

The “social disease” racism

White people enslaved black people in a dimension like never before. This is why we need to examine this horror from another perspective, again, which is: Racism. Racism became operative from the moment when the first twenty Africans were put ashore at Jamestown in 1619.¹ In 1630, the court of Virginia sentenced Hugh Davis to "be soundly whipped before an assembly of the Africans and others, for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and shame of Christians, by defiling his body in lying with an African woman; which fault he is to acknowledge next Sabbath day".² Ten years later in 1640, a white man called Robert Sweet was required to do penance in church according to the laws of England for fathering a child with an African woman, and the woman to be whipped.³ Both decisions reflected anti-African feelings, even though other emotional responses may have been involved. These racial antipathies apparently increased in later years, for in 1691, Virginia enacted a law banishing permanently any white person, male or female, who married a Negro, mulatto, or Indian.⁴ Virginia was not unique in passing this type of legislation; other colonies, North and South, were adopting similar laws.⁵ There is no agreement among present-day historians as to what originally generated these and kindred racist responses. Some think that they were the outgrowth and rationalization of slavery.⁶ Carl N. Degler, however, reverses the order of causation, saying that racial discrimination preceded and preconditioned slavery. One might properly speak of slavery as the institutionalization of a folk prejudice.⁷ Neither of these views satisfies Winthrop Jordan, who, after carefully analyzing early black- white relations in Maryland and Virginia, concluded that the enslavement of the black man and white antipathy toward him "appeared at the same time." Accordingly, he argues that neither prejudice caused slavery nor slavery caused prejudice, but that they generated each other. More precisely, he states: "Both were twin aspects of a general debasement of the African. Slavery and 'prejudice' may have been equally cause and effect, continuously reacting upon each other, dynamically joining hands to hustle the Negro down the road to complete degradation."⁸ However, while differing in their theories of the original causation of slavery, the historians would all agree that the enslavement of the Africans greatly reinforced the white man's belief in the black man's inferiority. They would also likely agree that success in reducing

¹ Smith, John: *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isle* in Barbour, Philip L.: *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith*, Vol. II; pp. 232.233

² Hening, William W.: *Statutes at Large- A Collection of Laws of Virginia*, Vol. I; p. 146

³ *Ibid*; I, p. 552

⁴ *Ibid*; III, p. 87

⁵ Hurd, John Codman: *The Law of Freedom and Bondage in the United States*, Vol. I; pp. 263- 292

⁶ Ruchames, Louis: *Racial Thought in America- From the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln- A Documentary History*, Vol. I; pp. 12- 15

⁷ Curtin, Philip D.: *The Atlantic Slave Trade- A Census*; pp. 89- 92

⁸ Hill, N.C.: *White over Black- American Attitudes toward the Negro 1550- 1812*; p. 80

Africans to an abject status goes far to explain why American slavery, in the “evolution” of black-white relations, got identified exclusively with the Africans, and consequently became racial.

Christian support and rejection of slavery

Some historians say that by 1708, there were about four hundred African slaves in Boston.⁹ One would expect that the ministers of the city expressed themselves on the subject of slavery to be evil. Instead, one of them, Samuel Willard of the congregational South Church, declared:¹⁰ "All servitude began in the curse, but had been so ordered by divine providence as to be beneficial to mankind". Yet, why only Indians and Africans should have been cursed with perpetual slavery, Willard left unexplained.¹¹ The bondsmen were to bear such punishment with total subjection, remembering, "that servitude itself was bro't on by sin."¹² At least as early as 1689, Cotton Mather had charged that masters were keeping their bondsmen "strangers to the Way of Life" and treated them "only as horses or oxen". In seeking to excuse themselves, they claimed that their slaves were too dull to respond to religious instruction. Appealing to their self-interest, he urged that Christianized blacks would make slaves that are more efficient. He also told the masters that they did not need to fear losing their slaves because of baptism, since Christianity contained no law forbidding servitude. Mather urged that masters were duty-bound to teach their bondsmen "that it is God who has caused them to be servants, and that they serve Jesus Christ, while they are at work for their masters".¹³ Nowhere did he give the slaves any hope of ever becoming free men. Perhaps, this was too much to expect of the Boston Puritan, especially since he himself owned slaves.¹⁴ The British “Quakers” who also called themselves “Society of Friends”, grew into becoming the pioneering antislavery church in America. Nevertheless, it must be noted that up until the eve of the American Revolution, many if not most of their prosperous members in all the colonies continued to held slaves. Unlike churchmen in most of the other denominations, Quakers did not publish pamphlets or sermons in support of slavery, but the fact that they bought and kept Negroes spoke more loudly than the printed word. One of them was William Penn (1644- 1718) who received a huge land grant from King Charles II between New York and Maryland as a payment for the king’s debts. Here, the Quaker started the so-called "Holy Experiment". Penn made laws, which included religious freedom and high social norms. Through this, many Quakers settled in the land, which was then called “Pennsylvania”. Here, Quakers ruled throughout the first half of the 18th century. Therefore, their sentiment on slavery represented Quakerism in general. In contrast to his beliefs and many

⁹ Greene, Lorenzo J.: *Slave-Holding New England and its Awakening in Journal of Negro History*, Vol. XIII; p. 496

¹⁰ Willard, Samuel: *A Compleat Body of Divinity in Two Hundred and Fifty Expository Lectures on the Assembly's Shorter Catechism*; pp. 613- 617

¹¹ *Ibid*; p. 614

¹² *Ibid*; pp. 616.617

¹³ *Ibid*; p. 32

¹⁴ Haynes, Henry W.: *Cotton Mather and His Slaves in American Antiquarian Society Proceedings*, N.S., Vol. VI; pp. 191- 195

good deeds, Penn died as a slave-owner.¹⁵ During the first third of the century, Philadelphia Quaker merchants were busily engaged in importing and selling West India blacks, and some of them persisted in that trade well into the 1750ies.¹⁶ According to a cautious historian, "Friends" were "the principal slaveholders" in many sections of Southeastern Pennsylvania. "At many different periods during the 18th century", he further observed, "they probably held from a half to a third of all the slaves in the colony".¹⁷ In 1725, a law was passed which levied a penalty of one hundred pounds upon any magistrate or minister who married a black and white couple.¹⁸ During the colonial era, Roman Catholics were concentrated overwhelmingly in Maryland. In his report of 1785 to Cardinal Antonelli of Rome, Father John Carroll, future archbishop of Baltimore, put the Maryland faithful at about 15.800 habitants. This included about 3.000 Negro slaves.¹⁹ "The slaves", he noted, were "kept so constantly at work" that their spiritual nurture was neglected, with the result that they were "very dull in faith and depraved in morals". Catholic priests as well as laymen held property in slaves. Carroll himself owned several of them.²⁰ The practice did not contravene Catholic doctrine of the time, which taught that slavery, as distinct from its abuses, violated neither divine nor natural law²¹. Hence, Catholic representatives sharply dissented from the radical abolitionist doctrine that slavery was inherently sinful. On the other hand, many American Catholics lamented the existence of Negro servitude and wished to see it ended. This was notably true of the great Catholic patriot and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, who in 1797 introduced a bill in the Maryland legislature to abolish slavery.²² In 1817, he freed thirty of his own slaves.²³ Like most Protestant churchmen of this period, he favored sending free blacks out of the United States. In 1816, Carroll helped to found the "American Colonization Society" which aimed to settle free Negroes in Africa.²⁴ The society's first president was Bushrod Washington who was succeeded in 1830 by Charles Carroll.²⁵

At this time, colonial Anglicanism, like New England Puritanism and Roman Catholicism, held that human bondage was compatible with Christianity. This is clearly verified by the teaching and policy of the "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts" (S.P.G.) and by the sentiments expressed by its missionaries. The society was chartered in London in 1701, from where they sent Commissary Thomas Bray to Maryland. Within a few years, it placed missionaries in the American colonies, giving preference to colonies in which the Church of

¹⁵ Drake, Thomas E.: *Quakers and Slavery in America*; Vol. 4; pp. 23.24

¹⁶ Wax, Harold D.: *Quaker Merchants and the Slave Trade in Colonial Pennsylvania in Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. LXXXVI; pp. 144- 150. 157- 159

¹⁷ Turner, Edward R.: *The Negro in Pennsylvania- Slavery/ Servitude/ Freedom 1639- 1861*; p. 58

¹⁸ Hurd, John Codman: *The Law of Freedom and Bondage in the United States*; pp. 289.290

¹⁹ Ellis, John Tracy: *The text of Carroll's report in Documents of American Catholic History*; pp. 151- 154

²⁰ Gillard, John T.: *Colored Catholics in the United States*; pp. 63ff

²¹ Ellis, John Tracy: *American Catholicism*; p. 87

²² Nuesse, C.J.: *The Social Thought of American Catholics 1634- 1829*; p. 75

²³ Smith, Ellen Hart: *Charles Carroll of Carrollton*; p. 267

²⁴ Staudenraus, Philip J.: *The African Colonization Movement 1816- 1865*; pp. 29.30

²⁵ Smith, Ellen Hart: *Charles Carroll of Carrollton*; p. 270

England was most in need of assistance.²⁶ Bishop of Asaph William Fleetwood delivered a notable discourse of this type in 1711.²⁷ In his earnest plea for slaves' evangelization, the bishop told masters that Christianity posed no threat to slavery. Taking issue with the traditional notion that a baptized slave was entitled to freedom, he declared that masters "are neither prohibited by the Laws of God, nor those of the land, from keeping Christian slaves; their slaves are no more at liberty after they are baptized, than they were before... The liberty of Christianity is entirely spiritual."²⁸ He said the Society's only obligation, besides keeping the blacks busy and healthy, was to "instruct them in the Faith of Christ, bring them to baptism, and put them in the way that leads to everlasting life."²⁹ Bishop of London Edmund Gibson insisted that the Gospel of Christ would actually place slaves "under stronger obligations to perform" their duties "with the greatest diligence and fidelity".³⁰ Laws backing up these positions were passed in most colonies, including Maryland (1671), New York (1706), and South Carolina (1712).³¹ On becoming Christians, the slaves joined a community that professed oneness in Christ. As Paul put it: "There is neither slave nor free, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This spiritual unity and Christian equality implicitly challenged the dogma of blacks' inferiority. Morgan Godwyn (c.1603–c.1645) recognized the continuing masters' refusals as a real hurdle to the evangelization of blacks³². In his remarkable book, he pointed out that when masters were exhorted to encourage the conversion of their bondsmen, they would commonly exclaim: "What, such as them, what, those black dogs be made Christians? What, shall they be like us?"³³ In 1711, Francis Le Jau cited two instances in which whites revealed their superiority attitude toward blacks: "Is it possible," asked a mistress of slaves, "that any of my slaves could go to heaven, and must I see them there?" A young man announced that he had "resolved never to come to the holy table while slaves are (also) there."³⁴

So after the hesitant but ongoing evangelization of slaves, the confrontations continued inside the churches. When Dean George Berkeley (later bishop) preached the anniversary sermon of the S.P.G. in which he charged that a main obstacle to converting blacks in that colony was "an irrational contempt" for blacks "as creatures of another species, who had no right to be instructed or admitted to the sacraments".³⁵ Berkeley added that even if blacks were received into the church, they would still be inferior to their white brethren.³⁶ Far more serious than being

²⁶ Thompson, H. P.: *Into All Lands- The History of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts 1701- 1950*; pp. 47- 91

²⁷ *Ibid*; pp. 197- 212

²⁸ *Ibid*; pp. 205.206

²⁹ *Ibid*; p. 211

³⁰ Americana, Sabin: *Two Letters of the Lord Bishop of London Edmund Gibson*; pp. 7.11

³¹ Hurd, John Codman: *The Law of Freedom and Bondage in the United States*, Vol. I; pp. 281.300.301

³² Goodwyn, Morgan: *A Supplement to the Negro's & Indian's Advocate* in Hart, Albert Bushnell: *American History Told by Contemporaries*, Vol. 1; pp. 299- 301

³³ Goodwyn, Morgan: *Negro's and Indians Advocate Suing for their Admission into the Church*; p. 61

³⁴ Wood, Betty: *The Origins of American Slavery- Freedom and Bondage in the English Colonies*; p. 132

³⁵ Berkeley, George: *Works of George Berkeley*, Vol. IV; p. 404

³⁶ Klingberg, Frank J.: *Anglican Humanitarianism in Colonial New York*; p. 136

segregated in worship, however, was the fact that black Christians were constantly told that God had decreed their bondage to the white man. This fact was made clear, for example, in two sermons, which Rev. Thomas Bacon of Maryland preached to a congregation of Episcopal slaves.³⁷ "(The) Almighty God", he declared, "hath been pleased to make you slaves here and to give you nothing but labour and poverty in this world".³⁸ Far from giving them any hope of earthly freedom, he continued: "Hey, (if) you desire freedom, serve the Lord here, and you shall be his freemen in heaven hereafter."³⁹ When he told his "dear blacks brethren and sisters" that their owners were "God's overseers", he warned them that whatever wrongs they committed against their masters and mistresses, were "done against God himself", and that unless they repented and served their overseers faithfully, God would punish them severely in the world to come.⁴⁰ In his triumphant tours of the colonies, George Whitefield, the most influential evangelist of the time, was instrumental in converting African Americans. At the close of his preaching mission in and around Philadelphia in 1740, almost fifty black converts followed him to his lodging house to thank him "for what God had done to their souls". "I believe", he wrote in his journal, "Masters and mistresses will shortly see that Christianity will not make their Negroes worse slaves."⁴¹ "I challenge the whole world", Whitefield said, "to produce a single instance of a Negro's being made a thorough Christian, and thereby made a worse servant".⁴² Indeed, by 1747, he himself owned eight slaves whom he used to cultivate his South Carolina plantation for the benefit of his orphanage at Bethesda, Georgia.⁴³ Naturally, then, he opposed the original antislavery policy of Georgia, contending that the province never would be prosperous until Negro slavery was permitted, there.⁴⁴ In 1750, the trustees repealed the antislavery law of that colony, and the famed evangelist lost little time in buying blacks for his plantation. Writing to a "Mr. B." in 1751, Whitefield defended the lawfulness of slavery on biblical grounds, noting especially that Abraham bought bondsmen. He conceded that the slave trade was wrong, but then went on to say that since it would be carried on anyhow, he would consider himself "highly favoured" if he "could purchase a good number" of Negroes and bring up their offspring "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord". The proslavery evangelist further rationalized his position by remarking that while liberty was "a sweet thing" to those who were born free, slavery might not be so irksome to those who "never knew the sweets" of liberty.⁴⁵

³⁷ Bacon, Thomas: *Two Sermons Preached to a Congregation of Black Slaves at the Parish Church of S. P. in the Province of Maryland*; p. 12

³⁸ *Ibid*; p. 16

³⁹ *Ibid*; p. 69

⁴⁰ *Ibid*; p. 28

⁴¹ Whitefield, George: *George Whitefield's Journals*; p. 422

⁴² Henry, Stuart C.: *George Whitefield- Wayfaring Witness*; p. 117

⁴³ Whitefield, George: *Whitefield to the Trustees of Georgia in Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.*, Vol. II; p. 209

⁴⁴ Whitefield, George: *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.*; p. 132

⁴⁵ *Ibid*; p. 132