

John Wesley: Church Mission Struggle in the Fight against Slave Trade

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Abstract

Several scholars have studied the impact of slave trade and its impetus on John Wesley (1703-1791) the founder of Methodism's zeal for mission endeavour. This paper is an attempt to discuss the historical implications of John Wesley's mission passion throughout the time of slavery and specifically the role that Christianity played in that endeavour. Christian slavery refers to slave trade that was driven by adherents of this religion. The article is divided into five subsections: Introduction, John Wesley the man against slavery, the role of religion in slave trade, from slavery to abolition to missionizing of Africans and a conclusion. First, John Wesley the founder of Wesleyan movements including Methodism is discussed and his role in the fight against slavery. The paper delves into how religion (Christianity) was used to advance and fight against slave trade. The paper offers a critical review discussing the origins of slavery, its operations and specifically the role played by Rev. John Wesley in influencing the abolition of slave trade. The paper touches briefly the subsequent mission endeavours in the slave plantations and concludes by challenging Christians and especially Christian leaders to be sensitive to this history's impact on the advancement of God's mission work in the present century.

Key words: John Wesley, Wesleyan, Christianity, Islam, Slaves Slavery, Slave trade, Africa, Religion, Mission, Missiology, Theology.

1. John Wesley the Man against slavery

John Wesley (1703-1791), in his early years of faith formation discovered that slavery was morally sinful and that there was no other way to deal with it but to condemn it. He knew that the trade was justified under false reasons:

“Slavery is said to arise from captivity in war...slavery may begin, by one man's selling to another. And it is true, a man may sell himself to work for another: But he cannot sell himself to be a slave... Thirdly, that men may be born slaves, by being the children of slaves” (Wesley 1774, p. 35, 36).

Wesley learned about the Portuguese supply of slave men to Spaniards who needed them to expand their territories to the new world-America. He found that by 1508 the first

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groups of slaves had been shipped to Hispaniola and by around 1540 King Charles the 5th of Spain and determined to end such slave trade. Passionate about this discovery and desire to help the persecuted populations, John Wesley, his brother Charles and George Whitefield set to travel to Savannah, Georgia as missionaries in the 1770s. This experience was a shock to him, which forced him to leave America for anew transformation experience that later on took place at Aldersgate. As early as 1771, Wesley was actively involved in redeeming slaves for God's kingdom and putting a stop to their mistreatment as less than human beings were. The immoral practices associated with this trade are well documented in their books (Wesley, 1774; Newton, 1788).

John Newton, initially a slave ship captain, later experienced transformation from the sins associated with the trade and converted to become an ambassador of Christ calling everyone to stop trading human beings. After his conversion, he wrote two powerful hymns; *Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound, and How Sweet the Name of Jesus* that are used by Christians around the world. Because of Wesley's great dislike of the slave trade, he spent a lot of time researching its beginnings and ways to eradicate it. His exposure to such readings convinced him that slavery was the worst sin any human being could commit against another being. Trying to discover the origins of slavery, he wrote:

“It commenced in the barbarous state of society, and in process of time spread into all nations. It prevailed particularly among the Jews, the Greeks, the Romans, and the ancient Germans: And was transmitted by them to the various kingdoms and states, which arose out of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, after Christianity prevailed, it gradually fell into decline in almost all parts of Europe. This great change began in Spain about the end of the Eighth Century: and was become general in most other kingdoms of Europe, before the middle of the fourteenth” (Wesley 1774, p. 4, 5).

These words show how Wesley was trying to find the historical roots of slavery and what states that were involved arguing that; “From this time (8th to 15th century) slavery was nearly extinct, till the commencement of the Sixteenth Century, when the discovery of America, and the Western and Eastern coasts of Africa, gave occasion to the revival of it.

In Wesley's documentation, slavery took its rife from the Portuguese, who supplied the Spaniards with men, which cultivated their new possessions in America. Procured slaves from Africa were sold to the American Spaniards. This began in the year 1508, when the first Negroes were imported to Hispaniola. In 1540s, Charles the Fifth, then King of Spain, determined to put an end to Negro-Slavery by giving positive orders, that all the Negro Slaves in the Spanish Dominions should be set free. This was accord-

ingly done by Lagasca, whom he sent and empowered to free them all, on condition of continuing to labour for their masters (Wesley, 1774). However, soon after Lagasca returned to Spain, slavery resumed and started to flourish again. Afterwards other nations, as they acquired possessions in America, followed the examples of the Spaniards; and Slavery took deep roots in most of our American Colonies. There is reason to believe that John Wesley did not focus his address to the Arabs at the time since Arab slave trade had not expanded as it did in the nineteenth century.

John Wesley was always disturbed by the senseless and inhuman behaviours of slave masters. For him he could not understand why their greed and economic enticement was used as a reason to advance slave trade under unbearable circumstances. Wesley strongly condemned this behaviour:

“This equally concerns every merchant who is engaged in the slave-trade. It is you that induce the African villain to sell his countrymen; and in order thereto, to steal, rob, murder men, women, and children without number, by enabling the English villain to pay him for so doing, whom you overpay for his execrable labour. It is your money that is in the spring of all that empowers him to go on: So that whatever he or the African does in this matter is all your act and deed. And is your conscience quite reconciled to this? Does it never reproach you at all? Has gold entirely blinded your eyes, and stupefied your heart? Can you see, can you feel, no harm therein? Is it doing as you would be done to? Make the case you own. “Master,” said a slave at Liverpool to the merchant that own him “what, if some of my countrymen were to come here, and take away my mistress, and Master Tommy, and Master Billy, and carry them into our country, and make them slaves, how would like it?” His answer was worthy of a man: I will never buy a slave more while I live.” O let his resolution be yours! Have no more any part in this detestable business. Instantly leave it to those unfeeling wretches who laugh at human nature and compassion! Be you a man, not a wolf, a devourer of the human species! Be merciful, that you may obtain mercy!” (Wesley 1774, p. 7).

From this writing, one cannot fail to see the point Wesley was trying to convey to the world. Specifically Wesley knew that Christians were involved in this trade writing:

“The Christians landing upon their coasts, seized as many as they found, men, women and children, and transported them to America. It was about 1551, that the English began trading to Guinea: At first, for gold and elephant teeth, but soon after, for men” (Wesley 1774, p. 15).

For Wesley religion was a social phenomenon than an individualized kind of experience. For him, Christianity without social holiness and consciousness was death. This is why he was convinced slavery was unholy practice writing:

“such is the nature of slavery; such the beginning of Negro slavery in America. But some may desire to know what kind of country it is from which the Negroes are brought; what sort of men, of what temper and behaviour are they in their own country; and in what manner they are generally procured, carried to, and treated in, America” (Wesley 1774, p. 4, 5).

Wesley’s writing indicated a deep desire he had toward fighting against slavery and slave trade. He hoped he could one day free the slaves from their masters. While the eighteenth century European Christian missionaries who first came to Africa expressed reservations and negative attitudes toward a “barbaric continent,” Wesley, saw Africa as a source of world transformation, a place that should be respected and its people given opportunities to advance. Arguing about Africans, especially those from Benin (Dahomey at that time), Wesley wrote:

“The natives of the Kingdom of *Benin* are reasonable and good-natured people. They are sincere and inoffensive, and do no injustice either to one another or to strangers. They are eminently civil and courteous: If you make them a present, they endeavour to repay it double. And if they are trusted, till the ship returns the next year, they are sure honestly to pay the whole debt. Theft is punished among them, although not with the same severity as Murder. If a man and a woman of any quality, are taken in adultery, they are certain to be put to death, and their bodies thrown on a dunghill, and left a prey to wild beasts. They are punctually just in their dealings; and are also very charitable: The King and the great Lords taking care to employ all that are capable of any work... The inhabitants of *Congo* and *Angola* are generally a quiet people. They discover a good understanding, and behave in a friendly manner to strangers... Upon the whole therefore the Negroes who inhabit the coast of *Africa*, from the river *Senegal* to the Southern bounds of *Angola*, are so far from being the stupid, senseless, brutish, lazy barbarians, the fierce, cruel, perfidious Savages they have been described (Wesley 1774, p. 9).

Wesley wanted to free all Africans from slavery. He was convinced that Africans had their organized socio-cultural, religious, linguistic, and political standards before falling prey to foreign slave masters. Later, some Africans themselves became masters enslaving their own people. Some of those Africans ritualized stories about slavery bringing memories of the Atlantic and Indian slave trade. In Rosalind Shaw’s anthology of some of these stories in her well-articulated book (Shaw, 2002), exposes the details about the realities and the impact of the slave trade on the lives of many Africans. The ritualizing of those experiences offered some relief to Africans from a traditional religious background. Research demonstrate that silence is not the best thing especially, when we know that Africans cultural values and practices

changed because of foreign invasions in the name of Christianity, Islam, slavery and colonialism. (Shaw, 2002)

We find similar ritualization among black slaves in a number of publications (Bailey, 2005; Stinchcombe, 1995; Dunn, 2012 and White & White, 2005 together with Oldfield 2007). All these books have some detailed information that clearly portrays the transferability of memories of rituals that slavery had with them from African to their destined foreign lands.

2. The role of religion in slave trade

Historically, little has been written on the role of Islam in fighting slave trade clearly implicating the need for research from an insiders' perspective. Ballard (Summer 2002) shows that even after slavery had been declared abolished in Mauritania, it persisted and many *kafirs* or non-Muslim believers were victims of raids and sale as chattel slaves. Similar cases could be cited in Sudan and many other countries dominated by Muslims in Africa. For instance, there is need for a study to understand the role Sultan of Oman played in fighting against slavery in nineteenth century Zanzibar. Many scholars have documented the struggle against the slave trade and its negative impact on humanity. As portrayed by several scholars, slave trade had become inhuman and many Africans were discontent about it (Manning, 1990; Diouf, 2003). This evidence confirms John Wesley's concerns about the way slaves were treated. Hans Sloan's writing details the slave painful punishment this way:

“they frequently geld them, or chop off half a foot: After they are whipped till they are raw all over, Some put pepper and salt upon them: Some melted wax upon their skin. Others cut off their ears, and constrain them to broil and eat them. . . . The Slave-holding is utterly inconsistent with Mercy, is almost too plain to proof. Indeed, it is said, “That these Negroes being prisoners of war, our Captains and Factors buy them, merely to save them from death. And is this not Mercy?” I answer, 1. Did Sir *John Hawkins*, and many others, seize upon men, women and children, who were at peace in their own fields and houses, merely to save them from death? 2. Was it to save them from death, that they knock'd out the brains of those they could not bring way? 3. Who occasioned and fomented those wars, wherein these poor creatures were taken prisoners? Who excited them by money, by drink, by every possible means, to fall upon one another?” (Wesley, 1774, p. 14, 18)

The description above gives details of how inhumane this trade had become. In the Christian tradition, the Bible obligates to be a brother or sister's keeper. John Wesley's call was to fight against the slave trade and set Africans free was driven by his theological convictions. In Methodist missiology, the struggle against some evils

in our society may be a source of motivation for mission work. Fighting for human justice is a part of spreading God's love to all while preaching and teaching salvation to a sinful world. Wesley was not alone in his fight against slave trade. His lifelong opposition to slavery estranged him from George Whitefield who condoned slavery in order to reach people with the Gospel. Whitefield used scriptural authority to defend his position of advocating for slave trade through condoning slavery, especially those who were in the colonies for economic stability. Big question remained should slaves be set free and be let go poor and without conversion or should they be protected under the slave master while being provided their needs and converted? Even so, being an Anglican clergy and doctrinally Calvinistic in character on the subject of predestination which would not be acceptable by John Wesley this created more tension between the two on how best to proclaim the Gospel.

From 1774 to 1778, several slaves were brought to England and Whitefield preached to them. While Wesley would have a big problem with that approach, he stood firm against slavery, and often used both scriptural and human rights arguments to defend his stand. He alleged that Africans lived a better and organized life until the time slave masters disrupted their cultural, linguistic, and political patterns. The trade entailed the stripping of many Africans so that prospective buyers could examine them, separating them from their relatives and families, and many other humiliations. Wesley exhorted the world to care and take a stand against such abuses. John Wesley became the most prominent opponent of slavery. When preaching one day at Bristol, he called that place "the dark den of slave traders." Because of this great concern, and many words of wisdom from Wesley to William Wilberforce, he started convincing many senior government officials to advocate against slave trade extending to the New World. How then did this campaign by John Wesley extend to America?

3. From slavery to freedom to missionizing Africans: What role did the Wesleyans play?

Since many slaves were shipped to the New world-America, the first preachers sent by John Wesley to America had to deal with the issue of slavery. Thomas Coke, one of Wesley's colleagues and author of a journal about his five visits to America published in 1787, claimed in his journal that he was gifted in reaching out to the Blacks, referring to slaves. Coke was so enthusiastic about the ministry that he resolved to create a mission society that would send missionaries to West Africa, especially to a place known as Foulah Country. Several publications have indicated how Methodism was involved in mission work to slaves in America and even in Africa. For instance, Smith (1971) shows how Methodism and especially its leaders got involved in the business of slave trade and the redemptive attempts of slaves from sin. The impact of impact of

early Methodist missions to slaves from 1829-1844 has been well documented (Matthews, 1965). Nevertheless, the Methodist preachers who fought against slave trade were often found to be the perpetrators of the same trade. A good example is William Capers, a man portrayed to have been so concerned with the salvation of the Negroes, is a case in point. We know that Methodist church helped convince Brunswick County, Virginia to authorize the release of chattels (Budros, 2005).

All of the aforementioned evidence suggests that, unlike many other denominations, Methodism from John Wesley's time strongly condemned slavery with few exceptions. Those exceptions include those who condoned slavery. Francis Asbury, the founder of American Methodism, did not take John Wesley's approach in fighting against slavery seriously, he however took George Whitefield's approach of preaching to them (White, 2001). The white Methodists in particular attempted to ordain African-American pastors and gave them leadership roles so they would reach out to their colleagues in the slave colonies. This step was taken, however, only after a long struggle. The ownership of slaves is evident in several instances among white Methodist pastors while the spread the gospel to those slaves in bondage. The question, that remains is whether the white leaders of the Methodist churches in the United States were willing to share leadership roles with African-American pastors or did they only ordain black pastors in order to reach the blacks with other blacks. This practice may inform our Methodist church today in its itinerancy appointment.

Donald Matthews in his writing, "The Methodist Mission to the Slaves," describes that from 1787 to 1829:

"Methodists ordained colored ministers and even bent the law to give the Negroes spiritual leadership...were encouraged to make sure that their "colored brethren" were educated in the gospel and accepted at the communion rail". He continued "During the sermon Negroes often sat in the gallery at the back and sometimes stood outside listening at the window. They often partook of the Lord's Supper after the whites and sometimes left the church by a separate door.

Both because of these arrangements and the concentration of ecclesiastical power on white hands, many Negroes began to leave the Methodist Episcopal Church after 1816" (Matthews 1965, p. 616).

The picture we see here resembles the picture we have already seen about Africans treated as second-class human beings sold, mistreated, and brought to the New World. It seems as if the white dominance and mistreatment of coloured people was part of the Christian discipline.

The aforementioned experiences led the Methodist General Conference to think twice about how to improve the treatment of blacks in the church. Therefore, the white

Methodists chose to be very sensitive in treating the coloured members within their congregations. The two most vocal conferences against slavery were the Southern Methodists of the Carolina and Georgia conferences. Among those who became first advocates and then missionary to the blacks was a slaveholder convert, William Capers, who later entered into the holy ministry and offered himself to serve among the slaves.

“Later as a prominent pastor (to the blacks) he fought a hard and bitter fight with cynical whites in his congregation who wished to degrade and segregate the free Negro members. He even tried to treat his slaves as if they were free by allowing them to manage his farm, and with disastrous results. To him the slave was a soul to be valued, a human being ultimately equal to his master, even if “uncontrollable circumstances” effaced that equality in society” (Matthews 1965, p. 618).

Different reports about Methodist missionaries to the slaves have emerged. Methodists were often highly charismatic in their spiritual practices and thus in such mission fields people criticize the way they did mission work. The Methodists, especially abolitionists, sharply condemned the dehumanizing treatment of slaves. Against Wesley’s mission strategy, Bishop Francis Asbury encouraged American Methodist preachers to preach to the slaves the Gospel instead of preaching freedom from slave masters and against slavery. This, Asbury thought, would change and transform the slaves and thus create a peaceful relationship with them. The problem though, was that preachers who had slaves in their homes were preaching to them while not advocating for their freedom. William Capers, together with his colleagues from New York, Nashville, Richmond, Charleston, and Cincinnati founded a church ministry that reached out to twenty thousand slaves and continued to shepherd them under such oppressive circumstances.

4. What this means today and conclusion

It is sometimes difficult to envision how these missionaries managed to preach to slaves who did not understand the language and culture of the preachers. Matthews seems to be on thin ice when he writes: “Since the Negroes initially knew too little about Christianity to understand the sermons, oral instruction was far more important than preaching” (Matthews, 1965, 2015). While these African Christians may not have been able to explain every aspect of Christian doctrine, their songs on their shipment to the New World had some cultural and theological meanings that gave them meaning, purpose and resilience. In other words, the fact that the slaves were not able to articulate the doctrine of the faith; may not necessarily mean they never conceptualized the concept of a higher power. The slave owners’ faith was questionable to the slaves whether their slave trade was a Christian mandate or greed driven. Obviously,

the slave masters' negative assumptions about Africa may have led them to view Africa as a "dark continent" that had no faith and needed a human master to control them.

Clearly, we have seen from this paper that African slaves were taken from well-knit socio-cultural, religious, economic and political communities to a disgruntled and disengaged new world. When Europeans penetrated into Africa, they completely interfered with the lifestyles of the African people. Indeed, Africans were civilized in their own right and cultural standard but most Europeans aimed at taking away their names, their faith and their cultural orientation and replaced it with a new form of identity. The fact is that Africans knew God differently from the Europeans, specifically a foreign concept of Jesus Christ being the incarnate son of God. Unfortunately, even some of the Methodists who engaged in missions to slaves in the New World assumed that Africans were barbaric and had completely no sense of God in them. Although the white Methodist missionaries' approach to "Christianizing" slaves was misguided, information recorded by Donald Matthews helps us see how these white Methodist missionaries perceived and treated African slaves during this time:

"Either after Sunday morning worship or at stated times during the week, the missionary would gather the slaves, children in the front row, and have them repeat their lessons after him phrase by phrase" (Matthews, 1965). This degrading approach continued to have negative effects. Standing African men with their children or grandchildren and asking them to memorize a scripture is the worst degrading thing one can do to African adults before their children. See also other reports: "Missionaries reported them (slaves) to be much more clean and honest, less thieving and adulterous than ever before" (Matthews 1965, 625).

Clearly, John Wesley played a significant role in fighting against slavery even though he faced opposition in achieving his goal. His companion Whitefield had a significant contribution in promoting the gospel to the slave population. For instance, we see that Wesleyan missionaries in America and even in Africa had a biased agenda. Indeed, even though Methodist missionaries worked hard to reach these slaves with the gospel some maintained their negative image about Africa and Africans. We see this even today that when missionaries go to a mission field some regard their hosts cultures as less educated, morally impure, linguistically limited and barbaric in their lifestyles. A positive writing by Capers as quoted by Matthews helps us see some good in the way mission recipients must be perceived:

"They are...human beings, and have the feelings of human beings-feelings too, with many of them as delicate and sensitive as your own, and which demand to be respected, and carefully preserved from outrage" (Matthews, 1965: 627).

Today's churches should be sensitive to this kind of history as they cultivate cross-cultural mission efforts, itinerancy appointments, cross-cultural shared pulpits, and mission endeavours. For effective mission to happen, different races, cultures and languages should seek ways to better design outreach focus that is not driven by divisiveness, racial biases, linguistic barriers and historical misguided principles.

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