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William Wilberforce and the Ambiguities of Christian Antislavery

1 Introduction: Evangelicalism and Antislavery

According to Roy Porter, ‘the campaigns in England which secured first the abolition of the slave trade [in 1807] and then of slavery itself in the British Empire [in 1833] were led by Evangelical Christians and Quakers, not by the liberal intelligentsia.’¹ It is a striking claim, not least because Porter himself was an avowed member of the liberal intelligentsia and a keen advocate of secular Enlightenment values. The claim does require qualification: some members of the liberal intelligentsia played a vital role in the abolition campaigns or in their ultimate success: notably the Whig politicians Charles James Fox, Henry Brougham, and Charles Grey. Some Evangelicals mixed with the liberal intelligentsia, writing for the *Edinburgh Review* or helping to found the non-confessional University of London. Moreover, the British abolitionist campaign was an ecumenical coalition, bringing together activists from across the ecclesiastical spectrum, from Unitarians to high church Anglicans. We miss much if we focus exclusively on Quakers and Evangelicals.²

Yet Porter was summing up received wisdom: historians tend to agree that Quakers and Evangelicals were central to British abolitionism.³ Much has been written about the Quakers, but in this chapter, I will focus on the Evangelicals, especially Anglican Evangelicals, and on their most prominent figure: the politician William Wilberforce, who was not only the parliamentary spokesman for the abolitionist campaign from 1789 to 1823 but also one of the most influential religious figures of his generation. Indeed, some historians have written of ‘the age of Wilberforce’.⁴

In English, the noun “Evangelical” is used to refer to the pietist, revivalist, or populist Protestants who first emerged as a major force in Anglo-American religious life

¹ Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990): 68.

² On the role of Unitarians, see Anthony Page, “Rational Dissent, Enlightenment, and Abolition of the British Slave Trade,” *Historical Journal* 54 (2011): 741–72. Christopher Leslie Brown’s *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) highlights Quakers and Evangelicals, but also notes the orthodox Anglicanism of Granville Sharp and the latitudinarian connections of Thomas Clarkson.

³ See Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* (London: Macmillan, 1975); Brown, *Moral Capital*: ch. 6–7; John Coffey, “Evangelicals, Slavery and the Slave Trade: From Whitefield to Wilberforce,” *ANVIL* 24, no. 2 (2007): 97–119.

⁴ Notably Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

during the Evangelical Revival or the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s.⁵ Evangelicals, in this usage, are the children of John Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and (on the German side) August Herman Francke and Nicholas von Zinzendorf. They argued that Protestant Christianity had become sleepy, lukewarm, or “nominal”. Thus, they set out to revive it by promoting authentic “heart religion”. In his religious bestseller, *A Practical View*, published in 1797, Wilberforce contrasted the ‘prevailing religious system’ of the educated classes with the ‘real Christianity’ of the New Testament. The book was republished many times in Britain and the United States: it was also translated into other languages.⁶

Pietists and revivalists could be found across the denominations. The Methodists were a direct product of the revivals, and Baptists became another key constituency, but Evangelicalism also made inroads into established churches: the Anglicans in England, the Presbyterians in Scotland, and the Congregationalists in New England. By the late eighteenth-century, Britain was experiencing a new wave of evangelical revival: Evangelical Dissenting chapels sprung up across the nation, and a growing number of parishes fell under the sway of the “serious” clergy.⁷

On both sides of the Atlantic, Evangelicals made major contributions to the anti-slavery movement. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had denounced the slave trade as ‘the sum of all villainies’. He also castigated American slavery as ‘the vilest that ever saw the sun’, and in the late eighteenth-century, American Methodists had (for a couple of decades) condemned slavery, even in the American South. ‘The collapse of evangelical antislavery’ in the early nineteenth century was described by the historian Henry May as ‘the most lamentable fact in American religious history’.⁸ Nevertheless, the second wave of American abolitionism after 1830 was fuelled (in the northern states) by the Second Great Awakening. Many leading activists who demanded immediate emancipation were evangelical Christians: William Lloyd Garrison was a Baptist,

5 See two classic modern studies: David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); William Reginald Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

6 William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country contrasted with Real Christianity* (London: Cadell, 1797). See John Wolffe, “William Wilberforce’s *Practical View* (1797) and its Reception,” in *Revival and Resurgence in Christian History*, eds. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008): 175–84.

7 See Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); John Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers, and Finney* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006).

8 Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976): 328. See also Donald Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780–1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997): 92–94, 138–39, 155–56.

Lewis Tappan a Presbyterian, and Theodore Dwight Weld, a protégé of the Presbyterian evangelist Charles Grandison Finney.⁹

Moreover, on both sides of the Atlantic, black Protestants emerged as pioneering abolitionists. In late eighteenth-century London, the Calvinistic Methodist Olaudah Equiano published a seminal slave narrative, while in Philadelphia, the black Methodist ministers Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were important players in the antislavery movement.¹⁰ In a later generation, black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass were also steeped in the language and narratives of the Bible. In the United States, however, they confronted a powerful phalanx of proslavery Evangelicals.¹¹

In the case of Britain, proslavery sentiment was much weaker among revivalists and pietists, though it was more widespread than is often realized. Evangelicals became a central constituency in the abolitionist movement, an assertion which holds true of both the elite metropolitan leadership and the grassroots campaign, especially after 1800. The original twelve-man Abolition Committee, founded in 1787, had consisted of nine Quakers and three Anglicans.

In the early nineteenth century, however, the abolitionist leadership was reorganized around William Wilberforce and his inner circle, which included two other significant figures. First, Zachary Macaulay, a veteran of Jamaica and Sierra Leone, who edited abolitionist periodicals and raised a famous son: the historian and liberal imperialist Thomas Babington Macaulay.¹² Second, James Stephen, a maritime lawyer who had lived in the British Caribbean before becoming the chief strategist behind the Slave Trade Abolition Acts of 1806 and 1807. His son, James Stephen Jr, drafted the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.¹³ Wilberforce, Stephen, and Macaulay were adult converts to Evangelical religion: they were also ardent supporters of the Bible Society and various missionary societies. Evangelicals were also important to the abolitionist campaign at the grassroots level, especially in the 1820s and 1830s. In 1823, the leading

9 James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997): ch. 2.

10 Vincent Carretta, "Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, and the Black Evangelical Experience," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Evangelicalism*, ed. Jonathan Yeager (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022): ch. 30.

11 Charles Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

12 There are two substantial recent studies on Macaulay, one sympathetic, the other more critical: Iain Whyte, *Zachary Macaulay, 1768–1838: The Steadfast Scot in the British Anti-Slavery Movement* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), and Catherine Hall, *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

13 There is no major study of James Stephen Sr, though James Stephen Jr has received more attention. On the former, see Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition*; on the latter, see Zoe Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Alan Lester, Kate Boehme and Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilization and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021): part 1.

activist, Thomas Clarkson, advised Macaulay to build a new antislavery network using the mailing lists of three evangelical groups: the Bible Society, the Wesleyan Methodists, and the Church Missionary Society: 'If we could get Names from the 3 Societies', Clarkson wrote, 'We might write then throughout the whole Country and awaken it.'¹⁴ Britain's evangelical public was galvanized in the antislavery cause, and in the early 1830s, 90 percent of English Methodists signed petitions against slavery.¹⁵

The question I will address in this chapter is why? Why were British Evangelicals so agitated about the Atlantic slave trade and West Indian slavery? What, according to Evangelicals like Wilberforce, was wrong with slavery? Furthermore, what does this tell us about the nature of their abolitionism? How did their religion prompt them to abolish slavery but also to reinforce colonial dependency?

Some historians have taken an essentialist approach to the problem of evangelical antislavery, arguing that Evangelicals were naturally predisposed to becoming abolitionists or that there was at least an elective affinity between Evangelicalism and abolitionism. Most notably, Roger Anstey identified five "religious forces" that were formative in antislavery: (1) Arminianism, (2) redemption, (3) sanctification, (4) post-millennialism, and (5) denominationalism. He argued, for example, that because Evangelicals were preoccupied with the idea of redemption, they were inclined to preach liberation from both spiritual and physical bondage.¹⁶

However, most scholars recognize that the connection between Evangelicalism and antislavery was contingent rather than necessary. Several of the founding fathers of modern Evangelicalism were complicit with slavery: Jonathan Edwards purchased at least one domestic slave for his household; Zinzendorf, on his visit to Caribbean plantations, preached subordination to enslaved people citing the biblical curse of Ham; and George Whitefield purchased enslaved Africans to work on the land of his Georgia orphanage, doing so while slavery was still illegal in the colony.¹⁷

Moreover, in the American South, especially after 1820, Evangelicalism and slavery often went hand in hand. In a recent book, Ben Wright argues that the "conversionist" religion of Evangelicals was less likely to inspire abolitionism than the "purist" religion of Quakers and Unitarians. For Evangelicals, the most urgent priority was mass conversions: thus, they often collaborated with plantation owners who supported missionary work. Purists, by contrast, were more interested in the quality of religious devotion among the faithful than the quantity of converts: they were also more likely to court

14 Huntington Library, Zachary Macaulay Papers (mssMY143): Thomas Clarkson to Zachary Macaulay, 8 June 1823.

15 See Roger Anstey, "Parliamentary Reform, Methodism, and Anti-Slavery Politics," *Slavery & Abolition* 2 (1981): 209–26.

16 See Roger Anstey, "Slavery and the Protestant Ethic," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 6 (1979): 157–81.

17 For a good recent overview, see Paul Harvey, "Slavery," in *Oxford Handbook of Early Evangelicalism*, ed. Jonathan Yeager (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022): ch. 24.

ostracism by denouncing slavery.¹⁸ In the case of British Evangelicals, however, things were to turn out differently. Their missionary drive put them on a collision course with Caribbean slaveholders.

2 Wilberforce and his Critics

Before returning to the broader question related to abolitionism among British Evangelicals, we should introduce our principal figure: William Wilberforce.¹⁹ Born into wealth and privilege, the son of a Baltic merchant who had twice been mayor of Kingston-upon-Hull, Wilberforce was educated at St John's College, Cambridge, before going straight to the House of Commons in 1780 at the age of twenty-one, as the member of Parliament for his hometown. He soon became close friends with another MP, William Pitt the Younger, the son of a former Prime Minister. Pitt himself became Prime Minister in 1783 at the age of twenty-four and held the office for the better part of two decades. Meanwhile, Wilberforce became MP for Yorkshire, England's largest county constituency.

In 1785, however, he was shaken by a religious awakening. Wilberforce then turned his back on "nominal" Christianity. He became a "serious" Christian and began keeping an introspective spiritual journal. In that journal, in 1787, he wrote his much-quoted statement: 'God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.'²⁰ For the next thirty-eight years as an MP, he would campaign against the Atlantic slave trade and (eventually) against colonial slavery.

In the nineteenth century, Wilberforce was the world's most famous (or notorious) abolitionist. Harriet Beecher Stowe's renown may have eclipsed his following the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and Frederick Douglass is arguably more celebrated today, but for most of the century, it was Wilberforce's name that resounded across the Atlantic world. It helped that it was a resounding *name*: Wil-ber-force. In the black republic of Haiti, his portrait hung in the villa of the President, Alexandre Petion, alongside those of Raynal and Gregoire, Alexander the Great and Toussaint L'Ouverture.²¹ In the northern half of Haiti, the black emperor Henri Christophe, en-

18 Ben Wright, *Bonds of Salvation: How Christianity Inspired and Limited American Abolitionism* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 2020).

19 There are numerous popular biographies of Wilberforce. The best short introduction to his life is John Wolfe, "Wilberforce, William (1759–1833)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <https://www.oxforddnb.com/> [accessed 15.08.2023].

20 Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1838): i. 149 (hereafter *Life of Wiliam Wilberforce*).

21 Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture* (London: Allen Lane, 2020): 333.

gaged in extensive correspondence with Wilberforce and Clarkson.²² In the United States, Wilberforce was hailed by black abolitionists, who named one of the first independent black colleges in his honour, i.e., Wilberforce University in Ohio. Furthermore, in 1858, shortly before he ran for the presidency of the United States, Abraham Lincoln acknowledged the abolitionist's renown: 'School-boys know that Wilbe[r]force, and Granville Sharp, helped the [antislavery] cause forward; but who can now name a single man who labored to retard it?'²³ Already in 1858, Lincoln was thinking about posthumous fame – he recognized that taking a stand against slavery might secure one's place in history.

Despite his iconic status, or perhaps because of it, Wilberforce was and is a controversial figure. In his lifetime, his abolitionism was often attacked from the conservative Right by proslavery lobbyists who accused him of ignoring poverty at home to focus his telescopic philanthropy on slavery abroad.²⁴ Wilberforce had never travelled outside Western Europe. He was depicted as an ignorant philanthropist with a reckless disregard for the consequences of his actions. In one satirical cartoon, produced after the outbreak of the revolution in St Domingue, he was depicted as "The Blind Enthusiast", who has falsely accused innocent planters (who are here declared "Not Guilty" by Justice); he recklessly risks sparking further slave revolts in the Caribbean islands.²⁵ The word "Enthusiast" was carefully chosen. In modern English, it carries positive connotations, but to early modern ears, it signified religious fanaticism. It was well-known that Wilberforce had undergone some kind of evangelical conversion, and he was widely suspected of "Methodism" and enthusiasm. A later caricature, by George Cruickshank, showed Wilberforce presiding over a "New Union Club", an interracial political orgy in which puritanical white abolitionists are juxtaposed with chaotic scenes of black sexuality and violence, with the black activist Prince Saunders dominating at the centre. In the picture in the background, Wilberforce is carried to Heaven by two black angels (a satire on his reputation as a "Saint"). Cruickshank's depiction has been described as one of the most complex and racist caricatures of the period, but it captures how Wilberforce was viewed from the Caribbean, in the wake of the Barbados rebellion of 1816, as a man out of his depth, a pious "Saint" whose naïveté had unleashed chaos.²⁶

²² *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, eds. Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1840): i. 357–95.

²³ Abraham Lincoln, "Speech Fragment concerning the Abolition of Slavery," <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/lincoln-abolition-england-and-united-states-1858> [accessed 15.08.2023].

²⁴ On the proslavery, West Indian lobby, see Michael Taylor, *The Interest: How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery* (London: Bodley Head, 2020).

²⁵ Richard Newton, "The Blind Enthusiast" (1792), https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_2007-7058-3 [accessed 15.08.2023].

²⁶ George Cruickshank, "The New Union Club" (1819), https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1868-0808-8458 [accessed 15.08.2023].

Yet Wilberforce was also attacked from the Left. Radical abolitionists complained that he was too cautious and deferential to government ministers, especially his close friend, Pitt the Younger, Prime Minister from 1784 to 1801, and 1804 to 1806. Since the mid-twentieth century, this critique has broadened in scope. Wilberforce's most influential critic was the Marxist historian and future Prime Minister of Trinidad, Eric Williams, who, after completing a doctorate at Oxford University, published a seminal book on *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944). Williams acknowledged that the abolitionists were 'a brilliant band', but he did not warm to Wilberforce:

There is a certain smugness about the man, his life, his religion. As a leader, he was inept, addicted to moderation, compromise and delay. He deprecated extreme measures and feared popular agitation. He relied for success upon aristocratic patronage, parliamentary diplomacy and private influence with men in office. [. . .]

Wilberforce was familiar with all that went on in the hold of a slave ship but ignored what went on at the bottom of a mineshaft. He supported the Corn Laws, was a member of the secret committee which investigated and repressed working-class discontent in 1817, opposed feminine anti-slavery associations, and thought the First Reform Bill too radical. [. . .]

The abolitionists for a long time eschewed and repeatedly disowned any idea of emancipation. Their interest was solely in the slave trade, whose abolition, they thought, would eventually lead, without legislative interference, into freedom. On three occasions the Abolition Committee explicitly denied any intention of emancipating the slaves. Wilberforce in 1807 publicly disowned such intentions.²⁷

Wilberforce was indeed fortunate to be remembered as 'the Emancipator'. The timing of his death did the trick. As he lay on his deathbed in 1833, the Slavery Abolition Act was passing through Parliament, and the coincidence ensured that his name became indelibly associated with emancipation. Having voted to abolish slavery in the Caribbean, the British establishment advertised its new-found virtue by laying Wilberforce to rest in Westminster Abbey. Yet he had retired from Parliament a decade earlier, and it was only in the final years of his parliamentary career that the abolitionists established an Anti-Slavery Society (1823), which was committed to "gradual" rather than "immediate" emancipation. For most of his career, Wilberforce focused on the abolition of the British and European Atlantic slave trade and the mitigation of West Indian slavery. For this reason, he might be called 'the ameliorator' rather than 'the emancipator'.

Yet it is worth observing that Williams and other black activists of his generation sounded very different from nineteenth-century black abolitionists, who were generally sympathetic or even enthusiastic about Wilberforce.²⁸ There are no doubt various reasons for this divergence. Black abolitionists had bitter personal experiences of enslavement and an acute sense of the overwhelming forces arraigned against them.

²⁷ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; repr. London: Penguin, 2022): 172–73.

²⁸ See John Oldfield, *The Ties that Bind: Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Reform, c. 1820–1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020): ch. 1.

They also typically shared Wilberforce's Christianity, whereas their twentieth-century counterparts tended to be more secular and, in Williams' case, Marxist. Finally, we should remember that Williams was not just reacting to Wilberforce but to the uses of Wilberforce. He was frustrated by the way Wilberforce had been co-opted as a national and imperial icon, Exhibit A in the moral case for the British empire.

In 1923, the Professor of Imperial History at Oxford, Reginald Coupland, had written a laudatory biography of Wilberforce, presenting him as the personification of humanitarian imperialism.²⁹ In 1937, just a few years before Williams wrote his landmark book, Wilberforce featured in a set of cigarette cards titled 'Builders of Empire' alongside the soldiers, sailors, and statesmen who had secured for Britain the largest empire in history. Apologists argued that Britain's imperial rule was benevolent, pointing to the nation's long campaign against the European Atlantic slave trade and African slavery as evidence.

In 2007, when Britain celebrated the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Wilberforce still loomed large as the British (under Tony Blair) marked a heroic moment in the national past. The movie, *Amazing Grace*, financed by the American Evangelical philanthropist, Philip Anschutz, breathed new life into the Wilberforce legend. Advertisements declared (in true Hollywood style) that "One Man Led a Movement that Changed the World". Critics complained that the anniversary had become a "Wilberfest", and black activists condemned the hero-worship of this archetypal "White Saviour".³⁰

As a result, the bicentenary drew attention to the dark side of Britain's history, and in subsequent years, the public has become much better informed about the nation's deep investment in racial slavery and how much it benefitted financially from the profits of forced labour. The Legacies of British Slavery project, based at University College London, and the Colonial Countryside project at the University of Leicester, have made it hard to avoid this historical reckoning.³¹ Yet, when statues of slave traders were toppled in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, some suggested that they should be replaced by statues of William Wilberforce.

Ironically, for all his fame and notoriety, there has been a lack of sustained scholarship on Wilberforce. The numerous biographies are written mainly by churchmen and politicians, including the former Conservative party leader and foreign secretary,

²⁹ Reginald Coupland, *Wilberforce: A Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923).

³⁰ On the 2007 bicentenary, see John Oldfield and Mary Wills, "Remembering 1807," *History Workshop Journal* 90 (2020): 253–72. See also the "Antislavery Usable Past" website: <https://antislavery.ac.uk/> [accessed 15.08.2023].

³¹ Legacies of British Slavery: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs> [accessed 15.08.2023]; Colonial Countryside: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/colonial-countryside-project> [accessed 15.08.2023].

William Hague.³² There have been critical reassessments by academic historians, but Wilberforce's manuscripts have lain largely undisturbed.³³ There is no edition of his diaries and journals, no catalogue of his thousands of extant letters, and no edition of his major speeches. Since the 1970s, historians of British antislavery have turned their focus away from Westminster to recover the forgotten histories of grassroots abolitionism, including the work of black and female activists. However, the abolitionist leadership is now garnering renewed attention. The Wilberforce Diaries Project is preparing a complete edition of his diaries for Oxford University Press (the manuscripts contain almost a million words). The project is also compiling a list of all his extant letters (currently five thousand, with many remaining to be catalogued).³⁴

3 Three “Secular” Arguments: Justice, Humanity, Policy

How might a reassessment of Wilberforce adjust our understanding of the relationship between evangelical religion and abolitionism? First, the sources indicate that evangelical abolitionism owed much to the Enlightenment and the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility. Wilberforce and various members of his inner circle were adult converts to evangelical religion; by the time of their conversion in their mid-twenties or early thirties, their moral formation was well advanced. In the early years of Wilberforce's diaries, there is no evidence of intense piety. He had been exposed to Methodism as a boy when he lived with his aunt and uncle following the death of his father, but his mother quickly removed him from Methodist influences. As a young man, Wilberforce attended church occasionally, associated with clerical friends from university, and rented a pew in a Unitarian chapel, suggesting that he identified with fashionable, urbane liberal Protestantism. His social life was a swirl of drinking, dancing, and gambling in gentlemen's clubs, soirees, and balls.

Antislavery sentiment could circulate in this urbane milieu, and Wilberforce himself claimed that he had long opposed the slave trade.³⁵ So did James Stephen. In old age, Stephen noted that as a young man, he despised evangelical religion ‘as narrow-

32 The three major biographies are Robin Furneaux, *William Wilberforce* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974); John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London: Constable and Co., 1977); William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London: Harper Collins, 2007).

33 See the essays by Fiona Spiers and James Walvin in *Out of Slavery: Abolition and After*, ed. Jack Hayward (London: Frank Cass, 1985), and Padraic Scanlan, *Slave Empire: How Slavery Built Modern Britain* (London: Robinson, 2020). The one recent study of abolitionism to make use of Wilberforce's manuscripts is Anna Harrington, “‘The Grand Object of my Parliamentary Existence’: William Wilberforce and the British Abolition Campaigns, 1783–1833” (PhD diss., University of Leicester, 2020).

34 <https://wilberfordiariesproject.com/> [accessed 15.08.2023].

35 *Life of William Wilberforce*: i. 147–48.

mindfulness and bigotry', yet 'regarded negro slavery as the greatest evil that ever afflicted suffering humanity, and the most opprobrious crime of my country'. 'It is not true then', he concluded, 'that zeal for Christianity, or what my opponents call enthusiasm in religion, made me an enemy to slavery. It would be much nearer the truth, for certain reasons, to say that this enmity made me a Christian.'³⁶

We will return to that last point later, but first, we need to underscore Stephen's claim that there were other reasons (besides religious ones) to detest slavery. As Anna Harrington has shown, Wilberforce's parliamentary rhetoric tended to downplay religion in order to persuade other MPs, who resented speeches that turned into sermons, of his position.³⁷ After his conversion, Wilberforce continued to read widely in secular literature: his diary documents this. In October 1797, for example, he was reading Burke on the French Revolution, a travel narrative of an English lady in France, newspapers, a novel (Moore's *Edward*), 'gettg Scripture by heart while walkg', and perusing Voltaire's *Candide* 'rapidly'.³⁸ Thus, it is important to note here that we cannot understand evangelical abolitionists simply by reference to their religion.

Irrespective of their religious standpoint, abolitionists typically presented a three-fold argument against the slave trade and slavery, appealing to Justice, Humanity, and Policy. A print by Joseph Collyer celebrating the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 portrayed Britannia flanked on one side by *justice*, with a bust of Wilberforce looking on.³⁹ James Stephen invoked justice when he described slavery as a crime. He had witnessed a horrific miscarriage of justice against enslaved men in a Barbados law court. He saw slavery as a violation of natural law because Africans were subjected to perpetual, hereditary slavery, something that could not be justified by the law of nations, which according to Grotius and other jurists, only permitted slavery in the case of prisoners of war or criminals. Furthermore, abolitionists often asserted that slavery violated natural rights or "human rights" because every person enjoyed a natural right to liberty. These juridical arguments, of course, were not purely secular; they were couched within a theistic natural law discourse. However, they made sense across the religious spectrum – from Deism to Methodism – and were articulated by heterodox and orthodox alike.

Secondly, abolitionists appealed to *humanity*. Slavery and the slave trade were inhumane. In Joseph Collyer's etching, Britannia herself was presented as the embodiment of humanity, with the chains of slavery trampled beneath her feet. Wilberforce was imbued with this fashionable humane sensibility. In his earliest diary, recording his journey to the Lake District in 1779, we see him swept up in the cultural currents of his age, revelling in the new craze for the picturesque, waxing lyrical about sub-

³⁶ James Stephen, *The Slavery of the British West India Sugar Colonies Delineated* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1830): xv–xvi.

³⁷ Harrington, "The Grand Object of my Parliamentary Existence": ch. 3.

³⁸ Bodleian, MS Wilberforce c. 34, f. 144 (Diary, October 1797).

³⁹ <https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-147314> [accessed 15.08.2023].

lime and awful mountain scenery.⁴⁰ As Brycchan Carey has demonstrated, the politician's first great speech against the slave trade in 1789 utilized the discourse of sensibility and showed the abolitionist to be "a man of feeling", one formed by the eighteenth-century's moral philosophy, novels, and poetry.⁴¹ Of course, the new cult of humanity was not purely secular. The language of benevolence owed much to the liberal Protestant theology of the early Enlightenment, with its benign depiction of God as the divine philanthropist whose goodwill extended to all humanity.⁴² The language of sympathy and fellow feeling had also flourished among Puritan and Pietist practitioners of "heart religion".⁴³ Yet Wilberforce had imbibed this cult of humanity before his evangelical awakening in the mid-1780s.

Third, abolitionists developed arguments from *policy* designed to appeal to hard-headed statesmen whom moralists or sentimentalists could not sway. As Collyer's etching shows, the British abolitionist movement appealed to patriotism. According to them, abolition would restore Britannia's moral capital, demonstrating that the British were indeed lovers of liberty. The abolitionists also appealed to imperial self-interest and economic efficiency. Stephen himself devised the strategy that led to the abolition of the slave trade, a strategy that deliberately downplayed moral or religious appeals, presenting abolition as a war policy. In 1806, Wilberforce retreated into the shadows as the government set out to abolish Britain's slave trade to foreign colonies in an effort to undermine France. Here, as Roger Anstey noted, was a rare case of humanitarianism masquerading as *Realpolitik*.⁴⁴

The abolitionists also took up Adam Smith's contention that free labour was (in the long run) more productive than slave labour. In 1787, Wilberforce had been invited by Henry Dundas to a private colloquium with Smith and involving Pitt as Prime Minister. Wilberforce made a careful study of Smith's classic work of political economy, *The Wealth of Nations*. Abolitionist engagement with free labour ideology led David Brion Davis to argue that the movement's appeal lay (in part) in its legitimating function: by setting up a binary contrast between free and slave labour, abolitionists legitimized industrial capitalism. Whether deliberately or not, this strategy masked the exploitative working conditions of British labourers.⁴⁵ Wilberforce himself inherited a fortune acquired in the Baltic trade and formed numerous connections with bankers, merchants,

40 William Wilberforce, *Journey to the Lake District from Cambridge: A Summer Diary, 1779*, ed. C.E. Wrangham (Stocksfield: Oriel Press, 1983).

41 Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2005): 145–73.

42 David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966): ch. 11.

43 Abram Van Engen, *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

44 Roger Anstey, "A Re-Interpretation of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade, 1806–07," *English Historical Review* 87 (1972): 304–32.

45 David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).

and industrialists. His vision of the future was commercial, not just religious. He believed that the consequence of his efforts would be the replacement of the blood-stained commerce of slavery with “legitimate commerce” between Africa and the advanced economies of Europe.⁴⁶

4 Religious Reframing of Justice, Humanity, Policy

So, what difference did evangelical religion make? The diaries and journals certainly record a dramatic shift in Wilberforce’s outlook in the mid-1780s. His comfortable progress was suddenly interrupted during a grand tour of France, Switzerland, and northern Italy in the summer and autumn of 1785. Accompanied by the devout Cambridge mathematician Isaac Milner, he began reading the Greek New Testament and a devotional work by the English Dissenter Philip Doddridge. He became convinced that his soul was in danger. Previously, Wilberforce had imbibed the optimistic soteriology of eighteenth-century Enlightenment Protestantism with its reassuring picture of a benevolent God and a broad path to heaven. Now he encountered a more alarming theology that emphasized human depravity, divine wrath, and the urgent need for repentance. His new religious journal recorded a regimen of self-examination and self-denial.⁴⁷ Even his daily diary became deeply introspective, peppered with laments about his failures, and laden with time charts that tracked how he had used and squandered time.

What is the connection between this earnest piety and Wilberforce’s abolitionism? It seems clear that it intensified and reframed the main arguments from Justice, Humanity, and Policy, with which he was already familiar. He came to understand the *injustice* of the slave trade as a desecration of the divine order. In the 1780s, the evangelical moral drama of personal conversion was projected onto the nation as a whole. Britain had recently lost half her New World colonies in the American War of Independence, a calamity that prompted soul-searching among pious Protestants. At Teston in Kent, a group of Evangelicals who gathered around the Reverend James Ramsay and his patron, Sir Charles Middleton, identified the slave trade as the empire’s greatest sin and the American calamity as a divine punishment. Evangelicals now called on the nation to repent of its “sins of oppression” or face further judgments.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ See for example his speech on 9 July 1817 in *The Parliamentary Debates from the Year 1803 to the Present Time*, eds. William Cobbett and T.C. Hansard, 41 vols. (London: T.C. Hansard, 1804–20): xxxvi. 1323, 1330.

⁴⁷ See *William Wilberforce: His Unpublished Spiritual Journals*, ed. Michael McMullen (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Heritage, 2021).

⁴⁸ On Teston see Brown, *Moral Capital*: ch. 6.

This admonition to national repentance is what James Stephen had in mind when he explained that his abhorrence of slavery ‘made me a Christian’. The atrocities he had witnessed in the Caribbean outraged his moral sense, and Christianity provided an objective moral framework for this subjective instinct. In particular, the heightened providentialism of evangelical Christianity suggested that this violation of the cosmic order aroused God’s anger against Britain and its empire. In his youth, Stephen had imbibed “liberal” religious sentiments, and while he was never an atheist, he thought of Providence as somewhat distant and unconcerned about human affairs; conversion to evangelical religion provided him with a far more active view of Providence. In Stephen, Wilberforce, and other leading abolitionists, the discourse of ‘judicial providentialism’ loomed large: God was the Judge of Nations, and the slave trade (and slavery) were among the causes of his wrath. National repentance, however, could restore divine favour, as we see in Joseph Collyer’s depiction of Britannia. Abolition was presented as an act of atonement, a means of repairing the nation’s relationship with God. In Collyer’s image, now that the slave trade has been abandoned, Heaven’s rays shine down on Britannia. She has heeded the pleadings of religion, which stands by her side. Atonement has been made. Britain is now a righteous empire.⁴⁹

In reality, however, the British continued to enslave almost 800,000 people in their Caribbean plantations, and while British evangelicals agreed that the Atlantic slave trade was intolerable, there was more ambivalence about slavery. In 1807, when another MP suggested that Parliament should follow up the abolition of the slave trade with the abolition of slavery, Wilberforce protested that this was not on the agenda: the abolitionists had always distinguished between the two. ‘Immediate emancipation’ would be ‘injurious’ to the enslaved and ‘ruinous to the colonies’.⁵⁰ He knew that emancipation legislation stood little chance of passing in Parliament, and he believed that a process of amelioration would need to pave the way for eventual emancipation. With the ending of the slave trade, enslavers would have to improve the conditions of the enslaved, growing their population through breeding rather than working them to death and replacing them with new supplies from Africa. Benevolent planters and Christian missionaries had a vital role to play in mitigating Caribbean slavery and preparing enslaved persons for freedom. Indeed, for several years in the 1810s, Wilberforce and his circle were involved in managing slave plantations on Crown estates in Berbice, a failed experiment that was quickly curtailed.⁵¹ It is an episode overlooked by Wilberforce’s biographers.

Yet, as the 1810s wore on, Wilberforce, and especially James Stephen, became increasingly troubled by slavery and progressively doubtful that it would die out by a

49 See John Coffey, “‘Tremble Britannia’: Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758–1807,” *English Historical Review* 127 (2012): 844–81.

50 Speech on 17 March 1807, in *Parliamentary Debates*: ix. 143.

51 See Harrington, “‘The Grand Object of my Parliamentary Existence’”: 152–57.

gradual process of amelioration. Wilberforce's own thinking was shaped, at least in part, by reading the Hebrew prophets. In an unpublished diary entry for 1818, he notes:

My mind is very uneasy & greatly distracted about the Course to be pursued in the West Indian Matters – This is clear, that in the Sacred Scripture no National Crime is condemn'd so frequently & few so strongly as Oppression & Cruelty – & the not using our best Endeavours to deliver from them all our fellow Creatures – Jeremiah 6:6, 34:9 “this is a City to be visited, she is wholly oppression in the midst of her” from Ezekiel 16:49 (of Sodom's Crimes, “Neither did She strengthen the Hands of the poor & needy”) 22:7, 7:23, 29 – Zephaniah 3:1 – Amos 4:1 – 8:6 – Psalm 82 – Isaiah 58:6 &c – I must therefore set to Work – And O Lord direct & support & bless me.⁵²

Here, a decade after the abolition of the slave trade, Wilberforce concluded that Britain's atonement was incomplete. The nation was still involved in oppression and cruelty. Thus, like the ancient kingdom of Judah or the city of Sodom, it was still under divine judgment. At this point, it was not clear to Wilberforce how West Indian slavery could be ended. Gradual emancipation laws were in place in some American states but not in the slave societies of the South and the Caribbean. So, there was no clear roadmap to emancipation. Yet, Britain could not keep ignoring her national sins.

In explicating the *inhumanity* of slavery, the second type of argument mentioned above, abolitionists drew on Christian anthropology: slavery, they said, degraded and corrupted humans made in the image of God. First, it degraded the enslaved. After documenting how enslaved people in the Caribbean were brutalized, Wilberforce drew the lesson:

Ought [this] not to enforce on us, as by a voice from heaven, that we have been most cruelly and inexcusably degrading, to the level of brutes, those whom the Almighty had made capable of enjoying our own civil blessings in this world, [and] to be heirs of our common immortality?⁵³

For Wilberforce, the ‘moral evils’ of slavery were even worse than its physical evils. Under slavery, Africans were not treated as persons but as animals, ‘vendible chattels’ rather than ‘free agents’. Their ‘moral nature’ was disregarded. They were deprived of the goods required by ‘a rational and immortal being’: ‘personal independence’, ‘self-possession and self-government’, ‘the power of pursuing the occupation and habits of life which we prefer’, and the opportunity for social mobility.⁵⁴

To make matters worse, ‘white oppressors’ showed contempt for Africans by denying their equality and perpetuating ‘the old prejudice, that the Negroes are creatures of an inferior nature’.⁵⁵ Indeed, the Jamaican historian Edward Long had even

⁵² Wilberforce House and Museum, KINCM.2005.5787 (Diary, 8 March 1818).

⁵³ William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1823): 68.

⁵⁴ Wilberforce, *An Appeal*: 46.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 43.

compared Africans to orangutans. Wilberforce protested that this racial prejudice was ‘astonishing’ and systemic:

All who know anything of the West Indies must be but too well aware that the great governing principle of the system is the depression of the black and coloured, and comparatively speaking, the exaltation, the almost deified superiority of the European race. This, indeed, as we have long contended, is the main spring of the whole machine. This it is, which extinguishes that sympathy which would otherwise excite in the white colonists kinder feelings towards their sable brethren.⁵⁶

Colour prejudice was fundamentally incompatible with the Christian doctrine of the unity of humankind. Africans were ‘invested with the moral dignity that was the undoubted attribute of all human beings’.⁵⁷ Slavery stripped the enslaved of dignity and subjected them to degradation.

In addition to degrading the enslaved, slavery corrupted the enslaver, dehumanizing both the oppressors and their victims. It is important to remember that Wilberforce was a moral reformer, reacting against the sexual revolution that had relaxed the mores of eighteenth-century England.⁵⁸ The second of his ‘two great objects’ was ‘the reformation of manners’. By manners, he meant “morals”, and in 1788, he founded a Proclamation Society to reform the morality of the British, including their sexual mores. This organisation attracted more support from the upper echelon of British society than the abolition movement: moral reformation was backed by King George III, the archbishop of Canterbury, and various members of the aristocracy. Many social conservatives who supported moral reformation did not support abolition, and many progressive reformers who supported abolition kept clear of the Proclamation Society, but for Wilberforce, the two causes were intertwined.⁵⁹

White society in the West Indies provided one of the most spectacular cases of British moral corruption. The culture of the enslavers combined authoritarianism and libertinism, thus blending domination and a disregard for Christian sexual taboos to create a situation in which white men engaged in systemic sexual exploitation of black women. From the 1780s onwards, abolitionists turned the image of the white Jamaican upside down: from being model colonial citizens, they were stereotyped as

56 Speech to the House of Commons, 15 June 1824, in *Parliamentary Debates*, new series (London: T.C. Hansard, 1825): xi. 1410.

57 Speech to the House of Commons, 9 February 1818, in *Parliamentary Debates*: xxxvi. 247.

58 Faramarz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, 2012). On Wilberforce, see pages 65, 116–16, 261, 352–53.

59 The best analysis of the Proclamation Society is Joanna Innes, “Politics and Morals: The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later Eighteenth-Century England,” in *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Joanna Innes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): ch. 5.

drunken, debauched, and godless.⁶⁰ Their moral corruption was evidence of a principal abolitionist contention: that slavery was soul-destroying, both for the enslaved and the enslavers, who themselves became spiritual slaves to their base passions. Wilberforce talked of slavery's 'depraving properties'. He could even say that slavery 'avenges' the injuries suffered by its immediate victims (the enslaved) by producing a 'depravation of moral character' among the enslavers. The members of the latter group were, thus, indirectly, victims of slavery themselves.⁶¹ Slavery posed a grave moral and spiritual threat. Wilberforce thought in terms of eternity, not just of time, of immortal souls, as well as perishable bodies. In line with an abolitionist reading of Matthew 16:26, he believed perpetrators could gain the whole world and lose their souls.

Emphasis on the depraving properties of slavery, in turn, led to a reframing of the third abolitionist argument: that the slave trade and slavery were *impolitic*. Politicians typically thought of the national interest in purely temporal terms, but abolitionists argued that this conception of policy was too narrow. Providence had to be considered because while righteousness exalted a nation, national crimes brought national punishments. Abolition of the slave trade and then of slavery was presented as a spiritual insurance policy, a means of restoring Britain's damaged relationship with Heaven and thus of securing the nation's future well-being and prosperity. Britain and its empire would only flourish if it underwent a moral reformation. To calculate the national interest without regard for Providence was to make a fatal mistake. Abolitionists, then, appealed not merely to altruism (or "humanity"); they claimed that abolition was in the national interest. According to them, it would refurbish Britain's reputation in the eyes of the world and restore Britain's favour with Heaven.⁶²

5 Millennialism and Human Progress

In addition to these elements of rhetorical *Realpolitik*, there was a further eschatological dimension to British antislavery that is often missed in modern scholarship. Wilberforce's generation witnessed the birth of the modern Evangelical missionary movement with the founding of the London Missionary Society, the Baptist Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, and the Wesleyan Missionary Society. This development was underpinned by a millennialist faith in the future. Most promoters

⁶⁰ See Trevor Burnard and Richard Follett, "Caribbean Slavery, British Anti-Slavery, and the Cultural Politics of Venereal Disease," *Historical Journal* 55 (2012): 427–51.

⁶¹ *Substance of the Proceedings in the House of Commons on Thursday, July 25, 1822* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1822): 5.

⁶² See Coffey, "'Tremble Britannia'"; and Boyd Hilton, "1807 and All That: Why Britain Abolished her Slave Trade," in *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*, ed. Derek R. Petersen (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010): ch. 2.

of missions advanced a modern version of millennialism, one that envisaged the gradual Christianization of the world. In contrast to earlier millenarians, they denied that the millennium would be inaugurated by the sudden, personal return of Christ. Instead, the millennium was the era of Christ's *spiritual* rule, and the personal return of Christ (the Second Coming) would only occur after the millennium. This eschatology has come to be known as postmillennialism, and it was mainstream among British Evangelicals.⁶³

Wilberforce and his circle were postmillennialist Protestants who anticipated the conversion of the Jews, Muslims, and Roman Catholics to the Protestant faith: they also believed that the worldwide triumph of Christianity would lead to the demise of slavery. By denying the *imminent* return of Christ, postmillennialism opened the prospect of centuries of human progress, through which the present age would morph into the millennial age. This eschatology was easily combined with the political economy of the Scottish Enlightenment and its stadial view of history progressing towards commercial society. It also made room for a new missionary and liberal imperialism. Britain and her reformed empire could have a vital role to play in the climax of world history: by spreading Christianity, commerce, and civilization, she could help to usher in the millennium.

Millennialists were not necessarily anti-slavery. In the eighteenth century, the enslavement of Africans had often been depicted as a *felix culpa*, a happy fall that had providentially exposed the heathen to the Christian Gospel. In the nineteenth century, some American Protestants developed a proslavery millennialism, in which godly paternalist slaveholders prepared the way for Christ's rule by evangelizing their slaves.⁶⁴ However, for British abolitionists, the Atlantic slave trade and Caribbean slavery were barriers to the spread of the gospel, not vehicles for it. As Christopher Brown has observed in relation to the Anglican abolitionists of the 1780s, 'the antislavery impulse [. . .] did not spring from the logic of the conversion experience. Instead, it originated in frustrated aspirations to propagate the gospel in the British West Indies'.⁶⁵

In 1819, while looking back on his long campaign against the Atlantic slave trade, Wilberforce told a missionary meeting that his greatest objection to this evil commerce was spiritual: it erected a three-thousand-mile barrier along the African coast, 'which shuts out light and truth, and humanity and kindness'.⁶⁶ By the 1820s, Caribbean slavery was viewed in the same way. The evangelical missionaries and their converts experienced constant obstruction and harassment by hostile white colonists.

63 David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990): ch. 3; Stephen Orchard, "Evangelical Eschatology and the Missionary Awakening," *Journal of Religious History* 22 (1998): 132–51.

64 Jack P. Maddex, "Proslavery Millennialism: Social Eschatology in Antebellum Southern Calvinism," *American Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1979): 46–62.

65 Brown, *Moral Capital*: 351–52.

66 Speech to the British and Foreign Bible Society, reported in *Episcopal Magazine* 1 (1820): 25.

Even where missionaries were allowed, the religious liberty of the enslaved was severely curtailed: they needed passes to attend chapel and were often forced to work on the Sabbath. Planters protested that Dissenting missionaries would destabilize slave plantations. Their prophecy seemed fulfilled when two major slave revolts erupted from missionary chapels: the first led by the black deacon Quamina in Demerara in 1823, the second by the black Baptist Sam Sharpe in Jamaica in 1831 / 1832.⁶⁷

Wilberforce was deeply invested in the missionary cause. Between the late 1780s and the early 1830s, his manuscript diaries record scores of meetings with evangelical missionaries, including Moravians, Anglicans, Lutherans, Wesleyans, Congregationalists, and Baptists. In speeches to missionary societies and the Bible Society, he exulted in the 'bloodless triumphs' of the Gospel; Satan's dominion was 'now declining' as the 'light of truth was diffusing' and 'spreading more and more through the earth'. He had no doubt that 'the glories of the meridian day would infallibly succeed' the morning sun, for 'we are approaching the period when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth'.⁶⁸ In an 1822 speech to Parliament on slavery in the Cape Colony, he even told MPs of what he believed to be the nation's eschatological mission:

We are engaged in diffusing the light of Divine truth throughout the earth, by our Bible societies, and by our Missionaries, whom we send to enlighten and to civilize, in the most distant countries, the victims of ignorance and depravity. What a contradiction would it be, if, while we are professing ourselves the servants, and diffusing the principles, of the Prince of Peace and Love, we were to be establishing a system utterly and irreconcilably at war with the rights and happiness of our fellow creatures – in short, a system which may be justly termed one grand violation of every law, Divine and human!⁶⁹

As Wilberforce gazed into the millennial future, he could foresee a time, centuries hence, when 'the vast deserts' of Africa 'shall have become the seat of civilization' and true religion.⁷⁰

For Wilberforce, then, the antislavery movement was part of a grander narrative: the eschatological triumph of Christ's kingdom throughout the earth. Slavery blocked the road to the millennium, partly because enslavers were so hostile to missionaries, partly because slavery discredited Christianity in the eyes of both Africans and liberal sceptics, but also because slavery was the enemy of human flourishing. The spread of Christianity, commerce, and civilization depended on the freedom of rational, moral agents who enjoyed self-determination and self-governance.

⁶⁷ See Stiv Jakobssen, *Am I not a Man and a Brother? British Missions and the Abolition of the Slave Trade and Slavery in West Africa and the West Indies, 1786–1838* (Uppsala: Almquist and Wiksells, 1972); and Duncan Rice, "The Missionary Context of Anti-Slavery," in *Slavery and British Society, 1776–1846*, ed. James Walvin (London: Macmillan, 1982): ch. 6.

⁶⁸ "Speech to the Wesleyan Missionary Society Annual Meeting," 1823, in the *Scottish Missionary Register*, 1 June 1823, 265–66; *The Methodist Magazine* 11, no. 11 (1828): 424–26.

⁶⁹ *Substance of the Proceedings . . . July 25, 1822*: 7–8.

⁷⁰ *Substance of the Proceedings . . . July 25, 1822*: 34.

Nevertheless, there was also a tension – even a contradiction – between this ideal of independent self-rule and the belief in European cultural superiority. On the one hand, abolitionists qualified the binary contrast between European civility and African barbarism, documenting the nobility of African culture and the barbarity of the European Atlantic slave trade. Christian Europe and its empires, they argued, were in urgent need of moral reform. Africa and Africans had the same inherent potential as Europe and Europeans. In the next generation, it would be Henry Venn, the son of Wilberforce's pastor (John Venn), who, as secretary of the Church Missionary Society, developed the three-self principle: the idea that indigenous churches should be encouraged to become self-governing, self-funding, and self-propagating.⁷¹ For these Anglican Evangelicals, Africans were equal by nature; it is misleading to suggest that 'None of the leading abolitionists believed in the intellectual equality of black and white people'.⁷²

On the other hand, Wilberforce and his contemporaries had no doubt that, due to contingent historical developments, Europe was a more advanced, refined, and enlightened civilization. He rejected the racist claim that Africans suffered from "incurable barbarism" not because he denied the barbarism but because he saw it as curable. While Wilberforce believed in the *inherent* natural equality of Africans and Europeans, he took it for granted that Africans suffered from *ingrained* cultural inferiority.⁷³ Christian Europe had a mission 'to enlighten and to civilize', one that would prepare the way for a millennial age in which slavery would cease to exist throughout the earth.⁷⁴ That mission of emancipation would help to legitimize European colonial rule in Africa. The civilizing process in both Africa and the Caribbean would not be quick: it would require decades, even generations, of European paternalism. Enslaved Africans must be made 'fit for the enjoyment of British freedom' under colonial tutelage; after emancipation, they would become a 'free and industrious peasantry'.⁷⁵ The ultimate goal was to see the emancipated 'enjoying our own civil blessings in this world'; in the meantime, however, they were expected to be colonial subjects rather than equal citizens.⁷⁶ Here we see the ambiguities of Christian abolitionism on full display.

⁷¹ Wilbert R. Shenk, *Henry Venn: Missionary Statesman* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983): ch. 3.

⁷² Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British Empire: From Africa to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 154.

⁷³ On the distinction between "inherent" and "ingrained" inferiority, see Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁷⁴ *Substance of the Proceedings* . . . July 25, 1822: 8.

⁷⁵ Wilberforce, *Appeal*, 73–74; *Substance of the Proceedings* . . . July 25, 1822: 4.

⁷⁶ On this theme, see Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Policy, 2002).

6 Conclusion

Taking the measure of Wilberforce and elite abolitionists, more generally, is no easy task. Much contemporary scholarship on abolition reflects a late modern suspicion of emancipation narratives or at least of those narratives inherited from old-fashioned Whig history. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, historians are increasingly struck by how little the abolitionists achieved and how much they were entangled with the forces of capitalism and imperialism.⁷⁷

From the very different vantage point of the nineteenth century, however, black commentators like Frederick Douglass were more sympathetic to the British abolitionist achievement and more conscious of the immense obstacles that Wilberforce and his allies faced. Douglass was also impressed by how effectively British abolitionists had mobilized Christianity. In his most famous speech, given to mark American Independence Day on the Fourth of July, the African American orator contrasted Britain with the United States, where “Christian slavery” remained a powerful institution and abolitionists were disillusioned with the Church:

There [in Britain], the question of emancipation was a high religious question. It was demanded in the name of humanity, and according to the law of the living God. The Sharps, the Clarksons, the Wilberforces, the Buxtons, and Burchells, and the Knibbs were alike famous for their piety and for their philanthropy. The anti-slavery movement *there* was not an anti-church movement, for the reason that the church took its full share in prosecuting that movement: and the anti-slavery movement in this country will cease to be an anti-church movement, when the church of this country shall assume a favorable instead of a hostile position towards that movement.⁷⁸

Douglass exaggerated the contrast, as he praised Britain in order to shame America. Yet it is hard to deny his point about the British abolitionist leadership: for them, abolition and emancipation were ‘a high religious question’.

⁷⁷ For a particularly stark example, see Kris Manjapra, *Black Ghost of Empire: The Long Death of Slavery and the Failure of Emancipation* (London: Allen Lane, 2022): 1: ‘Slavery constituted a centuries-long war against African peoples. And the emancipations – the acts meant to end slavery – only extended the war forward in time’.

⁷⁸ “The Meaning of July Fourth to the Negro,” Speech at Rochester, New York, 5 July 1852, in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, eds. Philip Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999): 202.

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