

## SLAVERY: COUNTRY AND CHURCH

By Gabriel Moran

The United States is not in a good position to protest against the international slave trade when its own record at home is so shameful. The problem has existed from the beginning of settlements in British America. The first slaves were imported in 1619 and became an integral part of the economy, particularly in the southern colonies but not exclusively there.

In 1776 the colonies published “a unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,” a document mainly composed by Thomas Jefferson. After the well-known opening paragraphs, asserting that all men are created equal, the main body of the document consists of 30 accusations against King George III. Among those indictments, Jefferson had the gall to write: “He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the person of a distant people.” Jefferson went on to express disdain for “the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain, determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold.”

The Congress had the good sense to omit that paragraph; Jefferson complained it was the doing of Georgia and South Carolina. (The Congress substituted a racist attack on native people: “He has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontier the merciless Indian Savages, who known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.”).

On July 2, 2013 the *New York Times*, in a case of moral myopia, said that “if Jefferson’s ‘cruel war’ passage had stood, the founders’ endorsement of liberty wouldn’t need an asterisk.” But the problem with Jefferson and most of the country’s founders, is that they were defenders of the institution of slavery. When the United States of America was founded in 1787 the authors of the Constitution shamefully wrote in Article 1, Section 2, Paragraph 3 that the total number of people shall be determined by adding to the number of free persons “three fifths of all other persons,” a neat compromise to satisfy both northern and southern colonies.

The year 1787 was also the beginning of the abolitionist movement in England. It took fifty years of struggle to end slavery in the British Empire, but some extraordinary men and women stayed the course. These abolitionists included Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, Elizabeth Heyrick and Harriet Martineau. The reformers used a combination of popular support and political skill to finally achieve success. There is a wonderful movie, *Amazing Grace*, that captures the drama of the movement.

At that same time in the 1830s, slaveholders in the United States were digging in to resist a movement to outlaw slavery. Fredrick Douglass, one of the great U.S. citizens of the nineteenth century, wrote: “Slavery is a crime, not against Englishmen but against God, and all the members of the human family, and it belongs to the whole human family to seek its suppression.”

It is difficult to understand the moral obtuseness of people in the middle of the nineteenth century who defended slavery. Robert E. Lee wrote to President Franklin Pierce in 1856: “There are few, I believe, in this enlightened age, who will not acknowledge that slavery as an institution is a moral and political evil.” Lee had the decency, if that is the right word, to admit

that slavery is immoral. The question then is how he could have led the confederate states in a savage war to defend “the peculiar institution.” A different approach was taken by Alexander Stephens in his cornerstone speech at the founding of the Confederacy on March 21, 1861. Stephens said that the new constitution would put to rest all agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution because “the negro is not equal to the white man, that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition.”

The question that must be raised is whether future generations will look back at the early years of the twenty-first century and ask how a country that celebrates liberty and preaches human rights to the rest of the world could keep two million people locked up as slaves and could have exploited their labor. The prison lobby, similar to the military lobby, promises to deliver jobs. Rather than provide education for poor people and treatment for sick people, it is easier and more profitable to put them in prison cells. In a fuller picture of the economy, it is economically disastrous to be investing in prisons rather than in schools, businesses, and health care.

One of Douglass’ most famous speeches delivered on December 8, 1850 might still apply today: “What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim....There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody, than are the people of the United States at this very hour.”

In the mythology of “America,” as contrasted to the history of the United States, Abraham Lincoln is the Christ figure who redeemed the nation with his blood. And indeed, after a shaky start in opposing slavery Lincoln did his best to end slavery but the project was aborted by his successors. For a few years after Lincoln’s death it seemed that the country might move in the direction of “liberty and justice for all.” Timidity on the side of reformers was no match for the continued rapacity of the former slaveholders.

In addition to the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment allowing slavery for people convicted of a crime, the law allows the disenfranchisement of anyone who has been convicted of a crime. Today that means the exclusion of 6 million people from the right to vote, In Florida and Kentucky, 20 % of black people are prevented from voting.

President Obama was criticized for saying in an interview that racial equality has taken 150 years. Commentators said that surely he meant to say 100 years. I suspect it was not a slip of the tongue. He was drawing upon, among other facts of history, his personal experience of the past six years. It is difficult to find any explanation for the level of visceral hatred of Obama other than his being the first black president.

The attitude of the Christian Church to slavery through most of its history is even more difficult to understand than the attitude of a country which is “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” A religious movement that proclaimed liberation to all people was exceedingly slow in condemning slavery. The New Testament, for some strange reason, includes St. Paul’s letter to Philomen which advises the slaveholder to be nice to his slave. Paul is excused on the same ground that numerous other people are because they could not transcend the

assumptions of the society around them. But was not Paul as leader of the Christian movement supposed to challenge the grave moral problems of his time?

The medieval church was right in condemning practices that were called *contra naturam*, that is, a violation of nature. Thomas Aquinas explained that “just as the ordering of right reason proceeds from man, so the order of nature is from God himself; wherefore in sins contrary to nature, whereby the very order of nature is violated and injury is done to God, the ordainer of nature.” The church understood usury and adultery to be against nature but not slavery. The church had a litany of names for sexual sins; sodomy was the strange name given to what was considered to be a particularly grave sin. However, there was no name for a sin of slavery.

From the seventeenth century onward, none of the main Christian Churches in England or the United States distinguished themselves in their attitude to slavery. The one group that was consistently on the right side of the issue was the Quakers. They were fearless in opposing war and slavery while refusing to employ counter-violence. The great abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson put it bluntly: “Only if Christianity is a lie could slavery be acceptable.” His reason for devoting 50 years of his life to the anti-slavery movement, he said, was because “never was any cause, which had been taken up by man in any country, in any age, so great and important.” Frederick Douglass said that by the age of nine years old he knew that to say “God is our father” is to say slavery is a crime.

The white churches failed miserably in applying their Bible to the issue of slavery. Ironically, it was the black congregations and their “invisible institution” that gave life to Christianity in the United States. The invisible institution consisted of the groups of slaves who would secretly meet to read the Bible and who believed that there was a real church somewhere that was different from the church of the slaveholders. After the master instructed the slaves on obedience as taught in the Bible, the slaves did their own interpretation of the texts. The slaves recognized the story of Exodus as their own story. A main reason for laws that outlawed teaching a slave to read was the fear that they would get rebellious ideas from the Bible. On this point, the slave masters were correct.

When Heinrich Denzinger in 1854 gathered together the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, he was able to cite ten condemnations of usury. There was not a word condemning slavery. On November 20, 1890 Pope Leo XIII addressed a letter to African missionaries urging them to work for the elimination of slavery in Africa. The letter opens with the Pope’s assertion that the church “from the beginning sought to eliminate slavery completely.” The Pope lists twelve of his predecessors but he does not have a single quotation from any one of them.

The Roman Catholic Church of the past century has a much improved record in opposing slavery. At least there are numerous missionaries at home and abroad who have taken a stand with the victims of a merciless economic system. In past centuries, Christian missionaries were often a part of the colonizing process; the missionaries and the military arrived together to “civilize and Christianize” the native population. That description no longer fits the overwhelming majority of missionaries who are quietly working with poor people to improve their lot in life. They don’t preach the Christian gospel to the heathen; they discover the

workings of the divine in the people they work with and they exemplify what the living of the Christian gospel means.

The Roman Catholic Church has many people working quietly among the disenfranchised of the world. Nicholas Kristoff, the *New York Times* columnist, has often expressed appreciation for the work of these dedicated people. Obviously, many aspects of Christianity still run counter to their work with the poor of the world. Bishops who build multi-million dollar mansions for themselves are more obvious to the world than teachers working in Kenya or Ethiopia. Perhaps Pope Francis can inspire a major shift of the Roman Catholic Church toward siding with the most vulnerable of the world. His symbols so far have been impressive. He cannot finish the job but he might be able to do enough restructuring of the church to make possible, if not to guarantee, a like-minded successor.

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The following address is arguably the greatest speech ever given in the history of this country. <sup>2</sup>  
The final paragraph on healing the nation's wounds is regularly quoted but the searing indictment of the country that precedes it is seldom cited. Astoundingly, what is printed here is Lincoln's entire Inaugural Address which would have taken less than 5 minutes to deliver. Can anyone imagine a president today giving an inaugural address of that length? And can anyone imagine the response of Lincoln's hearers? Presidents love to invoke God as being on their side in a war against evil. Lincoln's shocking premise is that God is on neither side and that both the north and the south may be getting what in justice they deserve. Presidents and ordinary citizens of the United States should read this speech periodically to be reminded of this part of their history which continues to reverberate today.

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#### ABRAHAM LINCOLN: SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Fellow countrymen: At this second appearing to take the oath of the Presidential office there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement somewhat in detail of a course to be pursued seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself, and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it, all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to *saving* the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to *destroy* it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union and divide effects by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish, and the war came.

One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, <sup>3</sup>

perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the *cause* of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged.

The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away.

Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.