

The past impacting the present:

the enduring legacies of the transatlantic slave trade

Legacies

2007 marks the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act (1807). The high-profile commemorations provide an opportunity for us all – teachers and learners included – to reflect on, and respond to, the transatlantic slave trade by considering its enduring legacy. How does the fact that, over a four-and-a-half century period, millions of free Africans were captured, transported to the Americas and put to work as slaves impact on contemporary UK society? ... on life today in North America and the Caribbean? ... on life in Africa?

*50% of the 20 million Africans enslaved
for the transatlantic slave trade died
within two years of capture*

On the one hand, everyone living in the UK today benefits directly or indirectly from the historic trade in enslaved Africans. This is because some of the wealth created by the transatlantic slave trade was used to build (or repair) churches, cathedrals, public libraries, art galleries, theatres, town halls, schools, colleges, universities, canals, roads and railways. Other profits from the slave trade – made by those who owned, insured or built the slave ships, and those who smelted the ore to make the iron that was used to forge chains and shackles, as well as those who owned plantations or had a stake in processing and selling the crops sown, tended and harvested by slaves – provided endowments and scholarships which allowed generations of people with little money but great talent to push back the boundaries of art, literature and science.

On the other hand, precisely because the economy and culture we inhabit is contaminated by immoral

Our worldview is a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade

earnings generated by the transatlantic slave trade and its associated industries, we share in the shame of those who went before us.

Maafa

Slavery is an ancient institution. It is mentioned in the Bible and was prevalent in Greek and Roman society. But the transatlantic slave trade differed from the Greek or Roman examples in two key respects:

- **the scale of the operation** – between 1440 and 1888, an estimated 20 million Black Africans were enslaved because of the transatlantic slave trade;
- **the barbarity of the operation** – Milton Meltzer (*Slavery: A World History*, 1993) says 50% of the 20 million Africans enslaved for the transatlantic slave trade died within two years of capture (0.9 million died at slaving ports on the African coast; 2.5 million died during the transatlantic voyage; 6.6 million died whilst being 'broken in' at 'seasoning camps' designed to prepare slaves for plantation life). David Stannard (*American Holocaust*, 1992) estimates that a further 10 million Africans died in wars fought between African kingdoms as they vied to enslave each other's populations in order to satisfy demand created by the transatlantic slave trade and, in so doing, increase their own wealth and power.

It is worth noting at this point that, from the 9th to the 19th centuries, the Arab-Islamic slave trade



'Am I not a Man and a Brother?'



Richard Reddie was born in Bradford in England to Jamaican parents. He is currently project director of *Set All Free*, a Churches Together in England initiative established to commemorate the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 2007.

He became interested in slavery after watching the docudrama *Roots* as a ten year old. He subsequently studied the subject as part of his first degree. He consequently travelled to countries in South and Central America and the Caribbean which had slave-based societies to assess for himself the impact of the transatlantic slave trade.

After completing a masters degree in Information Management, Richard worked as an information officer for the Evangelical Alliance. He then worked as an Education Policy Officer for ROTA (Race on the Agenda), a social policy think tank, where he devised programmes to raise the attainment levels of young pupils, especially those from Black and minority ethnic communities.

Richard has written for a number of publications, including *Focus*, *Christianity*, *The Weekly Gleaner* and *The Voice*. He is also the author of *Abolition!* (Lion Hudson, 2007, £9.99).

robbed Africa of an estimated 17 million people (9 million via the trans-Saharan caravan route; 4 million via the Red Sea; 4 million via the Swahili ports in East Africa). Between them, Europeans and Arabs systematically mined Africa of its human population. The Kiswahili word 'Maafa' (literally meaning 'terrible occurrence' or 'great tragedy') is sometimes used to describe this thousand-year 'Holocaust of Enslavement' or 'African Holocaust'.

During the transatlantic slave trade, ships sailed from Europe to Africa to the Americas and back to Europe again as part of the Triangle Trade. When ships arrived at an African slaving port, commodities such as guns, brandy, rum, iron and glass beads would be exchanged for a human cargo. In the eyes of White traders, Black African slaves were just another commodity to be bought, transported and sold for profit; Black life was cheap and expendable.

Justification

A three-fold justification was given for the systematic dehumanisation and exploitation of Black people:

- economic necessity;
- racist theology;
- race science.

From the 15th century onwards, Western European powers desperately wanted to find people to mine, farm and build their American colonies. European colonisers began by encouraging (or coercing) fellow Europeans to emigrate to the 'New World'; they then enslaved indigenous Americans; then, when the transatlantic slave trade began delivering large quantities of cheap slave labour from Africa, this was used; finally, Europeans saw that it was more economic to 'breed' Black slaves in the Americas than to buy recently-captured African slaves.

Theology was used to advance a pernicious, racist ideology. Bible passages were cited to support a belief that the enslavement of one race by another was consistent with God's plan for the world.

Two centuries on, we find that we are all – Black and White; African and European – shackled to the past . . . and to one another. This is the legacy we share

Noah said, 'Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.' He also said, 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend the territory of Japheth; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave.' GENESIS 9:25-27 (GOOD NEWS BIBLE)

Genesis 9:25-27 was quoted to suggest that Africans were the cursed ancestors of Ham, Noah's son, and hence condemned to an existence of perpetual enslavement at the hands of their peers. Some Christians also argued that, because the Bible links 'light' with purity and 'dark' with evil, light-skinned people are inherently good whilst dark-skinned people are innately bad. Black Africans were perceived as wicked, uncouth and lazy, having more in common with Satan than Jesus Christ (often portrayed in European art as being fair-skinned and straight-haired). Europeans popularised the use of the colour 'black' ('negro' in Spanish and Portuguese) to describe the people indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa. This was important, because the word 'black' – which is closely associated with the word 'dark' – has long been a loaded concept; even today, the word 'black' has very few affirmative associations in the English lexicon.

Some historians argue that the escalation of the transatlantic slave trade coincided with the birth of the specious discipline of 'race science' which alleged that Black Africans had a smaller cranial capacity – and were, therefore, less intelligent – than other races. Some race scientists even argued that Africans were more like apes than human beings. In the Caribbean, slave owners had their own take on the capacity and faculties of Africans who they regarded as torpid, dim-witted, uncivilised, ignorant, ugly, undignified, etc (the list of pejoratives goes on).

Family life

The transatlantic slave trade demolished the Black family. In the USA and much of the Caribbean, for example, marriages between slaves were not recognised in law and were often discouraged and derided by Whites. Because churches were not legally permitted to provide a Christian blessing – let alone unite a Black man and Black woman in holy matrimony – slaves were left to conduct their own ceremony (eg a couple would jump over a broom in front of witnesses) or asked their owner

to bless them. Occasionally, a 'generous' slave owner would provide wedding clothes, food and drink. That said, the slave owner knew all along that he was legally empowered to break up slave 'marriages' and sell off slave children as and when he saw fit.

Furthermore, slave owners were free to rape their own slaves with impunity. It was not uncommon for slaves – women, men and children included – to be sexually, emotionally and physically abused by a succession of slave traders and slave owners. Certainly, no Black woman was safe from the unwanted attentions of her White overseer, his friends and his sons, and her White master, his friends and his sons. Some slave owners saw their female slaves as concubines and jealously protected them from competing (White or Black) males; others repeatedly raped their female slaves with the express intention of impregnating them in order to breed more slaves.

The mixed-race (Mulatto) progeny of these illicit unions inherited their mother's slave status rather than their father's freedom. According to the USA census of 1860, over 0.5 million people in the slave states were mixed-race.

In the post-slavery societies of the Caribbean, which had set no structures in place to assist newly freed slaves, men often had to leave their families to find paid employment overseas. The moribund nature of Caribbean economies during British colonial rule forced many Black people to look for work in Belize, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, the USA and Venezuela. Then, after World War II, tens of thousands of Caribbean men left their families to earn a living in the UK. This put added strain on



The separation of a family of slaves after being seized and sold upon a warrant of distraint for their master's debts

already stretched family structures, as wives and children were left permanently behind during these increasingly protracted migratory sojourns.

Afrophobia

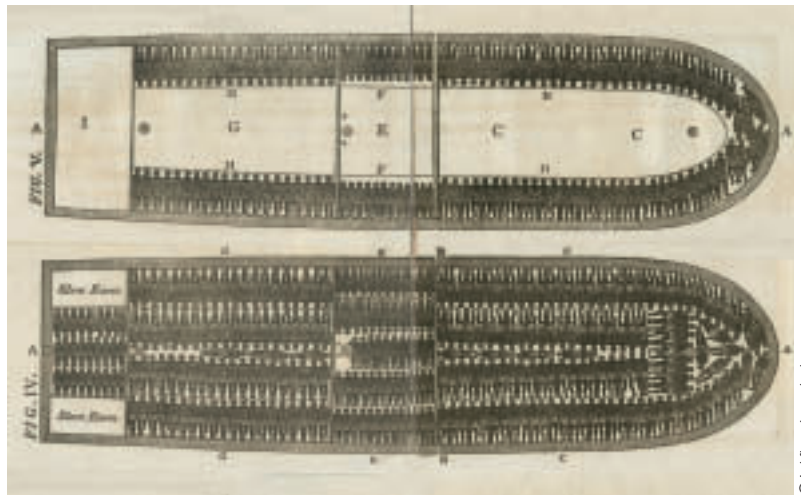
In slave-owning societies in the Americas, social hierarchies tended to be based on skin colour. Racism was endemic and institutionalised. The influence of colour or ethnic prejudice is still felt throughout the Americas today. It is no accident that, in every culture which either experienced slavery or was a direct beneficiary of it, people of African descent are still disproportionately found in the lowest positions. To this day, Black people endure the greatest inequalities in terms of health-care, employment, education and the criminal justice system.

During the time of slavery, slave owners tried their utmost to make enslaved Africans submissive. However, many slaves revolted. (See Linda Ali's article, *Black abolitionists and the end of the transatlantic slave trade*, in the Spring 2007 edition of *ACT Now*.) Because of their legitimate emancipatory aspirations, Africans were regarded as deceitful, frightening and treacherous. These assumptions gave birth to 'Afrophobia' – a fear of Black people. Afrophobia is still prevalent in the West today.

For a thousand years Africa was systematically depopulated: first by the Arab-Islamic slave trade, then by the transatlantic slave trade

The term 'aggressive' is often used to describe a confident or assertive Black person, and an assembly of Black people is assumed to be 'up to no good'. According to the Institute of Race Relations (a UK-based anti-racist think tank), Black people living in England and Wales are eight times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than White people, and four times more likely to be arrested. Consequently, a staggering 77% of Black males in England and Wales aged 15 to 34 are profiled on the National DNA Database. In contrast, 22% of young White males, and just 6% the general population, are on the NDNAD.

UK Government figures (*Prison Statistics: England and Wales, 2000*) indicate that a disproportionate number of Black people are given custodial prison terms for crimes for which their White counterparts invariably receive suspended sentences. Black women are around 16 times more likely to go to prison than White women.



A human cargo – tightly packed, like sardines in a tin

© Anti-Slavery International

Afrophobia also impacts on Black children. According to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Black pupils are three times more likely to be excluded than their White peers, after all other background factors are taken into account. Gus John, Chair of the Communities Empowerment Network, believes this is due to overt and institutional racism on the part of teachers and schools.

Africa today

In the West, Africa is all too often depicted as calamity-ridden and ungovernable. We are bombarded with images of corrupt dictators, gun-toting rebels, refugee camps and starving children. Some people argue that greater trade equality between Africa and Europe will help to bring peace and prosperity to Africans trapped by conflict and poverty. But to what extent can 21st century Fair Trade redress the legacy of the most unfair of trades: the trade in human beings?

Europeans arrived in sub-Saharan Africa having already made up their minds that Africans were naïve beings who possessed nothing and were in need of everything. Hugh Trevor-Roper, the esteemed Regis Professor at Oxford, argued that Africa had no history until the arrival of the Europeans; the continent was an 'area of darkness' which needed the illumination of Europe. A careful perusal of history books reveals that very few Europeans arrived in Africa during the slavery epoch holding the belief that Africans had anything to teach them. Hence, to Whites, trading on equal terms with Blacks was anathema.

For a thousand years Africa was systematically depopulated: first by the Arab-Islamic slave trade, then by the transatlantic slave trade. The fittest and ablest of its people were used to develop the old economies of the Mediterranean, the Middle East,

Western Europe and, subsequently, the emerging economies of the Americas.

But as the respective slave trades waned – and before the continent could catch its breath – a new era of exploitation began. During the ‘scramble for Africa’ in the 19th century, the Western European powers promised Black Africans three Cs: commerce, Christianity and ‘civilisation’. In reality, colonialism turned out to be every bit as one-sided as the slave trades that preceded it. Whites – eager to find resources to fuel their industrial revolution – began plundering the continent’s mineral wealth. Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain each staked a claim. King Leopold II of Belgium even had the audacity to establish a private corporate state for himself in central Africa, but the inhabitants of his Congo Free State were anything but free.

Since the African independence movements of the 1950s and ’60s, leaders of varying ability and integrity have struggled to navigate their countries through the Cold War, unfair trade rules, outside interference and natural disasters.

If we are not careful and critical, we – like our European forebears – may find ourselves unquestioningly accepting a worldview that sees Black Africans as the hapless victims of cruel circumstance or, worse still, of fellow Black Africans. This is the kind of thinking that established and sustained the transatlantic slave trade; led to an era of colonialism; and perpetuates race-based inequality around the globe today. Our worldview is a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade.

Black and proud?

In today’s society, Black people thrive in sports and other physical activities. This is also a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. Slavery valued physical strength rather than intellectual prowess, and the gruelling regimen of plantation slavery meant the strong survived and the weak died. Hence, some of the descendants of these survivor-slaves are today’s elite athletes, boxers and footballers.

But whilst society allows Black people to succeed and prosper in some areas (eg sport and music), it still discriminates against them in others. Black people in the UK are, for example, conspicuously under-represented in law, medicine, education and politics.

According to *Black Teachers in London*, a report commissioned by Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London, and published in 2006, Black staff account for 1.5% of teachers in England and 7% in London. In Hackney, Lambeth and Southwark 48 to 50% of pupils are Black yet only 16 to 18% of

45% of Black teachers in London have qualified teacher status but only 4% become headteachers or deputy heads

their teachers are Black. In Camden, Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster and the City of London no more than 5% of teachers are Black whilst the Black pupil population is 20% or greater. Furthermore, 45% of Black teachers in London have qualified teacher status but only 4% become headteachers or deputy heads.

Where racism and anti-Black biases prevail, some Black people resent being Black. They hate their skin colour and resent their connection with Africa. If they are descended from slaves, they see themselves as the product of violence and helplessness; some of their ancestors are White rapists, others are Black rape victims. They have internalised the hurt of being Black in a society that hates them for being Black. There are Black people who are willing to undergo painful plastic surgery or use dangerous bleaching creams to alter their appearance. This is a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade.

The Church

The Church had a chequered role during slavery. Individuals such as Granville Sharp and groups like the Clapham Sect acted to oppose slavery, but the Church as a whole was ambivalent and inactive at best, and often pro-slavery in its stance. (See Linda Ali’s article, *Black abolitionists and the end of the*



The slave driver’s whip unfolds its torturing coil

transatlantic slave trade, in the Spring 2007 edition of *ACT Now*.) It took the established Church 199 years to make any significant statement of regret about its role in slavery, which included owning slaves and plantations as well as receiving gifts and patronage from slave traders and slave owners.

The Church in the UK failed the descendants of the enslaved Africans again when they arrived from the Caribbean after World War II to help reconstruct a war-damaged country. Many White Christians were aloof and unwelcoming; others were overtly racist. This unfriendliness was one of the reasons for the birth of 'Black' churches in the UK.

The marking of the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act (1807) provides us with ample opportunity to examine slavery's continuing impact on our society. There is little doubt that the Church has an invaluable part to play in this work because anything that was part of the problem must be part of the solution.

Freedom for all

In former times, abolitionists fought to set slaves free but ignored the need to dismantle the structures that enslaved them in the first place. Two centuries on, we find that we are all – Black and White; African and European – shackled to the past ... and to one another. This is the legacy we share.

For each and every one of us to be truly free, *all* must be set free: free from prejudice; free from discrimination; free from poverty; and free from inequality. *This* is the real story that needs to be told during the bicentenary celebrations. The struggle against slavery is still unfinished. This fight involves freeing people from modern-day forms of literal slavery and bondage, and liberating us all from the legacies which continue to blight lives and dishonour God.

■ Richard Reddie

Organisations

Anti-Slavery International

Many people think slavery no longer exists. Yet we know that in the world today at least 12 million men, women and children are forced to lead lives as slaves. In 2007 we have a huge opportunity to open people's eyes to the realities of modern-day slavery and to engage them in the struggle for its ultimate eradication.

Anti-Slavery International was founded in 1839 by the same abolitionists who led the campaign against the transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and fought for the abolition of slavery in 1833. We continue to work for an end to all forms of slavery throughout the world and are the leading organisation in this field.

Anti-Slavery International's *Fight for Freedom 1807–2007* campaign seeks to revitalise the abolitionist spirit of the past and harness it for the



eradication of slavery today. We are also calling for measures to better understand the transatlantic slave trade; action to tackle the legacies of the trade in enslaved Africans, such as racism and discrimination; and the development of countries affected by the transatlantic slave trade.

For further information and to sign the 'Fight for Freedom Declaration', visit www.antislavery.org/2007

Anti-Slavery International, Thomas Clarkson House, The Stableyard, Broomgrove Road, London SW9 9TL

T: 020 7501 8920 F: 020 7738 4110

E: info@antislavery.org W: www.antislavery.org

Set All Free

Set All Free has been established by Churches Together in England to commemorate the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 2007 in ways which challenge modern society to engage with Christian values. The project aims to highlight how the abolitionists' values can transform our relationships on an individual, community and society level.

Set All Free has a holistic approach to the bicentenary, aiming to:

REMEMBER

- the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade
- the abolitionists – Black and White; male and female; mostly Christian
- the role of the Church in both slavery and abolition

REFLECT on the consequences of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery on:



- racism
- under-development
- commerce

RESPOND to legacies of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade by:

- taking action to end modern forms of slavery
- working to effect healing and reconciliation

Set All Free, 27 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HH

T: 020 7529 8141

E: info@setallfree.net W: www.setallfree.net

References

- Blair, M. (2001) *Why Pick on Me? School Exclusion and Black Youth*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books Ltd.
- GeneWatch UK (2007) *Police Retention of DNA: A briefing for councillors and Police Authorities*. Buxton: GeneWatch UK.
- Home Office (2000) *Prison Statistics: England and Wales, 2000*. Norwich: The Stationery Office Ltd.
- Horton, J.O. and Horton, L.E. (2004) *Slavery and the Making of America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Leapman, B. (2006) 'Three in four young black men on the DNA database'. *The Sunday Telegraph*. 5 November 2006.
- Maylor, U., Ross, A., Rollock, N. and Williams, K. (2006) *Black Teachers in London*. London: Greater London Authority.
- Meltzer, M. (1993) *Slavery: A World History*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Reddie, R. (2007) *Abolition! The Struggle to Abolish Slavery in the British Empire*. London: Lion Hudson.
- Stannard, D. (1992) *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wanless, P. (2006) 'Getting it. Getting it right.' (*Exclusion of Black Pupils: Priority Review*). London: DfES.
- www.antislavery.org (Anti-Slavery International)
- www.compowernet.org (Communities Empowerment Network)
- www.irr.org.uk (Institute of Race Relations)
- www.setallfree.net (Set All Free)