



Religion and Slavery

I observed all the oppression that goes on under the sun: the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors—Ecclesiastes 4:1¹

This has been a year of marking the bicentenary of the Parliamentary Act, in March 1807, for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. We have seen exhibitions, country-wide celebratory events, debates, innumerable websites and blogs, special resources for schools, documentaries and even a superb film, *Amazing Grace*, dramatising the life and work of anti-slavery champion William Wilberforce. This bicentenary has given us the impetus to reflect on the origins of slavery, its function in the global economy, and consider who carried responsibility for it.

Religion and its relationship with slavery



People often use the Bible and its ancient teachings on slavery to try to address the question of responsibility, and consider whether religion supports or is opposed to slavery. The origins of slavery, however, are in ancient history, long before the present forms of religion. Slavery was embedded in almost every ancient culture worldwide that we know of. In biblical times, it was an integral part of society, and biblical sources in the Hebrew Bible (also known as the Old Testament), the New Testament and the Koran simply describe the system, rather than condoning or criticising it. Even the most famous liberation narrative in the Bible, the exodus of Israelites from slavery in Egypt, which inspired modern liberation theology, is actually about the oppression of a nation, rather than about slavery itself. The liberated Israelites are then taught rules to live by—which include how to treat their household slaves.



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The sacred texts of the 3 Abrahamic faiths—

Judaism, Christianity and Islam—contain within them many teachings about slavery, and some of these are contradictory. For example, the ancient Jewish tradition teaches: 'You may acquire male and female slaves from the nations around you... they shall become your property: you may keep them as a possession for your children after you to inherit them as property for all time'—*Leviticus 25:44-46*. On the other hand, it also teaches: 'Is this not the fast I ask for: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of slavery?'—*Isaiah 58:6*.

Similarly, the early Christian tradition teaches, in St. Paul's 'Epistles', that slaves should 'obey their masters', and that it might even be commendable for enslaved Christians to suffer at the hands of cruel masters (*1 Peter 2:18-25*). And yet the same early Christian tradition also taught that slave traders were condemned: '...law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God.'—*1 Timothy 1:9-11²*



The same kind of contradictions can be found in the Koran, in that early Islam accepted the institution of slavery, yet liberating a slave is a good deed. What this demonstrates in all these religions, is that there is a variety of attitudes to slavery in their scriptures, ranging from criticism to acceptance.

The involvement of religious people in the transatlantic slave trade

The slave trade, practised worldwide, was always relatively lucrative, even when slaves were mostly captives of war. But when the transatlantic slave trade began in earnest by people being kid-



napped from their homes and villages, it moved to a different, even more sinister, level of industry. Now, many more people became involved—and from all different parts of society. Because the transatlantic slave trade emerged within a society where most people were still religious believers, it is not surprising that religious arguments were used to support it. Indeed, scriptural teachings were often quoted to justify the idea that some races were superior to others, and therefore to promote the idea that people of one race could actually own members of another race.

No religion holds a monopoly on truth, nor does any one religion teach a sole monolithic 'truth'. Religions also change over time, religious teachings and beliefs shift and different interpretations emerge. Religious teachings



both reflect and re-shape the socio-political reality—witness, for example, the shift within Christianity and Judaism towards women's rights, and towards gay rights. The religious attitude towards slavery changed alongside the change in the social and political climate.

As social and political attitudes towards slavery gradually changed, there was also a parallel shift in what religious voices were saying, and a gradual move within institutional religions in the west from defending slavery to condemning it. Just as it had been possible to find scriptural quotations to justify slavery, it was now important to select those that criticised it.

Nevertheless, one shameful strand continued, even within religious teachings: that of racial hatred and racist supremacy. Slavery may have officially ended, but anti-black attitudes remained, defended by some religious leaders who used racist interpretations of scriptures. One of these was the infamous Curse of Ham, the widely-held interpretation of part of the Noah story in the Bible, that Ham was black and therefore black people were cursed with eternal slavery.³ These racist interpretations are still used by white supremacists today. In mainstream religion in the west, the discourse changed radically in the second half of the 20th century, as civil rights and anti-racist movements gained momentum. But the 'racist legacy of black slavery was to prove durable and resistant long



after slavery itself had faded from Western thought and memory.⁴ Our religious leaders were now needed to take the moral and spiritual lead



in teaching about equality, tolerance and humanity. One such example of religious leadership was the friendship of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who worked together for civil rights in the USA, and taught what Heschel called 'moral grandeur and spiritual audacity', the injunction for religious people to take a stand. 'Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it,' he wrote to President Kennedy, in June 1963. 'Please demand of religious leaders personal involvement not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes [sic].'

This stance, of religious leaders as activists—standing up for the dispossessed, those forgotten by society, the invisible victims, the most vulnerable—is the stance that most religious leaders work from today. And it is the lens through which religious leaders look at what is called the modern global slave trade. It is this slave trade that now demands us to take a moral and religious stand. Urgently



The modern global slave trade: today's slaves, bonded labour, human trafficking

Defeating human trafficking is a great moral calling of our time.—Condoleeza Rice, US Secretary of State.

'It certainly was a momentous day in 1833 when the British Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act, which gave freedom to all slaves held captive in the British Empire,' writes David Batstone, journalist and Professor of Ethics at San Francisco University (in *Not for Sale, The Return of the Global Slave Trade and How We Can Fight It*). 'Abolition laws eventually spread to nearly every nation in the world.

'In our own day, however, a thriving black market in human beings has emerged once again. It is a criminal enterprise involving both local scoundrels and sophisticated international syndicates... [which] respects no borders...'

I am not for sale

You are not for sale

No one should be for sale

The simple but stark slogan of the *Not for Sale* campaign alerts us to the horrific reality that some

27 million slaves exist today in the world. By slaves, we do not mean slaves sold in irons at slave markets.



We mean human beings who are forced into terrible situations, and kept enslaved there by indenture, false imprisonment, economic dependency, and under conditions of violence.

'Girls and boys, women and men of all ages are forced to toil in the rug loom sheds of Nepal, sell their bodies in the brothels of Rome, break rocks in the quarries of Pakistan, and fight wars in the jungles of Africa... The commerce in human beings today rivals drug trafficking and the illegal arms trade for the top criminal activity on the planet', writes Batstone. There are more slaves in bondage today than in 4 centuries of the transatlantic slave trade, and each year about 900,000 human beings are bought or sold, 80% of whom are women, 50% of whom are children. One million children are forced to sell their bodies every day, in the global sex industry. This is a global humanitarian and moral crisis; appalling, horrifying and tragic for the individuals and families who are impacted by it—and also a terrible indictment of humankind in our apparently civilised times.



Anti-Slavery International (www.antislavery.org/) campaigns for ordinary people to become abolitionists to eradicate modern slavery. Their website (www.antislavery.org) contains a wealth of information

and educational resources for schools (KS3) and youth clubs on human rights, contemporary and historical slavery, including classroom activities and school assemblies. ASI urge people to join the campaign, sign their *Fight for Freedom* campaign petition, raise awareness, to educate themselves and others, and to become abolitionists. They write: 'The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that around 179 million children work in the *worst forms of child labour*. The worst forms of child labour, as defined in the ILO's Convention No. 182 (1999), includes (a) all forms of slavery or similar practices, such as debt bondage, trafficking and forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; (b) the use of children for prostitution and pornography; (c) the use of children for illicit activities, such as the production and trafficking of drugs; and (d) all work which is likely

to endanger the health, safety or morals of children (Article 3).'

Edmund Burke, the 18th-century Irish orator, philosopher and politician, famously said: 'All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing'. We know, from our own lifetimes and recent world history, what happens when we 'do nothing' when faced by evil in the world. The following is a proposed 7-point action list for becoming an abolitionist:



1. **Join Anti-Slavery International**, and sign up to the *Not for Sale* campaign;

2. **Read** David Batstone's *Not for Sale*, for information and inspiration;

3. **Boycott** shops, industries and products whenever they are found to be using child or bonded labour;

4. **Pro-actively seek out** and support shops, industries and products that are trading ethically and that assure no illegal labour is used, such as RugMark, (www.rugmark.org.uk/) which also rescues child rug labourers and educates and supports poor and vulnerable weaving families to prevent them from becoming bonded in illegal rug-making factories;



5. **Feminist activism**—most trafficking victims are women, and women make powerful advocates and formidable abolitionists: In Batstone's *Not For Sale*, read about and be inspired by Kru Nam in Thailand, Lucy Borja in Peru, Annie Dieselberg in Bangkok, Florence Lacor in Uganda, Anna Rodriguez in Florida, USA, Kay Buck—Executive Director of CAST (Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking) in the USA... Here in the UK, be inspired by the work of the Helen Bamber Foundation, (www.helenbamber.org/) working to support victims of cruelty, whose current campaign is about victims of trafficking. Have a group of friends or colleagues read *Not For Sale*, and work together on becoming abolitionists at any level—whether it's to target local brothels and offer refuge to enslaved trafficked prostitutes, or to build a boycott against local restaurants, hotels and nail bars that employ enslaved 'staff';

6. **Campus activism**—empowering other students to be part of the abolition movement. We are often capable of a politico-ethical clarity as young adults, which we lose—or suppress—as we get older. Harness that clarity, together with a passion to change the world; educate, inform, mobilise, peti-

tion, raise consciousness, act on your principles, and be a role model for others in your own personal actions. There are many resources available, for example the *Not for Sale* website (www.notforsalecampaign.org/action-downloads.html) includes a student toolkit to download, with information and ideas for activism, written by students for students;

7. Religious activism—those of us who are part of a faith community, use our spiritual teachings to focus mind, body and spirit, in the fight against oppression, slavery and human trafficking. Whether we seek spiritual meaning via the teachings of Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Bhagavad-Gita,



Buddhism, or elsewhere, we know that human beings are equal in the sight of God, and that slavery is unacceptable. But knowledge is not enough. We have a religious imperative to act. For Christian settings, there are two key organisations: Set All Free, (www.setallfree.net/) a project initiated by the Church of England, and CHASTE, Churches Alert to Sex Trafficking in Europe (www.chaste.org.uk), each of which has excellent online resources. For Jewish settings, there is an excellent education resource produced by JCore, the Jewish Council for Racial Equality, for use with ages 8-adult (www.jcore.org.uk). Use churches, mosques, temples and synagogues, to educate, inform and instigate action: newsletters, text study groups, sermons, parent and toddler groups, Scouts and Guides, youth clubs. As the Bible teaches us: 'Do



not stand idly by the blood of your neighbour'—*Leviticus 19.16*.

At this time of the year, many of us will be celebrating a religious festival—Christmas, Eid, Diwali, Chanukah—all festivals of light and



hope, celebrating the triumph of good over evil. We remember and re-tell the ancient stories associated with these festivals, and we consider

their meaning for us, what they teach us, to help us make sense of our lives. This year, as we come to the end of a year of commemorating the abolishment of the transatlantic slave trade, let us turn hearts, minds and commitment to the abolishment of the new slave trade. 'After all,' taught Olaudah Equiano, 18th-century slave turned abolitionist campaigner, 'what makes any event important, unless by its observation we become better and wiser, and learn to "do justly, to love mercy, and walk humbly before God"?'



¹Jewish Publication Society translation, Philadelphia 1999

²Richard Reddie, *The Church: Enslaver or Liberator?* www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/church_and_slavery_article_01.shtml

³For an excellent scholarly overview of the development of anti-black sentiment from ancient Israel to the 8th century, see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham, Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Princeton University Press 2003

⁴James Walvin, *Questioning Slavery*, Routledge 1996

Rabbi Lee Wax

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Resources

The Real Histories Directory has a number of resources that can help with teaching and learning about the relationship between religion and the trade in slaves.

Anti-Slavery International's Recovered Histories (www.recoveredhistories.org/storiesreligion.php) site has a section on religion. **Set All Free's** section on 'The Bible and Transatlantic Slavery' (www.setallfree.net/bible_trans_slavery.html) analyses the way in which verses from the Bible were used to justify and perpetuate the enslavement of Africans as well as the way scriptures were interpreted to coerce, cajole and convince enslaved Africans that God sanctioned Transatlantic slavery for their spiritual and social betterment. It also highlights how the Church was part of an apparatus that used various socio-economic and religious ideas to exploit Africans for the financial benefit of Europe.

From the **London Schools of Economics'** website, you can download a copy of the article 'Religions and the abolition of slavery - a comparative approach' (www.lse.ac.uk/collections/economicHistory/GEHN/

GEHNPDF/ClarenceSmithWASHINGTON.pdf) by William G. Clarence-Smith, Professor of the Economic History of Asia and Africa. **Black Britain's** (www.blackbritain.co.uk/Feature/details/84/slavery/) website has a report on The Cross Community Forum for 2007 which met to engage in dialogue about how religion was both villain and hero during the Transatlantic slave trade and what its role should be today in dealing with its legacies.

On the Diocese of Liverpool's website, you can read the 'Thought for the Day' (www.liverpool.anglican.org/people/bishops/Thought%20for%20the%20day/070830_TFTD.htm) by the **Bishop of Liverpool** first broadcast on 30 August 2007, where he reflects on the endurance of faith throughout the period of the Transatlantic slave trade.

The BBC's **Religion & Ethics** (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/) site has a number of articles on slavery and the links with different faiths including Buddhism (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/history/slavery.shtml), Christianity (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/slavery_1.shtml), Islam (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/slavery_1.shtml) and Judaism (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/history/slavery_1.shtml). It also explores the religions that grew out of slavery, as well as the reasons why slavery persists in the modern day. **English Heritage** (www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.00100300400l007) also suggests resources to help in teaching about the role of religion in the Transatlantic slave trade.

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The Real Histories Directory

The **Real Histories Directory** (www.realhistories.org.uk) has been created as a resource tool for teachers, parents, pupils and the wider community to support them in their teaching and learning about cultural diversity in the UK. The website helps you to locate **resources** in your and other LEAs, such as storytellers, dual language books, culturally diverse toys and relevant **events** taking place in the UK. There are also items of **news** that may be of particular interest to schools and teachers.

You can also submit resources that you would like to include in the directory free of charge by visiting the site, clicking on 'Submit an entry' and following the on-screen instructions.

As well as the varied resources available, each month a new **Topic of the Month** is added with suggestions for using the Directory in the classroom and at home.

We are interested in hearing your views on our Topics and the Real Histories website. You can email comments and suggestions to: realhistories@runnymedetrust.org.