

BOOK REVIEW

James Walvin, *The Trader, The Owner, The Slave: Parallel lives in the Age of Slavery* London: Jonathan Cape, 2007, 297pp. Price £17.99, ISBN-9780224061445

This book was published to coincide with the bicentennial celebration of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire in 2007. Walvin has a number of masterly works on the slave trade to his credit. But this work has a unique perspective in focussing on three historical characters associated with the British slave trade and the overseas implications of this dastardly business. He acknowledges that slavery has deep roots in many human cultures over long periods of history. However the Atlantic slave trade, in its three centuries of existence from 1550, was unique in its motivation, capitalist inspiration, and the degree of cruelty and exploitation involved in the institution. As he states : “to transport so many Africans, to force them to work, generally in the most difficult and oppressive of environments, Europeans and their American descendants devised systems of excruciating violence and cruelty” (p. xvi).

That this could have its roots in substantially Christian societies without serious criticism is explored by Walvin. He points out that this was only possible by keeping the slave transporting phase of the triangle (Africa to the Americas, otherwise known as the Middle Passage) removed from the ports of Europe. The other two sides completed the triangle. On the one hand, the Americas to Europe transported the produce of the slave economy (sugar, tobacco and rice). On the other hand, Europe to Africa involved trade goods (including armaments). In completing the triangle a ship never travelled empty ensuring trading prosperity. Yet the triangle ensured that no captive slave needed to be seen in any European port to disturb a troubled conscience. All could function under the appearance of ordinary trade.

Walvin notes the scale of the trade by pointing out that in the period 1662 to 1807 British ships transported 3,250,000 slaves to markets in the Americas (in the last seven years climaxing with a total of 250,000 persons). Not that the British had any monopoly of the barbarous trade, but for a century and a half they exploited the trade to

their advantage, and on it built the foundations of their modern economy more than did any other nation.

To explore the question Walvin personifies the issues by choosing three historical figures representing the concerned groups: the slave trader in the person of John Newton, the slave owner in the person of Thomas Thistlewood of Jamaica, and the slave in the person of Olaudah Equiano (otherwise known as Gustavus Vassa), all three being eighteenth century contemporaries.

Newton, after a career as slave trader on the Guinea coast was partly disabled by a stroke and took a bureaucratic job in the port of Liverpool before undergoing an evangelical conversion. He became a Methodist priest and a noted evangelical preacher and hymn composer (whose compositions include the famous *Amazing Grace*). While admitting some of his earlier slaving career, the details had to be filled in after his death by examining his meticulous ship logs. In 1770 he wrote : 'we are taught from our infancy to admire those who, in the language of the world, are styled great captains and conquerors, because they burned with desire to carry slaughter and terror into every part of the globe, and to aggrandise their names by the depopulation of countries and the destruction of their species....' (p. 86). In 1788, as the Wilberforce movement for abolition was gaining strength, Newton published *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, and became an influential advocate for the abolition cause.

By contrast Thomas Thistlewood is studied as typical of the slave-owning class in the Caribbean. Though this class were products of Enlightenment education, this had little effect on their attitudes towards their slaves. As Walvin states : 'In this highly racialised world, the rooted inferiority of the black majority was an article of faith, an economic and racial assumption from which everything else followed.... Violence was the lubricant of the whole system' (pp. 108, 121). Naming and sexual humiliation were used to destroy any sense of previous identity. But many cases are found where slaves found strategies to cope with their intolerable situation, sometimes leading to violent revolution. However Walvin concludes that ultimately it was the subversive nature of Enlightenment ideas which would eventually undermine the supports of slavery.

The third character chosen by Walvin's study is Olaudah Equiano, a slave who succeeds, by extraordinary personal business

initiative, in buying his own manumission. In London he came under the influence of the Quaker-originated abolitionist movement, and took an active part in it. He came on the scene at a time of extraordinary convergence of religious, cultural, political and economic forces which would eventually succeed in bringing about the banning of the slave trade in the British Empire.

There is no doubt that Equiano emerges from the story as a most admirable individual. However his story is so unique that it is hard to imagine him as typical of the slave experience, while Newton and Thistlewood could indeed be seen as typical of their classes. Equiano comes across as having many of the elements of an English gentleman, which might be the purpose his image served in the abolitionist movement: to show that there was no need to fear the consequences of emancipation. But the picture needs to be balanced by histories of slaves who took their own destinies into their own hands in less fortunate circumstances, sometimes leading to a violent outcome. Such was the case of Tacky's Revolt in Jamaica in 1760 (p. 139), or indeed the emergence of the slave republic in Haiti under the leadership of Toussaint L'Overture in 1791.

Walvin assumes that the abolition of slavery in the British Empire came about principally as a result of a popular movement growing out of a belated application of the Christian morality and Enlightenment-based humanitarian concern. However a competing theory of Eric Williams deserves to be considered as a balance: that slavery came to an end because it was no longer profitable or serving the interests of a capitalist class.

James Walvin's book is a most readable and absorbing work which deserves a wide readership due to its theme and its blending historical accuracy with personalised characters with whom readers can easily identify.

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Patrick Claffey, *Christian Churches in Dahomey-Benin: A Study of their Socio-political Role*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2007, 328 pp.

Recent reports from Papua New Guinea point to a resurgence of sorcery (*sanguma*), the return of the cargo cults, and even the execution of suspected 'witches' in response to the AIDS pandemic, echoing similar warnings from Africa. The tragedy of Rwanda-Burundi should have made clear an unpalatable truth which Claffey confronts directly, politically incorrect though it may be: the 'Christianisation' of Africa is still only skin-deep, and the unexorcised demons of Africa's past still haunt the nation-states which are struggling to be 'modern' societies. Africa, like the India of V.S. Naipaul, is a "wounded civilisation" with which Christianity, whether in the form of traditional churches or the 'modern' African Initiated Churches with their message of 'health and wealth', has yet to come to grips. Claffey questions whether Pentecostalism is in fact a new form of liberation in Africa, as the sociologist David Martin has claimed for Latin America. His more basic question, however, concerns the churches' role in democratisation.

The dramatic story of the passage of the Kingdom of Danxome, with its heritage of human sacrifice and complicity in the slave trade, to the modern democratic state of Dahomey, now Benin, provides a gripping case study of the religio-political forces at work in the modernisation of traditional societies. Early Irish republicanism contained elements of the sacralisation of violence, but the extent of African complicity in the slave trade from Danxome and its ritual legitimation is truly shocking. Even at a time when agriculture would have been a viable alternative, opted for by the neighbouring Yoruba, the kings of Danxome clung to slavery and sanctified it in the public human sacrifice known as the Customs, withdrawing into the "closed calabash" of Vodún until their "kingdom of fear and suspicion" finally imploded and was swept away. The repressed memory of this dark past has still not been faced up to, giving rise to an "anthropological fragility" which casts doubt over the cultural and political viability of the new

nation. Traditional Danxome was “a Hobbesian solution to a Hobbesian problem”, the repressed memory of which still poisons contemporary politics. The thought that Benin could yet end up as a second Haiti is “West Africa’s worst nightmare”.

This account, however, relies heavily on the “colonial narrative” which still influences Dahomeans’ perception of themselves, just as it contributed to the West’s picture of Danxome as the prototypical kingdom of darkness. Colonial observers, who are quoted copiously, revelled in descriptions of the notorious Customs, which their Victorian contemporaries predictably found shocking. Vodún, conceived in terms of West Indian Voodoo rather than West African religion, was misinterpreted and misrepresented. As described by Claffey, it resembles the *mana* of the Pacific Islanders, the power of Life passing over to the Ancestors (*tumbuna*), rather than a divinity along the lines of the Yoruba Orisha. Danxome, at any rate, proved impervious to Christian missions, playing one off against the other and all the churches against the colonial administration while maintaining its isolation. At the same time, its Manichean heritage seemed only too compatible with the theologies of the English Protestant and French Catholic churches which competed for its allegiance. This raises the question which Claffey principally wishes to address: how are churches to deal with such a Machiavellian totalitarian polity? Claffey recounts the unsuccessful attempts of a number of colourful missionary personalities to penetrate the defences of a society which managed to quarantine them all in their restricted enclaves and neutralise their évangélical message.

After the final defeat of Danxome in 1892, however, the churches had their chance to collaborate in building the nation of Dahomey. The more far-sighted of them envisaged an indigenous clergy and, in Claffey’s striking phrase, “education was the new Vodún”, forming a Catholic elite which provided the first generation of revolutionaries. A coup in 1972 ushered in a Marxist-Leninist regime which inaugurated a church-state split, but the churches had the resources to make a constructive contribution to nation-building which eventually superseded Marxist ideology.

Traditional Catholic social doctrine rather than imported liberation theology was a more reliable guide to democracy and development, and even ‘apolitical’ Pentecostalism was de facto an important political factor with its “fantasies of dramatic transformation”. Its apocalyptic and militaristic imagery awakened uneasy memories of slavery-ridden past with its ever-present Vodún, but the churches found a more acceptable role as the refuge and rock of people in dire need of healing and deliverance, an alternative to witchcraft in the face of new crises such as AIDS. For today’s educated professionals, the traditional remedies simply don’t work; the type of cost-benefit analysis they are used to looks for practical solutions to specific problems, though the ministry of exorcism could well be counted among these. The resurgence of witchcraft is exacerbated by the individualism which goes hand in hand with modernity and by the sense of victimhood arising from a half-remembered past. Anthropological fragility acquires a social dimension.

Yet in 2006 Benin held successful presidential elections resulting in a peaceful transfer of power, a process in which the churches played a constructive role. This is no mean achievement for a fledgling state with such a past, and it bears out Claffey’s thesis that Christianity, despite many failures, does have a role in modern Africa. This role, however, is not merely that of a provider of educational and health care. The churches, if they can wean themselves from the cheap ‘success’ that comes from winning converts by promising prosperity, have the much more profound task of helping African peoples deal with their anthropological fragility by confronting the memories of past suffering and victimisation, even and especially where, as in Danxome, it was self-inflicted.

The wealth of documentation cited, the forthright though never confrontational style, and the sheer heights and depths of the story of Danxome-Dahomey-Benin make this book a compelling read as well as a valuable contribution to the missiology and anthropology of West Africa.

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Jane E. Soothill, *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power: Charismatic Christianity in Ghana* Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2007 ISBN 978 90 04 15789 7m. Distributed by Turpin, Pegasus Drive, Stratton Business Park, Biggleswade, Bedfordshire SG18 8TQ, UK. x+261 pages, Bibliography, Index, Hardback. No price reported.

Ruth Marshall-Fratani's 1991 essay '*Power in the Name of Jesus*' opened a debate on the question of gender, social change and power in African Pentecostalism which has continued down to the present. This book, based on case studies in Ghana is the most important research on the question to date. Clear, concise, and elegantly written, it is a subtle and nuanced analysis of the gender dynamics in this form of African Christianity.

Jane Soothill is very aware of the difficulties posed by her position as a female, British scholar, versed in the gender debates of the Western academy. As she notes, the "book looks at the lives and experiences of 'African women', which requires the researcher to be doubly aware perhaps of the relationship between the 'Self' and 'Other', especially given the history of European women's engagement with their African counterparts." This is something she does very well.

Soothill looks at Pentecostalism and gender in an historical perspective before moving on to contemporary patterns. Looking back to the evangelical move in the USA, she notes that "on the whole the evangelical movement was not a feminist one" but that "many women, when they did move from evangelicalism to feminism, took with them the knowledge and skills they had learnt" in their churches. These claims are often made for Pentecostalism in other parts of the world. Soothill examines the work of Salvatore Cucchiari and Elizabeth Brusco, writing from southern European perspectives and Latin American perspectives, while going on to look in some detail at the claims of Ruth Marshall-Fratani with regard to Pentecostalism, gender and power in Africa. It was upon much of this material that David Martin based his somewhat ecstatic conclusion that Pentecostalism is in fact a "women's movement"; a "sisterhood of shared experience". Martin points to the "buried intelligentsia who through their

involvement in the churches more and more actively relate to each other and sustain each other". Jane Soothill is more circumspect and more complex in her analysis, concluding that "the gender discourses of Charismatic Christianity are used in multiple ways to challenge old cultural forms, to create new ones, and to generate renewed forms of legitimacy for 'traditional' gender norms". She concludes that essentially "[they do] not challenge the structures that reinforce and perpetuate gender inequalities"

Two remarkable figures in Ghanaian Pentecostalism, Francesca Duncan-Williams and Christie Doe Tetteh emerge in the chapter entitled "Big Women, Small Girls". Soothill was quite clearly impressed (maybe even a little overawed) by these "big women". Soothill feels their power, but they also feel hers, and their relationship was marked by a definite tension. For me this was a particularly fascinating part of the book. She explores the relationship of power between born-again women and argues that leading female figures such as these exert considerable authority over other women in their respective churches. Concluding her marvellous study of these two figures Soothill concludes: "The new churches appeal to many women primarily not because they provide opportunities for communal solidarity—though they may do this to some extent—but because they provide access to the spiritual power of prophetic individuals."

While these "big women" have enormous power, other women can also access it and often do, particularly in relation to their men. In **Chapter Six** entitled "Men, Marriage and Modernity" the author examines the influence of this form of Christianity on the understanding of marriage and how "born-again women access spiritual power through charismatic practices and use it to try to mediate changes in their gendered relationships."

Going back to the late Adrian Hastings and Richard Gray, and more recently in the work of Paul Gifford and J.D.Y Peel amongst others, the School of Oriental and African Studies, has made an important contribution to the understanding of African Christianity. In this book Jane Soothill has made an impressive contribution to that tradition and claimed a significant place in the field.

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