

Christianity: Challenges and Responses

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My areas of research

- Historian of Christianity in Britain (18th century) and the British Empire (19th and 20th centuries)
- Researched the role of white women in/on Aboriginal missions in the 19th and 20th centuries
- Worked on major history of Coranderrk mission (the [Minutes of Evidence](#) project)
- Current projects include assisting with an oral history of Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-op, surveying attitudes to history in Australia and study of colonial church land grants.

Challenges for/to Christianity

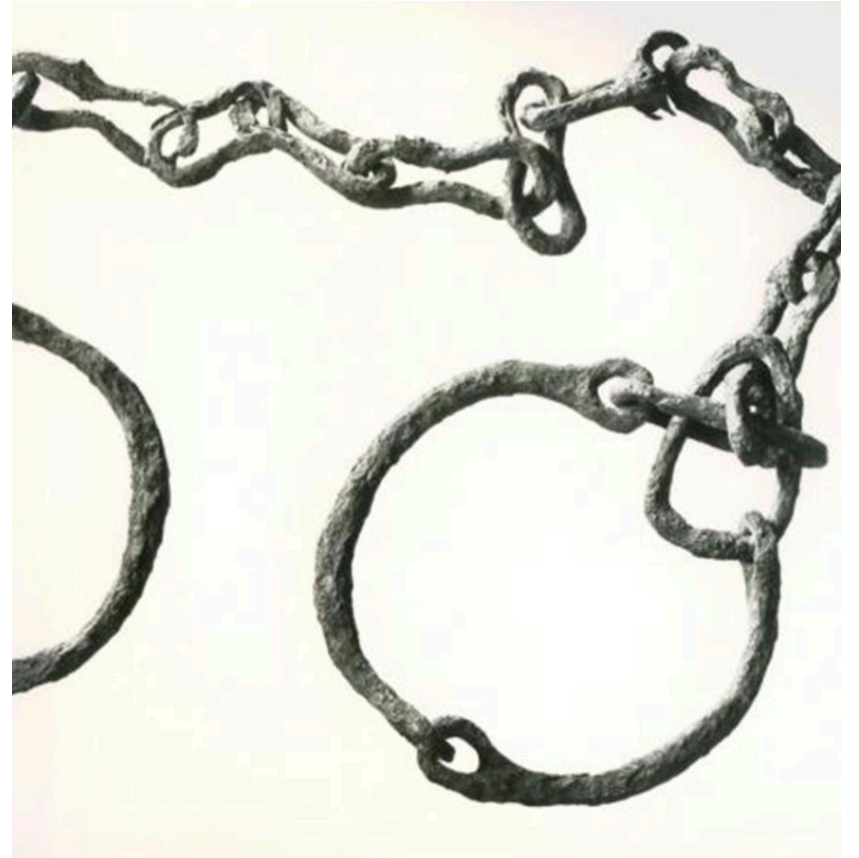
- What relationship will Christian individuals and institutions have to the dominant culture, its values and institutions? (accommodation, rejection, active engagement, withdrawal, critique, endorsement, acceptance, persecution)
- How will they understand their place and time in the purposes of God ('salvation history' or 'salvation geography')? (as replacing Jewish people as 'the chosen ones', as 'grafted on' to Judaism, as national, imperial or global in identity, in the end times or at the beginning of something new)
- How will internal differences and divisions be managed? (schism, union, reunion, by establishing authorities of creed (Orthodoxy), episcopacy (Roman Catholicism) or Scripture (Protestantism), through violence, through compromise, through tolerance).

Christianity and Slavery

- general historical background
- key shifts and points of difference
- resources to follow

What is meant by 'slavery'?

- In 'Chattel' slavery, people are classed as property and can be bought and sold at will. Enslavement is often inherited.
- In some societies, enslaved people were routinely incorporated into kin relationships over several generations.
- Other forms of unfree labour, which include serfdom and indentured/bonded labour, are also forms of slavery
- Forms of slavery have been practiced in many, probably most societies for the last 11000 years.
- Slavery was both common and legal in the Jewish, Roman and Greek societies in which Christianity emerged.



Early Christianity and Slavery

- Slavery is a key metaphor within the Christian/New Testament texts, used with both positive and negative connotations. Jesus himself became a slave (Phil 2.7)
- These texts assert the spiritual equality of 'slave and free' in Christ (Gal 3.28), but also assume that slaveholding is compatible with membership in the body of Christ (Eph 6.9; Col 1.2)
- Both the NT writers and many early Christian authors:
 - Urge slave holders to be moderate and just in their treatment of enslaved people.
 - Condemn slave-traders and the trade in enslaved people
 - Allow or encourage manumission (the freeing of enslaved peoples)

Early Christianity and Slavery

- ‘Be slaves to one another, Jesus taught. The cultivation of humility and a slave-like ministry of mutual service were moral innovations characteristic of the Christian movement, innovations that did not result in systematic opposition to the institution or ethical critique of slaveholders.’
- Glancy, ‘Slavery and the Rise of Christianity’



A slavery tag (5.8 cm in diameter) inscribed with information about return. Rome, Italy, 4th century AD.

Medieval Christianity and Slavery (476-c 1500CE)

- ‘Although there exists a general belief that slavery gradually died out in Europe during the Middle Ages, slavery and slave markets existed in Christian Europe throughout this period. Italian merchants... were major figures in the trade.’

Muldoon, ‘Spiritual Freedom, Physical Slavery’

- In Europe itself, chattel slavery was increasingly replaced by other forms of unfree labour (‘serfdom’) but some Europeans participated actively in selling and buying enslaved non-Christians (including Balkan and Muslim people).



Medieval Christianity and Slavery

With the emergence of canon law during this period, slavery became the focus of legal reflection and codification:

- Christians could not be taken as slaves under canon law
- People who were baptized after being enslaved did not need to be released (though slaveholders were encouraged to do so)
- Marriage between enslaved people was encouraged and legal; married couples could not be separated.

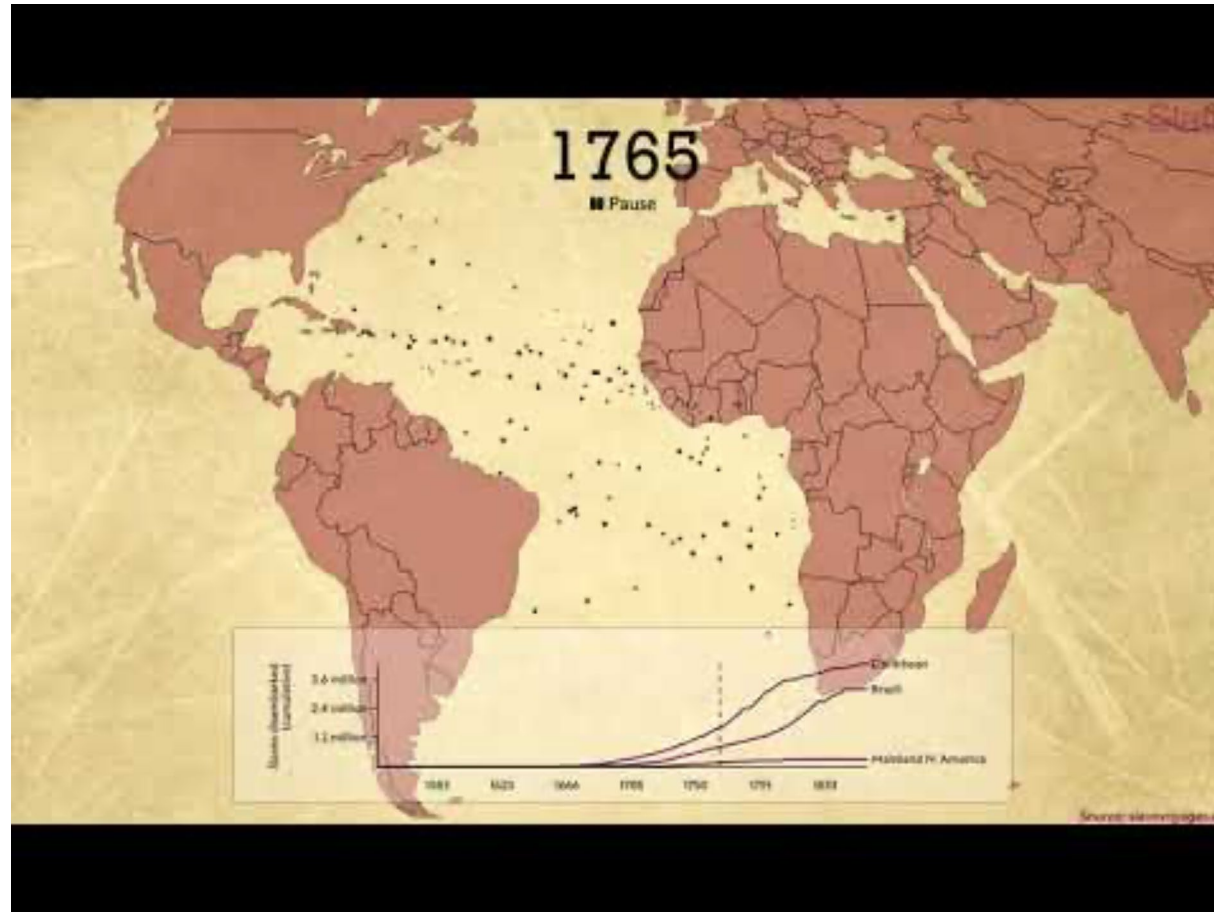


Pope Gregory I observes Angle (English) slaves at a slave market in Rome.

Slavery and European Empires

- It was in the context of imperial expansion that European powers – first the Iberian empires and then the French, British and Dutch – began to engage in enslavement on an historically unprecedented scale.
- This included the enslavement of 2.5-5 million Indigenous people of the Americas and at least 12.5 million Africans.
- This enslavement and trade in human beings was foundational to the power that these Christian empires developed and for much of this period it was either endorsed or accepted by the dominant European Christian traditions.

Atlantic Slave Trade in 2 minutes



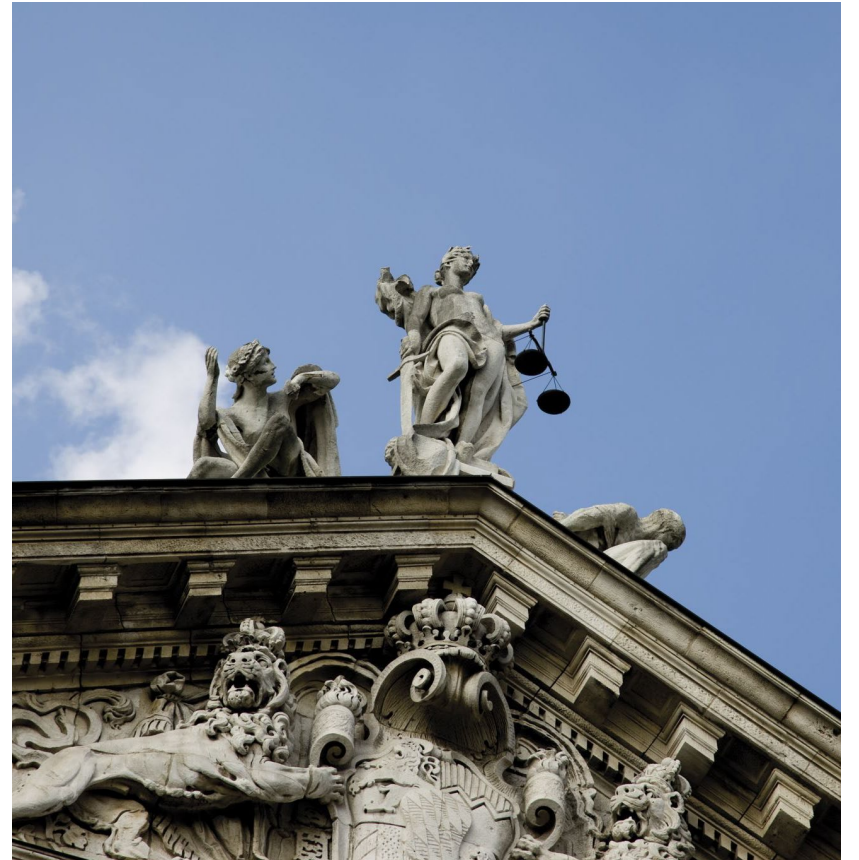
Catholic Empires

- In the mid-15th century, several papal bulls endorsed the enslavement of Muslims and other non-Christian peoples. When the Iberian empires began colonizing the Americas after 1492, these were extended to approve enslaving the indigenous people of these lands.
- Bartolome de las Casas, a Spanish missionary, argued powerfully for an end to the system of slavery.
- In 1542, this led to Spanish laws against slavery in 1542, which in turn led to a revolt by colonial landholders in Peru.



Catholic Empires

- The expansion of the enslavement and trade of Africans leads to the emergence of race as a concept and the racialization of slavery
- Some Catholic leaders protested the arrival of enslaved Africans to Catholic colonies, but these voices were largely over-ridden by economic interests.
- Spanish (as of 1538), Portuguese, and French (1685) legal systems required that all slaves be baptized and instructed in religion.



Protestant Empires

- Enslaved people were the foundation of the economy of the British Empire via the Caribbean colonies and the American colonies.
- In the Caribbean slave plantations and then in the – forms of slavery developed which were perhaps uniquely oppressive.
- In the southern states, enslaved people were completely removed from kin networks, unable to legally marry and liable to be separated from children and partners at any moment
- Opportunities for manumission were increasingly limited – enslaved people faced endless generational enslavement
- Slavery is completely racialised

Abolition

- The movement for the abolition of slavery was primarily a religious movement, fueled by the Protestant Evangelical Revival, but building on older currents including Quaker and Catholic traditions of anti-slavery.
- This movement included the voices and experiences of enslaved peoples, many of them Christians, though often mediated through white abolitionists.

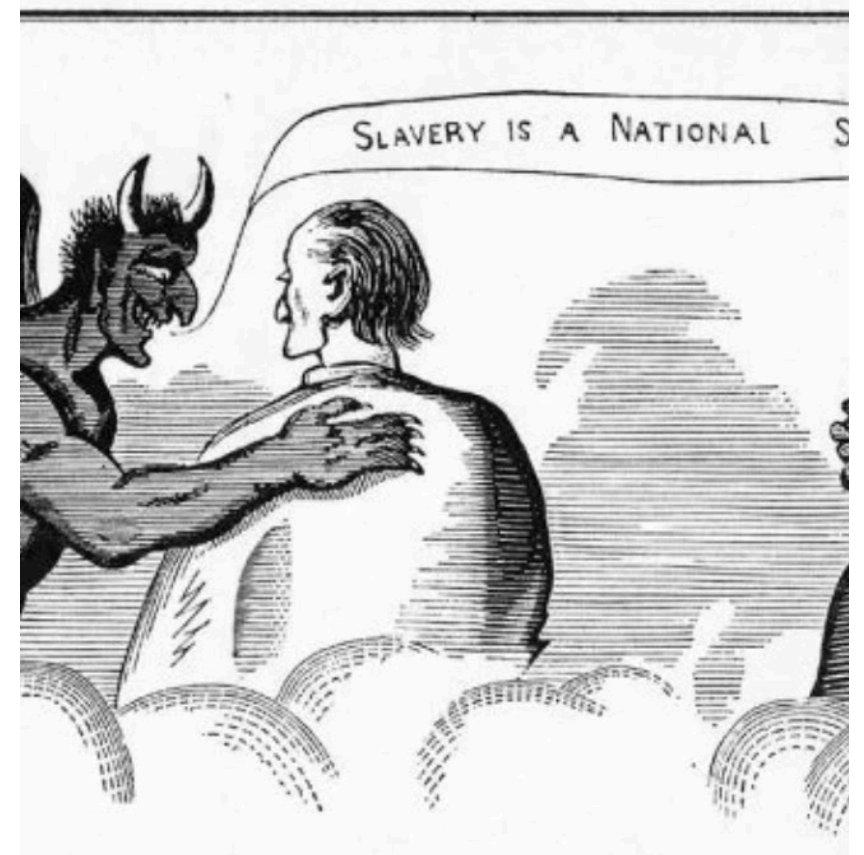


The History of Mary Prince

A West Indian Slave

Abolition

- Regardless of the underlying motivations for slavery and its abolition, the debate over abolition in the British Empire and then in America was conducted in religious terms.
- This included the development of comprehensive theological arguments for and against enslavement.
- The American Civil War is a violent conflict over this theological question.



Abolition

- Slavery is abolished in Britain in 1807, the British Empire in 1833
- Reparations are paid to slaveholders, not enslaved people
- Those empires and nations which still allow enslavement follow suit in abolishing slavery
- In 1863, slavery is abolished in the US

**EIGHT HUNDRED THOUSAND SLAVES
SET FREE!!**

The Anniversary of EMANCIPATION in the British West Indies, will be celebrated in the

CITY OF WORCESTER,
On FRIDAY, August 3d,

By a general MASS MEETING of the Friends of Freedom. If the weather be pleasant, the Meeting will be held in the

HOSPITAL GROVE
Commencing at 10 1-2 o'clock, A. M.

If the weather be unfavorable, the meeting will be in the spacious

City Hall,

Among the Speakers, who have engaged to be present, are

Wendell Phillips, Wm. Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Adin Ballou, Charles C. Burleigh, and Robert Morris.

LET WORCESTER COUNTY
give a good account of herself that day. Let the HEART of the Commonwealth be moved from its depths. Let a mighty voice go up, in the name of GOD, demanding that His PEOPLE SHALL GO FREE.

COME ONE AND ALL,
and Keep the Fast which GOD HAS CHOSEN---even "to undo the heavy burdens, and let the OPPRESSED GO FREE."

Christianity and Slavery

- How has slavery been a challenge to or for Christianity?
 - In many times and places slavery and Christianity have co-existed quite comfortably
 - Historically, many Christian individuals and states have gained power and wealth from the capture, trading and labour of enslaved peoples.
 - Within Christianity, there has been continuous theological reflection on enslavement and the treatment of enslaved people
 - There is a long tradition of minority voices questioning the institution of slavery itself.
 - At times, slavery has been the focus of profound divisions within Christianity, at time spilling into revolt and war among Christians

Christianity and Slavery

- There is now a broad consensus that slavery is incompatible with Christianity, which is a result of the theological arguments constructed by enslaved people themselves, their descendants as well as other abolitionists.
- This includes critiques of the theology of 18th-19th century abolitionists
- The role of Christianity in the horrors of racialized slavery can be identified a challenge to the moral legitimacy of the faith.

Resources

Glancy J. 'Slavery and the rise of Christianity' in Bradley K, Cartledge P, eds. The Cambridge World History of Slavery. Cambridge University Press; 2011:456-481.

Muldoon, J. 'Spiritual freedom, physical slavery: the medieval church and slavery'. Ave Maria Law Review, 3:1 (2005), 69-94.

Servant or Slave? (Documentary) 2015.

<https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/the-screen-guide/t/servant-or-slave-2015/33088/>

Slate Magazine, 'The Atlantic Slave Trade in 2 Minutes',

<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/09/atlantic-slave-trade-history-animated-interactive.html>