

Extracts from *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*, 1823

Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbour's service without wages, and giveth him not for his work. JEREMIAH

Do justice and love mercy. MICAH⁷

To all the inhabitants of the British Empire, who value the favour of God, or are alive to the interests or honour of their country – to all who have any respect for justice, or any feelings of humanity, I would solemnly address myself. I call upon them, as they shall hereafter answer, in the great day of account, for the use they shall have made of any power and influence with which Providence may have entrusted them, to employ their best endeavours, by all lawful and constitutional means, to mitigate, and, as soon as it may be safely done, to terminate the Negro Slavery of the British Colonies; a system of the grossest injustice, of the most heathenish irreligion and immorality, of the most unprecedented degradation, and unrelenting cruelty.

At any time, and under any circumstances, from such a heavy load of guilt as this oppression amounts to, it would be our interest no less than our duty to absolve ourselves. But I will not attempt to conceal, that the present embarrassments and distress of our country – a distress, indeed, in which the West Indians themselves have largely participated – powerfully enforce on me the urgency of the obligation under which we lie, to commence, without delay, the preparatory measures for putting an end to a national crime of the deepest moral malignity. [. . .]

[Wilberforce surveys the evils of slavery, noting particularly its inherent injustice, and the tendency for slaves to be overworked and undernourished and hence to have high mortality. These, however, ‘to a Christian eye, . . . shrink almost into insignificance when compared with the moral evils that remain behind’ (p. 9). The slaves are morally degraded by being treated as chattels who can be bought and sold, by the fact that their evidence is inadmissible against a free person in a court of law, and by being driven with whips and otherwise maltreated, like animals, in their

⁷ Two quotations from Old Testament prophets on the title-page of the pamphlet highlight Wilberforce's sense of a religious basis for the campaign.

work. No attempts have been made to introduce 'the Christian institution of marriage' (p. 17) and hence 'promiscuous intercourse . . . is nearly universal' (p. 20).]

In my estimate of things, however, and I trust in that of the bulk of my countrymen, though many of the physical evils of our colonial slavery are cruel, and odious, and pernicious, the almost universal destitution of religious and moral instruction among the slaves is the most serious of all the vices of the West Indian system; and had there been no other, this alone would have most powerfully enforced on my conscience the obligation of publicly declaring my decided conviction, that it is the duty of the legislature of this country to interpose for the mitigation and future termination of a state in which the ruin of the moral man, if I may so express myself, has been one of the sad consequences of his bondage.

It cannot be denied, I repeat, that the slaves, more especially the great body of the field Negroes, are practically strangers to the multiplied blessings of the Christian Revelation.

What a consideration is this! A nation, which besides the invaluable benefit of an unequalled degree of true civil liberty, has been favoured with an unprecedented measure of religious light, with its long train of attendant blessings, has been for two centuries detaining in a state of slavery, beyond example rigorous, and in some particulars worse than pagan darkness and depravity, hundreds of thousands of their fellow creatures, originally torn from their native land by fraud and violence. Generation after generation have thus been pining away; and in this same condition of ignorance and degradation they still, for the most part, remain. This I am well aware is an awful charge; but it undeniably is too well founded, and scarcely admits of any exception beyond what has been effected by those excellent, though too commonly traduced and persecuted men, the Christian missionaries. They have done all that it has been possible for them to do; and through the divine blessing they have indeed done much, especially in the towns, and among the household slaves, considering the many and great obstacles with which they have had to contend. [. . .]

In all that I state concerning the religious interests of the slaves, as well in every other instance, I must be understood to speak only of the *general* practice. There are, I know, resident in this country, individual owners of slaves, and some, as I believe, even in the colonies, who have been sincerely desirous that their slaves should enjoy the blessings of Christianity: though often, I lament to say, where they have desired it, their pious endeavours have been of little or no avail. So hard is it, especially for absent proprietors, to stem the tide of popular feeling and practice, which sets strongly in every colony against the religious instruction

of slaves. So hard also, I must add, is it to reconcile the necessary means of such instruction with the harsh duties and harsher discipline to which these poor beings are subjected. The gift even of the rest of the Sabbath is more than the established economics of a sugar plantations permit even the most independent planter to confer, while the law tacitly sanctions its being wholly withheld from them.

Generally speaking, throughout the whole of our West Indian islands, the field slaves, or common labourers, instead of being encouraged or even permitted to devote the Sunday to religious purposes, are employed either in workin their provision-grounds for their own and their families' subsistence, or are attending, often carrying heavy loads to, the Sunday markets, which frequently in Jamaica, are from ten or fifteen miles distant from their abodes [. . .]

The insensibility of the planters, even to the temporal good effects of Christianity on their slaves, is the more surprising, because, besides their having been powerfully enforced by self-interest [. . .] in restraining a licentious intercourse between the sexes, they were strongly recommended, especially in the great island of Jamaica, by another consideration of a very peculiar nature. The Jamaica planters long imputed the most injurious effects on the health and even the lives of their slaves, to the African practice of Obeah, or witchcraft. The agents for Jamaica declared to the privy council, in 1788, that they "ascribed a very considerable portion of the annual mortality among the Negroes in that island to that fascinating mischief." I know that of late, ashamed of being supposed to have punished witchcraft with such severity it has been alleged, that the professors of Obeah used to prepare and administer poison to the subjects of their spells: but any one who will only examine the laws of Jamaica against these practices, or read the evidence of the agents, will see plainly that this was not the view that was taken of the proceedings of the Obeah-men, but that they were considered as impostors, who preyed on their ignorant countrymen by a pretended intercourse with evil spirits, or by some other pretences to supernatural powers. The idea of rooting out any form of pagan superstition by severity of punishment, especially in wholly uninstructed minds, like that of extirpating Christianity by the fire and the faggot, has long been exploded among the well-informed; and it has even been established that the devilish engine of persecution recoils back on its employers, and disseminates the very principles it would suppress. Surely then it might have been expected, that, if from no other motive, yet that for the purpose of rooting a pagan superstition out of the minds of the slaves, the aid of Christianity would have been called in, as the safest species of knowledge? and it was strange if the Jamaica gentlemen were ignorant of the indubitable fact, that Christianity never failed

to chase away these vain terrors of darkness and paganism. No sooner did a Negro become a Christian, than the Obeah-man despaired of bringing him into subjection. [. . .]

If anything were wanting to add the last finishing tint to the dark colouring of this gloomy picture, it would be afforded by a consideration which still remains behind. However humiliating the statement must be to that legislature which exercises its superintendency over every part of the British Empire; it is nevertheless true, that, low in point of morals as the Africans may have been in their own country, their descendants, who have never seen the continent of Africa, but are sprung from those who for several successive generations have been resident in the Christian colonies of Great Britain, are still lower. Nay, they are universally represented as remarkable in those colonies for vices which are directly opposite to the character which has been given of the Africans by several of the most intelligent travellers who have visited the interior of their native country. In proof of this assertion, I refer not to any delineations of the African character by what might be supposed to be partial hands. Let any one peruse the writings of authors who opposed the abolition of the Slave Trade, more especially the Travels of Mr. Parke and M. Golberry,⁸ both published since the commencement of the Slave Trade contest. It is not unworthy of remark, that many of the Africans in their own country are raised, by not being altogether illiterate, far above the low level to which the entire want of all education depresses the field slaves in the West Indies. It is stated by Mr. Parke, who took his passage from Africa to the West Indies in a slave-ship, that of one hundred and thirty slaves which the vessel conveyed, about twenty-five of them, who, as he supposes, had been of free conditions, could most of them write a little Arabic. The want, however, of this measure of literature is of small account: but compare the moral nature of the Africans, while yet living in their native land, and in all the darkness and abominations of paganism, with the character universally given of the same Africans in our West Indian colonies. He will find that the Negroes, who while in Africa were represented to be industrious, generous, eminent for truth, seldom chargeable with licentiousness, distinguished for their domestic affections, and capable at times of acts of heroic magnanimity, are described as being in the West Indies the very opposite in all particulars; selfish, indolent, deceitful, ungrateful, – and above all, in whatever respects the intercourse between the sexes, incurably licentious.

⁸ Mungo Park (1771–1806) travelled in West Africa from 1795 to 1797 and published his account of his journeys in 1799. The *Travels in Africa* by Sylvain Meinrad Xavier de Golbéry (1742–1822), a French soldier, appeared in English translation in 1802.

And now, without a farther or more particular delineation of slavery of the British colonies, what a system do we behold!! Is it too much to affirm, that there never was, certainly never before in a Christian country, a mass of such aggravated enormities?

That such a system should so long have been suffered to exist in any part of the British Empire will appear, to our posterity, almost incredible. It had, indeed, been less surprising, if its seat had been in regions, like those of Hindostan,⁹ for instance, where a vast population had come into our hands in all the full-blown enormity of heathen institutions; where the bloody superstitions, and the unnatural cruelties and immoralities of paganism, had established themselves in entire authority, and had produced their natural effects in the depravity and moral degradation of the species; though even in such a case as that, our excuse would hold good no longer than for the period which might be necessary for reforming the native abuses by those mild and reasonable means which alone are acknowledged to be just in principle, or practically effectual to their purpose. But that in communities formed from their very origins by a Christian people, and in colonies containing no Pagan inhabitants but those whom we ourselves had compulsorily brought into it, – inhabitants too, who, from all the circumstances of their case, had the strongest possible claims on us, both for the reparation of their wrongs, and the relief of their miseries, – such a system should have been continued for two centuries, and by a people who may, nevertheless, I trust, be affirmed to be the most moral and humane of nations, is one of those anomalies which, if it does not stagger the belief, will, at least, excite the astonishment of future ages. [. . .]

[Wilberforce responds to arguments used in defence of slavery.]

Indeed, the West Indians, in the warmth of argument, have gone still farther, and have even distinctly told us, again and again, and I am shocked to say that some of their partizans in this country have re-echoed the assertion, that these poor degraded beings, the Negro slaves, are as well or even better off than our British peasantry – a proposition so monstrous, that nothing can possibly exhibit in a stronger light the extreme force of the prejudices which much exist in the minds of its assertors. A Briton to compare the state of a West Indian slave with that of an English freeman, and to give the former the preference! It is to imply an utter insensibility of the native feelings and moral dignity of man, no less than of the rights of Englishmen!! I will not condescend to argue this question, as I might, on the ground of comparative feeding and clothing, and lodging, and medical attendance. Are these the only claims? Are these the

⁹ India.

chief privileges of a rational and immortal being? Is the consciousness of personal independence nothing? Are self-possession and self-government nothing? Is it of no account that our persons are inviolate by any private authority, and that the whip is placed only in the hands of the public executioner? Is it of no value that we have the power of pursuing the occupation and the habits of life which we prefer; that we have the prospect, or at least the hope, of improving our condition, and of rising, as we have seen others rise, from poverty and obscurity to comfort, and opulence, and distinction? Again, are all the charities of the heart, which arise out of the domestic relations, to be considered as nothing; and, I may add, all their security too among men who are free agents, and not vendible chattels, liable continually to be torn from their dearest connections, and sent into a perpetual exile? Are husband and wife, parent and child, terms of no meaning? Are willing services, or grateful returns for voluntary kindnesses, nothing? But, above all, is Christianity so little esteemed among us, that we are to account as of no value the hope, “full of immortality,” the light of heavenly truth, and all the consolations and supports by which religion cheers the hearts and elevates the principles, and dignifies the conduct of multitudes of our labouring classes in this free and enlightened country? Is it nothing to be taught that all human distinctions will soon be at an end; that all the labours and sorrows of poverty and hardship will soon exist no more; and to know, on the express authority of Scripture, that the lower classes, instead of being an inferior order in the creation, are even the preferable objects of the love of the Almighty? [. . .]

[No confidence can be placed in the capacity of the colonial legislatures to reform slavery. The experience of the colony for freed slaves in Sierra Leone demonstrates that Africans can become industrious and moral Christians if their human dignity and autonomy is restored to them.]

Are these important lessons to be read to us without producing any influence on our minds? Ought they 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, not less clearly that he has fitted them to be heirs of our common immortality?

But while we are loudly called on by justice and humanity to take measures without delay for improving the condition of our West Indian slaves, self-interest also inculcates the same duty, and with full as clear a voice. It is a great though common error, that notwithstanding we must, on religious and moral grounds, condemn the West Indian system, yet, that in a worldly view, it has been eminently gainful both to individuals and to the community at large. On the contrary, I believe it might be proved to any inquiring and unprejudiced mind, that taking in all con-

siderations of political economy, and looking to the lamentable waste of human life among our soldiers and seamen, raised and recruited at a great expence, as well as to the more direct pecuniary charge of protecting the sugar colonies, no system of civil polity was ever maintained at a greater price, or was less truly profitable either to individuals or to the community, than that of our West Indian settlements. Indeed, it would have been a strange exception to all those established principles which Divine Providence has ordained for the moral benefit of the world, if national and personal prosperity were generally and permanently to be found to arise from injustice and oppression. There may be individual instances of great fortunes amassed by every species of wrong doing. A course, ruinous in the long run, may, to an individual, or for a time, appear eminently profitable; nevertheless, it is unquestionably true, that the path of prosperity rarely diverges long and widely from that of integrity and virtue; or, to express it in a familiar adage, – that honesty is the best policy. [. . .]

[Fears of economic ruin from slave emancipation are unfounded, but the danger of a slave revolt if nothing is done is all too real.]

Here, indeed, is danger, if we observe the signs of the times, whether we take our lesson from the history of men, or form our conclusions from natural reason or from the revealed will of God.

But raise these poor creatures from their depressed condition, and if they are not yet fit for the enjoyment of British freedom, elevate them at least from the level of the brute creation into that of rational nature – dismiss the driving whip, and thereby afford place for the development of the first rudiments of civil character – implant in them the principle of hope – let free scope be given for their industry, and for their raising in life by their personal good conduct – give them an interest in defending the community to which they belong – teach them the lesson which Christianity alone can truly inculcate, that the present life is but a short and uncertain span, to which will succeed an eternal existence of happiness or misery – inculcate on them, on the authority of the sacred page, that the point of real importance is not what is the rank or the station men occupy, but how they discharge the duties of life – how they use the opportunities they may enjoy of providing for their everlasting happiness. Taught by Christianity, they will sustain with patience the sufferings of their actual lot, while the same instructress will rapidly prepare them for a better; and instead of being objects at one time of contempt, and at another of terror, (a base and servile passion, which too naturally degenerates into hatred,) they will soon be regarded as a grateful peasantry, the strength of the communities in which they live, – of which they have hitherto been the weakness and the terror, sometimes the mischief and the scourge.

To the real nature of the West Indian system, and still more to the extent of its manifold abuses, the bulk even of well-informed men in this country are, I believe, generally strangers. May it not be from our having sinned in ignorance that we have so long been spared? But ignorance of a duty which we have had abundant means of knowing to be such, can by no one be deemed excusable. Let us not presume too far on the forbearance of the Almighty. Favoured in an unequalled degree with Christian light, with civil freedom, and with a greater measure of national blessings than perhaps any other country upon earth ever before enjoyed, what a return would it be for the goodness of the Almighty, if we were to continue to keep the descendants of the Africans, whom we have ourselves wrongfully planted in the western hemisphere, in their present state of unexampled darkness and degradation!

While efforts are making to rescue our country from this guilt and this reproach, let every one remember that he is answerable for any measure of assistance which Providence has enabled him to render towards the accomplishment of the good work. In a country in which the popular voice has a powerful and constitutional influence on the government and legislation, to be silent when there is a question of reforming abuses repugnant to justice and humanity, is to share their guilt. Power always implies responsibility; and the possessor of it cannot innocently be neutral, when by his exertion moral good may be promoted, or evil lessened or removed. [. . .]

Source: W. 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, pp. 1–2, 24–33, 45–7, 68–9, 73–4.