
Extracts from *A Letter on the Abolition of the
Slave Trade; addressed to the Freeholders and
Other Inhabitants of Yorkshire, 1807*

No efforts have been made for the religious and moral improvement of the Negroes, and any plans of that kind, when adopted by others, have been considered as chimerical, if not dangerous. This is the more extraordinary, because an example on a large scale, has been of late years furnished in the little Danish islands, and in one settlement, at least, of our own smaller islands, of the happiest effects resulting from such endeavours: so that men of great knowledge and experience in West Indian affairs, in estimating the effects of the labours of the missionaries, who were employed in this benevolent service, by a pecuniary standard, declared, that a Slave, by becoming one of their converts, was worth half as much more than his former value, on account of his superior morality, sobriety, industry, subordination, and general good conduct. [. . .]

Might we not then have expected that our own West Indian Proprietors would be prompted, not only by considerations of self-interest, but by motives of a still higher order, to pay some attention to the religious instruction of their Negroes? Might not mere humanity have enforced the same important duty? Might we not have hoped that the Slaves of this Protestant and free nation, might have had some compensation made to them, for the evils of their temporal bondage, by a prospect being opened to them of a happier world hereafter, a world of light and liberty? But alas! no such cheering prospects are pointed out to them. It is left, alas! to Paganism to administer to them, I had almost said happily, a faint intimation of that more animating hope which Christianity should impart; and these poor beings are comforted by the idea, that death will once more restore them to their native land; on which account it is, that, as we learn from respectable testimony, the negro funerals in the West Indies are seasons of joy and triumph, whereas in Africa, they are accompanied with the usual indications of dejection and sorrow. [. . .]

Slavery, we know, existed among the ancients; and according to the savage maxims of Pagan warfare, (too strikingly agreeing with the mode of carrying on war which the Slave Trade has produced in Africa), not only the soldiery of an enemy, but the peaceable inhabitants of conquered countries were commonly sold as Slaves. But what an idea does it convey of the abhorred system, which, with coadjutors abler than myself, I have been so long endeavouring to abolish; that, just as in Africa, it has forced Christianity to acknowledge the superior power of Mahometanism, in rooting out the nature superstitions, and in instructing and civilizing the inhabitants – so in our possessions in the western hemisphere, it combines the profession of the Christian faith with a description of slavery, in many respects more bitter in its sufferings, than that which the very darkness of Paganism itself could scarcely tolerate.

This is the more grievous to those who duly venerate and love our most pure and excellent form of Christian faith, because to have first mitigated the evils of slavery, and at great length to have abolished the institution itself, have been numbered among the peculiar glories of Christianity; and because, what we deem a corrupted system of Christianity, has produced highly beneficial effects on the negro slaves of our Roman Catholic neighbours in the same quarter [. . .]

Forgive me if I seem to linger; if I appear unwilling to conclude. When I call to mind the number and magnitude of the interests which are at stake, I know not how to desist, while any fresh argument remains to be used, while any consideration not as yet suggested occurs to me, by which I may enforce my intercession in behalf of the most injured of the human race. But though the mind be naturally led to the Africans as the

greatest sufferers, yet, unless the Scripture be a forgery, it is not their cause only that I am pleading, but the cause of my Country. Yet let me not here be misconceived. It is not that I expect any visible and supernatural effects of the Divine vengeance; that, not to listen with seriousness to the accounts which have been brought us of late years from the western hemisphere, as to a probable intimation of the Divine displeasure would be to resolve to shut our ears against the warning voice of Providence. To mention now other particulars, a disease new in its kind, and almost without example destructive in its ravages, has been for some time raging in those very colonies which are the chief supporters of the traffic in human beings; a disease concerning which we scarcely know any thing, but that it does not affect the Negro race, and that we first heard of it after the horrors of the Slave Trade has been completely developed in the House of Commons, but developed in vain [. . .]

Thus it is, that, most commonly by the operation of natural causes, and in the way of natural consequences, Providence governs the world. But if we are not blind to the course of human events, as well as utterly deaf to the plain instructions of Revelation, we must believe that a continued course of wickedness, oppression and cruelty, obstinately maintained in spite of the fullest knowledge and the loudest warnings, must infallibly bring down upon us the heaviest judgments of the Almighty. We may ascribe our fall to weak councils, or unskilful generals; to a factious and overburthened people; to storms which waste our fleets, to diseases which thin our armies; to mutiny among our soldiers and sailors, which may even turn against us our own force; to the diminution of our revenues and the excessive increase of our debt: men may complain on one side of a venal ministry, on the other of a factious opposition; while amid mutual recriminations the nation is gradually verging to its fate. Providence will easily provide means for the accomplishment of its own purposes. It cannot be denied, that there are circumstances in the situation of this Country, which, reasoning from experience, we must call marks of a declining empire; but we have, as I firmly believe, the means within ourselves of arresting the progress of this decline. We have been eminently blessed; we have been long spared; let us not presume too far on the forbearance of the Almighty.

Source: W. Wilberforce, A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade; addressed to the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of Yorkshire, London, J. Hatchard and Son, 1807, pp. 124–9, 348–51.