so major a change as ending the slave trade. When abolition came, it did so almost by sleight of hand. The foreign slave trade bill of 1806 banned the trade to foreign islands. But by then, that accounted for the bulk of the British slave trade. The slave lobby had been caught unawares, and it remained only to kill off the trade fully in the following year.

But slavery survived (and was not outlawed in British colonies until 1833—surviving in the USA until 1865 and Brazil until 1888). Despite an aggressive Royal Navy, an illicit slave trade continued to ship Africans, manly to Cuba and Brazil, until the 1860s. Still, in 1807 the British turned their back on the trade they had perfected.

The campaign drew together a small band of friends (and relatives)—the Clapham Sect—whose intellectual and political efforts were to flourish later in the renewed campaigns against slavery and in various African causes. Wilberforce, Thomas Babington, Zachary Macaulay, James Stephen and Henry Thornton remain among the best-remembered activists against slavery. But what gave abolition its strength before 1807 was not so much its intellectual leadership or the eminence of its leaders, but its deep-seated popularity. The British people impressed its views about the slave trade on Parliament, and ultimately Parliament felt obliged to end the trade. As the Edinburgh review noted in 1807, 'the sense of the nation has pressed abolition upon our rulers'. Yet the historical conundrum remains. Why did they do it? After all, there was no sign that the British slave trade was in economic crisis. In the years when abolition came to prominence—the 1780s and 1790s—the trade boomed. British ships—now operating largely from Liverpool—carried more Africans than ever before, and British industries were busy packing the holds of outbound slave ships with every conceivable commodity required for trade in West Africa and for life and labour on the West Indian plantations. All those most intimately involved in the trade—shippers, merchants, manufacturers and backers—remained vocal in their support for the continuation of the trade (and were vociferously supported, throughout, by the Lords). If contemporaries thought that the slave trade was in economic decline, they kept their worries to themselves. It is true that there were early economic criticisms of slavery itself, and suggestions that normal, free trade might be better. Adam Smith said it, so too did the African Olaudah Equiano and Thomas Clarkson. The chest Clarkson carried round the country was filled with African produce and commodities: evidence and proof that normal trade would easily replace the trade in African humanity. But the fact remains that the overwhelming bulk of the criticism aimed at the slave trade was inspired by religious and moral sentiment.

In a way, this was not perhaps surprising. For a start, much of the abolition activity focussed on local churches, but especially on dissenting chapels. It is clear that by, say, 1789, churches of all sorts had sided with abolition. A generation earlier, they had remained silent or indifferent. Now, when Christian abolitionists spoke out against the slave trade, they did so on religious grounds. Time and again, they laced their writings with biblical denunciations of slavery. There was, of course, an abundance of biblical material to quote on the other side: the Old Testament was

peppered with evidence in favour of slavery (as Christian supporters of US slavery discovered in the nineteenth century). Indeed the ability to draw biblical evidence pro and con slavery became a feature of the slavery debate in the next century in the USA. But in the late eighteenth-century British abolition debates, the tide ran largely in one direction: that gospels and Christian sentiment were deeply opposed to the slave trade. But what made the Christian attack on the slave trade so potent and so persuasive was that it harnessed itself to much more mundane, brutal details.

Thomas Clarkson helped to orchestrate the evidence which was printed by the Abolition Society, and that was presented verbally to parliamentary hearings. This evidence was grim and unremitting: a string of eye-witness accounts of brutal maltreatment of Africans, and a litany of African sufferings which, even by the standards of the late eighteenth century, was unconscionable. What many found unacceptable was that the whole episode was orchestrated by a Christian nation—the British. Two key themes came together, very quickly, in the last twenty years of the eighteenth century, to create a potent political brew: raw secular sufferings fused with Christian outrage. Christians came together to feel that here was a disgrace to their faith, and even non-believers or the indifferent could join them by sensing that the cruelties of the slave trade were inhuman. Both sides could agree that nothing (commercial profit or the sweetness of sugar) could possibly justify what happened as a matter of daily routine on British slave ships.

Equally, both sides rallied around the central and core belief of the abolition movement. The idea of equality, enshrined in the American constitution and later in the French revolution (the rights of man, 'liberty, equality and fraternity'), were fundamentally corrosive of slavery. If black and white were equal, then slavery was impossible to justify. But this secular philosophy was also grounded in religious sentiment. Time and again, early Christian abolitionists asserted the unity of humankind and dismissed the self-serving arguments of the slave lobby (and their scribes) that Africans were both different and unequal, and were born to be the beasts of burden to their white masters. At first, this assertion of Christian equality was the work of a small band of writers and activists, but, after 1787, it quickly blossomed into a widespread and deeply rooted belief. In its turn it was sustained and nourished by the parallel secular attachment to the rights of humanity. Indeed it was often hard to distinguish the secular from the religious arguments in the abolitionist debates. Of course, the more godly, led by Wilberforce in Parliament, were open in their inspiration: that they were attacking the slave trade from a deep sense of Christian outrage.

Compounding this abolitionist surge was the rise of Christianity among the slaves themselves. There were, of course, Africans in London, most of them freed slaves, who denounced the slave trade and who offered their own experience as visible proof both of the iniquities of slavery and of what might be achieved under freedom. It was a story promoted most notably by Olaudah Equiano in his self-published autobiography of 1789. But that book was also the story of a spiritual journey: one man's account of finding his way to Christianity despite everything that slavery could throw at him. The moral was clear; freedom could lead the slaves to Christianity. At the same time, the early (non-conformist) missionaries in the Caribbean were introducing similar ideas and beliefs into the slave quarters—against the wishes of the planters.

Christian slaves became literate slaves, and the lessons of the Bible (expounded by slave preachers) would be corrosive of slavery itself. By their lights, the planters were right to resist the rise of black Christianity: it would undermine the very system of slavery. Remarkably, after many years of silence and indifference, the Christian church had stirred itself and moved against the slave trade and slavery.

When abolition finally passed in 1807, it was widely seen as a triumph for Christian feeling. And it is true that its major leaders and spokesmen were devout men who shaped their campaign on Christian principles. All that, today, does not seem odd or surprising. There are few Christians today who would argue in favour of the slave trade or slavery. And yet Christian abolition was late in rousing itself. When it did, however, it proved a powerful political force. More than that, it left behind a remarkable Christian legacy. Missionaries dispatched to the slave colonies laid the groundwork for a new form of Christianity: that powerful black Christianity which we see today in black communities throughout the West Indies and the US South. Equally, the recent migrations to Europe and to northern US cities saw those black churches transplanted into different settings. Britain is now home to enthusiastic, evangelical and Pentecostal churches which would have amazed Wilberforce and his friends. Yet there is a direct line of descent from these modern churches to the efforts of early missionaries to bring Christianity—and freedom—to the slave quarters, and to purge the Africans of their indigenous beliefs. We now know, of course, that there was often a remarkable blending of older beliefs with the lessons learned from the missionaries.

There remains, however, the troubling and painful issue of Christian involvement in the slave system. Though it is true that Christianity was a powerful agent in the attack and destruction of the slave trade and later, slavery, what about the centuries before? What should the churches (and especially the Anglican church) say about its silence, its activities, its entanglement with, the slave ships and the plantations? It is not an easy or comfortable matter (nor is the church alone—not least because slavery ensnared each and every institution in Britain, from Parliament itself, to the humblest of manufacturers and workers labouring in slave-related industries). Whatever else it achieves, the bi-centenary provides the perfect opportunity to confront the awkward historical realities of the past.

AUTHOR DETAILS

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