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Britain, the Slave Trade and Slavery: An African Hermeneutic, 1787

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evils of Slavery* was published in London in 1787, the first book by an Afro-British writer to condemn the slave trade as well as slavery itself. Cugoano was a former slave stolen from Africa. He was brought to Britain where he gained his freedom and became an evangelical Christian. His jeremiad against the brutalities of the slave business, part of the campaign against the slave trade, was firmly based on the Bible and also current ideas of natural rights and justice. This paper looks in detail at how Cugoano handled the Bible.

'Suppose', wrote the Afro-British writer, Ottobah Cugoano, in 1787,

that some African pirates ... had made excursions on the coast of Great-Britain or elsewhere, and though even assisted by some of your own insidious neighbours, for there may be some men even among you vile enough to do such a thing if they could get money by it; and that they should carry off your sons and your daughters, and your wives and friends, to a perpetual and barbarous slavery, you would certainly think that those African pirates were justly deserving of any punishment that could be put upon them.¹

By this graphic illustration Cugoano, a former slave, attempted to bring the enormity of the slave trade home to Britons, to whom his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* was specifically addressed. Not only did Cugoano oppose the slave trade with all its murderous cruelty but he also condemned the system of colonial slave labour from which Britain's imperial economy derived great profit.

This article looks at the life of Cugoano, an Afro-British writer about whom relatively little is known but whose ideas were shaped by his harsh experience of the slave trade and slavery. His Christian conversion, probably sometime in the 1770s, but how and when we know not, was of great significance in giving direction to the writing of his *Thoughts and Sentiments*. In this, his sole written work, published in 1787 (an amended, shorter version appeared in 1791), he marshalled arguments

1 Cugoano 1787. A further and briefer edition appeared as Cugoano 1791. All quotations and references in the text are from the Penguin Classics edition, Carretta 1999,

which includes the 1791 edition. Page references in the text are to the 1787 edition unless shown otherwise, here pp 51, 86-7 (1787) and p 141 (1791).

from the Bible to angrily demand the immediate abolition of the slave trade and the emancipation of slaves in the British Empire.

The transatlantic slave trade

In the mid-eighteenth century British ships dominated the transatlantic slave trade that each year carried thousands of black slaves, mainly from West Africa, to the American colonies. This was a trading system that began first by shipping African slaves to Europe, and then, following the European discovery of America, increasingly to their newly established colonies. The Portuguese and the Spanish were first in the business, to be quickly followed by the French, Dutch, English/British, Danes, Germans, and other Europeans. Western Africa, where slavery was endemic, provided a source of labour in men, women, and children who were resistant to the old world diseases that ravaged the native populations of the Americas. Although the transatlantic aspects of the trade were in European hands, the accumulation and sale of slaves was controlled by Africans. The African rulers and merchants involved in the trade were commercially adept, often able to operate a sellers' market in human beings made up of war captives, criminals, those who had been kidnapped, and people who had fallen into debt. By the eighteenth century slaves had become the major, although not the sole, Afro-European external trade commodity of large areas of coastal West Africa. Human cargoes were exchanged for cloth, liquor, bar iron, cowries, firearms, gunpowder, and a range of manufactured goods, the products of an expanding European global trading system that embraced the Indian and Atlantic Oceans.²

African slaves, packed into ships 'like so many books upon a shelf', were shipped across the Atlantic on the 'middle passage' to the Americas. Conditions were harsh and brutal. In the process of capture and confinement in Africa many slaves died; more died on the middle passage, a journey that might last between six weeks and several months; and there was further mortality in the seasoning period as new slaves were broken-in for plantation or mine labour in the American colonies. In the long period of the slave trade, approximately the years 1520-1870, between 10 million and 12 million Africans were sent to the Americas. Some 42 percent went to the islands in the Caribbean, 38 percent to Brazil, and only four percent to North America. From the late seventeenth century until abolition in 1807, English and British shipping increasingly dominated the slave trade, carrying larger cargoes of slaves than their European or American competitors. In that period British ships transported 3.4 million slaves from Africa to the Americas, mainly to the Caribbean islands which since the late seventeenth century had become the major source of sugar exports to Europe. From the 1770s to 1807, the years with which this article is concerned, slave mortality rates on British ships began to fall but still averaged over five per cent per annum.³

Slavery was common throughout the eighteenth-century world. Few white people in Europe or the American colonies gave much thought to the morality of buying and selling Africans and their exploitation as forced labour. However, it had long been thought unacceptable that Christians, who were mainly Europeans, should be enslaved in the Muslim states of North Africa. Collections to redeem

2 See Klein 1999; Walvin 1992; Thomas 1997; Blackburn 1997.

3 Richardson 1998. See also Morgan 2000.

people from Muslim slavery, and services to commemorate their homecoming, were frequent in many parishes and towns across Europe.⁴ The use of white convicts, transported to American colonies as coerced labour, continued until the outbreak of the revolutionary war in 1776, and thereafter Australia became a new dumping ground for a further ninety years. But these were convicted criminals and their coerced labour a punishment. By the early eighteenth century it was established that white people should not be slaves. The same idea had not attached to Africans. This ambiguous thinking clearly raised moral questions and required rationalisation and justification. Most thinking people in the mid-eighteenth century acknowledged that Africans were people from a common human stock, an acceptance of the monogenesis spelled out in the biblical account of creation. Books and pamphlets continued to be written stating that Africans were a sub-species of humanity, but such ideas were not widely held by most thoughtful Europeans. It was also accepted, particularly by those who read the Bible seriously, that Africans had souls and that like the rest of humanity they needed redemption. But if the Bible made all of this seemingly clear it was also open to interpretation by a commercially convenient hermeneutic that justified the enslavement of Africans because, as the children of Ham, they bore a divine curse to be a servant class. Biblical justification, and colour as a badge of servitude, placed Africans and people of African descent into a category that even high-minded and biblically literate Europeans could discriminate against with divinely endorsed confidence. A further justification for enslaving Africans was that in so doing they had the opportunity of hearing the gospel which was absent from their own 'benighted land'. At a material level, and at a time when ideas about the employment of labour were changing as a result of the industrial revolution, there were those who believed that free labour was economically to be preferred over slave labour, but also those who believed that supposedly idle Africans should be brought forcibly into the modern world if necessary by coercing their labour.

In late seventeenth-century Europe and North America, isolated voices had condemned the slave trade largely on grounds of its cruelty and inhumanity. By the mid-eighteenth century there were good commercial reasons why Britons in particular should endorse both the slave trade and slavery. It was a profitable trade, with British ships carrying most slaves. Furthermore, as numerous writers pointed out, the national and colonial economies benefited greatly from slave labour, a view firmly endorsed by the West Indian interests that owned and were involved in colonial plantation production. As slave populations in most of Britain's Caribbean colonies failed to reproduce themselves, largely due to the high male sex ratio of imported slaves and the harsh conditions to which they were subjected, a continuation of the slave trade was seen as vital to meet this demographic deficit. Few Britons could conceive of an Atlantic empire without the use of slave labour.

To question this key building-block of the country's commerce was a major step. It is not surprising that few were prepared to do so. There are multiple and complex inter-woven reasons for the slow change in sentiment about the slave trade and the emergence of the belief that Britain's imperial Atlantic economy in future might manage without the use of imported slave labour. Enlightenment ideas and the evangelical awakening both stressed concern for human worth and thus a greater

4 See Colley 2002.

compassion for people and for animals. Evangelical religion emphasised Christ's redeeming power for all humanity and urged believers to spread the gospel and to engage in acts of charity. Emerging economic ideas, well exemplified in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), argued that new industrial processes required different attitudes to managing freer labour that would result in greater productivity and profitability. Over all of this was a society and economy increasingly geared to consumption and comfort but also marked by a heightened compassion. Further, British ideas about the politics and economics of Empire changed as a result of the loss of North American colonies in 1783 following the revolutionary war.

Abolitionism and Cugoano

There is a considerable literature – and it is growing in this bicentenary year – on the movement that brought about Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807.⁵ Much popular literature (plus the recently released film 'Amazing Grace') focuses on the activities of William Wilberforce whose role and significance in the abolitionist struggle has been over-emphasized. Less notice has been given to the activities of Granville Sharp, the extra-parliamentary Quaker lobbyists of the mid 1780s,⁶ the further Committee founded in 1787, or to Thomas Clarkson whose adult life was devoted to ending first the slave trade and then slavery itself.⁷ Among leading abolitionists were also a number of Black Britons. The best known is Gustavus Vassa, or Olaudah Equiano, whose two volume *Interesting Narrative*, published in London in 1789, has deservedly become an iconic text with his description of his enslavement in Africa and the cruel and murderous business of transportation on the 'middle passage' to slave labour on the plantations of the Americas.⁸ A less well-known Afro-British writer, the focus of this paper, was Quobna Ottobah Cugoano who, two years before his friend Equiano's book was published, wrote a passionate denunciation of both the slave trade and slavery entitled *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*.

Biography

According to his own personal narrative, Cugoano was a Fante, born on the coast of modern-day Ghana about 1757. In 1770, when he was about thirteen years old, he was kidnapped by Africans and sold to Europeans traders who shipped him across the Atlantic to the West Indian island of Grenada. By his own account he spent nine or ten months in a slave gang in Grenada where he witnessed 'the most dreadful scenes of misery and cruelty ... my miserable companions often cruelly lashed, and as it were cut to pieces, for the most trifling faults' (16). A further year was spent in other islands before he was taken by his owner, Alexander Campbell, to England in late 1772. In June of that year Chief Justice Mansfield had ruled that Black slaves could not forcibly be removed from England and Wales to slavery in the colonies. This ruling was won, after much effort, by the energies of Granville Sharp and his brother who had taken up the cause of a runaway slave named James Somerset. Somerset was seized by his master and put on board a ship bound for

5 See the splendid account by Brown 2006. Also Anstey 1975; Davis 1975; Hochschild 2005; Schama 2005.

6 Jennings 1997.

7 Clarkson 1808 (reprint 1968) offers his own account; see further Wilson 1989.

8 Equiano 2003 (edited by Vincent Carretta for the Penguin Classics series).

the Americas. The Sharps gained a writ of *habeas corpus* and rescued Somerset. In the subsequent court case the master tried unsuccessfully to regain Somerset whom he argued was his property. Cugoano and many Black people in Britain, who may have numbered 15,000 or more, acclaimed the Mansfield judgement as a statement of emancipation of slaves in Britain, which it was not.⁹ This idea rapidly circulated among the Afro-British population and also became known among Black people, both slave and free, in the American colonies.

It is not known how Cugoano gained his freedom; perhaps his master formerly 'freed' him, or he simply walked away and found other employment on terms over which he had at least some control. What is recorded, in August 1773, is his baptism in the name of 'James Stuart – a Black, aged 16 Years' at St James's Church, Piccadilly. It was commonly believed, and not only by black people in Britain, that conversion to Christianity and baptism conferred freedom. For many Afro-Britons a European name and identification as a Christian was seen to ensure a measure of security in England. What is clear in the case of Cugoano is that his conversion, either before his baptism or after it, was indeed real. The majority of the Afro-British writers of that period – Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Phillis Wheatley, John Marrant, Cugoano, and Equiano – were all evangelical Christians, influenced by Methodist ideas, as is indicated by their own statements, their writings, and their religious allegiances. In the case of Equiano his position is firmly proclaimed in the frontispiece portrait of his *Interesting Narrative* where he is depicted with a Bible open at Acts 4.12. Cugoano's text is solidly based on the Bible and his own position of faith is also clearly indicated by his identification with sinful humanity redeemed by God's sovereign grace through the blood of Christ (40 and 42). He held moderate Calvinist views, and regarded himself as one of 'the Elect'.¹⁰ Like the majority of Britons at the time, he was hostile to Roman Catholicism ('popish superstition and nonsense' (108)), though he also thought that northern European Protestantism had inflicted harsh suffering on slaves. But, as he pointed out, there was a distinction between being 'Protestant' and being a Christian. (108-9). Cugoano's description of the Church – it 'signifies an assembly of people' (110) – and his statement that 'sometimes an old woman selling matches, will preach a better, and more orthodox sermon than some of the clergy, who are only decked out with the external trappings of religion' (109), reflected both his evangelicalism and incipient dissenting views.

By the mid 1780s Cugoano had become the servant to the painters Richard and Maria Cosway in central London. Black servants were common in many well-to-do homes throughout Britain in the eighteenth century, their presence sometimes captured in family portraits and also occasionally mentioned by contemporary writers. In 1786, while working for the Cosways, Cugoano and another Afro-Briton, William Green, joined with Granville Sharp to prevent a Black servant from being forcibly shipped by his employer to the colonies. Cugoano, all too aware of the cruelties of slavery and of how precious was his own acquired liberty, was prepared to take direct action against those who sought to handle black people harshly and to breach the law. In the next year his anger against the slave trade and also slavery was poured out in his *Thoughts and Sentiments*, a book that Carretta rightly calls a

9 On Britain's black population see Fryer 1984 and Shyllon 1977, 1974.

10 See Hindmarsh 1996.

'jeremiad'. During 1787-9 Cugoano's name was associated with several other men who identified themselves as 'Sons of Africa' – 'a part, or descendants, of the much-wronged people of Africa' – and who wrote letters to Granville Sharp, Sir William Dolben, William Pitt, Charles James Fox, and others, about slavery and the slave trade. This was the first recorded instance of black people in Britain combining to speak collectively on issues of common concern.¹¹

The abolitionist movement

In 1787, the year that *Thoughts and Sentiments* was published, a number of Quakers and a handful of Anglican Christians met in London to form the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The Committee set about creating a nationwide lobby, gathering a list of subscribers county by county, publishing anti-slavery books and tracts, assembling data on the iniquities of the slave trade, arranging petitions to Parliament, producing a medallion showing a kneeling slave stating 'Am I not a man and a brother?' (ever the suppliant Black!), and later organising a boycott of sugar and other slave produced goods. The abolitionists suspected that the struggle to end the slave trade would be long and difficult. They were seeking to end a business that was profitable to British shipping and merchants, and from which considerable profit was derived by West Indian plantation owners and those connected with colonial commerce. Although petitions were presented to Parliament (100 in 1788 and 510 in 1792) which indicated the growing temper of abolitionist sentiment, the extra-parliamentary and parliamentary progress of the movement was retarded by the outbreak of war with France, the threat of Jacobinism, and government measures to suppress democratic expression. Nevertheless, in the years 1789 to 1806 the slave trade was restricted by numerous pieces of legislation and eventually, following France's return to slaving and when the abolitionist movement had regained its energy, it was made illegal for British subjects in 1807.

Although an activist against slavery from 1786, there is little if any evidence of Cugoano's close identification with the London Committee founded in 1787. He certainly knew some of its members, for example Granville Sharp, its self-effacing chairman, and also the Quaker publisher James Phillips, one of the founder members of the Abolition Committee, who was active in producing anti-slave trade books. Cugoano's book was a piece of anti-slave trade propaganda, as was Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, although Cugoano's text went further in forcibly condemning slavery. Denouncing slavery was a much bolder act than tackling the slave trade. Increasingly many people thought that the trade in Africans was unacceptable. Christians began to argue that God would not look providentially on Britain if the country continued to engage in the slave trade. However, questioning slavery was a more radical move that challenged not only property rights but also a form of labour perceived to be essential to the economic welfare of both the West Indian colonies and of the United Kingdom.

Thoughts and Sentiments

Cugoano did not learn to speak English until his arrival in Grenada and he claims that in England he was briefly sent to school by his master, but where is not known.

11 In 1897 Henry Sylvester Williams, from Trinidad, helped to form the African

Association in London; three years later the first Pan-African Conference met in London.

He appears from the various texts that he cites in *Thoughts and Sentiments* to have been relatively well-read. The book is rather repetitive and Shyllon, Edwards, and Carretta all suggest that Cugoano was most likely helped in writing the book by his friend Olaudah Equiano. To compare the elaborate language and expression in the text of *Thoughts and Sentiments*, not to mention the syntax and spelling, with that in Cugoano's later letters addressed to Sir William Dolben and to Granville Sharp, suggests that there must have been a more refined and skilful hand assisting him either in writing or revising the book.¹² Unlike Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, Cugoano's account is not autobiographical and he makes only passing and brief mention to his experience of capture in Africa, the middle passage, and slavery in the colonies. The personal detail of people, places, and movement contained in Equiano's autobiography has enabled researchers to pursue his life,¹³ Cugoano recorded little of his past and as a consequence far less is known about him and little research has been undertaken on his life. His book served a single purpose. He was a propagandist out to touch the minds of his readers, and particularly Christians, by a sturdy biblically-based denunciation of the slave trade and the institution of slavery. On the title page of *Thoughts and Sentiments*, and beneath the title, is a text in adapted form from the Mosaic law in Exodus 21.16: 'He that stealeth a man and selleth him, or maketh merchandize of him, or if he be found in his hand: then that thief shall die'. This is followed by the statement in capitals: 'LAW OF GOD'.

Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* was self-published in London in 1787. The book was a petition 'humbly submitted to the inhabitants of Great-Britain' and the author, dropping his British baptismal name, stated that he was 'Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, A native of Africa'.¹⁴ His account was not reliant on white patronage, as were the books written by Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho that had been published a few years earlier.¹⁵ How Cugoano funded the publication of his book is not known. It was sold by various London booksellers, including James Phillips, and could also be bought from 'the Author' and at the Pall Mall home of the Cosways, for whom Cugoano worked. Cugoano sent copies to the Prince of Wales, who was hostile to abolition, and to Edmund Burke the Tory politician. A French edition was published in Paris in 1788. In 1791 Cugoano published a shorter version but this time he solicited a list of pre-publication subscribers in the metropolis, a not uncommon way of publishing a book and a means used by Equiano.¹⁶ Among the nearly 170 subscribers to *Thoughts and Sentiments* were Charles James Fox, Sir Joshua Reynolds, a few women, and a sprinkling of aristocrats. No review of either edition appears to have been written

12 See Shyllon 1977: 173 also Edwards 1985: 177, 183-7 and Carretta 1999: 190-1, 195-6.

13 There are two biographies of Equiano, the most substantial being Carretta 2005 and the less well-researched one being Walvin 1998. There is also a substantial literature on aspects of his life and writings.

14 Olaudah Equiano, friend and sometime collaborator with Cugoano, also stated clearly on the frontispiece of his *Interesting Narrative*, self-published in 1789, that he was

'the African', although he retained his European name of Gustavus Vassa.

15 Wheatley 1773, which was dedicated to the Countess of Huntingdon. Sancho 1782, see edition in Penguin Classics, Carretta 1998.

16 The title of the 1791 edition was *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery: or, the Nature of Servitude as admitted by the Law of God, compared to the Modern Slavery of the Africans in the West-Indies ... by a Native*.

and published. Cugoano seems to have left Richard Cosway's employ, and perhaps financial need led him to state, at the end of the 1791 edition, that he intended to open a school for Afro-Britons, although there is no evidence that he did this. In a letter to Granville Sharp, probably written sometime in 1791, he discussed going to Nova Scotia to recruit settlers for a further settlement in Sierra Leone. At the end of the letter he mentions his financial difficulties and also his experience of racial prejudice: 'I within this last three months b[een] upwards of fifty places but, Complexion is a Predominant Prejudice for a man to starve for want in a Christian Country ...'. Thereafter Cugoano disappears from the pages of history, although perhaps serendipitous or assiduous research may throw further light on his life and clarify whether or not, as was claimed, he married an English woman, and whether he died in the early 1790s.

Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments* was fuelled by his own experience of being enslaved. Arriving in Britain just after the Mansfield declaration of 1772, his views on slavery were further shaped as he saw the weakness of English law. This failed to protect fellow Africans from being deported, contrary to that legal ruling, and then, ten years later further failed when the captain of the slaver *Zong* threw 132 sick slaves, some shackled, into the sea and the ship's owners successfully filed an insurance claim for loss of property (85). There was plenty of cruelty and murder to fuel Cugoano's angry condemnation of both the slave trade and slavery. However, he avoided the personal accounts, such as Equiano was later to provide, and instead focused his thesis or argument on natural law and rights and biblical precepts. In so doing he also condemned European colonialism in the Americas as being at the root of both the slave trade and the system of New World slavery.

Cugoano's book appeared at a time when controversy about the slave trade was increasing. The London Committee first met in May 1787. In the preceding three years a number of books and pamphlets had either condemned or supported the slave trade and slavery. This was mainly in response to James Ramsay's *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London 1784). Unlike earlier books and pamphlets on slavery it aroused considerable opposition. Not only was Ramsey's book a substantial text of over 300 pages but it was written by someone who had resided in the West Indies for many years, had owned slaves in St Kitts and thus possessed first hand experience of slave conditions.¹⁷ Earlier texts condemning the slave trade and slavery, written in the 1770s by Sharp and Wesley, had largely been ignored by the pro-slave interests,¹⁸ as was the Quaker text *Case of Our Fellow-Creatures* (1783). However, the response of the West Indian interest was fierce towards Ramsey and resulted in nine pro-slavery pamphlets, several anonymous, published in Britain between mid 1784 and 1787. Several of these, eager to present an idea of planter humanity, disingenuously sought to claim the high moral ground. Ramsey quickly replied in his own pamphlets, as did other writers, some of whom were Christians, who used biblical texts to denounce the slave trade.¹⁹ It is clear that Cugoano drew on a number of books and pamphlets written by abolitionists since 1769. Some of these men – and they are all men – were personally known to him (for example Granville Sharp was a major influence) but he also read books by

17 Brown 2006: 364 ff.

18 See Sharp 1769, 1776a, 1776b and Wesley 1774.

19 These can best be followed in Brown 2006, chpt 6.

Anthony Benezet, Francis Hargrave, John Wesley, James Ramsey, and Thomas Clarkson.²⁰

Cugoano and the Bible

The Bible and slavery

Cugoano had a high view of the Bible, a text which clearly he knew well. His ideas and knowledge were characteristic of his age, but his biblical ideas were those that one would expect to be held by a Christian suffused with Methodist and moderate Calvinist ideas. In the earlier part of his text he draws heavily on the Old Testament, in the latter part more on the New. However, like many Bible-believing Christians then and now, he found appropriate texts to buttress his arguments as he condemned both the slave trade and slavery. An obvious problem is that the Bible is ambiguous about the institution of slavery. Nowhere in Scripture is slavery specifically condemned, although regulation meant that Hebrew slaves had to be offered freedom after seven years. The overall thrust of biblical theology is that all people are equal in creation and in their need of salvation. In the New Testament, Gentiles are included in the new covenant and the obligation to love your neighbour, and also your enemy, is universal. Christians are bound to act in a way that encourages human flourishing. In our own time many Christians have also read such biblical passages but, for a variety of reasons, pursued actions that seem to contradict what the New Testament appears to be saying. Cugoano used the Bible to condemn the slave trade and slavery because that is how he read and interpreted the text, but also because there were writers who used Scripture to support the practice of enslaving Africans.²¹ Throughout *Thoughts and Sentiments* runs a sense of outrage that peoples and nations who claim to be Christian could engage in a practice that contradicts divine law.

Cugoano wrote in a biblical prophetic tradition. Like many prophets he was a man on the edge of society, a black man among white people and, in likening the British nation to the ancient people of God, he sees them as chosen for a divine purpose but also, as with Old Testament Israel, disobedient and headstrong to the divine will. As a Protestant he bemoaned the fact that Britain, a Christian country, was taking slaves in exactly the same way as Roman Catholic and Muslim states that, without the gospel, did not know any better. Parallel to his scriptural condemnation of slavery and the slave trade, Cugoano also leans on ideas of justice and natural rights. All people, he argued, possess the 'natural and common rights and privileges of men' (21 and 22).

The slave trade, stated Cugoano, was 'an evil of the first magnitude ... contrary to all the genuine principles of Christianity' (24), conducted by 'robbers and ensnarers of men [who] can never be Christian'. In pursuit of these 'crimes' (25) the inhabitants of Britain murdered thousands of Africans every year. Slavery as an institution was the result of sinfulness and thus an offence in the sight of God

20 It appears that Cugoano was familiar with the work of Anthony Benezet (Benezet 1771, *Some Historical Account of Guinea, Its Situation, Produce, and the General Disposition of its Inhabitants. With an Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade, Its Nature,*

and Lamentable Effects, Sharp 1776b (*The Law of Retribution*), and also Ramsay 1786 (*An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*).

21 See, for example, Thompson 1772; Martin 1774.

(16). Christians, that is anyone who is a 'man of God', as defined by the Apostle Paul in 2 Tim. 3:17, and likewise Christian nations, therefore should not be involved in the business of buying and selling people. Those who did so were 'infidels' (37), and ignorant of Scripture (45). The whole law of God, Cugoano argued, quoting Matt. 22:37-39, was concerned with human love for one another. Slavery thus obviously breached God's law, as laid down in Matt. 7:12 (52), because the African is neighbour to the European (88). How could a person love a neighbour, which included strangers (139-40: 1791), while brutally abusing them? In ending the slave trade and freeing slaves Britain would act in accordance with God's righteous purposes (97). 'This is the law of Lord Christ ... *As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise*' (141: 1791). Cugoano wrote that he heard 'many of my own countrymen ... crying and groaning under the heavy yoke of slavery and bondage, and praying to be delivered; and the word of the Lord is thus speaking for them in the words of Mic. 7:1-11: *'Woe is me! alas Africa!'* (60).

Bible, ethnicity and colour

In arguing that all humanity was equal in God's sight, Cugoano was answering James Tobin, a pro-slaver who had attacked Ramsay in a pamphlet.²² Ethnicity and colour, and the biblical curse on Ham and thus on his younger son Canaan, did not single out Africans or Black people to be slaves. To argue so was 'a grand pretence for the supporters of the African slavery to build a false notion upon', and to muddle Scripture (31 and 32).²³ Cugoano argued for a close reading of the Bible (39). This would show that there was nothing in Scripture 'to warrant the modern practice of slavery' (38). Quoting from Acts 17:26, 'that God who made of one blood all the nations and children of men, and who gave to all equally a natural right to liberty' (97), he stressed that the Bible firmly stated that all people equally were sinners in God's sight. All 'are like the Ethiopians'²⁴ (even God's elect) in a state of nature and unregeneracy ... black with original sin ... which they cannot reverse' (40). But though all humanity was unregenerate, equally all might be saved because God 'has opened a fountain through the blood of Jesus for sin and for uncleanness ... and the blackest dyes of sin and pollution' (40). The Old Testament laws that required sacrifice of animals were no longer necessary; God's grace was sufficient (42).

Cugoano's scriptural arguments were based on the then widely held idea of monogenesis, affirmed by Paul in Acts 17:26. Cugoano argued that people were 'of one blood and of one nature, that there does not an inferiority subsist, or depend, on their colour, features or form, whereby some men make a pretence to enslave others' (29). This common origin in creation was continued through the descendants of Noah, and differences of complexion occurred as people spread throughout the earth, but supremely in a 'variety which it hath pleased God to establish and caused to take place', so that 'the difference of colour among men is only incidental' (29-30). Cugoano then tackled an idea used by pro-slave interests that Africans bore a divine curse that marked them out to be slaves. There was

22 Tobin 1785 was a pro-slave riposte to Ramsay 1784, 1786.

23 The 'curse of Canaan, the son of Ham' (Genesis 9. 21-7) was a European medieval idea that by the 18th and 19th centuries was

the main justification for racial slavery. See Goldenberg 2003.

24 'Ethiopian' was a term commonly applied in the eighteenth century to black Africans.

only one curse, he argued, and that was the curse placed on Canaan via his father Ham, but it was specific to Canaan and not to all the descendants of Ham (31-33). Thus there was 'nothing in nature, reason, and scripture to warrant the enslaving of black people more than others' (45). Colour, said Cugoano, was like a cloak with everybody equal in God's sight (41 and 90). As a leopard could not lose its spots (Jeremiah 13.23), neither could a person change their complexion (39-40). Blackness did not represent evil, for all are evil and only the blood of Christ could wash a person clean. He further argued that in the Old Testament bond slavery is there to demonstrate slavery to sin; there is an analogous nature of ritual law, not to be repeated as written: 'nothing in nature, reason or scripture justifies slavery' (45).

Divine law and judgment

God was at work in the lives of individuals and also in the works of nations, argued Cugoano. God disapproved of slavery but blessed righteous nations, a view advanced by Sharp and others. To end the slave trade and slavery in the Caribbean colonies would be to fulfil God's law. Where the law in British colonies upheld slavery, that law was contrary to God's law (57). Cugoano (83-4) cites Prov. 14:3 – 'Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people' – a view also developed by Granville Sharp in his *Law of Retribution* (1776). As there are divine rewards for righteousness (95, 109-110), equally there is God's retribution for sinners and thus for slave holders (77-9). This inevitable judgement would fall also on those individuals and nations that failed to intervene to help oppressed Africans (89-90). Cugoano referred to Jer. 16:18 to argue that kings and rulers were guilty when they 'have it in their power to prevent it' but permit the slave trade and allow slavery to continue; they know the truth but ignore it and therefore are the more guilty (62, 81-2).

The mental world that Cugoano inhabited was one where God was actively at work. He could see this in his own life where God's providence had delivered him from slavery in Grenada. God had also given him the opportunity to learn to read and write, schooling that enabled him to improve his mind, to read the Bible, and to acquire from books a knowledge of Africa, the slave trade and slavery (17). The harsh misfortunes that had befallen him by enslavement were also in God's providence; as with Joseph taken into Egypt, they were, he wrote, 'for my good' (17).

Cugoano revealed his English Protestant thinking by extending the idea of God's providence to the British nation. He saw Britain as similar to ancient Israel, called by God, chosen for a purpose, and yet like Israel also disobedient. Jews were forbidden to enslave fellow Hebrews, except for a limited time in cases of debt, and thus it was 'not contrary to the natural liberties of men' (35). The Hebrew system contained within it mutual benefits as bond servants were delivered from poverty and debt, eventually redeemed, and thus were no worse than poor labouring people (36). 'Great-Britain ... the Queen of nations' could provide deliverance for Africans (97). As a Protestant Christian nation, Britain should abandon the slave trade and slavery, thus removing the nation from God's

vengeance and singling itself from the base act of slaving pursued by Roman Catholic and Muslim states.

Cugoano and the reality of slaving

A thread running throughout Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments* is his appeal to the ideas of 'law, civilization, reason, justice, equity, and humanity' (51). Africans, as he repeatedly pointed out, were taken from a state of innocence and conveyed in a barbarous and cruel manner to the horrors of American slavery (15, 23, 29). Although he foregoes a detailed personal account of his own experiences, there is sufficient in the text on the rattling of chains and the sound of the whip to convey the viciousness of both the slave trade and slavery which brutalised men and women. In a propagandist text directed at an audience imbued with the Christian ideas of marital fidelity, and where women were taking an increasing interest in the abolitionist cause, Cugoano emphasises that female slaves were subject to sexual exploitation by white sailors and plantation owners. Slaves thus had an appeal to a higher moral law with a duty not only to escape but, if necessary, to enslave their masters if that is their only means of gaining the justice of divine law (59).

Law, justice and humanity

Slavers breached the law of God but, had they remained in England, they would have been in breach of the laws of the land, acting like bandits and 'more atrocious than the highwaymen in England' (19). Not only did slave masters exploit stolen labour but they even provided rewards for the capture and return of runaway slaves (37). Great wrong had been inflicted on Africa by Britain. The action required was twofold: the 'total abolition and universal emancipation of slaves, and the enfranchisement of all Black People employed in the culture of the Colonies' (91), and also that slave holders should provide 'restitution for the iniquities they have already done' (61). Thus Cugoano goes further than most abolitionists in demanding the end of Caribbean slavery, something that few even contemplated in the 1780s. Most abolitionists then argued, as did some slave holders, that slave labour would slowly disappear, but few suggested so drastic a measure as emancipation which would deprive slave owners of their 'property'. Cugoano follows up this demand by asking why slave owners should fear such a step. Not only would free labour be in accord with the current economic ideas of Adam Smith, but it would be more productive than slave labour (92, 103). However, Cugoano is not demanding immediate emancipation. This would be undertaken gradually. Slaves would receive Christian instruction and honest and instructed slaves would be freed under certain conditions after seven years. Thus slaves 'would become tractable and obedient, useful labourers, dutiful servants and good subjects' (99), some perhaps returning to Africa to instruct others as agents of 'civilisation'.

A future vision

Cugoano also proposed plans for Britain following the abolition of the slave trade. His suggestions have a contemporary resonance: there should be 'universal reformation and repentance' (97-8) to be marked by days of mourning and fasting

(98). Total abolition would mean that those caught slaving be fined £1000. A British fleet should be sent to the West African coast to conduct anti-slavery patrols (100), and curbs put on Dutch excesses to their slaves in their colony at the Cape of Good Hope (100). In West Africa, Britain's trading forts should be placed under new governors and become 'shepherd's tents' and 'doors of hospitality' to encourage legitimate trade (100). This would be to the great commercial and strategic advantage of Britain (101). In arguing for British naval action to suppress the slave trade, and for the promotion of legitimate trade to divert both African and European merchants from selling and buying slaves, Cugoano was putting forward ideas that were to be used by Britain in its anti-slave trade strategies following abolition.

Africa, Britain and Empire

In contesting Tobin's arguments, Cugoano addressed the question of African involvement in the slave trade. Certain Africans directly profited from selling fellow Africans, but, says Cugoano, 'if there were no buyers there would be no sellers' (16). He goes on to argue that African systems of slavery were very different from European plantation slavery in the Americas. Certainly the former was the result of sin (Cugoano had rather an idealistic view of both Ancient and African slavery, 36-7), but it did not involve the brutalities of the middle passage and the coerced labour of black slaves for white masters (16).

A further question, raised by Tobin and repeatedly used by those hostile or indifferent to the abolitionist cause, was that African slaves in the colonies were treated no worse than many working men in Britain. William Cobbett, an outspoken radical, but no friend to abolition, later uttered such ideas. Cugoano replied that however unjust the conditions of white workers in Britain they could not be compared with those endured by colonial slaves in the West Indies. In the colonies slaves were chattels, 'beasts of burden' (23-4), able to be bought and sold, dealt with 'as their capricious owners think fit, even to torturing and tearing them to pieces, and wearing them out with hard labour, hunger and oppression' (20). Workers in Britain might suffer oppression but they enjoyed a measure of liberty denied to slaves.

Conventional British political wisdom upheld the possession of colonies and, although it was beginning to be questioned, the mercantilist system which was seen to promote and benefit the overseas commercial interests of the country. Cugoano was an economic conservative and against current mercantilist ideas. He also extended his jeremiad against all European settlements and colonies (62), which had their origin in the Americas with the Portuguese and Spanish whose colonies were 'founded in murders and devastation' (65, 72-3). The slave trade and West Indian slavery, and all indirect beneficiaries of trade with the colonies, were 'guilty' as were those 'Antichristian' robbers who enslave men (67-8). What advantage had Britain gained from Empire? asked Cugoano. The results have been debts, taxes, with diverse consequences at home (68-9), and lotteries, and speculations (69). Later in his original text Cugoano appears to contradict himself by stating: 'we would wish to have the grandeur and fame of the British empire to extend far and wide; and the glory and honor of God to be promoted by it' (107), but that would be an

Empire without slavery and thus honouring to God, a force of principle and good in the world, especially among the 'unlearned Heathen'.

One aspect of Empire that Cugoano endorsed was the plan to settle London's poor black population in West Africa. Many of the impoverished black people in London were former slaves who had fled their masters in response to British appeals during the American revolutionary war to remain loyal to the Crown. Some settled in Nova Scotia, others came to Britain, where a Committee, which included Oluadah Equiano, planned to relocate them in the future settlement of Freetown. Cugoano supported the Committee's plan but had grave doubts as to the success of the venture (105).

Conclusion

Although Cugoano has received a certain amount of publicity in the recent bicentenary commemoration of abolition, he still remains a relatively unknown Afro-British writer. His *Thoughts and Sentiments* firmly parades his evangelical Christian faith. In many ways his is a remarkable black voice, that of a man who had suffered the great cruelty of being ripped from his home in Africa, carried across the Atlantic and enslaved in the Americas. Divine providence, as he argued, brought him to Britain and subsequently to a knowledge of Christ. His view of the fallen world was shaped by God's almighty power and the need for obedience by all peoples and nations to that authority: only through the grace of Christ was there salvation and a restored relationship with a loving heavenly Father. Cugoano condemned the slave trade and demanded that government act immediately to abolish it and further prevent its practice; he denounced colonial slavery and urged humane transitional policies to end it; he also urged a different relationship between metropole and colonies. His view of the past and the present was that there were 'universal human rights and privileges of men' (118: 1791), and that 'improvements in civilization' would be marked by the ending of great wrongs such as the suppression of the inquisition and the end of slavery (117: 1791). His *Thoughts and Sentiments* may not have been reviewed by contemporary journals, but today the text continues to display the author's human courage and optimism that Christ's love and grace will be at work in the lives of men and women.

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