

# The Bulletin

of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and Religion

Vol. 3 No. 2

June, 1979

## Slavery and the Idea of Progress

by David Brion Davis

**Editor's Note:** *A distinguished historian and the 1967 winner of the Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction, Dr. David Brion Davis is an expert on the topics of slavery and American cultural and intellectual history. He has written and edited numerous articles and books, including The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture and The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823. Dr. Davis is currently the Sterling Professor of History at Yale University.*

*His address, "Slavery and the Idea of Progress," was presented to the Center on February 28, 1979. A videotape of the occasion has been made by the Center.*

"The perfectibility of man!" D. H. Lawrence once exclaimed. "Ah heaven, what a dreary theme!" Like many rebels of the early twentieth century, Lawrence was eager to deflate the Anglo-American heritage of moral uplift, self-improvement, and obedience to the Great God Progress. Since Lawrence's time literary and academic thought, at least in the non-communist world, has at best paid lip service to the perfectibility of man and to the related doctrine of historical progress.

Yet the idea of progress was a central ideological weapon in Europe's

imperial expansion which extended from the late Middle Ages to the twentieth century. During the first and longest phase of this expansion, various concepts of progress justified the African slave trade and the extension of plantation slavery from Brazil and the Caribbean to the Southern states of North America. During the second imperial phase, from the early 1800s to World War II, the belief that slavery was an intolerable obstacle to progress gave moral sanction to Britain's rule of the seas and to British intervention in South America, Africa, and the Mideast. The vital links between antislavery and the idea of progress were also of crucial importance in America's sectional conflict that led to the Civil War. Hence, if the theme of perfectibility and progress now seems dreary and a bit unreal, I would submit that it is indispensable for any understanding of the great struggles over slavery that shaped so many of the contours of our modern world.

Here I can do no more than highlight a few aspects of a subject which is probably too broad and complex to be treated adequately in a single book. Instead of dwelling on examples of how various notions of progress were invoked by American

antislavery and proslavery spokesmen, I shall try, at the risk of superficiality, to place the subject in an extremely wide perspective. This strategy requires some initial attention to the idea of progress itself, followed by some remarks on the ancient associations between emancipation and human destiny.

The idea of progress, as generally defined by historians and philosophers, includes three elements. First is the belief that historical change is not governed by chance or accident, that the events and trends of history cohere in a meaningful pattern analogous to the laws described by natural science. Second is the belief that up to any present moment, the overall pattern of change represents an "increase or advance in value — toward that which is better" or desirable for humanity as a whole. Third is the prediction that such irreversible improvement is likely to continue in the future, even if contingent on human effort and rationality, or is inevitable and of indefinite duration, whether the product of human nature or of God's design.

There is still much debate over the origins and chronological development of this idea of progress. According to J. H. Elliott, "The almost miraculous

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**Included in This Issue:** Van K. Brock writes on "Assemblies of God: Elvis and Pentecostalism." Book reviews by Anne Rowe and Leo Sandon, Jr.

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sequence of events which led to the discovery, conquest and conversion of the New World did much to reinforce the linear and progressive, as against the cyclical, interpretation of the historical process in sixteenth-century thought." Although the Renaissance tended to exalt the models and superior civilization of ancient Greece and Rome, the classical world could boast of no achievements comparable to the discovery of America and the circumnavigation of the globe. Europe's commercial and territorial expansion thus provided arguments for the so-called Moderns in their century-long debate with the so-called Ancients who maintained that the triumphs of antiquity could never be equalled. Imperial expansion also bolstered the optimism of devout Catholics and Protestants, nourishing the conviction that Providence had finally opened the way for Christianizing all mankind.

As J. B. Bury and other historians have pointed out, the doctrine of secular progress was even more indebted to the principles and spectacular discoveries of seventeenth-century science, which clearly demonstrated the benefits of cumulative advances in knowledge. Yet it is necessary to qualify the traditional view of a dramatic shift from cyclical

theories of history to the idea of irreversible progress. On the one hand, Ludwig Edelstein has written an entire book on *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity*, and other scholars have stressed the continuing influence of Jewish and Christian messianic, perfectionist, and millenarian thought. On the other hand, it is not until the very late 1700s that one can point to full-blown secular theories of material, moral, and social progress, and it is not until the 1820s and 1830s that such notions gained widespread popular belief.

I use the phrase "idea of progress" because it has become an established convention. But the word "idea" can be misleading, especially as it has been used by historians of ideas who tend not only to extract their subject matter from historical context but to dissect, classify and transplant the disembodied contents. The idea of progress should be understood as a convenient symbol for a kind of rationalized faith or orientation, for a way of organizing experience and responding to change. Like all religious faith, it rests on certain beliefs about the past and future and is rooted in the human need for a sense of temporal identity. Ideas of progress have been held with varying degrees of emotional fervor; they have inspired and justified revolution and have also reconciled people to prolonged suffering and injustice.

The essence of progress, as I have suggested, is the belief that a particular course of change leads toward that which is better or desirable. Although the faith in progress is derived from the seeming pattern of history, the standards for judging what is "better" or "desirable" are necessarily transcendent in the sense of being above or outside history. Otherwise, the standards for judging progress would express no more than the interests and prejudices of each historical moment, and the disciples of progress in 1850, for example, could have no assurance that their own concepts of improvement would be acceptable to previous and subsequent generations. I leave it as an open question whether such external and objective standards

really exist. The crucial point is that the claim that such standards exist and are known to a particular group can convert the idea of progress into an extremely effective ideological weapon.

The effectiveness, as with religious or magical powers, depends on sincere conviction — often on an altruistic willingness to subordinate oneself as well as others to a higher purpose or transcendent design. Yet, historically, the idea of progress has been intermeshed with concrete interests, conflicts, priorities, and often with life-and-death struggles. We seldom reflect on the awesome power implied by the claimed knowledge that certain customs, institutions, or even races stand in the way of progress and must be consigned to the rubbish heap of history. Americans were shocked when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev announced that history would bury us. But for generations Americans exulted in the same prediction regarding the monarchies of Europe, and in the name of progress looked forward to the ultimate extermination of the Indian race.

It has been characteristic of Western proponents of modernization to express impatience and even moral outrage over institutions and ways of life that have survived beyond their allotted time, contrary to the supposed laws of progress. In this respect it is worth observing that Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman created a furor, in their recent book *Time on the Cross*, not by arguing that black slavery was morally justifiable, but by claiming that the institution conformed to modern standards of efficiency, productivity, and social progress. I shall return to some specific ideological uses of progress, but must first call attention to the symbolic and metaphorical significance of slavery in the history of Western culture.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SLAVERY

### The Judeo-Christian Tradition

Although it is only in relatively recent times that people have dared to anticipate a state of universal

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## THE BULLETIN

236 Williams Bldg.  
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Tallahassee, Florida 32306

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The *Bulletin* is printed and distributed three times each year. It is published by the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and Religion.

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happiness and well-being in this world, even the most secular visions of progress have been rooted in humanity's ancient longings for a better life. As these longings and aspirations found symbolic expression in Western culture, redemption and deliverance were almost always conceived as an emancipation from slavery. Since slavery was universal in the ancient world and anyone might suffer the fate of being enslaved, it is not surprising that the institution became a metaphor for the human condition, a metaphor standing for all forms of constraint, repression, exploitation, disability, and uprootedness from family and kinship ties.

In a sense, the Judeo-Christian tradition begins with a great myth of slavery and human progress: the Mosaic account of Hebrew slaves being delivered from Egyptian bondage, of their transferring their ultimate allegiance from worldly masters to a supreme God, and of their struggles to preserve their freedom and historic mission by faithful observance of God's law and remembrance of their former slavery. To this epic the Stoics added the doctrines that by nature all men are free and participate in a common, universal reason, and that true slavery, meaning the loss of virtue and self-control, has nothing to do with status and external condition. Hence, in the Stoic view, a great king might be a slave and a man in chains a freeman. If early Christians essentially accepted the Roman social order, it was at a price of extending this topsy-turvy perspective in the expectation of the imminent Kingdom of God. There was more than verbal play to Jesus' announcement that "he that was called in the Lord being a bond-servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise he that was called being free, is Christ's bondservant."

It has perhaps been overemphasized that the Gospels preach to slaves the duty of submission and obedience "unto them that according to the flesh are your masters, with fear and trembling in a singleness of your heart, as unto Christ." As William E. H. Lecky long ago observed, the parables also repeatedly dignify slavery by using it

as a symbol of Christian virtue. In Mark, when Jesus specifically contrasts the new Christian ethic with the worldly lordship of gentiles, he asserts the paradox that "whoever has a mind to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever has a mind to be first among you, must be the slave of all."

Similarly, in the Magnificat, Mary marvels that God "hath regarded the low estate of his slave-girl: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed." I deliberately use the words "slave" and "slave-girl" because the impact of such passages originally depended on the imagery of abuse and degradation associated with the Greek and Latin terms for chattel slavery. In early modern times, European translators softened some of the radical implications of early Christianity by choosing such bland words as "servant" and "handmaid." Ironically, this avoidance of the word "slave" made it easier for nineteenth-century abolitionists to contend that the servitude sanctioned by the Bible bore no resemblance to the harsh racial slavery of their own time.

It is a mistake to think of latent seeds of antislavery within the Judeo-Christian tradition, at least in the sense of seeds predestined or programmed for future fruition. But a religious culture often embodies a tension between a people's aspirations and historical experience, a tension that takes on new meaning in the face of new experience. The antislavery potentialities of the Judeo-Christian tradition were intimated by the collective efforts of Jews and Christians to prevent the enslavement of their brethren and to ransom captives held by outsiders. There may well have been economic and political reasons for the disappearance of slavery in northern and western Europe, but it is also of supreme importance that the Church condemned the enslavement of Christians.

Moreover, the symbolic associations derived from emancipation as a metaphor for human redemption became embedded in religious and secular literature. From the Renaissance onward, modern concepts of political,

religious, civil, economic and even psychological liberty have originally been defined in reference to some model of slavery. By the nineteenth century, the antislavery potentialities of the Judeo-Christian tradition were strikingly manifested in the religious fervor of Anglo-American abolitionism and above all in the syncretized religion of black slaves.

On the other hand, down to the late 1700s, Christianity proved to be wholly compatible with slavery so long as the original act of enslavement was limited to pagans or infidels and so long as bondage itself could be envisioned as an instrument of Christianization. For Jews, Muslims, and Christians, all of whom believed in a divine mission under the guidance of a monotheistic God, religious norms prohibited the forcible enslavement of members of the same faith. Ancient Jewish law limited the duration and conditions of Jewish servitude; Muslim law expressly barred the enslavement of free Muslims; and Christian practice, while more flexible for a time, tended to require by the late Middle Ages that slaves be of proven infidel or pagan origin.

All three religions permitted the enslavement of outsiders, but usually on the assumption that such slavery was a genuine benefit since it offered nonbelievers the chance of religious conversion, which was then the only available conception of moral progress. According to Canon Law and the decrees of numerous Church councils, Christian baptism automatically emancipated the slave of any Jew or heretic. But for both theological and pragmatic reasons the Church Fathers held that baptism and religious conversion could not in themselves bestow worldly freedom. If a slave could be emancipated simply by becoming a Christian, masters might well impede the spread of the faith. Furthermore, the slave's dependence and submissiveness were indispensable if the Christian household was to fulfill, through the cultivation of charity, piety and discipline, its task of transcending worldly distinctions. According to the ancient Christian ideal, the slave should serve Christ by faithfully

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servicing his own master. The master, having a model of humility before him, should serve Christ by acknowledging the spiritual equality of his slave. slave.

For both Muslims and Christians it was easier to accept the relative permanence of slave status, as slaves were increasingly recruited from alien peoples who, because of their ethnic or racial characteristics, were easily distinguishable even after religious conversion and acculturation. In the late Middle Ages, Europeans adopted Arab slave-trading practices almost incidentally in what seemed to them a worldwide struggle — economic, military, and religious — with Islam. Like the later discovery of America, the Portuguese explorations along the west African coast were part of a strategic move to outflank and encircle the Islamic world, breaking the Arab monopoly on trade with Asia. Black slaves were originally thought of simply as blackamoors, or black Muslims. It was thus in the interest of religious conversion and of aiding the crusade against Islam that the Church authorized, in the 1450s, the continuing shipment of African slaves to Portugal.

### The Economic Significance

The new religious mission happened to coincide in time with a more rapid westward expansion of sugar cultivation, an art which the original crusaders had learned from Arabs in Palestine. By the second half of the 1400s, the economic and urban development of Western Europe had created a growing market for sugar, salt, pepper, and other spices that had incalculable value to an age that knew nothing of refrigerated foods. Accordingly, when the island of Madeira experienced the kind of sugar boom that would later hit Brazil and the West Indies, a momentous change had occurred. Slaves, instead of being symbols of luxury and display as in most of the Muslim world, were now producing articles of luxury demanded by a new consumer class. Even before Columbus's voyages to America, most of Europe's sugar came from Portuguese plantations on which the

majority of workers were black. And of the nearly ten million black slaves ultimately sent to America, some 70% were destined for the sugar colonies.

This extension of racial slavery to plantation agriculture was originally justified by the old paternalistic ideal of the Christian household as an agency of conversion and gradual assimilation. Yet the European exploitation of Africa was a direct outgrowth of centuries of war and trade with the more advanced Islamic world, where black slavery had long been a familiar institution. The spread of black slavery from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic islands and finally to the West Indies and Brazil was closely tied to the expansion of European trade, technology, and religion, and hence with Europe's gradual strategic gains over the rival Islamic world.

Plantation slavery was neither the paternalistic, quasi-feudal institution that its defenders portrayed, nor was it an aberration that could be blamed on lawless buccaneers and lazy New World adventurers, as nineteenth-century liberals sometimes supposed. In blunt truth the slave plantation was part of an economic system created by the most progressive peoples and forces in Europe: Italian merchants; Iberian explorers; Jewish inventors and cartographers; Dutch, German and English investors and bankers. From the colonization of Madeira and other sugar-producing islands off the coast of west Africa to the cultivation five hundred years later of vast coffee and cotton plantations in Brazil and the United States, black slavery was an intrinsic part of European expansion.

### ANTISLAVERY AS PROGRESS

By the 1800s, however, it was antislavery that had become intermeshed with Europe's and especially England's ideas of material progress and commercial expansion. In the 1840s it seemed that all progressive minds agreed with Ralph Waldo Emerson when he honored the tenth anniversary of British West Indian emancipation, an event, he proclaimed, "singular in the history of civilization; a day of reason; of the

clear light; of that which makes us better than a flock of birds and beasts." The British knew, Emerson went on, that "slavery does not love the mailbag, a college, a book, or a preacher who has the absurd whim of saying what he thinks." Slavery, in short, was the very antithesis of what the nineteenth century celebrated as modern civilization.

To complete the ironic cycle, the final targets of the anti-slavery movement included Spanish Cuba, independent Brazil, and Portuguese Africa, the very regions to which Europeans had first adapted black slavery. By the turn of our own century the remaining targets were the Islamic Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, the regions from which Europeans had originally derived black slavery. The persistence of various forms of bondage supposedly proved that these societies were backward and premodern, and thus subject to an externally imposed emancipation as a first step toward civilization and progress.

This momentous transformation was partly the result of economic and political forces that I cannot begin to deal with here. But I would also argue that the changing response to slavery was shaped by changing conceptions of human progress. If we are to understand the ideological uses of various doctrines of progress, it is first important to note that antislavery and the modern idea of progress developed in remarkably parallel stages. In fact, the same writers who from the late 1500s to the late 1700s gradually developed an antislavery philosophy were also major contributors to the theory that knowledge and even material welfare and social justice advance in progressive stages in accordance with general laws of nature and human nature.

The convergence of antislavery and progressive thought is not surprising when one recalls that the Enlightenment represented a broad rebellion against both the traditional Christian resignation to worldly evils and the unquestioning acceptance of classical authorities. Both antislavery and the secular idea of progress required a

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repudiation of classical and Christian justifications of slavery, such as those found in Aristotle, the Justinian Code, and Canon Law. They also required arguments showing that there was no divine or cosmic design that ran counter to what Adam Smith described as the universal and uniform drive of "every man to better his condition."

#### Qualifications to Antislavery

There are certain catches, however, to the general view of growing enlightenment, optimism, and humanitarianism, a view bequeathed to us by the champions of secular progress. First of all, some 60% of all the African slaves shipped to the New World were transported during the century from 1721 to 1820, and the peak years of the slave trade coincided with the high Enlightenment. Second, from the very outset the progressive, modernist perspective was oriented to expediency. For example, in the Renaissance, disciples of progress celebrated gunpowder and artillery, along with printing and the compass, as magnificent inventions that advanced the cause of Christian civilization.

Linked with expediency was a tendency to exclude certain groups and regions from the benefits of progress. There was at least an abstractness and universality to the classical justifications for slavery. For example, the doctrine that captives could be enslaved instead of being killed in a so-called "just war" might theoretically apply to anyone. But Jean Bodin, the French humanist of the late 1500s who scornfully repudiated the classical arguments for slavery and who also contributed to the modern idea of progress, was primarily concerned with the welfare of the nation-state. He opposed slavery because the independent claims of a master contradicted the government's claims of absolute sovereignty. While Bodin thought that governments should gradually prepare slaves for emancipation and then grant citizenship to freedmen, he specifically excluded "strangers" or alien peoples.

The exclusionist tendency can also

be seen in John Locke, who denounced any form of bondage within the social compact, where fundamental rights were always to be protected against arbitrary authority. Yet Locke gave his blessing to black slavery in the colonies, offering the pretext that slavery was a just punishment for captives who had broken the social compact and forfeited their natural rights. This argument was unacceptable to the great jurist Montesquieu, who not only demolished the traditional justifications for slavery but who ridiculed the anti-black prejudices of his time. Yet Montesquieu went on to concede that in tropical countries slavery might be founded on natural reason, since the heat might make people unwilling to do heavy work. In other words, moral standards appropriate for Europe did not necessarily apply to the American tropics, where progress might require coercion.

A similar qualification appears in the great theorists of laissez-faire capitalism, Turgot and Adam Smith. Both men agreed that slavery violates the laws of morality and, an even worse sin for economists, that it is more expensive than free labor. But for Turgot and Smith the central issue was always the productivity of labor as the basic source of national wealth. If in the long run slave labor was doomed by economic laws, special circumstances might make the institution profitable for planters. If human behavior was governed by general laws and if there was a close correlation between climate, material conditions, and human institutions — all of which were basic premises of the Enlightenment — then American slavery could not be an accident.

According to Turgot and Smith, coercion had often been a necessary expedient whenever an abundance of land had coincided with a scarcity of labor. Only a greater supply of free labor could reduce the inflated cost of slave labor. For Turgot and Smith, all progress depended on freeing individual self-interest. It would thus be folly to try to eliminate slavery except by removing artificial protections, such as the monopolistic market which

required British consumers to subsidize the high labor costs of the British plantations. Eventually the beneficent effects of self-interest and market forces would abolish slavery in America, much as they had abolished slavery and serfdom in western Europe.

In the words of Smith's student and disciple, John Millar, no revolution in history had advanced human happiness as much as the abolition of slavery in Europe. Millar insisted, however, that this momentous progress was the result of purely material and utilitarian causes. It followed that slavery was a useful and necessary stage in human evolution and, by the late 1700s, was at worst an anachronism.

By Millar's time there were other proponents of progress who were prepared to argue that the African race was itself a kind of anachronism and that for blacks slavery was still a necessary stage of evolution. This is not the place to discuss the development of racist thought, but it should be noted that such thought was closely related to the new emphasis on environment and the relativity of progress. Thus the philosopher David Hume, in analyzing differences in national character, advanced the suspicion (like Thomas Jefferson a generation later) that blacks were "naturally inferior to whites." They had produced no civilized nations, no eminent individuals in the arts and sciences, in government or war. "Such a uniform and constant difference," Hume concluded, "could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men."

#### PROSLAVERY THEORISTS

We can better appreciate the significance of such expediency and relativism in progressive thought if we briefly look at some responses from later proslavery theorists. Ironically, the progressive ideology of the early 1800s defined both Northern free blacks and Southern slaveholders (including proslavery theorists) as in some way marginal and retrogressive.

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Even some abolitionists held that Northern free blacks were not only the victims of former oppression and present prejudice but that they belonged to a so-called primitive race that seemed capable of only limited progress. In the eyes of British and Yankee champions of progress, Southern white slaveholders and their defenders were anachronisms in another way. Blinded by their lust for power, they could not perceive their own true interests or see that slavery stifled the incentives of white workers, discouraging industry, innovation, efficiency, and other prerequisites for progress. In short, despite their profound differences in other ways, proslavery theorists and black spokesmen for equal rights needed to find ways of accommodating themselves to the Anglo-American worship of progress, a worship which tended to transform and by the mid-1800s even to supersede traditional Christianity.

Proslavery thought has too often been dismissed as a temporary and self-serving response to the Northern abolitionist attack, which suddenly threatened profits resulting from the great cotton boom. Actually, there were strong continuities from the 1600s to the 1800s in the defense of slavery. Southerners of the mid-1800s often invoked the seventeenth-century argument that pagans living in despotic and barbarous Africa had nothing to lose and everything to gain by being transported to America, where there was an opportunity to become Christianized and gradually civilized. During the 1700s British imperialists had repeatedly stressed that Africans had no understanding of European standards of liberty and justice; as slaves in America they were much better fed and treated than the peasants of Europe, and were gradually being weaned from their "brutal and scandalous Customs."

In 1746, a leading English economist anticipated a favorite Southern argument of the mid-1800s when he complained that the odious term "slave" was really inappropriate to describe a trade which benefitted everyone: "They are certainly treated with great Lenity and Humanity," he

wrote, "and as the Improvement of the Planters' Estates depends upon due Care being taken of their Health and Lives, I cannot but think their Condition is much better to what it was in their own Country."

English mercantilists of the 1700s also developed a rhetoric of expediency and tough-minded realism that was later echoed by such Southern writers as Thomas Dew, William Harper, and James H. Hammond. In the interest of national growth and power, they insisted, one should judge institutions by their results and not by abstract standards of right and wrong. The African slave trade, according to its British defenders, promoted a favorable balance of trade, increased the nation's stock of capital, ensured an influx of gold and silver, and strengthened the navy and merchant marine. These gains were closely tied to a theory of progress since they supposedly contributed to Britain's success in global struggles with Catholic Spain and France. For later Southerners and their Northern allies, slavery was no less essential to national security and to the national mission of extending republican institutions.

By the 1830s, however, even the most ardent defenders of slavery acknowledged that in Europe and in the Northern states the tide of opinion had turned. As one Southern writer complained, "This is an age of progress — a country of progress — a people of progress. Progress is synonymous with enlightenment, and he who falls into the rear rank, is considered recreant to the cause of civilization." A few Southern romanticists met this challenge by accepting the accusation of backwardness and turning it into a virtue, glorifying the supposedly feudal reciprocity of Southern social relations and the agrarian simplicity and stability of Southern life. This strategy presupposed that the much-acclaimed progress of industrializing nations was in reality a progress toward chaos and anarchy.

The overriding fear of Southern leaders, however, was that the North was progressing toward integration, uniformity, and unlimited power. If

slavery could be ideologically used to brand the South as a backward and morally degenerate region, it would be all the easier to deny Southerners equal access to national resources and opportunities, especially in the western territories. The result would be an irreversible drain of Southern wealth, power, and moral influence, leading to a condition of quasi-colonial dependence.

What distinguished Southern ideology from earlier defenses of slavery was the need to assimilate what Southerners themselves termed a "peculiar institution" to nineteenth-century visions of moral improvement and ordered historical progress. But there was little chance of convincing the Victorian world that slavery, in any literal sense, could ever be a progressive institution. For one thing, no historical event had contributed more to the Anglo-American belief in progress than the success in 1807 of both the British and American movements to outlaw the slave trade from Africa to British and American territories. According to the Bishop of London, from the beginning of the world to this hour of triumph, there had never been an act that had exterminated so great a quantity of evil or that had forwarded so great a quantity of good. By 1833, when Britain emancipated some 780,000 colonial slaves, generously paying £20,000,000 compensation to their owners, the lesson seemed clear. In the Anglo-American world, excluding the Southern slaveholding states, historians, theologians, and moral philosophers increasingly cited the progressive abolition of slavery as proof of a divine purpose in history, a purpose gradually revealed and made manifest through human enlightenment.

Although this achievement was seen as the culmination of a thousand years of struggle against the forces of prejudice, oppression, and reaction, it also conveyed a new sense of secular possibility — of moral perfectibility and social mission in this world. Most nineteenth-century historians attributed the elevation of European slaves and serfs to the beneficent

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influence of Christianity, though some scholars followed the lead of John Millar and stressed impersonal economic forces. In either case, the progress of liberty had depended on the unfolding of some unconscious or immanent design. Yet the abolition of the Anglo-American slave trade and West Indian slavery was supposedly the direct result of sustained agitation and enlightened public opinion. By demonstrating the potency of ideas and the ability of the enlightened public to control the course of events, the antislavery movement signaled a new phase or dispensation in the struggle for human liberty.

In response, proslavery Southerners like William H. Holcombe, a brilliant homeopathic physician, acknowledged that "the sympathies of the civilized world are united against us," and that "the mass of Northern people" looked upon slavery as "a relic of barbarism and a disgrace to an enlightened people. We are not regarded as equals but are merely tolerated, as persons whom they in their wisdom may possibly reform and improve."

Holcombe's reply, on the eve of the Civil War, was a defiant assertion that "African slavery is no retrograde movement, no discord in the harmony of nature, no violation of elemental justice, no infraction of immutable laws, human or divine — but an integral link in the grand progressive evolution of human society as an indissoluble whole." He even contended that proslavery doctrine was a progressive innovation, based on science, "more recent than any of the great inventions which had created the distinctive forms of our modern civilization." Thus Holcombe tried to turn the tables by claiming that Southerners were persecuted precisely because they were ahead of their times: "Let us be faithful to our sublime trust," he implored, "and future ages will appreciate the grandeur and glory of our mission."

Yet in truth the South had long been hobbled by a pervasive fear of innovation, assuming that change in any fundamental way of life might well have multiplier effects that would endanger the peculiar institution. The

Southern promoters of railroads, industrialization, and commercial expansion constantly complained of a conservative resistance to change which tended to substantiate the image of a backward or retrogressive region.

However, on one crucial level the proslavery theorists were not out of tune with the dominant trends of the Anglo-American world. If the dominant conception of progress required that the legal forms and trappings of slavery be consigned to the past, it was by no means hostile to the proslavery insistence that true progress depends on certain compulsions and that strict limits must be imposed on the economic and social freedom of so-called primitive races. Because proslavery Southerners are often treated in isolation, it is easy to ignore how much they shared, particularly in their discussions of labor, incentives, and the creation of wealth, with the great political economists in the utilitarian tradition. Southerners like Holcombe also had much in common with later Anglo-American imperialists who wholly endorsed pseudoscientific racism, white supremacy, and the necessity of coerced labor in the tropical colonies of the world.

Holcombe's mistake was in assuming that without slavery the white race could not fulfill its providential mission, which he described as "the subjugation of tropical nature to man; the elevation and Christianization of the dark races, the feeding and clothing of the world, the diminution of toil and the amelioration of all the asperities of life, the industrial prosperity and peace of nations, and the further glorious evolutions of Art, Science, Literature and Religion. . . ." This was precisely the vision of later imperialists who adapted antislavery to their own uses.

#### THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE

I have already suggested that from the 1400s on, Africa was a victim of European religious mission combined with economic enterprise. Europeans first justified the slave trade as an

expedient weapon in the great global struggles with Islam. Later, during the epic struggles for empire between rival Catholic and Protestant states, mission and enterprise legitimized slave-trading and slave colonies as obvious agents of progress — that is, progress toward the triumph of the true faith and toward national economic and strategic power.

However, as early as 1792 William Pitt, then prime minister of England, delivered an eloquent speech supporting the abolition of the slave trade and describing a vision of a different kind of mission and enterprise. If his listeners obeyed the voice of reason and duty, Pitt said, some might live to see the vision of African natives engaged in

calm occupations of industry, in the pursuit of a just and legitimate commerce. We may behold the beams of science and philosophy breaking in upon their land, which at some happy period, in still later times, may blaze with full lustre, and joining their influence with that of pure religion, may illuminate and invigorate the most distant extremities of that immense continent. Then may we hope that even Africa, though last of all the quarters of the globe, shall enjoy at length . . . those blessings which have descended so plentifully upon us.

Though Pitt's vision was premature, the dream of using antislavery as a means of civilizing Africa in accordance with British values and British national interests helped to justify the prolonged and costly experiment with Britain's first African colony, Sierra Leone. Despite the strong and continuing reluctance of the British government to acquire further African colonies, Pitt's vision lived on in the minds of missionaries, explorers, traders, and Colonial Office officials who appealed for varying degrees of intervention in Africa as a way of stopping the slave trade at its source.

By 1840, when a few British abolitionists had concluded that the slave trade in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans could be ended only by annexing African territory, Sir Robert Peel spelled out the ideology of progress that would underlie official

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policy in the last decades of the century. Peel (who would become Prime Minister the following year) observed that while the British people had cheerfully granted twenty million pounds at a time of great financial difficulty "for the purpose of purifying themselves from the stain of any participation in the horrors and complicated evils of slavery," they could not "conceal from themselves the mortifying reflection, that in having thus rescued their character . . . they had not succeeded in diminishing the sum of human suffering."

"Until this country rescued Christianity and the character of the white people" from the infamy of the slave trade, Peel predicted, "it never would be able to convince the black population of Africa of the moral superiority of their European fellow men; scarcely could it convince them of the truths of Christianity, which continued to tolerate such monstrous sins." He then called on his countrymen "to lay the cornerstone of an enterprise which has for its object to rescue Africa from debasing superstitions, and to put an end to her miseries by the introduction of the arts of civilization and peace."

Six years later Lord Palmerston, then Foreign Secretary, wrote an equally revealing dispatch to a British naval officer who was trying to negotiate a treaty with the Sultan of Zanzibar to end the Arab slave trade. Every opportunity should be taken, Palmerston wrote,

of impressing upon these Arabs that the nations of Europe are destined to put an end to the African Slave Trade, and that Great Britain is the main instrument in the Hands of Providence for the accomplishment of this purpose. That it is vain for these Arabs to endeavour to resist the consummation of that which is written in the Book of Fate, and that they ought to bow to superior power, to leave off a pursuit which is doomed to annihilation . . . and that they should hasten to betake themselves to the cultivation of their soil and to lawful and innocent commerce.

Such high-handed moralism was not a cloak for hidden economic interests. Britain's long crusade to stamp out the slave trade was not only expensive,

requiring naval patrols and continuing bribes in the form of compensation, but it was also at odds with Britain's immediate political and economic interests, as can be seen from the strong pressures for compromise exerted by knowledgeable officials in the field.

The impetus behind British anti-slavery policies was mainly religious, representing a fusion of religious mission and faith in material and moral progress. It was no accident that England's most famous African explorer of the mid-1800s, David Livingstone, was a missionary willing to sacrifice his life if necessary to find the shortest and easiest routes to the interior, so that Christianity, commerce and civilization could extinguish slavery in the very heart of darkness.

But these antislavery efforts and policies had the long-term strategic effect of establishing Britain's unquestioned moral and ideological hegemony over much of Africa and the Mideast, mainly at the expense of Muslims who were cast in the role of civilization's delinquents. If the European demand for slaves had helped to corrupt African societies, the influence had been indirect and had not challenged the right or capacity of black Africans for self-rule.

Antislavery encouraged more direct intervention. Instead of justifying the annual removal of tens of thousands of slaves, supposedly for the good of their souls, antislavery ultimately helped to justify the subjection of entire peoples to colonial rule, supposedly for the good of their future civilization. Ironically, it was because Europeans had long associated black Africans with slavery and because they increasingly associated slavery with the primitive stages of human development, that they so easily concluded that Africans were a "backward race" or "child race" needing tutelage from the world's most progressive peoples. The British, having taken the lead in repentance and in antislavery commitment, were by self-definition the people best equipped to assume such a burden.

The effectiveness of anti-slave-trade rhetoric, in helping to legitimate empire, can be seen in the way it was

finally taken over by Belgium, Germany, and other powers with African aspirations. In 1889-1890 an international conference on the slave trade convened at Brussels, partly for the purpose of impressing Muslim Turkey with the united determination of Christian Europe. Although Lord Salisbury hailed it as the first convention in history assembled "for the purpose of promoting a matter of pure humanity and goodwill," the Brussels Conference was dominated by European commercial and territorial rivalries. The Conference did, however, establish precedents for the kind of international trusteeship later institutionalized by the League of Nations. Symbolically, it also served to place the Islamic world on a kind of probationary status, suggesting that practices authorized by Islamic law and custom could have no place in the progressive and Europocentric world of the future.

As our own world has become less Europocentric, the moral distinctions between the progressive West and the so-called underdeveloped countries have become rather blurred. For a time the United Nations followed the antislavery precedents and policies of the older League of Nations, even giving the British Anti-Slavery Society consultative status at the Economic and Social Council. By 1970 slavery had been at least nominally outlawed in such stubborn nations as Saudi Arabia and Muscat. But at a time when the communist nations charged that capitalists sanctioned slavery, racism, and colonialism under other names, and when the so-called free world denounced slave labor camps behind the Iron Curtain, the British Anti-Slavery Society failed to arouse much public indignation over the sale of children and brides in parts of South America, the Mideast, and sub-Saharan Africa.

Even in the case of numerous and obvious atrocities, the exploiters were the formerly exploited who could draw support from the Third World's hostility toward every heritage of colonialism. It is significant that Awad Mohamed, an Egyptian who headed the United Nations' investigations of

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slavery in the mid-1960s, ultimately focused his fare on the apartheid and colonialism of South Africa and Angola. By 1970 the U.N. had branded apartheid as the true slavery of the twentieth century, although the British Anti-Slavery Society also concluded that in communist countries slavery has simply "been taken out of

private ownership."

Perhaps we have lost something from such confusion and from the dimming faith in moral progress. A public cynical over propaganda, wary of the risks of intervention, and satiated by tales of horror can hardly be sensitive to the cause of human rights. Yet the excesses and blindness

of past moralism should not lead us to a resigned cultivation of our own gardens. For if the study of slavery and related forms of bondage proves nothing else, it should alert us to the precariousness of any freedom, and to the fact that enslavement has usually been seen by the enslavers as a form of human progress.

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# Assemblies of God: Elvis and Pentecostalism

by Van K. Brock

*Editor's Note: "Assemblies of God: Elvis and Pentecostalism" represents one chapter in a six-part study, "Images of Elvis, the South, and America," by Dr. Van K. Brock. Dr. Brock is an Associate Professor of English at Florida State University; he received a 1978 Rockefeller-FSU Fellowship from the Center for his work on Elvis Presley.*

Memphis is really a metropolis for three states: Mississippi, Tennessee and Arkansas. The Mississippi River rubs up against it carrying the silt and residue of the Midwest and the North, the Missouri and the Ohio. Beale Street rises out of the Mississippi with the echo of the horns and riverboats, men loading and unloading cotton, loading and unloading slaves — old echoes from the rolling of the river itself, the sweat and moan of distant plantations, nearby cotton mills and Northern factories. Today it rises up a steep hill to the sterile bureaucratic bungle of an urban renewal tourist attraction, designed to make it respectable, to bring it into the mainstream.

But in the 1950s it rose up from the river to storefronts of varied character. From some of these came spirituals, gospel, blues and jazz. Up and down sidewalks and in and out of its doors, drab lives moved in sometimes fabulous clothes to the en-

livening rhythms. There were two Beale Streets, one black and one white, that all but flowed together. The musicians came and went from New Orleans, Nashville, Natchez, St. Louis or Chicago. They passed through a landscape whose turns and undulations contrasted with unimaginative buildings and people in dull clothes who were moving to lifeless rhythms. The river was under control and seldom rose out of its banks, but even if it did it would not reach the top of Beale Street, though sometimes at the top of Beale Street another river just as long and strong, and touching as many ports, seemed to rise up on the music.

Not very far in either direction were two Pentecostal churches, one for whites and one for blacks. They also diverged from the mainstream. Members of neither congregation attended the other, and few of either went to Beale Street, though inside they sang and shouted and moved in rhythms that seemed a repeated echo of the jazzmen and blues and gospel singers and occasionally even of the white country music stars who were sometimes seen walking past to and from Beale Street, often in clicking heels or cowboy boots, to perform, to jam, or to buy their incredible clothes. Though they might not frequent the jams or dances on Beale Street, when

not in church some of the members listened to the Grand Ole Opry or blues.

They came from Mississippi or Arkansas to find work or to live in a welfare house. One of them was a boy who first sang in public and began playing a guitar before he went to high school, where for a while he worked in a movie house: he dreamed of Nashville and Hollywood, and sometimes went down to Beale Street to look at and sometimes buy some of the clothes in the shops or to listen to the music seeping from the dilapidated storefronts or the old theater. His name was Elvis Presley. Within his limits, he was to become one of the best and most popular music stars of his time, and he is credited with an influence on his age and its culture that has seldom been matched.

If a whaling ship was Ishmael's Harvard and Yale, then the culture of Beale Street, the Pentecostal religion, the Grand Ole Opry, and Hollywood were Elvis Presley's. Both Beale Street and the Assemblies of God churches were pluralistic in their origins, and both contributed to the distinctive pluralistic fusion of his music and his dramatic sense as a performer. It is my purpose here, briefly, to explore the character of the Pentecostal mind as it may have influenced Elvis Presley.

Both churches, black and white, tell