



How Christians & Classical Liberals Defeated Slavery

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Slavery is one of the biggest blights on human history. Its abolition is one of humanity's greatest triumphs. But in our secular age it's easy to forget one of the great drivers behind that triumph: how Christianity and free market economists led the campaign against slavery.

Historians distinguish between 'slave societies'—civilisations where the economy was dependent upon the institution of slavery—and 'societies with slaves'—where slaves were incidental to the main sources of wealth creation.

Our historical memory fixates on the former: the pre-Civil War American South and Ancient Rome, for instance, dominate what we imagine the slave past to be. But this understates how ubiquitous slavery has been. Almost every historical civilisation was a society with slaves. Ancient China had slaves. The Islamic Caliphate had slaves. Japan had slaves. The great South American



civilisations were heavily slave-owning societies. Slavery was even common among Native Americans before the arrival of Columbus.

In Europe, slavery was widespread until the modern era. In Britain, William the Conqueror's Domesday Book recorded at least nine per cent of the population were slaves in the eleventh century. In some parts of the country, that figure was as high as 20 per cent. We rely on sources like the Domesday Book because slaves are quiet in the historical record. Slavery was normal, unremarkable.

So the interesting historical question is not why slavery existed, but why it was abolished; why humanity turned against this foul institution. The first answer is a revolution in Christian thought.

The most prominent British anti-slavery campaigners were drawn to abolition by their religious faith. William Wilberforce is the most famous. Depicted powerfully in the 2006 film *Amazing Grace*, Wilberforce was a leader in the legislative campaign which culminated in the Slavery Abolition Act 1833, which ended slavery in the British Empire. He was an evangelical Christian in an era when religious enthusiasm was not seen as a virtue.

This was not unusual. Marginal Christian groups were at the forefront of the abolition movement. The Quakers' radical approach to spiritual equality steered them towards a very early antislavery message. Modern abolitionism began when a group of Dutch Quakers in Pennsylvania condemned slavery in 1688. When Wilberforce joined the British Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1791 he was joining a group dominated by Quakers.

The basic Christian argument against slavery was simple. The Bible clearly stated that man was created in the image of God. This unambiguous claim offered no racial distinction upon which chattel slavery could be built.

Furthermore, Ezekiel 18:4 commands that 'All souls are mine'. God alone has control over humans. In the hands of Christian abolitionists, this latter scriptural directive became an argument that slavery 'usurps the prerogative of Jehovah'.

On the other side of the debate Christian supporters of slavery could draw upon a long history of theological self-justification. Biblical passages that suggested a natural hierarchy were used to argue that the sin of slavery was not the institution itself but abusive relationships between master and servant. Slavery was as natural as the power imbalance between parent and child. Anyway, it existed in Biblical times. If God's law is immutable and eternal then how could slavery be wrong now?

Scriptural debates such as these tend to work themselves into a stalemate. The abolitionists won the day because of the influence of a political philosophy on their Christianity rather than Biblical exegesis alone. That philosophy was classical liberalism—the ideals of individual liberty and free markets.

John Locke opened his *Two Treatises of Government* with an unambiguous denunciation:



‘Slavery is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man, and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our Nation; that ’tis hardly to be conceived, that an Englishman, much less a Gentleman, should plead for’t.’

Central to Locke’s thought was a belief in natural rights—the rights of life, liberty and property which were inviolable, and that governments were formed to protect, not undercut. An antislavery position was unavoidable if you believed in natural rights.

The American Declaration of Independence and its Bill of Rights are infused with the natural rights theory of John Locke. Yet the American founders failed to abolish slavery when the United States was born. But the fact that principles were inconsistently applied, or that the path to liberty was hesitant and staggering, does not undermine the power of Locke’s arguments for the natural rights of all humans. When American and British abolitionists were arguing their case against vile slavery they used Locke’s claims about humanity’s equal liberty.

And they were bolstered by the arguments made by liberal, free market economists who argued that all people were inherently equal. Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill were dedicated opponents of slavery. As the French liberal economist Frederic Bastiat argued, ‘Slavery is a violation, by law, of liberty’. Even for a professed utilitarian like Mill, a moral belief in the importance of individual liberty was a core part of his economic reasoning.

The economists’ opponents recognised the relationship between individual liberty and market economics.

The anti-capitalist writer Thomas Carlyle coined the phrase ‘the dismal science’ to describe the economic thought of the free market liberals. The epithet has stuck, as a catch-all phrase that seems to describe the dry, passionless arithmetic of economic inquiry. But few know what Carlyle really meant by the phrase. It first appears in his 1849 essay, ‘Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question’, which was written to support slavery in the West Indies.

To Carlyle, economics was ‘dreary, desolate ... quite abject and distressing’ because it treated all people as equal. The classical liberals ‘reduce[d] the duty of human governors to that of letting men alone’. Carlyle regretted that there was no room in the laws of supply and demand for forced labour on the basis of race. His essay first appeared in *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country*—followed by a furious denunciation by John Stuart Mill in the next issue.

Early free market economists built principles of natural rights and individual liberty deep into their reasoning about trade and production.

The foundation of their natural rights tradition was, itself, Christian theology. John Locke’s *Two Treatises* is as much a work of scriptural analysis as it is political theory. The abolitionists were deeply religious people deploying Christian philosophy and political views based on Christian assumptions to fight slavery.