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Why Slavery Was Abolished

Someone may point out: Was it not the Christian Britain which finally abolished the slavery?

Well, if someone practices tyranny isn't he the one who has to give up that practice? As already explained, Britain was the biggest slave-trader; and when economic forces compelled her to abolish slave-trade she did so. But does she or Christianity deserve any thanks for it? Should not we thank the economic forces behind that move?

The fact is that the movement against slavery was not spear-headed by Churches; it was led by a handful of moralists whose cries remained unheeded till the economic necessity compelled the Parliament to pass a bill in 1807 against slave-trade. After 26 years, another bill was passed to abolish slavery itself in British-held countries in 1833.

As Professor D. W. Brogan writes in the introduction of Dr. Eric Williams' magnificent book *Capitalism and Slavery,* "the abolition of the slave-trade, then the abolition of the slavery, were not merely the results of a rising standard of political ethics in Britain (although Dr. Williams does not dismiss as unimportant the work of men like Clarkson) but were a form of cutting of losses. The West Indies sugar monopoly became intolerable to a booming industrial society, rightly confident in its invulnerable competitive position in the early days of the industrial revolution."

To summarise, in the words of Prof. Brogan, the slave system was "tolerated, defended, praised as long as it was profitable."

"It was highly profitable and for a long time. On the profits of the West Indies plantations were based the fortune of Bristol and Liverpool and to some extent, of Glasgow. The West Indian planter was the rival in ostentation of the East Indian nabob.. It was in vain for moralists to point out that every brick of the great warehouses of Bristol and Liverpool was cemented in Negro blood.. But the voice of the moralists was seldom overheard amid the chink of guineas (the very name recalls the triangular trade between Britain, Africa and the transatlantic colonies)."

What the "triangular trade" meant? From England, sundry assortment "typical of the slave trader's cargo"

was taken to Africa: “Finery for Africans, household utensils, cloths of all kinds, iron and other metals, together with guns, hand-cuffs and fetters.” From Africa human cargo was taken to West Indies and Americas. From West Indies and other colonies sugar, tobacco, indigo, cotton, coffee and other raw materials were taken to the mother country (i.e., England) where they were processed and then re-imported.[1]

The plantations were founded on slavery and were protected by monopolies. Then came the secession of 13 colonies of America which closed a big market against the British held West Indies. It’s another effect was that the now independent U.S.A. turned towards French held Islands of Saint Domingue (Haiti), Cuba and Brazil. Dr. Williams writes, “The superiority of the French sugar colonies was for the British planters the chief among the many ills which flew out of the Pandora's Box that was the American Revolution. Between 1783 and 1789 the progress of the French sugar islands, of Saint Domingue especially, was the most amazing phenomenon in colonial development. The fertility of the French soil was decisive, French sugar cost one-fifth less than Britain, the average yield in Saint Domingue and Jamaica was five to one.”[2]

The disastrous effect upon British West Indies may be judged by the fact that “in 1775 Jamaica had 775 plantations; by 1791, out of every hundred, twenty three had been sold for debt, twelve were in the hands of receivers, while seven had been abandoned; and the West Indian planters, indebted to the enormous sum of twenty millions.” Gradually, British planters irretrievably lost that ascendancy which they had so long enjoyed in the European Market. “French colonial exports, over eight million pounds, and imports, over four millions, employed 164,000 tons of shipping and 33,000 sailors; British colonial exports, five million pounds, and imports, less than two millions, employed 148,000 tons of shipping and 14,000 seamen. In every respect the sugar colonies had become vastly more essential to France than they were to England.”[3]

Thus the cost of sugar (and likewise of all such products) was becoming too high. Dr. Williams explains, “The West Indian monopoly was not only unsound in theory, it was unprofitable in practice. In 1828 it was estimated that it cost the British people annually more than one and a half million pounds. In 1844 it was costing the country 70,000 pounds a week and London 6,000 pounds. England was paying for its sugar five millions more a year than the Continent...Two-fifths of the price of every pound of sugar consumed in England represented the cost of production, two-fifths went in revenue to the government, one-fifth in tribute to the West Indian planter..”[4]

Gradually, Saint Domingue (Haiti) held by France emerged as the most important sugar producer. From the standpoint of the British Prime Minister, William Pitt, this was the decisive factor. The age of the British sugar islands was over. The West Indian system was unprofitable, and the slave-trade on which it rested, “instead of being very advantageous to Great Britain...is the most destructive that can well be imagined by interests.[5] Therefore, Pitt turned to India to cultivate and produce sugar. “Pill's plan was twofold: to recapture the European market with the aid of sugar from India, and to secure an

international abolition of the slave-trade which would ruin Saint Domingue. If not international abolition, then British abolition. The French were so dependent on British slave traders that even a unilateral abolition by England would seriously dislocate the economy of the French colonies.

“Pitt's plan failed for two reasons. The importation of East India sugar, on the scale planned, was impossible owing to the high duties imposed on all sugar not the produce of the British West Indies.. Secondly, the French, Dutch and Spaniards refused.. to abolish the slave-trade. It was not difficult to see the political motives behind Pitt's cloak of humanitarianism. Gaston-Martin, the well-known French historian of the slave-trade and the Caribbean colonies, accuses Pitt of aiming by propaganda to free the slaves 'in the name no doubt of humanity, but also to ruin French commerce.' and concludes that in this philanthropic propaganda there were economic motives.

Then occurred a unique episode. The French planters of Saint Domingue, in 1791, fearful of the consequences of French Revolution offered the islands to England; soon Windward Island followed suit; Pitt accepted the offer in 1793. Expedition after expedition was sent, unsuccessfully, to capture the island.

Dr. Williams comments: “This is of more than academic interest. Pitt could not have had Saint Domingue and abolition as well. Without its 40,000 slave imports a year, Saint Domingue might as well have been at the bottom of the sea. The very acceptance of the island meant logically the end of Pitt's interest in abolition. Naturally he did not say so. He had already committed himself too far in the eyes of the public. He continued to speak in favour of abolition, even while giving every practical encouragement to the slave trade...Pitt's reasons were political and only secondarily personal. He was interested in the sugar trade. Either he must ruin Saint Domingue by flooding Europe with cheaper Indian sugar or by abolishing the slave-trade; or he must get Saint Domingue for himself.”[6]

“It would give Britain a monopoly of sugar, indigo, cotton and coffee... But if Pitt captured Saint Domingue, the slave-trade must continue. When Saint Domingue was lost to France, the slave-trade became merely a humanitarian question...

“But the ruin of Saint Domingue did not mean the salvation of the British West Indies. Two new enemies appeared on the scene. Cuba forged ahead to fill the gap left in the world market by the disappearance of Saint Domingue.”[7]

“Whilst, under the American flag, Cuban and other neutral sugar still found a market in Europe, British West Indian surpluses piled up in England. Bankruptcies were the order of the day. Between 1799 and in 1807, 65 plantations in Jamaica were abandoned, 32 were sold for debts, and 1807 suits were pending against 115 others. Debt, disease and death were the only topics of conversation in the island. A parliamentary committee set up in 1807 discovered that the British West Indian planter was producing at a loss. In 1800 his profit was 2 1/2 per cent, in 1807 nothing. In 1787 the planter got 19/6d profit per hundredweight; in 1799, 10/9d; in 1803, 18/6d; 1805, 12/-; in 1809, nothing. The committee attributed the

main evil to the unfavourable state of foreign market. In 1806 the surplus of sugar in England amounted to six thousand tons. Production had to be curtailed. To restrict production, the slave-trade must be abolished."[8]

Thus, in the words of Dr. Williams, "abolition was the direct result of that (economic) distress."[9]

1. Williams, Dr. Eric, Capitalism and Slavery, p. 65.
2. Ibid, p. 122.
3. Ibid, p. 123.
4. Ibid, p. 138-9.
5. Ibid, p. 146.
6. Ibid, p. 147-8.
7. Ibid, p. 148-9
8. Ibid, p. 149.
9. Ibid, p. 150.

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