Slavery and the Bible [1]

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Recently, Wintery Knight [2] posted an article [3] because he was "tired of atheists complaining that the Bible mentions slavery". The argument does get tired and is not nearly as much a defeater for Christianity as they think it is. In this article I would like to throw my two cents into the jar.

It is not just atheists who jump unto the Bible slavery bandwagon. In a recent debate [4], Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd showed, with all due respect, his amazing simplistic understanding of the Bible[1][2]. Like many others, he used the slavery issue to justify same-sex marriage[3]. The argument goes like this: if the Bible speaks of, and even condones, something as morally abhorrent as slavery, how can we believe it on other issues of social morality? After all, it just Makes Sense™ that same-sex marriage is morally good, right? But that is what Wintery Knight argues exactly cannot be the case for the naturalistic secularists: nothing can simply "make moral sense" without some base assumptions to support relativist views. Appealing to emotions for the win.

Secular vs Religious Motivations

If I can achieve only one thing in this article, I hope that it is the following point. Secularists are very quick to remind us of the separation of state and religion. How dare we, for example, voice our *opinions* (opinions!) on something like homosexual marriage?

At the same time, however, we are implicitly *expected* to support the anti-slavery movement. This may be because, at a time in history, Christians were the moral voice on the issue: when secular humanists and atheists were not too bothered about the issue. Some may have written about "freedom" and "equality" for all men, but these were often a bit academic. It took people—politicians and Christians like William Wilberforce—to dig into the trenches to get the slave trade outlawed in an empire which spanned a third of the earth's surface.

I think this part of history is often forgotten because the opponents of Christianity would rather focus on Christian pro-slavery attitudes in the American South. It is less embarrassing to gloss over the positive and serves their purposes to rather focus on the negative.

So what if William Wilberforce, a politician who was also a devout Christian, was not inspired and driven by his faith and religion to pursue the abolition of slavery as relentlessly as he did? The answer is simple: slavery would have been, at best, a part of the British Empire for a much longer

time.

An Outside-the-Box Religion

Where did Wilberforce's drive come from, then? Which aspects of Christianity drove him to work so tirelessly for the abolitionist movement? It is the fact that Christianity has always advocated the equal status of all people. Christianity was the first "Western philosophy" to say that all people are equal. This concept is grounded in three fundamental teachings of the Christian faith (Bible references given are not exhaustive):

1. All people are created in God's image. Therefore we are all image-bearers of God. (Genesis 1–2)
2. We are all rebellious sinners and deserve condemnation and damnation. (Genesis 3, Romans 1–3)
3. Jesus died for the sins so that salvation could be available to all people. (John 3:16–18, Romans 5–11)

In contrast, the Greeks and the Romans did not believe that all people are equal. Quoting at length from the Encyclopedia Americana[4] (for those rushed for time, only the first two paragraphs need to be considered):

> **Equality** has not always been, nor is it now, unexceptionally regarded as a virtue. Ancient Greece, from which our modern free culture largely sprang, did not hold men to be in fact equal, nor considered it ideal that men should be treated as equals. It was a double vice to treat unequals as equal or to treat equals as unequals. The ideal was to find the facts and to acknowledge them as basis for conduct. And the facts seemed to Plato, for instance, that men are unequal and so deserve unequal opportunities and benefits. Some men deserve little or nothing, for they are slaves by nature, and slaves should rightfully be treated slavishly.
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> Christianity, on the other hand, early affirmed that men are equal and so, to some point, should be treated equally. The origin of all men was the same, and the destiny the same, with only the difference which freely chosen character implies. Before God, men are equally undeserving, and from, God they are equal recipients of divine grace. If slaves were advised, as by St. Paul, to be obedient to their masters, it was because the inferiority was not indigenous and would be compensated for in the end.
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> Stoicism was the bridge between our Greek and our Christian inheritance; for Stoicism held men to share equally in the soul of the world and to be intelligible and sympathetic one to another because of their joint reason derived from the cosmos. Outward conditions could be ignored because of inner identity. Epictetus the slave and Aurelius the emperor were alike children of light, equally deserving, though not as yet equally rewarded.
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> Modern democratic thought, coming thus from dual stream of culture, has often been ambivalent as touching human equality. Intent as we are upon facts and devoted as we are to science, we are committed to discover how men actually stand to one another. Factually men are not equal; and the more specific the investigation, the more apparent it is that men are unequal: unequal in strength, in spirit, in grace, in thought. There is, said even Thomas Jefferson, an aristocracy of virtue and talent. Nevertheless, we have tended to believe, in deference to our religious insistence, that the king-face behind all facts is that men are equal somehow. Before God, at least, we see, to believe, men are equal. This persisting conviction bodies forth a syndrome of vague hopes and sympathetic aspirations.
> Where observable facts and undemonstrable aspiration are thus at war, there is much shifting back and forth. Jean Jacques Rousseau represented one emphasis as touching equality. He admitted that men are factually unequal, but held that it is because of this that it becomes the business of the legislator to make men equal. Equality remains an aspiration

> and exists for the correction of the facts.
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> More acceptable than Rousseau's formulation of the ideal has been the notion that, though unequal men cannot be made and kept equal, nevertheless men ought to be treated equally. In practise this prompting boils down to what in modern times we denominate as equality of opportunity; and it has become a veritable religion of democracy, guiding education, grounding reform, stabilizing emotion. Different reasons may be given for this obligation to equalize opportunity; but, whatever the reasons, the obligation is steady and all but universal. This religion of democracy may seem shallow as before the personalized theology of ancient days, and it may seem slight as before the metaphysics of early modern times but it is deeply compatible with the utilitarianism of the 19th century and the pragmaticism of the 20th.
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> The excess in practise of those who have renounced the conclusion of equality have given pause to those who have felt a weakening of their faith. The Nazis, not to mention Communists, have warned democratic peoples of what they may expect for themselves who renounce for others all equality of treatment. While some seek to restore the theological basis for equality and others would pick up the Stoic motif in renewed emphasis upon natural law, the minimum demand of the equality ideal remains the chance of every man to discover his talents and to perfect them in use. And the minimum ground for the vague obligation to equalize opportunity remains twofold: first, mankind needs the talents of all men for its advantage and improvement; and, second, we require for mutual protection the diminution of aggression as a motive.
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> The latter observation begets a concluding word, since fear of aggression operates as vaguely as it operates powerfully to keep some meaning of the equality ideal. Men who have not had their chance to discover and to perfect their powers easily become malcontents and capitalize their grievances as against the system which they think has wronged them. This negation bulks large in communism, the equal right, as it were, to feel aggrieved and to act out of envy. In democracy, however, aggression, though present, is played down by knowledge that each one has had his chance along with others, and either could not or did not take advantage of it. If one has gone to the same school with a successful man, has played on the same sand-lot baseball team, and has received in general the same community friendliness, it is difficult to blame anybody but oneself for the outcome, however invidious. Self-blame is not mankind's most luxurious enjoyment.
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> The belief that men are not equal, and even that they cannot and should not be made equal , is not wholly incompatible with the persisting ideal of equality. Even if we know men unequal, we do not know in what regard and to what degree they are unequal. This we need to know. And man has discovered no other way whereby he can determine how unequal men are except to give them the same opportunities and see how they react. Though contrary to fact, such egalitarian action reveals the genuine inequalities of men, opens a way to use all talents, whatever they be, and leaves men less mean in motive than when activated by aggression.

The author makes the point clear: our modern notions of equality have become "must haves" out of necessity, but lacks an ontological justification. Christian theism, on the other hand, provides this kind of justification.

The Bible and Slavery

Let us look at slavery in the Bible. This is not going to be an exhaustive treatment of every passage, but this discussion should provide the general gist of the matter.

As every person who wants to critique the Bible should know, there are two major parts of the Bible: the Old Testament and the New Testament. In terms of history, these two sections had vastly different socio-political backgrounds. Bearing these backgrounds in mind, let us look at each of these

in turn and see how slavery related to the settings.

Old Testament

For the large part the Old Testament takes place in the kingdom(s) of Israel. As I have previously explained [5], the laws which God gave that nation during the Exodus were multi-faceted. Some of the laws related to the political state of Israel, others related to the religion of the Israelites (which, for very good reasons, are distinct from Christianity), and others were (universal) moral laws. The laws regarding slavery fell into the first category. Therefore, the Old Testament should not be read as if advocating slavery even this day. The laws applied to a specific time and place in history. These laws rather regulated the practise which was largely social: the paying off of debts5. If someone could not pay their debts, they had the option to sell themselves (and possibly their families) as slaves to someone in order to help pay off their debt. This was not an exploitative relationship: there were strict rules regarding how slaves should be treated. This would be more like placing oneself under curatorship than giving up your basic human rights. Slaves were required to be freed, unless they *willingly* (Exodus 21:2–6) chose not to be. Slavery was an emotional issue for the Israelites because their own identity was partially found in being slaves in Egypt. For this reason God commands the Israelites not to exploit or harm slaves (Deuteronomy 23:15–16, Exodus 21:26–27, Leviticus 25:47–55) and strongly rebukes the Israelites when they do (Nehemiah 5:1–13).

Consider the modern predicament of being indebted to the bank for, say, a home loan: for a period of 20–30 years, most of the money you earn—which does not go into taxes—goes into paying off your debt. Of course one is not technically a slave in this situation: we are fortunate to live in a society where we have things like bond insurance (yet another expense), and checks and balances in place to make sure that we are not exploited by those to whom we are indebted. However, should someone not be able to repay their debts, it is still possible for them to become completely destitute. Slavery in the Old Testament provided a way for this situation to be avoided.

New Testament

In the New Testament, the Jewish nation (which had earlier split from the Israelite nation) finds itself as a vassal of the Roman Empire. They enjoy many liberties which other subjugated peoples do not (such as being exempt from compulsory military service). But this is still not enough for the devout Jews: they want to live in their own sovereign nation. And their ambitions are spurred on by Old Testament prophecies: that a God-sent messiah will come to liberate them and defeat their enemies. On the other hand there are Jews who are faring well under Roman rulership and it is in their best interest not to have the hornet's nest kicked.

In this penultimate section I am going to focus on two influential people in the New Testament: Jesus and Paul.

Jesus did not speak out against slavery6. In fact, Jesus hardly mentioned it: He mentioned servants being "appropriately" beaten in a parable. While some atheists [6] argue that this shows that Jesus condoned slavery, one could argue that Jesus used a well-understood and relevant example of His contemporary culture to more clearly communicate a more important message to His listeners.

The following point needs to be understood very, very clearly: Jesus did not come into the world to change, challenge or upset the political *status quo*. This would have been a very dangerous thing for Him to do. It would have dangerous, because that is exactly what people were *expecting* of the Messiah. At various times Jesus downplays or avoids the topic of His political leadership. On the one hand were the Zealots [7] who were anxiously waiting for the Messiah to restore Israel politically. On the other were the Sadducees and the local Roman governance who wanted to avoid political unrest and turmoil at all costs. Caught in the middle was Jesus, who did *not* have a political agenda (as everyone thought or expected Him to have), but rather a *divine* and *theological* one. Jesus carefully, and I would argue successfully, walked the tightrope between what He was expected to achieve and what He was ordained to achieve. He was eventually captured, tried and executed for political reasons, but His opposition were so bumbling that He had to deal the deathblow Himself, so to speak (Matthew 26:59–66).

Lastly, I need to address Paul. Paul has infuriated liberals not only on his comments about women, but on slavery as well. In Ephesians 6:5 and 1 Timothy 6:1–2 he instructs slaves to be obedient to their masters. However, again it can be argued that this does not mean that Paul condoned slavery as an institution or natural human condition. There would be several advantages for a Christian slave to be respectful towards his master:

- It maintains the political *status quo* and does not seek to undermine the current political establishment.
- The Christian slave is encouraged that he is also a slave to a much greater, more merciful and benevolent Master.
- Perhaps most importantly, it is to distinguish himself from other slaves, leading his master to not only hopefully treating him better, but also starting to ask questions and opening up dialogue so that the Christian slave can introduce the non-Christian master to Jesus.

Like Jesus, Paul was working *within the current establishment* and *towards a higher goal* which transcends humanism and materialism. Of course, these higher goals are lost on the sceptic. However, just because they do not believe in these goals does not mean they are free to neglect the facts that Jesus and Paul believed in them.

Conclusion

The entire objection of slavery being in the Bible is an uninformed and hypocritical argument. It is uninformed because people do not understand the meaning, purpose and place of slavery in the Old Testament. It is hypocritical because the same people who raise this argument also staunchly fight for the separation of church and state. At the same time religion *should have* influenced the state in the past, and at the same time it *should not longer do so*, especially on topics with which they disagree. Yet, ironically, Jesus and Paul sought to promote the Christian ideals within the framework of the existing government.

My humble request is that these objections be dropped now as potential defeaters for Christianity and that we can move on to discuss other matters.

- 1. He says that according to the Bible, "slavery is a natural condition". I would be interested to know where in the Bible he read that. In the Bible slavery is always a position which a person transitions into, whether by the actions of themselves of others. The prior existing condition is that of people who are free. As I shall argue later, Christianty was, in fact, the first Western philosophy to assert that all people are, in fact, equal. The other contemporary Graeco-Roman beliefs held that people were not all equal.
- 2. There were other problems with his arguments, but I am not going to dismantle them now. If I have not done so before on this blog for those arguments, then I shall at some point in the future.
- 3. Note, however, his use of the term "marriage equality"—one which is certain to have far ranging implications down the lines which he did not anticipate. Can you say "polygamy" and "cultural Marxism"?
- 4. Smith, T. V. "Equality *[8]*." In *Encyclopedia Americana International Edition*. Vol. 10., 1971.
- 5. Of course the Old Testament laws also condoned and regulated the keeping of non-Israelite slaves: the spoils of war. For information on this, see the links provided by Wintery Knight in the prologue of his article.
- 6. It is interesting how in this case, some people argue, Jesus's silence condones the matter, while in homosexuality it supposedly condemns [9] it.

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