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CHRISTIANITY AND BLACK SLAVERY

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Slavery has existed in virtually every society from the beginning of civilization to the present. Even now, while it is universally illegal, it is illegally practiced everywhere. Slaves could be captives taken in war or children of such captives, and they could be bought and sold. Sometimes free families sold their children into slavery. The conditions of slaves varied along a wide spectrum according to time and place. Some had no rights at all and could be tortured or killed at the will of their masters. Some had certain rights guaranteed, and some, particularly in ancient times, could rise to freedom and occasionally to wealth and to power, but cruelty and indifference were the rule. Conditions on European slave transport ships and in Arab caravans were almost inconceivably degrading; those who died were cast aside like garbage. The persistence of slavery is one of the most evil marks of original sin.

The history of Christianity as regards slavery can be divided into four periods: (1) from Christ to about 400; (2) from about 400 to about 1500; (3) from 1500 to 1750; (4) and after 1750.

SLAVERY AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Slavery was common among the ancient Israelites, as it was in almost all societies at the time. Christ is not reported to have said anything specific about slavery, but His behavior and His teaching that every human is beloved by God had strong implications. Paul said that masters and slaves are equally important to Christ (Eph. 6:9). The apostles faced a situation in the Roman and Persian empires, where Christianity first took root *and* where slavery was universally practiced. Apostolic teaching, like Christ Himself, had no specific social or political agenda; it was aimed at bringing everyone of any nation, condition, and color to the Kingdom of God. Since slavery was a social reality, the apostles taught that masters should be kind to their slaves and also that slaves should be obedient to their masters (Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22; 4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1; 1 Pet. 2:18). Buying and selling slaves—thus treating them as objects or livestock—was condemned as an egregious sin (1 Tim. 1:10). Slaves themselves obviously considered Christianity an improvement, since they formed a large proportion of early converts. Since Christians in general tended to be relatively poor, few held slaves. Teaching against slavery gradually increased, until in the 300s the

whole institution was condemned as sinful by Saint Augustine (354–430) in the West, Saint John Chrysostomos (347–407) in the East, and other Christian leaders.

Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire in 395, and by 400, slavery was in sharp decline. This improvement was caused partly because of Christian morality; partly because of the growing Germanic population, which had few slaves; and partly because the declining Roman military power was producing fewer captives to enslave. Meanwhile Christians pressed for the rights of slaves. Slaves took part in all Christian worship with no distinction between them and free persons; slaves served as clergy, sometimes even becoming bishops. The marriage of slaves was recognized, and slaves and free persons could marry.

ISLAMIC CONQUESTS AND SLAVERY

During the Middle Ages, there was little slavery in Christian lands. However, in the 600s and 700s, the Islamic conquest of Christian territory throughout the Near East, Africa, Spain, and Mediterranean islands reintroduced slavery where Christianity had eradicated it. The only Christian lands that retained slavery were those adjacent to Muslim lands—areas where the practice of slavery infected borders. Muhammad owned slaves; Muslims had both white and black slaves; and slavery was legal in some Arab countries into the twentieth century—it was abolished in Saudi Arabia only in 1962 and in Mauritania in 1981. It is estimated that about fifteen million slaves were brought from Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa to Arab countries. In Europe itself, slavery was virtually nonexistent after 700, though apparently a few slaves remained, for in the 800s a Frankish queen is reported to have sought to abolish slavery completely.

Serfdom, which was common in medieval Europe, was both essentially and practically different from slavery. Serfs were almost always agricultural laborers. Though serfs were bound to their masters to produce goods and services for them, and though they were not allowed to leave their masters' domains without permission, they were guaranteed certain fundamental rights: they could marry, they could keep and sell goods beyond what they owed to their masters, and they could not legally be killed or mistreated. Medieval Christian theologians seldom addressed the question of slavery since it was so rare, but when they did, they taught that it was a sin against natural and divine law. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) declared slavery contrary to natural law and to the fact that Christ died for all humans equally.

SLAVERY INCREASED VIA PORTS

From the 1400s, economics and politics trumped morality, for slavery once again became profitable, and on a large scale. During the Middle Ages, trade with China and the Indies had been conducted along the so-called Silk Road, overland through the Middle East and Central Asia. But this road was long, dangerous, and frequently closed by hostile forces. In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese, Europe's pioneer mariners, established a sea route around the coasts of Africa and thence to the East, and this became the main route of trade. It passed through many African ports where black

slaves existed. The fact that black Africans held black slaves is currently considered politically incorrect to mention, but it is a fact, nor does it indicate any particular depravity on the part of the Africans, since *almost* every society—Chinese, Mayan, Aztec, Arab, Native American, Mongol, Greek, Roman—held slaves. Black Africans, like the Romans or Persians earlier, took captives from regions that they conquered and enslaved them. The Portuguese did not scruple to purchase these slaves and a Portuguese ship introduced the first African slaves to Europe in 1441. Now for the first time most slaves in Europe were of one race: black. Once the Africans learned that Europeans were eager to buy slaves, they brought more and more to the ports for sale. By the 1600s Europeans established their own "factories," slave markets, on the West African coast. The evil of modern black slavery had begun.

Soon Spain, France, England, and other European countries were participating in the slave trade. In the 1500s Europeans made numerous attempts to enslave the indigenous peoples of North and South America, but this proved on the whole to be unprofitable, so that blacks soon became almost exclusively slaves of choice. The first African slaves in North America arrived on a Dutch ship docking at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. Until abolition, approximately fifteen million black slaves were transported across the Atlantic, about as many as were taken north by Arabs. The total number of somewhere around thirty million exceeds even the numbers of the worst genocides. And this does not include the very large number of blacks who died before even reaching the depots of sale. The Dutch and British were even more active in the slave trade than the Spanish and Portuguese, although the Portuguese brought at least three and a half million slaves to Brazil, and in 1849 nearly half the population of Rio de Janeiro was made up of slaves.

CHRISTIAN CONDEMNATION OF SLAVERY

Christian condemnations of slavery followed the revival of slavery rapidly. Though Pope Nicholas V gave permission to Christians in 1452 to enslave Muslim and pagan prisoners, this was a papal aberration. In 1435 Eugenius IV excommunicated Christians enslaving inhabitants of the Canary Islands (the earliest Portuguese and Spanish outpost in the Atlantic); in 1462, Pius II declared slavery a "great crime"; in 1537, Paul III demanded the freedom of all American Indians, as did Gregory XIV in 1591. Urban VIII (1623–1644) condemned all slavery, including that of blacks, and the Inquisition (Holy Office) followed suit in 1686. Though Christianity declared slavery immoral, many Christians preferred profit to moral theology. The most successful practical move against slavery was undertaken by the Catholic Jesuit order in Paraguay, where from 1609 until 1768 they created a free republic for the Guarani Indians. But at last the republic was destroyed by the Spanish and Portuguese kings at the demand of local slavers.

Official and theological condemnations made little impact on a trade that was growing more and more profitable because of the development of sugar and tobacco plantations in the West Indies and the shores of the Caribbean, where the condition of slaves grew much worse as they were worked in gangs under overseers for owners who

often remained in Europe. Of the civil codes regulating slavery, the Spanish *Código negro español* was the most lenient, permitting holidays, the right to sell produce above that owed to the masters, and respect of slave marriages. The French *Code noir* was stricter, and the British "Code of Barbados" in the West Indies the harshest, permitting torture and death—this despite the Christian view that slavery violates liberty of conscience and integrity of soul and body.

Theologians might have debated (if any ever did) whether blacks had souls, but slaves were treated as if they did not. Indeed, some slaveholders encouraged Christianity among slaves so that they might direct their hope for freedom to another world. After U.S. independence, when cotton became the staple crop in the South, the use of blacks for field hands grew more widespread and much more vicious. Whereas household slaves were sometimes treated well, field laborers were dehumanized as engine parts of the vast industrial machine needed to grow and sell cotton profitably. By 1790 there were more than 292,000 slaves in Virginia and more than 694,000 in the nation (only Massachusetts had already abolished it). The slave trade in the United States became mainly internal, along the interior rivers, particularly along the Mississippi, where going "down the river" meant a fate of misery and death in the cotton industry.

As the slave trade and slave labor became more and more inhumane, renewed voices were heard against it from the 1750s onward. The secular Enlightenment was divided on the question of slavery. Thomas Jefferson held slaves and did not even free them at his death. For purposes of census and voting, the Constitution originally counted a slave as three-fifths of a person. Voltaire, the baron de Montesquieu, the marquis de Mirabeau, and Edmund Burke continued to condone slavery, though other Enlightenment figures such as Adam Smith, Dennis Diderot, Jacques Turgot, Samuel Johnson, and the Marquis de Condorcet condemned it. Christianity was always at the front of the struggle against the slave trade and then against slavery itself. In 1754, the Quaker John Woolman launched a crusade against slave trading in America, and by 1771 Massachusetts outlawed the importation of slaves. In 1791 North Carolina declared that the killing of a slave was murder, and Georgia did the same in 1816. In Britain, William Wilberforce (1759–1833) founded the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, which John Wesley (1703–1791), the founder of Methodism, supported.

The movement against slavery had two phases: first, the abolition of the trade; and second—when that had been achieved—the abolition of the institution and the freeing of the slaves. Under Christian moral pressure, Protestant countries outlawed the trade: Denmark in 1803, the United Kingdom in 1807, the United States in 1808, and the Netherlands in 1848. On the Catholic side, Pius VII demanded abolition of the trade in 1815, and in 1839 Gregory XVI sent a pastoral letter to American Catholics condemning all slavery. France abolished the slave trade in 1831.

The reformers now turned to the abolition of slavery itself. The American Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1833 (the majority of its members being Protestant clergy) and the Free Soil Party in 1848. In 1833 the United Kingdom abolished slavery

entirely, as did France in 1848. In the Spanish-American republics, slavery was abolished first in Argentina in 1813 and last in Venezuela in 1854. Notoriously, the United States did not abolish slavery until 1865, but abolitionist writers such as Lyman Beecher, Lucy Stone, Charles Finney, and William Lloyd Garrison stirred Protestant consciences in the North. One of the great blows against slavery was Lyman Beecher's daughter Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Whatever the various causes of the Civil War, it was first and foremost a war against slavery. Spain did not abolish slavery in Cuba until 1886, and Brazil was the last Christian nation to abolish it (in 1888).

Secular historians, usually for ideological purposes, grossly understate the importance of Christianity in abolition: it is important to note that slavery was immensely profitable in the Caribbean area as well as in the southern United States, and that it cost governments immense amounts of money to recompense slave-owners for the confiscation of their "property." The economic and political interests followed the money, so there was little or no political impetus to abolition: it was *almost exclusively Christian moral leaders* who achieved the freedom of the slaves, just as it was Christian moral leaders who began and fostered the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Now, since slavery in many forms continues, more *remains* to be done.

Jeffrey B. Russell is a professor of history and has published nineteen books; the latest is *Exposing Myths about Christianity* (InterVarsity Press, 2012).