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BAPTISTS, ANTI-SLAVERY AND THE LEGACY OF IMPERIALISM

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The complex attitudes involving slavery, missions and imperialism are examined. The paper was given to the Joppa Group at the Baptist Assembly 2007.

We begin with two sermons. The first was preached on 10 February 1788 at the Stoneyard Baptist Church (now St Andrew's Street Baptist Church) in Cambridge. The preacher was Robert Robinson, pastor of the church since 1761. His text was Luke 4:18, the so-called Nazareth manifesto of Jesus, which in more recent times has been a principal source of inspiration of all theologies of liberation, beginning with Gustavo Gutierrez's famous book which first appeared in Peru in 1971.¹ Robinson began by quoting the King James Version of Isaiah 61:1, words which Jesus made his own: 'the Lord hath sent me ... to proclaim liberty to captives.' The Jews in Babylon, Robinson noted, had experienced a captivity in which 'a foreign victor reduced between twenty and thirty thousand free citizens to a condition of slavery.'² 'Free citizens reduced to slavery' - this was radical political language, language that would acquire overtly [285] revolutionary overtones a year later with the violent overthrow of the *ancien régime* in France. He went on to speak of Jesus as a man (only later does he call him 'Lord') who 'informed a few disinterested lovers of mankind of a few facts, which he foresaw would make their way, and slowly but certainly subvert the whole system of slavery.'³ Jesus taught the dignity of man, the universal Fatherhood of God, and the necessity for his disciples to be conformed to the divine character of holiness and justice. These were principles that, once proclaimed to all nations, were bound to undermine the institution of slavery. Nevertheless, according to Robinson, the early church acted wisely in not giving slaves their freedom on profession of faith in Christ, for that would have 'degraded religion from its dignity', making the promise of freedom an enticement to lure slaves into the kingdom. As for the apostle Paul, so often appealed to by the defenders of slavery, Robinson observed that, on the basis of I Corinthians 7:21, he enjoined slaves 'to become free, *if they could*'.⁴ Robinson then invited his congregation to join him in their imagination in the company of one of the earliest Christian churches gathered for worship around the Lord's table:

Let us imagine a primitive assembly of Christian slaveholders and slaves, *not now*, in this instance, *as slaves, but above slaves, brethren beloved in the Lord*, all sitting at the same table, eating the same bread, drinking the same cup, in remembrance of their common benefactor, who had said, *the Lord sent me to preach deliverance to captives*. Let us hear Paul commending charity, or universal benevolence ... How must a slaveholder feel, when in the assembly a charitable deacon proclaimed: *Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them?*⁵ The doctrines and the ceremonies of Christianity attack injustice and cruelty in their strong holds, depraved passions, and consequently if a slave trade be the effect of such passions our religion goes to subvert the whole system of slavery. Feel its influence, and the work is done.⁶

The purpose of Robinson's sermon, as he explained in an appendix to the published version, was less to expose the iniquity of the African slave trade (which he seems to have taken as

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being self-evident to his congregation), than to ‘vindicate the character of the primitive [286] Christians, or rather the credit of Christianity itself, which is grossly misrepresented when it is described as compatible with slavery.’ The appendix also declared Robinson’s support for total abolition of the slave trade, and for a process of gradual emancipation of the West Indian slaves. Exactly how that goal was to be achieved, while indemnifying the planters and preserving the stability of the state, he was content to leave to an indefinable quantity called ‘parliamentary wisdom’ – not, perhaps, one of the most commendable instances of Baptist faith.⁷

Our second sermon, entitled ‘Commerce in the Human Species and the Enslaving of Innocent Persons Inimical to the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Christ’, was preached four years later, on 29 January 1792, to the Particular Baptist congregation at Little Prescot Street, Goodman’s Fields, in London. The text was Exodus 21:16, which in the King James Version reads, ‘And he that stealeth a man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death.’ The preacher was one of the most influential Baptist ministers of the day, Abraham Booth, a more decided Calvinist than Robinson, and instinctively a more conservative figure. Booth’s language, like his theology, was less radical than Robinson’s, and the nature of his argument against the slave trade was more of an instrumental or strategic one linked to missionary objectives, but his conclusions were much the same:

That it is our indispensable duty to pray for the enlargement of our Lord’s visible kingdom among men, is plain; that the despised Africans are naturally as capable of being made the spiritual subjects of Jesus Christ as ourselves, ought not to be questioned; and that the Slave Trade is, at present, an effectual bar to the propagation of Christianity among them, appears with decisive evidence. Nay, it is an insuperable obstruction to the progress of civilization among them, and to an honourable commerce with them. Zeal for the honour of Christ, and love to our fellow-creatures, ought therefore to inspire us with ardent prayer, that the horrid impediment may be removed, and that Christ may be glorified among them. – Nor ought we to pray, merely that God would abolish the infamous commerce in man, on the shores of Africa; but also for the gradual emancipation of oppressed Negroes in the West India islands: that the slavery of innocent persons may cease to exist, and sink under the detestation of all Europe. For what must the enslaved Africans [287] in those islands think of Christians, of Christianity, and of Christ, under the tuition of their oppressors?⁸

Both sermons are heartwarming stuff. Here, fifteen and nineteen years respectively before the abolition of the British slave trade, whose bicentenary we are currently commemorating, are two spokespersons for the Baptist denomination taking a public stand against the transatlantic trade, and even going further, advocating the ‘gradual emancipation’ of the West Indian slaves themselves. The latter was a goal which would not be attained for another forty years or more: the Act of Emancipation was passed on 28 August 1833, came into effect on 1 August 1834, and reached its eventual climax on 1 August 1838, when apprenticeship came to an end, and the slaves throughout the British Empire were truly free at last. ‘The monster is dead: the negro is free’, famously exclaimed William Knibb on the stroke of midnight on 31 July 1838 in Falmouth Baptist Chapel in Jamaica.⁹

We find it reassuring that Baptists took the side of the angels relatively early: no doubt the front page of the *Baptist Times* would rejoice! Robinson and Booth are not the only examples I could have cited. From the Arminian side of the Baptist family, the General Baptist Assembly declared as early as 1787 that the slave trade was totally ‘inconsistent with every rational and humane principle’.¹⁰ From the tradition of evangelical Calvinism associated with Bristol Baptist Academy, Caleb Evans, Robert Hall junior, and Joseph Hughes lent their firm support to the abolitionist movement from the 1780s, though Roger Hayden has noted that Evans’s support was less explicit than one might have wished.¹¹ The former Bristol student, James Dore, pastor of the Maze Pond church in Southwark, preached a famous sermon against the slave trade in 1788, which went through three editions by 1790.¹² William Carey, in his famous pamphlet, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the*

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Conversion of the Heathens, published in 1792, lent his support to the 'noble effort' to abolish the 'inhuman Slave-Trade' and commended those 'many persons' who, in an early example of fair-trade shopping, had abandoned the consumption of West Indian sugar in protest against the 'iniquitous manner' by which [288] it had been produced.¹³ Carey's sister, Mary, claims never to have heard her brother pray either in his family prayers or in public without remembering the slaves.¹⁴ Carey's colleague at Serampore, William Ward, before leaving for India, was overtly involved in radical journalism and politics, using his editorship of the *Hull Advertiser* to give repeated publicity to the cause of abolition.¹⁵

Such examples may encourage a certain amount of preening of Nonconformist feathers and indeed a justifiable tinge of denominational resentment whenever the present commemorations of the abolition campaign speak only of evangelical Anglicans (and possibly also of Quakers and Methodists), but never of Baptists. A feature essay on 'Evangelicals and the origins of anti-slavery in England', currently on the website of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, is typical in its almost exclusive focus on the Anglican evangelicals of the Clapham Sect and the associated 'Teston circle' in Kent, and its entire neglect of the anti-slavery attitudes of Calvinistic Nonconformists.¹⁶

But once we have given Robinson, Booth and their Baptist contemporaries their proper due, we have to remember that there is another side to the story. Admittedly, it is not easy to cite cases of Baptists in this country who were slave-owners, though there were undoubtedly some in affluent commercial congregations such as Broadmead, Bristol, who had interests in the transatlantic and sugar trades.¹⁷ The reason, however, is not that there was some precious moral insight peculiar to the Baptist soul which was denied to other evangelicals. Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, patroness of the early evangelicals, was a slave-owner, and so was George Whitefield. The reason that few eighteenth-century English Baptists were slave-holders is not theological but sociological: most of them were simply too poor. They did not belong to the planter class. Neither Robinson nor Booth, you may have noticed, called for an immediate end to slavery as a compelling moral imperative: both spoke merely of gradual progress towards emancipation. The BMS Committee instructed its missionaries departing for Jamaica to avoid all interference in the politics of the island and to 'endeavour by a respectful demeanor to recommend yourself and the gospel to the white inhabitants of the Island'. Those [289] who refused to keep silent on the subject of slavery were liable, like Lee Compere in 1817, to find themselves summarily dismissed from the Society's service.¹⁸ J.H. Hinton, admiring biographer of William Knibb, is honest enough to make clear that Knibb and his colleagues, who for long had held slavery in private abhorrence, dutifully obeyed the instructions of the BMS Committee to say nothing in public against the plantation system until the slave rebellion of 1831-2 and its savage repression by the authorities made continuing neutrality impossible.¹⁹ Even then, when Knibb and his colleague James Phillippo returned to England to rouse public opinion to demand an immediate end to colonial slavery, they found John Dyer and the BMS Committee still inclined to urge 'prudence and a temperate policy.'²⁰ That Knibb and Phillippo ignored such cautious counsel is to their great credit. Without their courageous determination to make the issue of colonial slavery determinative in the 1832 general election, it is likely that slavery in the British empire would not have been abolished when it was.

The bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade is thus for Baptists neither an occasion for anguished breast-beating nor for denominational triumphalism. Baptists, like other Christians, found themselves caught up in an immensely powerful economic system which increasingly they felt to be at odds with the law of Christ but whose immediate overthrow for long seemed neither possible nor even part of their Christian calling. The fact that Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce led evangelical opinion 200 years ago in demanding an immediate end to the iniquitous transatlantic slave trade is certainly cause for

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deep gratitude to God, but it is hardly an occasion for unbridled rejoicing. After all, one does not, or should not, celebrate publicly the fact that one has stopped beating one's wife! When British Baptists eventually turned *en masse* against the very institution of plantation slavery, it was by and large because they had come to see it as an insuperable obstacle to the progress of evangelism in the West Indies. If you wish to mobilize Baptists (and evangelicals as a whole) on an issue that divides the nation down the middle politically, the way to do it is to persuade them that liberty to preach the gospel is at stake. There is no doubt that Nonconformist Christianity was fighting for its [290] life in Jamaica by 1831, but that in itself does not make the theological rationale that was adopted for the subsequent emancipation campaign an entirely satisfactory one. Was an end to plantation slavery merely a *precondition* for the advance of the gospel, or was it in some sense *part* of the gospel? That, of course, is the disturbing question that modern theologies of liberation have posed to Christianity in the western world: to what extent do the love and righteousness of Christ challenge not just sinful individuals but the unjust economic and political structures which those sinful individuals create?

What legacy have these events bequeathed to Christians today, and British Baptists in particular? The legacy is a mixed one. In the Caribbean, of course, Baptists have been able to live off the moral capital of the prominent role that Baptists played in the emancipation campaign of the 1830s. The trigger for the slave rebellion in Jamaica was the plan hatched in December 1831 by one of the slave deacons, Sam Sharpe, in the Baptist congregation at Montego Bay, for a campaign of passive resistance whereby the slaves would refuse to return to work after the Christmas holiday until the planters granted them their freedom. Some of the 'native' Baptist community, who constituted a radical Afro-charismatic penumbra outside missionary control, with whom Sharpe had closer links than he dared to admit to his missionary friends, made plans for armed revolt. An insurrection broke out on the night of the 27th, which became known as 'the Baptist war'. The uprising was savagely repressed by the planter authorities. Four BMS missionaries were arrested, though later released owing to lack of evidence. White colonial mobs destroyed Baptist and Methodist chapels. 312 slaves were convicted and executed, among them Sam Sharpe. In 1975 he was given the status of a National Hero by the government of Jamaica.

Baptists do not often gain recognition as national heroes, and certainly not on the basis of suspected involvement in armed anti-colonial insurrection. What is easy to miss is the fact that evangelical opposition to slavery in the nineteenth century regularly functioned as a generator of imperialism and not simply as a challenge to the colonial establishment of white planters. We tend to associate anti-slavery with the good guys and imperialism with the bad guys, but in the nineteenth [291] century the two categories overlapped. William Knibb concluded his impassioned appeal to the BMS annual meeting in 1832,

He could assure the meeting that slaves would never be allowed to worship God till slavery had been abolished. Even if it were at the risk of his connexion with the Society [i.e. sack me if you dare, BMS!], he would avow this; and if the friends of missions would not hear him, he would turn and tell it to his God; nor would he ever desist till this greatest of curses were removed, and 'glory to God in the highest' inscribed on the British flag.²¹

Slave emancipation, in Knibb's view, would be one of the crowning glories of the British Empire. Central to the ideology of popular imperialism in Britain from as early as the 1730s was the touching belief that our empire was quite different from all the others: it was a realm of liberty, wedded to the values of Protestantism and free trade, and underpinned by the exercise of unrivalled maritime power.²² This is the ideology of 'Rule, Britannia', composed by the Scottish poet, James Thomson, and famously put to music by Thomas Arne in 1740: Britannia's proud maritime domain is celebrated not simply as one in which 'Britons never will be slaves', but also as unique in its blessing by God and in its universal opposition to

tyranny:

The nations, not so blest as thee,
Must, in their turns, to tyrants fall:
While thou shalt flourish great and free,
The dread and envy of them all.²³

What evangelicalism did was to take that established imperial ideology and apply it both to the cause of anti-slavery and also to the missionary enterprise: other faiths were seen as empires of spiritual tyranny, in which countless millions languished under the oppression of priestly Brahmins or fanatical mullahs, and ultimately under the rule of the arch-tyrant himself, Satan. Hence British missions saw little contradiction between the fight against slavery, the commission to propagate the gospel, and the national calling of Protestant Britain to [292] extend her supposedly beneficent influence throughout the globe.

In Africa the connections between these three impulses were especially close. The British colony of Sierra Leone originated in a project led by Granville Sharp in 1787 to found what he termed a 'Province of Freedom' on the West Africa coast for former African slaves from Britain. The BMS began work there in 1795. In 1807 Sierra Leone became a British crown colony, not for white Europeans, but for 1,200 former slaves from British North America and increasingly also for ex-slaves from the West African interior liberated by the British navy. Its capital was and is still named 'Freetown'. Thomas Clarkson's brother, John, was appointed the first Governor. The anti-slavery impulse was one of the most powerful forces that sucked Britain deeper and deeper into imperial adventures in Africa. The dynamic first evident in Sierra Leone extended subsequently to what is now Nigeria. William Wilberforce's successor as the leader of the British anti-slavery movement, Thomas Fowell Buxton, launched an ill-fated Niger Expedition in 1841 to extinguish the slave trade in the heart of West Africa by a combination of British naval power, 'legitimate' commerce, and Christianity. The Bible and the plough were to regenerate Africa. In the late 1850s that same recipe of British imperial might, substitute trading commodities (notably cotton), and the Christian gospel was advocated by David Livingstone as the best way to extirpate the East African slave trade controlled by the Zanzibar Arabs. The resulting British expedition up the Zambezi river in 1860-62 was no more successful than Buxton's Niger expedition of 1841, but part of Livingstone's legacy was a growing belief among British Christians in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century that the only way to rid the heart of Africa of the curse of the slave trade was for Britain to assume some degree of imperial responsibility. That belief was one of the dynamics fuelling the 'scramble' for African colonial territory from the mid-1880s.

Anti-slavery, missions and imperialism were thus frequently woven together in a complex web of human motivation that defies any simplistic equation between empire and exploitation. But we need to appreciate the seductive allure of the ideology of Britain's empire as a [293] realm of freedom if we are to understand the less than enthusiastic response that many in the majority world, whether Christian or not, give to the current celebrations of the abolition of the British slave trade. It was an ideology that had just enough plausibility in it to hold the sincere allegiance of generations of British Christians. But it also had sufficient self-deception in it to attract the passionate invective of numerous post-colonial scholars today who are suspicious of the whole missionary project of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a device to baptize colonial exploitation. Was not the libertarian rhetoric of the British empire a veil of fine-sounding words that was cunningly used to cloak the ugly reality of continuing exploitation of indigenous peoples?

Whether it was or was not is arguably beside the point so far as current relationships between Christians and those of other faiths are concerned: the Christian rhetoric of empire is widely *perceived* as a hollow sham, and that is the reality with which contemporary Christian mission

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has to deal. Christians today therefore have to demonstrate unambiguously by their actions that the gospel really is the good news for the poor that it was when the common people heard Jesus gladly. Nevertheless, there is still a place for historians to remind the world that the reality of history rarely corresponded to the simple binary oppositions between wicked imperialists and the oppressed beloved of modern rhetoric.

One leading scholar who combines postcolonial orthodoxy with at least some recognition of the ambiguous role of Christianity is Professor Catherine Hall of University College London, who published a massive book in 1992, *Civilising Subjects*, which tells the story of how mission, anti-slavery and empire linked together the two nineteenth-century worlds of Jamaica and English Nonconformity, especially the Baptist churches of Birmingham.²⁴ Catherine Hall is the daughter of John O. Barrett, one-time minister of the church in which William Knibb spent his boyhood, Fuller Baptist Church, Kettering, and from 1949 to 1962 superintendent of the North-Eastern area of the Baptist Union. She is married to a leading Jamaican cultural theorist and intellectual champion of the Left, Stuart Hall, who came to England in 1951 to study and never returned home. In the mid-1960s she was a student in Birmingham in an [294] era when the first major eruptions of racial tension surfaced in that city. Catherine Hall thus unites in her own person some of the paradoxes we have been wrestling with. Passionately anti-colonial in her fundamental stance, she is nonetheless respectful of at least some strands of the Baptist tradition into which she was born. In the introduction to her book she speaks warmly of her father and of the Fuller congregation (which they continued to visit regularly after their move to Leeds) as committed to principles of egalitarianism, justice and internationalism. She is a lot less polite about the church at South Parade, Leeds, which they joined on their move from Kettering. Whether the congregation at South Parade was really so different in its theological stance from that at Kettering we may doubt: her view of South Parade is coloured by an adolescent's typical resentment at 'having to go to church and Sunday school' and at the apparent pressure to become a believer.²⁵ It may be significant that Hall ends her big book with reference to the black political activist, Marcus Garvey, son of a Methodist deacon and a chapel-going mother. Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded in Jamaica in 1914, aimed to unite all negro peoples of the world and promote self-government for black people. Hall notes that the Association's meetings used to begin and end with the singing of the missionary hymn, 'From Greenland's Icy Mountains'. That hymn has now been largely excised from the Christian repertoire, no doubt on the grounds of its allegedly racist language of 'heathen blindness' and the unfortunate rhyme that in 'Ceylon's isle' 'only man is vile'. But, as Hall observes, 'what richer symbol could there be of the contradictory and ambivalent legacy' of a missionary tradition that did so much to bring slavery to an end?²⁶

1 Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (originally published, Lima 1971; Eng. transl. 1973; first British edition, London: SCM Press, 1974), pp.167-8.

2 Robert Robinson, *Slavery Inconsistent with the Spirit of Christianity: a sermon preached at Cambridge, on Sunday, Feb. 10, 1788*, Cambridge: J. Archdeacon, 1788, p.3.

3 Ibid., pp.4-5.

4 Ibid., pp.5-12 (my italics).

5 Robinson is citing Hebrews 13:3.

6 Ibid., pp.12-13.

7 Ibid., pp.27, 35-6.

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- 8 Abraham Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species and the Enslaving of Innocent Persons Inimical to the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Christ: a sermon preached in Little Prescot Street, Goodman's Fields*, [295] January 29, 1792, 3rd edition, London: L. Wayland, 1792, p.22.
- 9 Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist 20 Missionary Society 1792-1992*, 21 Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992, p.81.
- 10 Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1986, p.102.
- 11 Roger Hayden, 'Caleb Evans and the anti-slavery question', *Baptist Quarterly* 39:1, January 2001, pp.4-14.
- 12 Brown, *English Baptists*, pp.122; Norman Moon, *Education for Ministry: Bristol Baptist College 1679-1979*, Bristol: 24 Bristol Baptist College, 1979, p.23.
- 13 William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, Leicester: 1792, pp.79, 84.
- 14 Eustace Carey, *Memoir of William Carey, DD*, London: Jackson & Walford, 1836, p.38.
- 15 John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward*, 2 vols., London: Longman, 1859, I., pp.93-6.
- 16 <http://www.oxford.dnb.com/public/themes/96/96075-content.html?articleid=96075&b>.
- 17 See Hayden, 'Caleb Evans...', pp.7-9.
- 18 Stanley, *History of the BMS*, p.71.
- 19 J.H. Hinton, *Memoir of William Knibb*, London: 1847, pp.136-7; see Stanley, *History of the BMS*, pp.76-7.
- 20 Stanley, *History of the BMS*, p.77.
- 21 *Baptist Magazine* 24, 1832, p.325, cited in Brian Stanley, 'Nineteenth-century liberation theology: Nonconformist missionaries and imperialism', *Baptist Quarterly* 32:1, January 1987, p.8.
- 22 On this theme see David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, Cambridge: CUP, 2000.
- 23 James Thomson, *Rule Britannia!* 1740, stanza 3.
- 24 Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002. See John Briggs's review, *BQ* 40:3, July 2003, pp.130-2.
- 25 Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, pp.2-34.
- 26 Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, p.441. Hall's actual words are 'the contradictory and ambivalent legacy of a particular colonial project'. In the final analysis, she sees Christians missions as 'a colonial project', whereas I would wish to argue that the ambivalence consists precisely in that missions functioned *both* as contributors to the ideology of imperialism and as subverters of colonial power.