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Topic Proposal

The arrival of the Enlightenment Era to the Western World ushered in a movement that centered around man: his accomplishments and his potential. As scientific knowledge increased, so did the possibility for man to reason through difficulty, offering endless possibility for the advancement of life and liberty. History, however, indicates that what appeared full of promise in theory often fell short in practice, as some of the brightest lights for reason did little to stop the gross inequalities of slavery that also marked the period. In trusting in the goodness of man while moving away from the goodness of God, the glow of the Enlightenment dimmed. But all was not lost, as concurrent to growing Enlightenment thought rose religious fervor through the Great Awakening, and the true heroes of the Abolition movement were those whose faith remained grounded in the God under whom all were created equal. For this assignment I will be investigating the link between Enlightenment Thinking, religious revival during the Great Awakening, and the abolition of slavery. The Enlightenment thinkers who held a standard of Christian equality during this age of reason founded and forwarded the movement that brought about the end of the slave trade and later the entire institution.

Some would argue, however, that the church and her leaders actually excused and even promoted slavery among their congregations. According to one author, some saw it as an opportunity for providing the gospel to those in Africa who would otherwise have not access to it, noting that for some, the best way to help the African was to overcome the “bad” slave owner

by being a “good” slave owner, treating their slaves well. This ignores blindness to the problem of owning people at all, viewing those made in God’s image as property rather than people. Often the profit of the slave trade was a deterrent to its abolition, as even those opposed in theory had difficulty with the practice of foregoing their taste for cheap and accessible sugar and tobacco. Church leaders profited as well, both directly, with some possessing ownership in the various industries that trades in slaves and other goods, and indirectly as recipients of the offerings of their congregants, some of whom were plantation owners. Choosing monetary gain over moral grounding, church leaders sought to justify slavery.

Scripture, however, belies their justification efforts. Equality is a Biblical tenant from the very beginning, as Genesis 1:27 states that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Further, Paul reminds his readers that “[In Christ] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Colossians 3:11). Christ calls us to love our neighbor, to deny ourselves, to lay down our lives for our friends (Mark 12:31, Matthew 16:24, John 15:13). And one can also argue that the Christianity of the slaveholder represented a misuse of Scripture, a misrepresentation of the Christ whose name the faith bears. Former slave Frederick Douglass gives a passionate discourse on the difference: “Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore hate the corrupt, slave-holding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason but the most deceitful one for calling the religion of this

land Christianity” (71). Christian in name does not mean Christian in word or deed, and many who claimed the name acted in direct violation of the commands of Christ.

Annotated Bibliography

Bilbro, Jeffrey. “Who Are Lost and How They’re Found: Redemption and Theodicy in Wheatley, Newton, and Cowper.” *Early American Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2012, pp. 561–89. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2012.0054>.

This article, written by a professor of English at Spring Arbor University, investigates poets of the 18th century Phyllis Wheatley and William Cowper and their reservations about the church’s stance against slavery (which was practically non-existent). The author suggests that these two writers greatly influenced Christian thought and turned it against slavery. He not only investigates their work specifically, but also their historical place in the struggle against slavery. John Newton, the former slave trader turned pastor who along with Cowper wrote “Amazing Grace,” is also examined. This article will help me understand those who went against popular church teaching to take a stand for the truth of the Bible and speak against slavery in their writing and their work.

Cugoano, Quobna Ottobah. *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery and Other Writings*. Penguin Books, 1999.

Cugoano was one of a handful of black writers of the 18th century who wrote about his experiences. In addition to being the least well known, he is the most radical, calling for the complete abolition of slavery at a time when many were satisfied with ending its trade to start. He writes specifically on the misuse of Scripture in regard to slavery and argues compellingly against those who claim Scripture backs up their ideas of blacks as less than. He has a strong grounding in Biblical truth and provides a unique perspective on how his faith requires him to speak out against slavery.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Dover Publications, Inc., 1995.

As a well-known slave narrative, this book tells the story of former slave Frederick Douglass in his own words. It is the appendix, however, that has my attention for this assignment. It is here that the author addresses Christianity and its relation to slavery. While Douglass writes in the mid-19th century of American slavery, thus slightly removed from the prime years of Enlightenment thought and the abolition of the British slave trade, he nonetheless offers an interesting perspective on how Biblical truth was trampled on by those who claimed that Christianity and slavery were compatible.

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. Penguin Books, 1995.

Olaudah Equiano was (possibly) born in what is now Nigeria in 1745. His *Interesting Narrative*, published in 1789, tells the story of his early years in Africa, his capture, and the many and varied adventures that made up his life, both as a slave and a free black in

the 18th and 19th centuries. Those adventures including coming to a faith in Christ, which will be a focus of my research into the intersection between Christianity and the end of slavery.

Leelathawornchai, Satit. "How Utility Pleases: Sentiment and Utility in The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2021, pp. 45–63. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=mlf&AN=202123336268&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

This journal article digs into Equiano's *Narrative* and his use of rhetoric to influence his readers to turn against slavery. The author seeks to bring together Equiano's utilitarianism, in which actions seek to maximize happiness and well-being, with appealing to the humanity of his readers in seeking an end to the slave trade. In a sense, Equiano applies the sensibility of the age in combining the utility of moral judgments alongside pathos to increase sympathy for abolition among his readers. While it doesn't appear that this work addresses Christianity directly, it may prove useful in some of its moral arguments.

Plasencia, Sam. "Metalinguistic Analysis in the Orations on the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1808–1823." *Early American Literature*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2022, pp. 495–529. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=mlf&AN=202226032955&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

This journal article examines speeches and sermons from the early 1820s commemorating the end of the slave trade in the U.S. in 1808. The author examines how these sermons use language to influence the thought and behavior of their audiences to resist the immoral practices of the slave trade. Since it deals in some cases with sermons specifically, I hope it will provide further evidence of the role of Christianity in the abolition of slavery.

Stewart, Dustin D. "Cugoano and the Hermeneutics of Black Calvinism." *ELH: English Literary History*, vol. 88, no. 3, 2021, pp. 629–59. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=mlf&AN=202123045613&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

The author of this article looks at former slave Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's work "Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery," specifically with an eye toward Cugoano's Calvinist leanings. However, he calls this "Black Calvinism," which influences both Cugoano's Biblical interpretation as well as his anti-slavery logic. This might be too deep in the weeds for my purposes, and I will use it only if I also use Cugoano's work, but I want to keep it as an option for now.

Wakefield, Hannah. "Olaudah Equiano's Ecclesial World." *Early American Literature*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2020, pp. 651–83. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=mlf&AN=202219943931&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

In this article, Hannah Wakefield of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga argues that Equiano had a sort of "primitive" Christianity to implore people to end slavery. The author focuses specifically on church teaching and how Equiano uses that to his rhetorical purpose, also relying heavily on the book of Acts and the model 1st century church. I hope this will give me strong evidence on how Christianity influenced authors such as Equiano to use their rhetorical skill to end slavery.

Williams, Eric. *Capitalism and Slavery, 3rd Edition*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

This book, written in the 1940s by an Oxford scholar, was one of the first to tie the rise of capitalist thought to the institution of slavery. He claims that the Industrial Revolution was only possible because slavery allowed for the allowance of cheap labor. In the early chapters he discusses "The Origin of Negro Slavery" and "The Development of the Negro Slave Trade." He provides information about the abolition movement and the church's role against it, in spite of known leaders like Wilberforce and Newton leading its charge. These will be useful in my evaluation of the church leaders who spoke for slavery, and in so doing spoke against Christianity.

Personal Interview

For the interview portion of this assignment, I plan to contact Professor Chris Gabbard. Dr.

Gabbard teaches the course "Slavery and the Enlightenment" at UNF. He will have insight into how Enlightenment thinkers viewed both slavery and Christianity, and could possibly direct me toward more resources for my research.