How Protestant Missionaries Encountered Slavery

Professor Alec Ryrie

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They did not set out to become implicated in one of the most terrible and drawn-out crimes in human history. Many of them were deeply uneasy about it or tried hard to believe that it was something other than what it was. Yet they had no choice but to be drawn into it. Or, I should say, they did have a choice, but the option of rejecting it all seemed too difficult, too costly, too eccentric, even too cowardly to be a realistic one. Cowardly because, for many decades, it seemed to Protestants as if it was their duty not to pretend that the ghastly machine of human misery, we call the Atlantic slave trade could be wished away. Instead, it was a reality with which they had to work, even if working with it meant sullying their own moral purity. Which it did. My story today is about how, despite or even because of how they came to the subject with high moral purpose and fine intentions, Protestant missionaries and churchmen were fatally compromised and corrupted by their dealings with slavery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And I do mean fatally, although the cost in lives was not paid by the missionaries themselves. The price they did pay was to see most of their hopes and efforts come to nothing, and slowly, some of them, to come to see that their supposed realism and pragmatism were founded on wishful thinking and self-serving prejudice. The only realistic thing to do with Atlantic slavery was to recognise it for the monstrosity it was. And if that sounds anachronistic, I hope to show you that there were grounds enough to see it at the time, for those who were willing to see.

In this series of lectures, we have been thinking about how Protestants first began to take their religion out to the wider world, and for most of the lectures we've taken a particular continent as our focus: we've done Europe and the Americas, and next time is Asia. Today our focus is not so much Africa as Africans. Because of course by far the most frequent encounters that Protestants in this period had with non-Christian peoples were with the Africans they had enslaved in the New World. I will be touching on missionary encounters in Africa itself, but this is a story rooted in the Caribbean and the American mainland, where around 12 million Africans were forcibly taken from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. The pattern was set by Spain and Portugal, which had conquered vast swathes of the new continent and needed labourers for their mines and plantations. But European diseases were scything through indigenous peoples, tropical diseases meant that European labourers also faced a fearsome death rate, and in any case the labour was brutal. The Portuguese and others had already been making use of slave-trading networks on the African coast, alongside straightforward raiding and kidnapping. Africans were both reasonably resistant to Old World and tropical diseases, and also readily replaced if they died – as perhaps a quarter to a third of them did when in transit or in their first year in the Americas. And it turned out that by using an unpaid workforce who can be literally worked to death, you can make quite a lot of money. Once the pattern was established, a relentless economic logic drove colonial economies towards large-scale sugar and tobacco plantations worked by enslaved labour. When enterprising, or idealistic settlers tried to break this pattern they invariably failed. Running a sugar plantation without slave labour in the eighteenth century was like running a modern economy without oil: that is, it's conceivable and lots of idealists would like to do it, but no-one has ever come close to making it work in practice.

As Protestant empires began to take shape in the years around and after 1600, they began to deal with this already-existing system. They generally found it distasteful but not shocking. They were accustomed to other forms of forced labour. There was not much slavery as such in Christian Europe at this date, but there was serfdom, and enslavement was used as a judicial punishment; and voluntary, temporary bonded labour was commonplace, from apprenticeships to military service to the indentured service which was often used to populate early colonial ventures. And while the household servants who were ubiquitous in Europe were not

slaves, let's say that their working conditions were not usually enviable. So when Dutch traders in the Far East found that household slavery was the norm for the wealthy classes of the region, it was only natural for them to pick up the pattern. There was really only one uncomfortable feature of this practice for them. Christian merchants suddenly found that their households were filled with infidels, pagans and idolaters. That distinction made it all the easier to justify keeping such people as slaves; contemporary views of bonded labour usually had a religious inflection, most obviously in the common rule in Europe that Jews might not keep Christians as servants or apprentices, but the other way round was actively desirable, since that way Jews might be brought to conversion. The head of a Christian household, it was assumed, had a paternal responsibility for all those under his care, whether his actual family, his servants or indeed his slaves.

The obvious tensions here were laid bare in the autumn of 1596, when a captured Portuguese ship was brought into the Dutch port of Middelburg as a prize of war and the privateers tried to sell the cargo. However, the cargo consisted of 130 African men and women. The mayor of the town secured an order forbidding the sale and stating that 'they should not be held by anyone or sold as slaves, but granted their true freedom, without anyone pretending to hold them as property'. But the reason for this was not that slavery itself was illegitimate. It was, the order made clear, because these people were baptised Christians. That probably means that they came originally from Angola or the kingdom of Kongo, regions of west-southern Africa which already had quite a substantial Catholic population at this date. Some of them may have found employment locally; certainly, we know that at least nine so-called Moors were buried in Middelburg that winter. But the privateer vigorously protested at the mayor's ruling, and set out, instead of selling the men and women locally, to ransom them and the whole ship back to the Portuguese. And this seems to have been what happened: as far as the Dutch were concerned, the problem went away: and as far as most of the captives were concerned, a bitter winter in Middelburg was only a detour en route to the Caribbean plantations.

The problem of what to do with Christian slaves remained unresolved. Twenty years later, in 1618, a national synod of the Dutch Church in the city of Dordt was asked to rule on the matter: the question, originating from the Far East, was, if you are a Christian slave-owner, and your pagan slaves have children while in your household, should you baptise their children as Christians? After all, they are under your overall care just as much as your own children. Indeed, although no-one was crass enough to say this out loud, they might well be your own illegitimate children. The Dutch East India Company delayed the departure of its annual fleet to the Far East to await the synod's answer to this knotty problem. The eventual ruling was that the children of enslaved pagan women ought not to be baptised until they were old enough to make a choice for themselves. But the synod also ruled, 'baptized slaves should enjoy equal right of liberty with other Christians and ought never to be handed over again to the power of the heathens. If that sounds a little vague, well, it is, but at least the aspiration is clear. What the delegates at Dordt were envisaging was a sort of soft, transitional, Christianised enslavement, closer to indentured labour than to chattel slavery: a system in which pagans became slaves to Christians, became Christians themselves in due course, secured new rights and status in the process, and might eventually aspire to freedom. This aspiration may sound like a pipedream, but there are occasional signs that it might have become real. The closest we get is in the Dutch colony called New Netherland, which the English renamed New York when they seized it in 1664. The first enslaved Africans were landed in New Netherland in 1628, and, importantly, most of them were again from Angola and from Kongo and were already baptised Christians. Many of them were admitted to the Dutch Church's sacraments, and in 1641 the colony's church council expressed optimism about the progress of the Gospel among them. Most remarkable of all, in 1644 a group of eleven enslaved Christian Africans in New Netherland wrote to the directors of the Dutch West India Company in Amsterdam to request their freedom. They said that they had repeatedly been promised this and emphasised their faithful service for fifteen years or more. And, what do you know, their petition was granted. Well, sort of. They were required to pay annual tribute to the Company for the rest of their lives, and their children were tied to employment with the Company. Even so, this looks like the kind of thing the Synod of Dordt had had in mind. But this brief mirage was already failing. The next new arrivals, enslaved West Africans from the Gulf of Guinea, were not Christians, and if they aspired to convert, they were met with suspicion. In 1664 a Dutch minister in New Netherland refused to baptise the children of slaves, partly because he feared they were only seeking baptism in order to find a way out of slavery.

Because this, of course, was the problem with the Synod of Dordt's idealism. If slaves acquired fresh rights and a route to freedom when they were baptised, then it would take an unusually idealistic slaveholder to allow that to happen. It was partly for this reason that we begin to see, unmistakably from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, a rising wall of resistance from slaveholders to any notion of preaching Christianity to enslaved people, and in particular to allowing them to be baptised. Colonists and churches

alike in the Dutch empire tried to close down the route that those eleven enterprising petitioners had taken advantage of. But the Synod of Dordt's vague ruling was periodically revived, and ultimately led, in the 1770s, to Dutch legislation requiring that all baptised slaves throughout the empire should be set free. The result, naturally, was virtually a dead letter. By then, it was long-established Dutch practice that only a tiny number of the enslaved, most of them acting as personal servants and so on intimate terms with their masters, were instructed in Christianity, usually explicitly as a prelude to setting them free. Other Dutch-held slaves were effectively barred from religious instruction, and as a result, were seen as less civilized and less deserving of freedom. It is no coincidence that the Netherlands was the very last European power to outlaw slavery in its colonial empire, as late as 1863. Nor that the longest-lasting Dutch colony in Africa itself, the one established at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, gave rise to the modern world's most poisonous system of institutionalised racism. The route from the Synod of Dordt's idealism to apartheid is not a direct one, but it is there. And that, when we are dealing with the Atlantic slave trade, is where good intentions get you.

The story in the other principal Protestant empire was different. A handful of individuals in one or two of England's colonies were able to negotiate freedom for themselves on the basis of baptism, but slaveholders, aghast at the prospect of their so-called property disappearing, quickly ensured that that door was slammed shut. Colony after colony passed laws insisting that baptism had no effect on a person's enslaved status. And yet, the idea refused to die. Partly because the mother parliament at Westminster never ruled on the subject: since that body was not dominated by the slave-holding lobby, there was always the chance it might suffer a fit of conscience. But if Christianity and freedom came to be associated with each other in England's colonies, it was by another route. The island of Barbados, the sugar-powered beating heart of England's Atlantic empire, had an African population of over 90% by 1700. The vast majority of them were enslaved, but not all. There was a small but growing group of freed Africans and people of mixed race, who had fragile but real rights and freedoms. One means to secure those rights, to claim a place in the island's brutal hierarchy, and to distinguish themselves from the enslaved majority was to embrace Christianity. In particular, only Christians could legally marry on the island, and legal marriage was one of the most important differences between slave and free: because, of course, enslaved people were property in the eyes of the law, and could not make binding contracts, or stop their owners breaking up families for sale as and when they wished. So, although slaves were not set free if they became Christians, most of them became Christians if they were set free.

Protestant ministers and enthusiasts found themselves caught in a quandary. They had a genuine pious impulse and indeed a deeply felt duty to bring the gospel to the heathen, to save souls, a duty that was especially urgent with regard to enslaved people: they were much more easily accessible than most other non-Christian people, preaching to them was generally not dangerous, and the paternalistic understanding of slaveholders' position made them directly responsible for these people's spiritual welfare. And yet, most slaveholders were increasingly and firmly opposed to any serious attempts to convert the people they claimed to own. A large part of our story is about navigating that problem.

For an example of what could and couldn't be done, consider the case of Elias Neau. He was a Frenchman, one of the Protestant minorities who had been exiled from France in the 1680s. He entered English service, but during the Anglo-French wars of the 1690s was captured by France and sentenced to galley slavery; after a year of this, his persistent attempts to preach to his fellow-captives had him sentenced to solitary confinement. He spent three years in prison, including a year in the infamous Chateau d'If at Marseille, which would later be made famous in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, although his account of it makes clear that Dumas's version of the prison is a sanitised and romanticised one. He was finally released in 1697 as part of the peace treaty and published an account of his ordeal in an attempt to secure the release of his comrades who were still being held. He also took himself to the New World, and settled in the burgeoning city of New York, making a living as a merchant. In 1703 he was contacted by the newly founded Society for the Propagation of the Gospel or SPG, the Anglican outfit whose aim was to help the Church of England take root in the colonies. They asked if Neau might be interested in some missionary work amongst Native Americans. Neau was not at all keen on this, believing that they were 'miserable Creatures who breathe nothing but Blood and Slaughter', but he had an alternative to suggest: would the SPG support him to work with the African slaves in New York City? More than a thousand souls, and almost none of them Christian, but pliable and eager to learn? So began Neau's nearly twenty-year career as, to give him his formal title, the Society's Catechist to the Negroes. He was paid a small stipend and, three nights a week, he hosted catechism classes in his house; within three years of starting, he had over a hundred people on his books, and was having to curtail his mercantile business as this new responsibility burgeoned. But the work was always uneasy. Neau was not himself an ordained minister, and the city's Anglican hierarchy was not entirely

easy about the zeal of this Frenchman for instructing their slaves; the fact that he himself had once been enslaved was hardly reassuring. The rector of the city's main Anglican church was openly suspicious of Neau, who went to considerable trouble to mollify him over many years. Neau's main concern was that so few slave-holders in the city allowed their people to come to him for instruction, and he pressed repeatedly, and vainly, for a law in the colony requiring slaveholders to allow missionary work. The crisis for Neau's school came on the night of 6-7 April 1712, when New York experienced what virtually every slave society experienced once a generation or so: a rebellion. The death toll was relatively modest for such an event: nine whites killed during the rising, twenty-one enslaved people executed and further six who took their own lives. As usual, however, there was a backlash against any attempts to humanise the enslaved. A consensus quickly formed in the city that Neau's school was responsible for the rising, and a petition to have it shut down was circulated. But in fact, only two of those executed had ever attended Neau's school; of those only one was a baptised convert, and he was apparently convicted on pretty slender evidence. The other man was slave to a merchant whom he had been petitioning for two years for permission to be baptised, fruitlessly. He was hanged in chains for killing his master during the rising. Neau's enemies in the city, led by that long-serving clergyman, spotted their chance. New regulations banned Africans from moving around the city after dark, which made evening catechism almost impossible, and Neau was even suspended from his office for a while. But the SPG and the colony's governor continued to support him, and eventually the school resumed, its numbers greater than ever. Neau died in 1722 leaving a prospering school behind him. The SPG appointed a new catechist, but he was a poor replacement. Pretty soon he was both complaining that 'I never had so many Negroes as Mr Neau had', by which he meant that his numbers had fallen from one or two hundred to two or three individuals. The only reason he could give for this was that 'most of them are so vitious yt People dont care to trust 'em in Companies', which is indeed perhaps explanation enough.

The delicate line that Elias Neau tried to walk was going to become the defining problem of mission to the enslaved for most of the century. The core problem was this: how could slaveholders be persuaded to allow Christian instruction? Neau's wondered about legal compulsion, and others floated schemes for tax incentives or the like, but such schemes were dead on arrival in any colonial legislature. Most missionary enthusiasts instead resorted to persuasion. Surely Christian slaveholders could be cajoled, or reassured, or shamed, into doing their Christian duty? The fact that a small minority of slaveholders did embrace missionary projects was seen as a hopeful sign, especially if it proved that this need not interfere with the smooth running of a plantation. The SPG itself, in fact, was bequeathed an entire plantation in Barbados in 1710, and decided to use it a model of Christian slavery, showing the island's sceptical white elite that you could Christianise your slaves and still extract sufficient profit from them. Unfortunately, the demonstration was never very successful. The SPG as an institution turned out not to know much about running a sugar plantation, and the local men it employed as agents were variously corrupt, inept or, at least, wholly unsympathetic to the Society's ideals. One of them had to be told to stop branding the word SOCIETY onto enslaved people's skin as a mark of ownership. Catechists and schoolmasters were sent to the estate in periodic fits of enthusiasm; they found themselves wrestling with the plantation's managers to have regular time with the slaves, and also found, to their evident surprise, that the people were no more enthusiastic about enforced Christian instruction than they were about their other tasks. You might even say that the Society's plantation project succeeded. It was meant to demonstrate how a model Christian slave plantation might work. It in fact demonstrated, painstakingly, that no such thing was possible.

It would be a long time before the missionising white Protestant establishment was ready to heed that lesson, however. The primary solution to the problem across the middle of the seventeenth century was exhortation. In 1727, the bishop of London, Edmund Gibson, who had overall responsibility for the Anglican churches in the colonies although in practice almost no power over them, wrote a forceful open letter to slaveholders, which sums up most of the themes of this argument. Allowing Christian preaching, he insisted, was a simple duty and to deny it was to call down God's judgement on yourself. But alongside these stark warnings went reassurance. Slaveholders, he insisted, had nothing to fear from Christianisation. The myth that baptised slaves might claim freedom or increased rights was, he soothed them, completely without foundation. Instead, he insisted, if slaves became Christians, they would be better slaves. For Christianity brings with it moral improvement, so they would be more honest, clean-living and hard-working than before, and in particular they would embrace the Christian principle that slaves should obey their masters as a matter of conscience. It was not only slaveholders' Christian duty to permit instruction. It was a matter of sheer self-interest.

This approach could work, at least up to a point. Perhaps the best example of it is on the Caribbean Island of St Thomas, now in the US Virgin Islands but then a Danish colony, where the Moravian Brethren, a small

Protestant church fizzing with missionary energy, launched a mission to enslaved people in the late 1730s. One of the first converts was this woman: then a teenager, born into slavery but recently freed, known only by her given name, Rebecca. She quickly fell in with the Moravians and, not yet twenty, became central to their mission. She was visited slave quarters, preached to women in a mixture of languages, and organised self-supporting study groups. She was 'very accomplished in the teachings of God', the Moravians said: 'everything depends on her'. Indeed, one of the missionaries went so far as to marry her, apparently in an attempt to offer her some protection, but in the event this provocative assertion of racial equality simply outraged the island's plantation-owners all the more. She and her new husband were arrested on trumped-up charges, and she faced the prospect of being sold back into slavery. What saved her was the arrival of the Moravian church's aristocratic patron, Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf, on the island. He preached a sermon openly defending the institution of slavery and insisting that his church had no intention of subverting the social order. It was enough: Rebecca and her husband were freed, although expelled from the island, and the Moravian mission was allowed to continue. That was only the start of what would be a long and extraordinary life which took her to Europe and then to Africa and make her the first Black woman ordained in a Protestant church. Working with the reality of slavery, then, could sometimes produce results.

A contemporary of Rebecca's gives us a different view of the matter. Johannes Capitein's Latin thesis defending the legitimacy of slavery was published in the Netherlands in 1742. It became famous less because of what he argued than because of who he was. Capitein was born, raised and, when he was seven or eight years old, enslaved at Elmina, in modern Ghana, where the Dutch had a slave-trading post. Eventually he fell into the hands of a merchant who kept him as a personal servant, and took him to the Netherlands, where he was freed, baptised a Christian, and eventually graduated from Leiden University and was ordained as a Dutch Reformed minister. His celebrated thesis defending slavery had the same purpose as Bishop Gibson's open letter and Zinzendorf's sermon: to persuade slaveholders that they had nothing to fear and everything to gain from Christian preaching. I will not say that this frontispiece to the published version of the thesis actively disproves his point. We don't have other pictures: possibly he really did look like this. But this does look to me more like a lazy and racist caricature of an African face than an actual portrait. All the high-minded attempt to persuade slaveholders to be reasonable and to Christianise the slave system flew in the face of a persistent problem: they had no actual wish to do so.

What makes these repeated arguments so frustrating is that they are so disconnected from reality. The claim that Christianity would produce virtuous and docile slaves did not really even make sense. Slaveholders were in fact quite right to fear the impact of a doctrine which emphasised the equal spiritual worth of all human beings, which saw acquiring literacy as almost essential to spiritual maturity, and which taught that marriage was a sacred and indissoluble bond. The efforts made to deny that Christianity did in fact do those things ended up creating a parody of Christianity which could scarcely appeal to enslaved people, while doing nothing to win over sceptical slaveholders. And of course, the argument is disconnected from reality in another sense, which is that this was an argument about converting slaves in which the one voice that was neither heard or considered was the enslaved themselves. This inability to recognise that enslaved people might have views of their own was just as prevalent amongst the missionary idealists as among the slaveholders. For an example of what that meant, consider what the SPG did in the 1740s, when they received a bequest intended to fund work amongst Africans in the New World and were trying to work out how best to spend it. They canvassed opinion, not from any actual Africans, but from white ministers in the colonies. They idea they chose was a project for a school for enslaved children suggested by Alexander Garden, the bishop of London's commissary in Charleston, South Carolina. Garden argued the teachers in such a school must not be slaveholders or whites sent from England. The children should be taught by their own peers, people born into slavery in the Americas, who could understand them and overcome the barriers of mistrust. Put like that it sounds like bold, even visionary. But Garden's idea was for the SPG to buy two teenage boys who might be trained to work as teachers, but who would *remain enslaved*. Harry and Andrew were duly bought and educated, and in its own terms the project was modestly successful. The school opened in 1743. Andrew turned out not to be as capable as was first hoped, so in 1750 Garden sold him. The SPG, mindful of its investment, wanted him sold to the Caribbean, where the prices were highest, but Garden disregarded the order and sold him locally instead: that is about as close to an act of humanity as we're going to get today. Harry served as schoolmaster for twenty-five years, and I can imagine that of the various ways to experience slavery in eighteenth-century South Carolina, that was not the worst; but when the school was closed in 1768, he was sent to the local madhouse for what the parish authorities called his 'repeated transgressions'. The point, I think, is that to work within the slave system was inevitably to be implicated in it.

The other side of the debate, the slaveholders' answers to the appeals for mission to the enslaved, is much harder to hear. It is very clear that they deeply disliked the idea but pinning down exactly why is frustratingly difficult. A whole host of reasons were aired. Christian instruction takes time out of a slave's week, which is a cost to the slaveholder. Gathering large numbers of enslaved people together constitutes a security risk. So does teaching them to read. The effort is pointless, since few slaves understand enough English, since they are incorrigibly sunk in moral corruption, since they are too stupid to understand the basics of Christianity, since they are violently resistant to instruction. Those who do convert start become tricky and disobedient, exactly the opposite of what the preachers promised. Some of these objections seem more serious than others, but it is hard to get away from the sense that all of them are rationalisations of a more deeply felt instinct: that there was something deeply offensive about the thought of a Black Christian slave. When an Anglican missionary in Barbados was told that he 'might as well Baptize a Puppy, as a certain young *Negro*', we are perhaps getting closer to the heart of things. Slavery is ultimately about turning people into property, animals, objects. Even the most watered-down variant of Christianity is subversive of that.

The idealists who hammered away at this futile notion of a reconciliation between Christianity and Atlantic slavery ought to have recognised the pointlessness of their project long before they did. And I can say that, not simply with the benefit of hindsight, but because the problem was mercilessly pointed out early on. It's time to introduce you to one of the most compelling and repulsive writers on this subject, an Anglican minister on the Caribbean Island of Nevis named Robert Robertson. When Bishop Gibson published his rebuke to slaveholders in 1727, Robertson was moved to publish a reply defending them. It is a remarkable book: remarkable for its harsh clarity in a debate fogged by cloying platitudes. He asks us, his readers, to put ourselves in the shoes of a planter who finds himself owning a slave plantation. That is, he says, a plantation worked by people who are incorrigibly stupid, with 'a peculiar Propensity to Theft, Idleness, and Lying ... quarrelsom, foul-mouth'd, stubborn, revengeful, and Lovers of Strong-Drink'. There is a lot more abuse in this vein. But his point is not that these characteristics justified enslavement. Rather, it is to argue that no-one would run an estate with such a workforce if they had a choice. No planter, he argues, chooses slave labour. It is their only option. He even invites us to pity the plight of slaveholders, forced to depend for their livelihoods on worthless heathens. I did tell you he was repulsive.

And yet Robertson does not stint in his depiction of the evils of what he calls 'this horrid slavery'. His description of how Africans come to be kidnapped and sold into slavery, and of how many die in the process, is unrelenting. And he describes the brutal work regime to a level of detail that few of his English readers can have known about: 'the *Sugar-Manufacture* in our Colonies admits of as little Respite from Labour as perhaps any sort of Business whatsoever anywhere else'. If, he says, 'the Nature and Circumstances of this abstruse *uncouth* Trade [would] be display'd' before the world, 'and were we to consider … the Millions of Lives it destroys, and what little Care is, or perhaps can be, taken of their Souls' – if that were to happen, pious souls would call out to abolish it. And if Britain alone were doing it, or indeed any one country, while others remained innocent, 'what would the rest of Mankind call them?'

But, as he points out, in fact they were all doing it. The British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, even the Danish. 'Were any of them to break it off on the Topick of Unlawfulness, they would soon lose their Share in the Profits arising from it,' while the others swarmed in to fill the gap. And what applies on the level of competition between nations applies on the level of the individual sugar estate too. Again, he invites us to put ourselves in the planters' shoes. 'Had it been the Lot of the best-natur'd and holiest Man that now lives in *England* to have lived in any of the *Sugar-Colonies*, he must have done so too.' That is not quite true: such a person would have had the option of not engaging in the slave trade or the sugar business at all, of setting free any slaves he may. Yet in a deeper sense Robertson is surely right. If a heroic few might have struck out alone, most human beings in such circumstances would take the path of least resistance, work with the system, tell themselves they were making it better, and put a spoonful of sugar in their tea. It was true of Robertson's eighteenth-century readers, passing judgement on him from four thousand miles away. And, if some evil spell was to land you or me as the heir to a Caribbean plantation in this era, it would probably be true of us too.

In fact, he tells us, every so often an idealist does show up in the Caribbean. Typically, an earnest young clergyman, filled with zeal to confront evils of which he is vividly aware but about which he is not terribly well informed. And, Robertson tells us, such people's careers usually follow the same pattern. They arrive, they meet the plantation owners, they learn to see the situation from their perspective, and they discover that Caribbean slavery is simply impervious to idealism and amelioration. His extended depiction of such a priest embarking on his ministry to the enslaved population is grimly comical. The hapless young man arranges with a pliant plantation-owner to hold a catechism class. A hundred men and women are pressed into a

space and told to listen to this oddly dressed stranger. These men and women, as Robertson correctly reminds us, will be a very varied bunch, the majority of them African-born, taken from a dozen different regions of Africa, speaking different languages; their English would be very limited, and it would not be strong on theological or ethical terms. 'The Minister, after viewing them well, and not without some inward Horror at the Undertaking he is now entring on, and the vast unknown Deep he is launching out into, begins with asking and writing down their Names.' And I will spare you the rest – but you can imagine how excruciating he makes this scenario. For such ministers in such circumstances to give up, to retreat into the easy embrace of the white community and to conclude that it is impossible to minister to this vast, alien, incomprehensible mass of people whom they are told are not much more than animals – such a neglect of the central duty of their vocation would be shameful. It would also be the easiest thing in the world, and if you are confident that you would not do the same in that situation, you are a better person than I am.

Robertson saved his deepest contempt for those, like Bishop Gibson, whose response to slavery was to attempt to 'have Christianity grafted onto it', to pretend that it could be improved. It was, Robertson saw – and he was surely right – simply a vast and irredeemably terrible fact, a blunt reality which was what it was and could not be sweetened. The only courses of action were to abolish it entirely – which seemed to Robertson both economically and politically impossible – or to live with it. But living with it did not mean pretending that it was nice. 'I leave it to the serious Thoughts ... of any Man of Candour and Ingenuity, who knows what Christianity is, and what *this* Slavery is, whether a *Christian-Slave* be not much such another Conjunction as *God-Mammon*, or *Christ-Belial*': a simple impossibility. Who was more wrong: the clear-eyed cynic like Robertson who chose to live in comfort amidst this vast evil, to repeat the liturgy every week and to preach the doctrine of obedience; or the idealist who hoped that slavery could be turned into something more gentle, more humane, less cruel and more Christian?

It was half a century before the lesson that this malevolent prophet had preached began actually to be learned. Half a century of earnest wishful thinking from well-intentioned Protestant do-gooders determined to believe that the circle could be squared, that Christian slavery was possible, and that Robertson's bleak choice could be avoided; half a century in which well over a million people were shipped across the Atlantic. As to why, by the 1780s, significant numbers of British and American Protestants lost their faith in this lethal fantasy, that is another question. The simplest answer is the American revolution that broke out in 1775, which created a new nation filled with earnest moral purpose, about half of which chose to apply that purpose to the slave trade; and which also denuded the slave-trading lobby in the British empire of some of its most powerful supporters, and persuaded Britain's pious political classes that the loss of their American empire must be a divine punishment for some dreadful national sin. Or perhaps the long attempt to believe in the possibility of Christian slavery ultimately failed because even the most alluring and convenient untruths eventually collapse under their own weight. The final episode I want to introduce you to this evening certainly suggests that: it shows us the Protestant vision of Christian slavery being tested to destruction.

You will remember Johannes Capitein, the formerly enslaved African who was ordained in the Dutch church in 1742. He was subsequently sent as a missionary, not to the enslaved in the New World, but to his home continent, based out of the Dutch slave-trading station at Elmina. It did not go well. His senior position in the Dutch hierarchy was a source of considerable resentment, various initiatives he tried to take were blocked, he was met with suspicion by his kinsfolk, and in any case, he died in less than five years. Still, the idea of missionary ventures to Africa itself had an appeal. In 1750, an SPG missionary in New Jersey named Thomas Thompson asked permission to attempt a mission to Africa, and in 1751 arrived at Cape Coast Castle, a British slave-trading fort in modern Ghana. He spent five years as chaplain and missionary there, with little success, but he did send three promising African boys to England for education. These boys were *not* enslaved, but rather came from prominent local families and were sent with their agreement. Now one of the three died, and a second ended up in a madhouse. But the third, a man named Philip Quaque – and to my considerable frustration but to nobody's surprise, we have no portraits of him at all – Quaque, we are told, 'improv[ed] in every Branch of Knowledge necessary to the Station for which he was designed', and in 1765 was ordained as an Anglican priest, the first African ever to be so ordained. And then, like Johannes Capitein before him, he was sent to Cape Coast Castle as a missionary in order to convert his own people, with high hopes invested in him.

Quaque remained at Cape Coast as a missionary for the remaining fifty years of his life. What makes his mission significant is not its success, which was minimal. He was earnestly committed to the Christian cause and deeply frustrated by his inability to reach his own kinsfolk with the Gospel message. But his bleak story matters because of why he failed. It was, in large part, simply because the SPG and the English establishment liked the idea of an ordained African but not the reality. Quaque was given the title of priest

and missionary, but not the authority which those titles generally commanded. The most remarkable thing about his extensive correspondence with the SPG is how unequal it is. He sent a full report every six months, as he was supposed to, often asking for guidance on specific issues or requesting particular supplies. But he did not receive a single reply until he had been there almost six years, and that was only prompted by a desperate letter in which he asked permission to move to a more congenial post in Senegal: the reply was simply a flat refusal. Some of the British officers at and visitors to the castle accepted him in his role, but more cold-shouldered him, denied him permission to use the castle's chapel, or wheeled him out for visitors as a freakish curiosity: the Black priest. He was stranded between two worlds: and the more he protested his Englishness and Christianity in a vain attempt to be accepted in that realm, the less he was able to make any progress amongst his own kinsfolks.

But as the years rolled past, he became increasingly clear that at the heart of the impossibility of his mission lay one key factor. As he told the SPG in one of his regular reports in 1782:

> *'While Countenance is given to the practice of Slavery, Religion will prove to us in these Parts … a stumbling Block, and to the Heathens who we earnestly wish may speedily become the Kingdom of God & of his Christ, Foolishness.'*

By this time Quaque was not merely corresponding with the SPG in London, but with a range of people interested in these questions on both sides of the Atlantic. An American correspondent asked him 'whether there is any seeming prospect of establishing Christianity [in Africa], or whether that cursed Slave Trade was not the chief Obstruction?': he agreed that of all the obstacles facing his mission, what he called 'the horrid Slave Trade' was the principal. To attempt to spread the Christian gospel from the same fortress that was being used to purchase, hold and ship captives into perpetual slavery was a contradiction too acute for even the most heroic amount of wishful thinking to overlook it. In the end, something had to give. And so, sooner or later, having tested every other alternative to destruction and beyond, Black and white Protestants alike were driven reluctantly to conclude that the slave trade and the spread of their faith were alternatives, and they had to choose between them. They could, and should, have reached that conclusion long before: all the facts were there for them. But they would not be the first or the last people to spend their lives striving mightily to avoid confronting a truth too terrible to see.

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References and Further Reading

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Many of the images used for this lecture are taken from the excellent archive at www.slaveryimages.org .