

CAMBRIDGE



P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

volume 15

number 2

june 2006

ISSN 1361-7710

Writing group

Denis Alexander PhD
John Coffey PhD
Caroline Eade MA
Michael Ovey MTh MA
Julian Rivers LLM
Michael Schluter PhD
Christopher Townsend MA
James Williams MA
Kate Williams MA
Margaret Wilson BA DipTh

Donations

The Jubilee Centre
3 Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2 NZ
Tel: 01223 566319
Fax: 01223 566359
E-mail: info@jubilee-centre.org
www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers
Registered Charity No. 288783

The abolition of the slave trade:

Christian conscience and political action

by John Coffey

Summary

The year 2007 marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade by the British Parliament. The campaign for abolition was spearheaded by devout Christians, and it stands to this day as perhaps the finest political achievement of what would now be called faith-based activism. But who were the abolitionists, and how did their Christianity motivate them to campaign against the slave trade? This paper examines the Christian mind of the abolitionists, and ponders the lessons for today.

Introduction

On 22 May 1787, twelve devout men assembled at a printing shop in the City of London. Most were Quakers, but they were joined by several Anglicans, including the veteran anti-slavery campaigner, Granville Sharp, and the young Thomas Clarkson, who would devote his entire life to the cause. The twelve established themselves as the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and they recruited a young Yorkshire MP, William Wilberforce, to lead the campaign in the House of Commons. Charming, well connected, eloquent and Evangelical, Wilberforce proved an inspired choice. He and his closest allies were fired with godly zeal for a righteous cause, and buoyed by an enormous swell of support from across the British Isles. The cause was promoted in a flood of publications: sermons, pamphlets, treatises, poems, narratives, newspaper articles, reports and petitions.

Within twenty years of that seminal meeting in the printing shop, the slave trade had been abolished throughout the Empire. In 1833, after the greatest mass petitioning campaign in British history, Parliament abolished slavery itself in British dominions; five years later, in 1838, the slaves were finally emancipated. By the 1880s, slavery had been extinguished in the southern United States and across most of the earth. 'From any historical perspective', writes the pre-eminent historian of slavery, David Brion Davis, 'this was a stupendous transformation'.¹

The rise of Christian abolitionism

British slave trading had begun in the late sixteenth century, and grew apace during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By 1807, around three million slaves had been transported to the Americas on British ships. The trade was occasionally denounced by Christians. Richard Baxter declared that slave-traders were 'fitter to be called devils than Christians', and the Puritan Samuel Sewall published America's first antislavery tract, *The Selling of Joseph* (1700). But most Christians in the early eighteenth century accepted slavery as a fact of life. The evangelist George Whitefield deplored the cruelty of slave-owners in the American South, but did not condemn slavery itself – indeed, he owned over fifty slaves in Georgia. The Anglican Evangelical John Newton was converted while captaining a slave ship in the 1750s, but he did not speak out against the trade until three decades later.² The Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts owned many slaves in the Caribbean – in fact the word 'SOCIETY' was branded on their chests with a red-hot iron to identify them as property of the SPG. For most Britons the brutality of the slave trade was out of sight, out of mind. British slave-traders were carrying almost 40,000 slaves from Africa to the New World every single year, yet there was no public outcry.

Only gradually, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, did a Christian abolitionist movement take shape. It began with American Quakers. As a perfectionist sect, the Quakers believed that true Christianity would be countercultural, but by the 1730s many owned slaves. Three remarkable figures, Benjamin Lay, John Woolman and Anthony Benezet, refused to accept this state of affairs. So tenacious were they in

¹ D. B. Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, Oxford University Press, 1984, p.108.

² John Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, 1788.

challenging their brethren that in 1754 the Philadelphia Quakers officially renounced the practice of slaveholding. Slavery was also coming under attack from Enlightenment philosophers like Montesquieu and Rousseau, but it was Christian activists who initiated and organised an abolitionist movement.

From the 1760s, the Anglican Evangelical Granville Sharp campaigned with some success in the courts on behalf of vulnerable black Britons – in the Somerset case of 1772, Lord Mansfield ruled that once in Britain, slaves could not be compelled to return to the colonies.³ By the 1770s, Evangelicals were waking up to the seriousness of the issue – inspired by Benezet and Sharp, the British Methodist John Wesley and the American Presbyterian Benjamin Rush denounced the slave trade in influential pamphlets. Increasingly, the horrors of this traffic in human beings were being exposed to public view – the most notorious atrocity involved the slave ship *Zong*, whose captain had thrown 130 slaves overboard in order to claim insurance for their deaths.

Once the British Abolition Committee was established in 1787, abolitionism quickly became a mass movement. In 1788–92, there was a media blitz and petitioning campaign timed to coincide with Wilberforce's Parliamentary bills. Thomas Clarkson had worked tirelessly to assemble damning evidence against the trade, and the abolitionists pioneered many of the tactics of modern pressure groups: logos, petitions, rallies, book tours, posters, letters to MPs, a national organisation with local chapters, and the mass mobilisation of grass roots agitation. There were even boycotts of consumer goods, as up to 400,000 Britons stopped buying the rum and sugar that came from slave plantations in the Caribbean. In a sermon to his fellow Methodists, Samuel Bradburn urged them to join the boycott, and recalled that hundreds of Manchester Methodists had signed a petition against the slave trade 'in the Chapel at the Communion Table, on the Lord's Day'.⁴

In just one generation, there had been a sea-change in Christian attitudes on both sides of the Atlantic. 'Thirty years ago', wrote the American Jonathan Edwards Jr., 'scarcely a man in this country thought either the slave trade or the slavery of Negroes to be wrong'. His own father, the famous theologian and revivalist, Jonathan Edwards Sr., had owned slaves. But the practice could no longer be excused. 'Our pious fathers', wrote the younger Edwards, 'lived in a time of ignorance which God winked at; but now he commandeth all men everywhere to repent of this wickedness'.⁵

Historians have worked hard to explain the sudden rise of abolitionism at this juncture in history. Some emphasise the impact of cultural change and the new bourgeois cult of sensibility; others suggest that abolitionism (albeit unwittingly) served the interests of the new industrial capitalism; the most recent analysis argues that the key lies in the anxieties and dislocations created by the American Revolution.⁶ Yet all agree that Quakers and Evangelicals played a central role in the abolitionist movement, though their success depended on building a broad coalition that included Whig and Tory politicians, Enlightenment rationalists, Romantic poets and sympathetic journalists.

The Christian campaigners were not naive idealists and were not afraid to appeal to British interests – Clarkson wrote a major work on the 'impolicy' of the trade, and the Evangelical James Stephen eventually persuaded Parliament that dismantling the Atlantic slave trade would undermine the colonial power of Britain's rivals, especially France. Parliament abolished the trade in 1806–07 after abolitionists exploited 'an unpredictable and

fortuitous conjuncture of politico-economic circumstances'.⁷ But as David Brion Davis notes, 'this political dimension should not obscure the crucial points': 'from the 1770s onward, devout Quakers were always the backbone of active antislavery organization and communication'; 'religion was the central concern of all the British abolitionist leaders'; and grass-roots support came 'overwhelmingly' from the Dissenting churches.⁸ As Davis writes, 'the fall of New World slavery could not have occurred if there had been no abolitionist movements'. This was 'a moral achievement that may have no parallel'.⁹

Clarkson and his allies succeeded because they produced compelling evidence of the cruelty of the trade, evidence presented to Parliament in a famous report and relayed to a wide audience in harrowing narratives of human suffering. But it is misleading to conclude (as does one recent account) that abolitionists realised that 'the way to stir men and women to action is not by biblical argument, but through the vivid, unforgettable description of acts of great injustice done to their fellow human beings'. To say that 'abolitionists placed their hope not in sacred texts, but in human empathy',¹⁰ is to divorce two things that Christian abolitionists wedded together, and to ignore the evidence of antislavery texts. If religious argument did not stir people to action, why did abolitionists give it so much space? For in publication after publication, critics of the slave trade quoted Scripture and rooted their campaign in Christian values and ideals. In the rest of this paper, we will explore the theological ideas of the abolitionists, and consider the lessons for our own world.

The mind of the abolitionists

Christian abolitionists came from across the denominational spectrum and from various parts of the British Atlantic world. Yet throughout their varied writings, a number of key themes appear again and again.

'Of one blood': the idea of brotherhood

Abolitionists believed passionately in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Indeed, the campaign's logo (devised by Josiah Wedgwood) was an image of a manacled slave on his knees beseeching his captor: 'Am I not a man and a brother?' Antislavery activism relied on the conviction that all people were made in God's image (Genesis 1:26–27) and precious in his sight. God was the Father of all mankind, all nations were his 'offspring', 'of one blood' (Acts 17:26). Disturbed that blacks 'stand convicted – of a darker skin!', the Anglican Evangelical Hannah More urged her readers to 'Respect his image which they bear... They still are men, and men shou'd still be free'.¹¹ 'Africans and Europeans, Pagans and Christians, are all on a level', wrote the Calvinist Baptist Abraham Booth. Oppressed Africans 'are brethren of the human kind'.¹² 'We are the common offspring of one universal Parent', wrote the Anglican Thomas Bradshaw, 'with whom there is no respect of persons'.¹³ When William Cowper contemplated slavery he lamented that 'the natural bond/Of brotherhood is sever'd'.¹⁴ Every reader of Scripture should know, wrote Cowper,

That souls have no discriminating hue,
Alike important in their Maker's view;
That none are free from blemish since the fall,
And love divine has paid one price for all.¹⁵

7 R. Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1807*, Macmillan, 1975, p.412.

8 Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, p.139.

9 D. B. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of New World Slavery*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p.331.

10 A. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery*, Pan, 2006, p.366.

11 Hannah More, *Slavery: A Poem*, 1788, p.10.

12 Abraham Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species, and the Enslaving of Innocent Persons, inimical to the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Christ*, 1792, p.17.

13 Thomas Bradshaw, *The Slave Trade inconsistent with Reason and Religion*, 1788, p.13.

14 William Cowper, *The Task*, 1784, book 2.

15 William Cowper, *Charity*, 1782.

3 See Steven M. Wise, *Though the Heavens may Fall: The Landmark Trial that led to the End of Human Slavery*, Pimlico, 2006.

4 Samuel Bradburn, *An Address to the People called Methodists concerning the Evil of Encouraging the Slave Trade*, 1792, pp.13–14.

5 Jonathan Edwards Jr, *The Injustice and Impolicy of the Slave Trade*, 1791, pp.29–30.

6 See B. Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility, 1760–1807*, Palgrave, 2005; D. B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823*, Cornell University Press, 1975; C. L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

The doctrines of creation, fall and redemption underscored human equality in the eyes of God.

The Christian belief in the fundamental unity of the human race clashed with fashionable theories of polygenesis and African inferiority, promoted by infidel philosophers. As Davis explains, ‘early antislavery writers like James Ramsay and Granville Sharp repeatedly identified the theory of racial inferiority with Hume, Voltaire, and materialistic philosophy in general; they explicitly presented their attacks on slavery as a vindication of Christianity, moral accountability, and the unity of mankind’.¹⁶ Hannah More deplored the new philosophical racism:

Perish th’ illiberal thought which wou’d debase
The native genius of the sable race
Perish the proud philosophy, which sought
To rob them of the pow’rs of equal thought!
Does then th’ immortal principle within
Change with the casual colour of a skin?¹⁷

The most eloquent testimony against ideas of racial inferiority came from black converts to Christianity. Abolitionists pointed to the writings of accomplished Africans: the letters of Ignatius Sancho, the poems of Phillis Wheatley, and the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano.¹⁸ Equiano himself pointed to Scripture. Commenting on a book arguing ‘that the Negro race is an inferior species of mankind’, he wrote indignantly: ‘Oh fool! See the 17th chapter of the Acts, verse 26: “God hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on all the face of the earth”’. Working out the logical implications of the text, Equiano argued in favour of racial intermarriage, and went on to marry Susannah Cullen of Soham in Cambridgeshire.¹⁹

‘Deliverance to the captives’: the idea of liberty

Abolitionists believed that common humanity entailed equal rights, especially the right to liberty. Because liberty was a gift of the Creator, men were not free to dispose of it by selling themselves into slavery, nor could they lawfully deprive anyone else of their liberty by force. The ‘slave-traders’ claim that Africans were now the property of Europeans was without foundation in natural law, and constituted a violation of natural rights. The Scottish philosophers who developed this line of argument were building on the Christian natural law tradition – Francis Hutcheson was a Church of Scotland minister, and James Beattie was a well known critic of Hume’s irreligion. Their argument had great appeal. ‘Liberty’, wrote John Wesley, ‘is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air. And no human can deprive him of that right, which he derives from the law of nature’.²⁰ Hannah More also used the language of human rights:

What page of human annals can record
A deed so bright as human rights restor’d?
O may that god-like deed, that shining page,
Redeem our fame, and consecrate our age!²¹

The right to liberty was dear to eighteenth-century minds. Britons and Americans saw themselves as free peoples, living in ‘this enlightened age’.²² In 1788, the centenary of the Glorious Revolution, abolitionists pointed out the glaring contradiction between the slave trade and Britain’s ‘boasted love of liberty’. As Hannah More put it: ‘Shall Britain, where the soul of Freedom reigns,/Forge chains for others she herself disdains?’²³ For

American Evangelical abolitionists like Jonathan Edwards Jr, Samuel Hopkins and Benjamin Rush, slavery was incompatible with the Declaration of Independence which stated that ‘all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights’.

The Protestant passion for liberty was fed by Scripture. Abolitionists recalled the foundational significance of the Exodus in Israel’s history, and argued that it revealed divine opposition to human systems of oppression and bondage. The slaves themselves saw America as a place of Egyptian bondage, and sang about deliverance in their spirituals – one historian writes that ‘No single symbol captures more clearly the distinctiveness of Afro-American Christianity than the symbol of Exodus’.²⁴ The African-American, Phillis Wheatley, wrote: ‘in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert that the same Principle lives in us. God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time’.²⁵ Like the children of Israel, slaves cried to God for freedom, and abolitionists joined in their prayer. In their eyes, God’s concern for the poor, the oppressed and the enslaved was found throughout Scripture. In letters to the press, Equiano cited OT texts on care for the downtrodden: ‘Those that honour their Maker have mercy on the poor’ (Proverbs 14:31); ‘Was not my soul grieved for the poor?’ (Job 30:25).²⁶ Abolitionists often quoted the mission statement of Jesus himself, taking it as the text for antislavery sermons: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor...to preach deliverance to the captives...to set at liberty them that are bruised’ (Luke 10:18). The emancipation of slaves, they argued, was on the agenda of Jesus, and an outworking of his Gospel of the Kingdom.

‘Love thy neighbour’: the idea of benevolence

Eighteenth-century Christians were imbued with the values of their age. The moral philosophers of the British Enlightenment, like Francis Hutcheson, had placed the value of ‘benevolence’ at centre stage, and argued that moral action should increase human well-being, producing ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’. The notion of ‘benevolence’ was promoted by Latitudinarian theologians, but before long Evangelicals too adopted the new language.²⁷ The Calvinist philosopher and revivalist, Jonathan Edwards, presented ‘benevolence’ as a key element of ‘true virtue’, and his followers came to see slave-owning as incompatible with ‘disinterested benevolence’.²⁸ Granville Sharp declared that ‘The glorious system of the gospel destroys all narrow, national partiality; and makes us citizens of the world, by obliging us to profess universal benevolence; but more especially, we are bound, as Christians, to commiserate and assist to the utmost of our power all persons in distress, and captivity’.²⁹ The Baptist, James Dore, wrote that Christianity was ‘a religion calculated to inspire universal benevolence, by teaching us that all mankind are our Brethren, that they stand in the same common relation to God, the universal Parent...it is calculated for general utility’.³⁰ If this was classic Enlightenment language, it was linked to the biblical concept of ‘mercy’. ‘That Slave-holding is utterly inconsistent with Mercy’, wrote Wesley, ‘is almost too plain to need a proof’.³¹ In Hannah More’s poem on slavery, the cherub ‘Mercy’ descends

16 See Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, pp.130–136.

17 More, *Slavery*, pp.4–5.

18 Their writings can be found in V. Caretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the 18th Century*, University of Kentucky Press, 1996.

19 Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. V. Caretta, Penguin, 2003, pp.334, 331–32.

20 John Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, 1774, p.27.

21 More, *Slavery*, p.18.

22 Bradburn, *An Address*, p.6.

23 More, *Slavery*, p.18.

24 A. Raboteau, ‘African Americans, Exodus and the new Israel’, in D. G. Hackett, ed., *Religion and American Culture*, Routledge, 1995, p.81.

25 Cited from E. S. Gaustad & M. A. Noll, eds, *A Documentary History of Religion in America to 1877*, Eerdmans, 2003, pp.224–25.

26 Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, pp.330, 334–335, 340.

27 D. B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Thought*, Cornell University Press, 1966, chs. 11–12.

28 K. Minkema and H. Stout, ‘The Edwardsean tradition and antebellum slavery’, *Journal of American History*, 92, 2005, pp.47–74.

29 Granville Sharp, *An Essay on Slavery*, 1773, pp.22–23.

30 James Dore, *A Sermon on the African Slave Trade*, 1788, pp.34–35.

31 Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, p.18.

softly to shed 'celestial dew' on 'feeling hearts' until 'every breast the soft contagion feels'.³² The cult of sensibility blended with Christian values to create a humanitarian ethos.

Abolitionists repeatedly invoked the Golden Rule: 'All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them' (Matthew 7:12). Obeying this 'Royal Law of Christ' involved looking at the world from the Other's point of view. Abolitionist preachers urged their listeners to imagine themselves being enslaved. The Baptist preacher, Abraham Booth, visualised himself, his family and thousands of his fellow countrymen 'kidnapped, bought, and sold into a state of cruel slavery'. He was left with a sense of outrage.³³ The maverick Quaker, Benjamin Lay, even kidnapped a child (temporarily) from its slaving-owning parents to help them see the distress their practice caused! Thinking about the Golden Rule required people to consider how their actions impacted others, including African slaves on the other side of the Atlantic. The Methodist, Samuel Bradburn, observed to his horror that though he had 'always abhorred slavery in every shape', he had been 'in some degree accessory to the Bondage, Torture and Death of myriads of human beings by assisting to consume the produce of their labour, their tears, and their blood!' He asked God's pardon, and hoped that by boycotting sugar he could 'make some restitution for my former want of attention to my duty in this respect'.³⁴

Christian benevolence involved sharing the love of God as revealed in Christ. So as well as fighting for the emancipation of African bodies, abolitionists longed for the deliverance of African souls – redemption was both a physical and a spiritual concept. 'O burst thou all their chains in sunder', prayed Wesley, 'more especially the chains of their sins; Thou Saviour of all, make them free, that they may be free indeed'.³⁵ Wesley and others knew that masters often prevented the preaching of the Gospel to their slaves, fearing that conversion to Christianity would undermine their servility. Methodist and Baptist preachers clashed frequently with slave-owners because they won numerous converts among the slaves, integrated them into their churches, and started to denounce slaveholding. By 1800, around a third of American Methodists were of African descent. The rise of antislavery was accompanied by the dramatic growth of black Christianity. For many Evangelicals in the late eighteenth century (both black and white), the evangelisation of the slaves went hand-in-hand with antislavery activism. Only in the nineteenth century, as they became part of the Southern establishment, did white Evangelicals in the American South make their peace with slavery. In a tragic compromise, they started to soft-pedal the social ramifications of the Gospel.³⁶

'Vengeance is mine': the idea of judgement

If the God of abolitionists was a benevolent deity, he was also a God of justice who would punish unrepentant sinners. This was a fearful thought. 'Will not the groans of this deeply afflicted and oppressed people reach heaven', asked the Quaker Benezet, 'and must not the inevitable consequence be pouring forth of the judgements of God upon their oppressors'.³⁷ William Cowper warned those engaged in the trade: 'Remember, Heaven has an avenging rod,/To smite the poor is treason against God!'³⁸ The former slave Equiano wrote ominously to the author of a pro-slavery pamphlet: 'Remember the God who has said, Vengeance is mine, and I will repay (not only the oppressor, but also the justifier of the oppressor)'.³⁹ Another African Christian, Ottobah Cugoano,

warned slavemasters that if they did not repent they would 'meet with the full stroke of the long suspended vengeance of heaven'.⁴⁰

But those directly implicated in the trade were not the only ones in the hands of an angry God. Abolitionists never tired of repeating that 'national sins produce national judgements'. As the historian Roger Anstey suggested, Evangelicals were passionate against the slave trade because of their 'overwhelming conviction that Providence regulates the affairs of men and in so doing chastises errant nations' – this belief was 'a spur to incessant activity'.⁴¹ The very titles of their pamphlets highlighted the threat of divine judgement. Near the outset of the long campaign, Granville Sharp wrote *The Law of Retribution: A Serious Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies, founded on unquestionable examples of God's Temporal Vengeance against Tyrants, Slaveholders and Oppressors* (1776); at its close, James Ramsay published *The Danger of the Country* (1807).

But Evangelicals were not alone in warning of collective guilt and national judgements. The Anglican Latitudinarian, Peter Peckard, reminded his readers that ancient Tyre 'traded, as we do, in the persons of Men. She became rich, as we do, in the iniquity of her traffick...But what was the sequel? The Lord gave a commandment against the Merchant city to destroy it, and it was levelled to the ground'.⁴² Abraham Booth declared that Tyre and Sidon were 'the Liverpool and Bristol of ancient times'.⁴³ If the British did not repent of their collective sin, abolitionists warned, the land would face a dreadful judgement. As Benezet put it, 'must we not tremble to think what a load of guilt lies upon our Nation'.⁴⁴

Biblical slavery?

Whilst abolitionist ideas of brotherhood, liberty, benevolence and judgement were rooted in Scripture, the Bible also presented them with a problem, since both OT Israel and the NT church seemed to accept (or at least tolerate) the institution of slavery. As the former slave Cugoano admitted, the claim that the Old Testament sanctioned slavery was 'the greatest bulwark of defence which the advocates and favourers of slavery can advance'. Cugoano thought that this was 'an inconsistent and diabolical use of the sacred writings'. How ironic it was to see slave-traders ransacking the Pentateuch to legitimate slavery while blithely ignoring texts which made slave trading a capital crime: 'He that stealeth a man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death' (Exodus 21:16; also Deuteronomy 24:7).⁴⁵

Abolitionists usually admitted that the Law of Moses did sanction a form of slavery, and that this was legitimate in its time and place. But they distinguished between the perpetual enslavement of Gentiles, and the highly qualified servitude of fellow Jews. The enslavement of other Jews was to be dissolved at the year of Jubilee, and abolitionists often argued that it was 'not, properly speaking, slavery' – which by definition involved permanent rights of ownership.⁴⁶ The enslavement of the Gentiles, they maintained, was a unique punishment for exceptional wickedness, and formed no precedent for other nations. In any case, even these slaves were guaranteed better treatment than modern Africans. The Israelites, as one writer noted, were 'exhorted to remember their own bondage in the land of Israel, and to treat their servants with the same lenity they wished to experience themselves' (see Deuteronomy 15:12–15; 24:14–22).⁴⁷ OT law regulated slavery in a manner that was unique in the ancient world.⁴⁸

40 Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*, 1787, p.25.

41 R. Anstey, 'A re-interpretation of the abolition of the British slave trade, 1806–1807', *English Historical Review*, 87, 1972, p.313.

42 Peter Peckard, *National Crimes the cause of National Punishments*, 1795, p.17.

43 Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species*, p.26.

44 Benezet, *A Caution and a Warning*, p.33.

45 Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, pp.29–30, 64–66. This text was printed on Cugoano's title page.

46 Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species*, pp.8–14.

47 Bradshaw, *The Slave Trade*, p.12.

48 For helpful discussions of OT slavery see C. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics and the People of God*, IVP, 2004, pp.333–37; M. Schuller and J. Ashcroft, eds, *The Jubilee Manifesto*, IVP, 2005, pp.193–95.

32 More, *Slavery*, p.19.

33 Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species*, p.28.

34 Bradburn, *An Address*, p.20.

35 Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery*, p.28.

36 For this sad tale, see D. Mathew, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780–1845*, Princeton University Press, 1965.

37 Anthony Benezet, *A Caution and a Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies*, 1766, p.9.

38 Cowper, *Charity*.

39 Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, p.339

Abolitionists also maintained that ‘the laws of brotherly love are infinitely enlarged’ by the Gospel, which proclaims ‘goodwill towards men without distinction’. Since all men were now to be treated as brethren, the Mosaic ban on perpetual enslavement of fellow Israelites was universalised.⁴⁹ Of course, pro-slavery Christians emphasised that neither Christ nor the apostles demanded the abolition of slavery. But abolitionists responded that slavery was tolerated as an evil by the early church, just like ‘the sanguinary despotism of Nero’ and ‘the sports of gladiators’, neither of which was expressly condemned in the New Testament.⁵⁰ Despotism and slavery were contrary to the ‘spirit’ of Christianity, whose ‘merciful operations’, though ‘gradual and slow’, eventually undermined both institutions.⁵¹ Abolition could not happen in the first centuries, when the church was too weak and slavery was integral to the Roman economy. As Equiano observed, if Paul ‘had absolutely declared the iniquity of slavery...he would have occasioned more tumult than reformation’. Yet his letter to Philemon plainly showed ‘that he thought it derogatory to the honour of Christianity, that men who are bought with the inestimable price of Christ’s blood, shall be esteemed slaves, and the private property of their fellow-men’.⁵² Paul had pointed the way; it was for later Christians to complete the journey.⁵³

Abolitionists maintained that over the long run Christianity was inimical to the institution of slavery. The great Scottish Enlightenment historian (and Church of Scotland minister), William Robertson, claimed that ‘the spirit and genius of the Christian religion’ had gradually undermined many of the evils of the ancient world, including ‘the practice of slavery’. He observed that the enslavement of fellow Christians had been widely forbidden by the church and its bishops, so that slavery largely disappeared from Christian Europe by the twelfth century.⁵⁴ The Cambridge Baptist, Robert Robinson, amplified the argument. In the central rite of communion, he reasoned, slaves and slaveholders ate and drank together as brethren, undercutting earthly hierarchies. Christ had brought ‘deliverance to the captives’ by teaching principles of brotherhood and human dignity that ‘slowly but certainly subverted the whole system of slavery’.⁵⁵ The revival of slavery in the sixteenth century was a terrible reverse, but it would not survive the consistent application of Christian principles.⁵⁶

Learning from the abolitionists

The profoundly Christian character of the abolitionist movement constitutes a serious stumbling block for secular commentators who rail against the ‘mixing of religion and politics’. Increasingly these days, secular Europeans and Americans are inclined to see religion as an essentially malign force in human affairs, one that should be excluded from public life, and securely locked away in a privatised compartment. Yet as the abolitionist movement illustrates, public religion has proved a powerful force for reform in Western society. In the last half-century, Christian churches made a vital contribution to the American Civil Rights Movement, the overthrow of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the fall of apartheid in South Africa.⁵⁷ Christian charities also played a central role in the worldwide campaign for the abolition of Third World debt, giving it the biblically resonant name, Jubilee 2000.

Christian social and political activism has made a major contri-

bution to the culture of modernity. Too many opinion-makers today operate with a fundamentally erroneous picture of modern history – they assume that the eighteenth-century Enlightenment secularised society and constituted a clean break with a religious past. The reality is rather different. As we have noted, a good deal of Enlightenment thought (especially in the Protestant world) still bore a Christian character, and Christian activism flourished during the ‘Age of Reason’. It has been a vital force ever since. The modern world can do without religious violence, but can it do without the Christian conscience?

If the abolitionists have a lesson for secularists, their ideals and values present an equally sharp challenge to contemporary Christians. Modern Christianity has been damaged by the severing of evangelism from social action. Liberal churches often embrace the political activism of the abolitionists but seem embarrassed by the very thought of evangelism. As a result, churchgoing is plummeting, pews are empty, and within a generation there may be few Christians left to do social action! Conservative churches, observing this dismal state of affairs, sometimes fear that social involvement is just a dangerous distraction from the proclamation of the Gospel. Talk of human brotherhood, benevolence and human rights, which once came naturally to Evangelicals, can now sound suspiciously ‘liberal’. As a result, modern Evangelicals have sometimes looked anything but the heirs of William Wilberforce and Granville Sharp.

Yet it is far from clear that we should avoid one reductionist view of Christian mission (the ‘social gospel’) only to replace it with another kind of reductionism (a Christianity shorn of concern for the created order, for the poor and the oppressed).⁵⁸ For most abolitionist Christians, ending the slave trade and evangelising non-Christians were complementary activities. Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*, for example, was both an anti-slavery tract and an Evangelical conversion story. Dynamic Evangelical movements like the Methodists and Baptists were at the forefront of British antislavery from the 1780s to the 1830s. Moreover, as Seymour Drescher observes, ‘the take-off of British abolitionism coincided almost exactly with the revival of the British missionary movement’.⁵⁹ Evangelisation and social reform flowed from a revitalised Christianity. Together they bore eloquent testimony to the transforming power of the Gospel. As David Brion Davis has argued, Christian abolitionism served to rehabilitate Christianity as a force for human progress in the face of challenges from rationalist scepticism.⁶⁰ Thomas Clarkson’s definitive history of the abolitionist movement was (among other things) an apologetic for Christianity. In its opening pages, Clarkson argued that the slave trade was the greatest of the social evils conquered by the Christian religion. On the final page, he urged his readers: ‘retire to thy closets, and pour out thy thanksgivings to the Almighty for this his unspeakable act of mercy to thy oppressed fellow-creatures’.⁶¹

Abolitionist Christians, of course, are not above criticism. Some were against the slave trade, but more willing to tolerate slavery itself; some rejected racism, but retained condescending attitudes towards Africans; some showed little concern for exploited workers in Britain’s industrial cities; some were uncritical of British imperialism. Yet for all their blind spots, the clarity of their moral vision of the slave trade stands as a lasting challenge to later generations. As contemporary Christians we need to ask ourselves hard questions: Does our faith shake our moral complacency and drive us to do justly, show mercy and walk humbly with our God? And are there grave injustices that we have ignored,

49 See Sharp, *An Essay on Slavery*, p.22.

50 Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species*, p.26.

51 Bradshaw, *The Slave Trade*, p.13.

52 Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, pp.337–38.

53 For modern analyses of the hermeneutical issues see W. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation*, Herald Press, 1983, ch. 1; W. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*, IVP, 2001.

54 W. Robertson, *The Situation of the World at the Time of Christ’s Appearance*, 1755, pp.28–32.

55 R. Robinson, *Slavery inconsistent with the Spirit of Christianity*, 1788, pp.12–13, 5–8.

56 For a spirited defence of the claim that Christianity undermined slavery in the long run see R. Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts and the End of Slavery*, Princeton University Press, 2003, ch. 4.

57 See J. W. De Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

58 See Ranald Macaulay, ‘The Great Commissions’, *Cambridge Papers*, 7:2, 1998; and T. Chester, *The Gospel to the Poor: Sharing the Gospel through Social Involvement*, IVP, 2004.

59 C. Bolt and S. Drescher, eds, *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform*, W. W. Dawson, 1980, p.47.

60 Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, pp.129–53.

61 Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols, 1808, vol. I, pp.5–9; vol. II, p.587.

much as Christians once disregarded the horrors of the trade in African slaves?

It may be that we have too many ills to combat, and no one great evil that pricks the Christian conscience and galvanises mass action. For some Christians, the burning issue is global poverty. While we in the West enjoy unparalleled affluence, hundreds of millions live on the brink of starvation. Just as eighteenth-century Britons learned that their consumption of sugar sustained the slave economy, so we need to see that our consumer choices can contribute to the exploitation of the world's poor. Christians must work to 'make poverty history'.

For others, the issue of our day is abortion. Like transported slaves, unborn children are out of sight, out of mind, and quite defenceless. Their destruction happens silently, and Christians must raise their voice in protest.

For others, human-induced climate change should be high on the Christian agenda. As the recent statement of the Evangelical Climate Initiative puts it: 'Millions of people could die in this century because of climate change, most of them our poorest global neighbours'. Love for the Creator of our world, love for our neighbours, and the demands of stewardship require that we act now.⁶² Once again, this action requires an imaginative leap – like our eighteenth-century predecessors, we will have to learn that seemingly innocuous actions (like taking frequent cheap-flight holidays) might contribute in a small way to a human catastrophe.

These issues hardly exhaust the list of competing claims on our attention. Indeed, slavery itself is returning in new forms, as human trafficking emerges as a global business, involving the transportation of over a million people a year for forced labour, sexual exploitation or other forms of servitude.

Conclusion

Faced with such a plethora of woes, it is easy to feel powerless. Yet the lesson of the abolitionists is that God can use conscientious Christians who think globally and act locally to accomplish seemingly impossible things. When the philosopher John Stuart Mill reflected on the abolition of the slave trade and the demise of slavery itself, he concluded that these great events had happened not because of 'any change in the distribution of material interests, but by the spread of moral convictions'. 'It is what men think', wrote Mill, 'that determines how they act'. Modern historians have been sceptical about this idealist interpretation of abolition – they correctly emphasise the importance of political contingencies, and the complex motivations of the participants.

But if 'the spread of moral convictions' was not a sufficient cause of the rise and triumph of abolitionism, it was a necessary one. Ideas mattered, and the leading abolitionists cannot be understood without reference to their Christianity. They believed that all people are God's offspring and bearers of the divine image; they believed that you must love your neighbour as yourself and do to others as you would have them do to you; they believed

in a God who heard the cry of the oppressed, and a Messiah who had come to bring deliverance to captives; and they believed that sooner or later, God would punish a nation that failed to repent of its iniquitous exploitation of another race. These simple religious convictions lent a special intensity to the campaign against the slave trade, turning it into a sacred cause. If we doubt the power and promise of Christian beliefs, we should remember the abolitionists.

Further reading

Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1807*, Macmillan, 1975. Now out of print, this remains the finest academic account of British abolition.

James G. Basker, ed., *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery, 1660–1810*, Yale University Press, 2002. With poems from 250 writers, this anthology is the best possible introduction to the eighteenth-century mind.

Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, University of North Carolina Press, 2006. This major new work is the most sophisticated and persuasive attempt to explain the dramatic rise of a British abolitionist movement in the wake of the American Revolution. It contains key chapters on why Anglican Evangelicals and Quakers took centre stage in the campaign against the slave trade.

Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. V. Caretta, Penguin Classics, 2003. The classic eighteenth-century slave autobiography.

Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery*, Pan, 2006. A riveting narrative, though it downplays the theological beliefs of the abolitionists.

Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440–1870*, Phoenix Press, 2006. This is a grand survey of the rise and fall of the slave trade.

www.brychancarey.com is an excellent website on British abolitionists with a special focus on black abolitionists.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Writing Group and to Professor David Killingray for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Its shortcomings, of course, are my own responsibility.

Dr John Coffey trained as a historian at Cambridge University. His research is on religion, politics and ideas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He is the author of several books, including Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689 (Longman, 2000). He is a Reader in Early Modern History at the University of Leicester.

62 The statement can be found at www.christiansandclimate.org

Receiving Cambridge Papers

If you would like to receive *Cambridge Papers*, and you are not already on our mailing list, please join via our website www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers or send an e-mail to info@jubilee-centre.org

Alternatively, please send your name and address to:
The Jubilee Centre, 3 Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2NZ
Tel: 01223 566319, Fax: 01223 566359

There is no subscription charge but if you are able to do so, you are invited to make a donation from time to time, by standing order, cheque or credit card, to help meet the cost of publishing and distributing *Cambridge Papers*. If you are a UK taxpayer, signing a Gift Aid declaration (available from the Jubilee Centre) will increase the value of your donations.

All available papers dating back to 1992 can be downloaded free of charge from our website.

To encourage debate, we have created a Responses section on our website. There is an open invitation to write a response of up to 500 words to a recent *Cambridge Paper*. Selected contributions will be published on the site at www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers/responses.php

Cambridge Papers is a non-profit making quarterly publication which aims to contribute to debate on contemporary issues from a Christian perspective. The writing group is an informal association of Christians sharing common convictions and concerns. The contribution of each is as an individual only and not representative of any church or organisation.

Next issue: Development: Moving the goalposts