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## **Churches Participate in Slave-Trade**

What was the attitude of the Christian church towards the Negro slave trade? From its inception, Christianity kept its eyes closed to the plight of the slaves. As mentioned earlier, the only reference to the slavery is found in the epistle of St. Paul returning a slave to Philemon to his master. That is all. Ameer Ali rightly comments that Christianity "found slavery a recognised institution of the empire; it adopted the system without any endeavour to mitigate its baneful character, or promote its gradual abolition, or to improve the status of slaves."1

To recognise the part played by the Christian churches in the slave trade one should read again the words of Mr. Alpers who writes, *inter alia*, that the Christians "were aware that to sell their fellow human beings could not be morally justified. Yet the Christian church came forward with excuses for the slave–trade. Many priests themselves carried on slave–trading, especially in Angola, and many others owned slaves in the Americas.

The only reason the Catholic Church give for its action was that it was trying to save African souls by baptising the slaves. The Protestants were worse, for they did not even make it clear that they accepted that the Africans had a soul. Instead, they supported the view that the African slave was a piece of property like furniture or a domestic animal. There is no part of the history of Christian church which was more disgraceful than its support of the Atlantic slave–trade."2

The arguments of James Boswell have already been quoted where he emphasises that slavery was an institution sanctioned in all ages by God and that to abolish slavery would be to shut the gate of mercy on mankind!

Now I quote from *Capitalism and Slavery* of Dr. Eric Williams, who was a recognised historian and was also the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. He writes, "The Church also supported the slave trade. The Spaniards saw in it an opportunity of converting the heathen, and the Jesuits, Dominicans and Franciscans were heavily involved in sugar cultivation which meant slave–holding.

The story is told of an elder of the Church in Newport who would invariably, the Sunday following the arrival of slaves from the coast, thank God that 'another cargo of benighted beings had been brought to

land where they could have the benefit of a gospel dispensation. But in general the British planters opposed Christianity for their slaves. It made them more perverse and intractable and therefore less valuable. It meant also instruction in the English language, which allowed diverse tribes to get together and plot sedition.

The governor of Barbados in 1695 attributed it to the planters' refusal to give the slave Sundays and feast days off, and as late as 1832 British public opinion was shocked by the planters' rejection of a proposal to give the Negroes one day in the week in order to permit the abolition of the Negro Sunday market. The Church obediently toed the line.

The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel prohibited Christian instruction to its slaves in Barbados, and branded 'Society' on its new slaves to distinguish them from those of the laity; the original slaves were the legacy of the Christopher Codrington. Sherlock, later Bishop of London, assured the planters that 'Christianity and the embracing of the Gospel does not make the least difference in civil property.' Neither did it impose any barriers to clerical activity.

For his labours with regards to the Asiento which he helped to draw up as a British plenipotentiary at Utrecht, Bishop Robinson of Bristol was promoted to see of London. The bell of the Bristol churches pealed merrily on the news of the rejection of Parliament of Wilberforce's bill for the abolition of the slave–trade. The slave trader, John Newton, gave thanks to the Liverpool churches for the success of this last venture before his conversion and implored God's blessing on his. He established public worship twice every day on his slaver, officiating himself, and kept a day of fasting and praying, not for the slaves but for crew. 'I never knew', he confessed, 'sweeter or more frequent hours of divine communion than in the last two voyages to Guinea.'

The famous Cardinal Manning of the nineteenth century was the son of a rich West Indian merchant dealing in slave–grown produce. Many missionaries found it profitable to drive out Beelzebub by Beelzebub. According to the most recent English writer on the slave trade, they 'considered that the best way in which to remedy abuse of Negro slaves was to set the plantation owner a good example by keeping slaves and estates themselves, accomplishing in this practical manner the salvation of the planters and the advancement of their foundations'. The Moravian missionaries on the island held slaves without hesitation; the Baptists, one historian writes with charming delicacy, would not allow their earlier missionaries to deprecate ownership of slaves. To the very end the Bishop of Exeter retained his 655 slaves, for whom he received over 12,700 pounds compensation in 1833.

"Church historians make awkward apologies that conscience awoke very slowly to the appreciation of the wrongs inflicted by slavery and that the defence of slavery by churchmen 'simply arose from want of delicacy of moral perception'. There is no need to make such apologies. The attitude of the churchmen was the attitude of the layman. The eighteenth century, like any other century, could not rise above its economic limitations. As Whitefield argued in advocating the repeal of that article of the Georgia charter which forbade slavery, 'It is plain to demonstration that hot countries cannot be cultivated without

## Negroes.'.

"Quaker nonconformity did not extend to the slave trade. In 1756 there were eighty–four Quakers listed as members of the Company trading to Africa, among them the Barclay and the Baring families. Slave dealing was one of the most lucrative investments of English as of American Quakers, and the name of slaver, The Willing Quaker, reported from Boston at Sierra Leone in 1793, symbolizes the approval with which the slave trade was regarded in Quaker circles. The Quaker opposition to the slave trade came first and largely not from England but from America, and there from the small rural communities of the North, independent of slave labour. It is difficult, writes Dr. Gray, to avoid the assumption that opposition to the slave system was at the first confined to a group who gained no direct advantage from it, and consequently possessed an objective attitude....

"Slavery existed under the very eyes of eighteenth century Englishmen. And English coin, the guinea, rare though it was and is, had its origin in the trade of Africa. A Westminster goldsmith made silver padlocks for blacks and dogs. Busts of blackamoors and elephants, emblematical of the slave trade adorned the Liverpool Town Hall. The insignia and equipment of the slave traders were boldly exhibited for sale in the shops and advertised in the press.

Slaves were sold openly at auction. Slaves being invaluable property, with title recognised by law, the postmaster was the agent employed on occasions to recapture runaway slaves and advertisements were published in the official organ of the government. Negro servants were common. Little black boys were the appendages of slave captains, fashionable ladies or women of the easy virtue. Hogarth's heroine, 'The Harlots Progress' is attended by a Negro boy, and Marguerito Steen's Orabella Burmester typifies eighteenth century English opinion in her desire for little black boy whom she could love as her long-haired kitten. Freed Negroes were conspicuous among London beggars and were known as St. Giles blackbirds. So numerous were they that a parliamentary committee was set up in 1786 for relieving the black poor.

"Slaves cannot breathe in England," wrote the poet Cowper. This was licence of the poet. It was held in 1677 that 'Negroes being usually bought and sold among merchants, so merchandise, and also being infidels, there might be a property in them. In 1729 the Attorney General ruled that baptism did not bestow freedom or make any alteration in the temporal condition of slave; in addition the slave did not become free by being brought to England, and once in England the owner could legally compel his return to the plantations. So eminent an authority as Sir William Blackstone held that 'with respect to any right the master may have lawfully acquired to the perpetual service of John or Thomas, will remain exactly in the same state of subjection for the life,' in England or elsewhere."3

When ships loaded with human cargo sailed from Christian countries to Western hemisphere, Christian priests used to bless the ship in the name of Almighty and admonish the slaves to be obedient. It never entered into their minds to admonish the masters to be kind to the slaves.

It is hard to believe but it seems that the Roman Catholics think it quite in keeping with the teachings of their church to obtain slaves even in this era of 1970s. In August 1970 the world was shocked to hear that the Roman Catholics had purchased, at the price ranging from 250 pounds to 300 pounds each, about 1500 Indian girls to shut them into convents because European girls do not like to live as nuns. 4 There was so much outcry in the world press that the Vatican had to establish a commission to enquire into this affair. But even before the commission started its enquire, a Vatican spokesman had to admit that there was an "element of truth" in the reports, though he dutifully condemned the *Sunday Times* for its sensation–mongering.

- 1. Ameer 'Ali, Spirit of Islam (London: University Paper-backs, 1965) p. 260.
- 2. Alpers, op. cit., p. 22.
- 3. Williams, op. cit., pp. 42-5.
- 4. Sunday Times (London) as quoted in East African Standard (Nairobi), August 25, 1970.

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