

# William Wilberforce:

## how transforming business can turn the tide of history



by Peter Heslam



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**This year is the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade by the British Parliament in 1807. While slavery cries out from the pages of British history as a moral outrage, the abolitionist's vision of 'commerce and Christianity' has much to teach us today.**

The year is 1780. A sailing ship is making headway through heavy storms across the Atlantic under a spread of canvas. She is loaded to the hilt with a cargo of human beings. They are chained together on narrow shelves, soaked in sweat, blood, vomit and excrement.

The year is 1780. In a London club an elegant young graduate fresh from Cambridge is seated around the gambling table with his high society friends, delighting them with his wit and charm. An MP from a business family, this twenty-one-year-old has a fortune behind him and a promising career ahead.

Who would have thought that these two pictures could ever have anything in common? Yet the young man in the gambling club became the chief instrument in the abolition of the slave trade and in sweeping slavery from the British Empire.

Unfortunately, this article cannot tell the remarkable story of how this came about. For that one needs

only to turn to the current deluge of articles, media broadcasts, documentaries, films and biographies (including one by William Hague, the shadow foreign secretary) which marks the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade by the British Parliament in 1807.

But what is overlooked in this deluge is the very thing about Wilberforce that is likely to be of most interest to readers of this journal. His vision for a better world lay in the transformative potential of faith and business, or in the language of his era, 'commerce and Christianity'. It was in pursuit of this vision that he initiated radical social transformation on a global scale.



William Wilberforce

Most historians associate the slogan 'commerce and Christianity' with David Livingstone. Yet its origins go back to the birth of the abolitionist movement, which, significantly,

coincided with the start of the British missionary movement. It became, in fact, as much an anti-slavery slogan as a missionary one. Legitimate commerce, coupled with the gospel, would cut off the slave trade at its source in Africa.

Wilberforce embodied this belief in the Sierra Leone Company, which he formed in 1790 with fellow members of the Clapham Sect, a small group of like-minded evangelicals. Thomas Clarkson, one of this group, described the company as the first ever formed for 'the abolition of the slave trade, the civilization of Africa and the introduction of the Gospel there'. Sierra Leone's Freetown became a symbol of this three-fold vision and soon trade began to flourish there and along the West African coast, despite a series of setbacks. The project's ideals proved so inspirational that the famous missionary Henry Venn, who took up office as Secretary of the Church Missionary Society in 1841, made abolitionism through enterprise a central aspect of his mission strategy.

For Wilberforce and his abolitionist friends, the idea that business and mission were – providentially - partners rather than rivals was grounded in their unshakable belief in human freedom. Because all human beings share a common humanity, he argued, they enjoy equal rights, especially the right to liberty. Because liberty was God-given, human beings were not to dispose of it by selling themselves into slavery, nor to deprive other human beings of it by force. To do either was to contravene both natural law and natural rights.

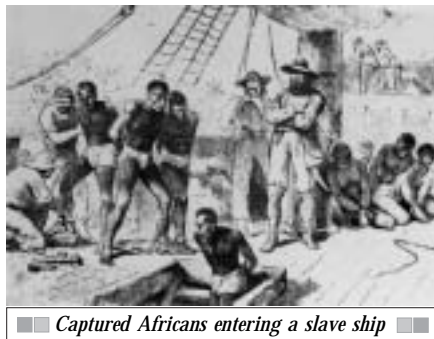
Wilberforce was supported in this view by other great spiritual and moral leaders of his day. John Wesley, whose last letter before his death was addressed to Wilberforce, wrote: 'Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air. And no human can deprive him of that right, which he derives from the law of nature'. Similarly, Hannah Moore pointed repeatedly to the inconsistency of the slave trade and Britain's 'boasted love of liberty'. The logic was clear – because Christianity and legitimate commerce both had human liberty at their core they were destined to work together for social reform.

Besides emulating this love of liberty, what lessons can those who wish to integrate faith and business today learn from Wilberforce? Two stand out in particular.

Firstly, we need to be prepared to go against majority opinion if need be, even if that opinion is held by the majority of Christians. In Wilberforce's time, many Christians owned black slaves. The Church of England had a major slave plantation in the

Caribbean and great revivalist leaders such as George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards were slave owners. Slavery was often defended on the grounds that it brought Africans within earshot of the gospel. Even those who condemned the slave trade assumed it was here to stay.

Today the moral consensus within the churches is that global commercial enterprise is a dubious affair, prone to impoverish the rich spiritually and the poor materially. Wilberforce's example offers us not only a more balanced



■ Captured Africans entering a slave ship ■

assessment of the spiritual and material potential of business but also the courage to stand up for this potential against the prevailing mindset.

Secondly, religious conviction can and should have transformative social impact. When the twelve members of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of Slavery first met in 1787 its prospects were unpromising. Yet within twenty years the slave trade was abolished. And within half a century, the 800,000 slaves in the British colonies were emancipated. By the 1880s, slavery had been extinguished in the southern US, Brazil and across most of the earth.

At a time when religion is increasingly regarded as a malign force that should be confined to

the private sphere, abolitionism serves as an inspiring example of how faith-based engagement with the public realm has been a powerful reforming force in Western society.

In recent history, churches have made a vital contribution to the American Civil Rights Movement, the overthrow of Communism, the fall of apartheid, the cancellation of international debt, the promotion of fair trade and the stewardship of the environment. Churches are now beginning to mobilise resources to address both the ravages of HIV Aids in Africa and contemporary forms of slavery. Confronted by resurgent rationalist scepticism, we need to be reminded that religion can be a force for human progress.

For sure the bicentenary offers an opportunity to be realistic about the moral failures of the past. Slavery is a scar on the conscience of our nation. The fusing of Christianity and commerce became, for some, a pretext for imperial exploitation. History is not a simple morality tale of heroes and villains. Human beings are fallen, even those who inspire us with their saintly qualities.

Yet we must not allow these facts to overshadow the magnitude and contemporary relevance of the abolitionist achievement. To do so would be to imperil yet further the transformative potential both of faith and of business, especially when they are brought together. ■

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