The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade:  
The Reconciliation of Reason and Religion

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In 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an influential French Enlightenment thinker, proposed that "man is born free, yet everywhere he lives in chains," and went on to use reason to challenge popular religious justifications for slavery.\footnote{Jean Jacques Rousseau, \textit{The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings}. Ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 41.} Later, in 1797, Granville Sharp, a popular British abolitionist proposed that reason was "written, as it were, on the heart of man by his creator," thus asserting his belief that religion and reason were able to be reconciled, especially when it came to abolishing the slave trade.\footnote{Granville Sharp, \textit{Serious Reflections on the Slave Trade and Slavery. Wrote in March, 1797}, London, 1805, 10.} Both arguments hinged on different factors: one proposed a move away from religion, while the other suggested reason and religion were not limited, and actually could be utilized together to form a coherent argument for abolition. Yet somehow, both avenues of the same argument reached a similar end—the abolition of slavery in both France and Britain.

Published arguments such as these regarding the Atlantic slave trade gained popularity during the late eighteenth century through the beginning of the nineteenth century, leading up to the institution’s abolition by Britain and France. While most people today know the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery within the New World colonies, little have any idea about the work that actually went into the abolitionist movement. Analyzing the debates regarding abolition offers an interesting approach to understanding the institution. Europeans began adamantly questioning slavery and the nature of its legality (under both governmental and religious law) in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century, during the period of the Enlightenment, which ironically was also the height of the Atlantic slave trade. In both England and France, critics and defenders of the trade vehemently argued their beliefs regarding slavery and its nature. There were, however, differences in the ways the arguments manifested themselves in both England and
France. In England, everyday, lower class people, as well as some highly religious upper class citizens and members of Parliament engaged in the abolition debates. One of the first and most influential groups of supporters of abolition was the Quakers, a religious society that believed in the equality of all mankind. In England, the arguments tended to center around various religious doctrines and modes of thought, yet still included hints of Enlightenment beliefs about the natural equality of all. In France, the debates regarding abolition were found in governmental settings and among upper class Enlightenment philosophers who believed reason-based arguments were more important than religiously based ones. Also, while ideas regarding abolition were born out of a new religious philosophy combined with the ideals of the Enlightenment in England, the exact opposite was the case in France, where the ideas grew out of Enlightenment beliefs about reason being more important than religion. The breadth of the arguments opposing slavery in both France and England proved to be a distinct strength for the abolition movement, as it allowed for more people (especially those of the lower classes) to associate with different aspects of the movement, and to find where their own beliefs about the nature of humankind and religion fit into the larger debate.

The history of slavery did not start with the colonization of the New World by Europeans. Slavery was common in antiquity, and even Aristotle and other early Greek philosophers wrote about the institution. Aristotle argued that "natural slaves" existed, and that these slaves were instruments of their masters.\(^3\) Throughout history, different societies around the world have punished criminals, prisoners of war, debtors, and various other transgressors by enslaving them. This, however, was not the same chattel slavery that developed in the Atlantic trading system, especially since many of the slaves in prior systems came from the same communities as their

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\(^3\) David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York: Cornell UP, 1966), 175.
masters. Fast-forward a thousand years or so, and we see slavery in its more modern conception re-emerging in the overseas empires of Spain and Portugal. In the late sixteenth century, French colonists began to take over various Caribbean islands and to force the natives into a situation of involuntary servitude, soon followed by a mass influx of imported African slaves. Similarly, in the late seventeenth century Great Britain introduced the first trading companies in the British West Indies, and soon began importing slaves from the West African coast to the islands for cheap labor. During the entire duration of the Atlantic slave trade, the Caribbean islands were an important stopping point for slave ships engaged the triangle trade, which started in Europe, traveled down the coast to west Africa, then crossed the Atlantic to various islands in the Caribbean before embarking on the journey up to North America. All in all, it is estimated that over 12.5 million Africans were forcibly taken from their homes and families in Africa.\(^4\)

French arguments for abolishing slavery and the slave trade grew directly out of the Enlightenment ideals of the eighteenth century. While ideas about abolition were looming before the French Revolution and before the French slogan “liberté, égalité, fraternité” became popular, the Enlightenment brought thoughts of the equality of all human beings into people’s consciousness. This equality, however, was not the same notion of equality in the eyes of God that many British abolitionists saw as the proper reason for ending the institution of slavery. In France, Enlightenment thinkers considered reason a more legitimate authoritative force than religion. Thus the ideas regarding the equality of all under the law and the notion of the natural dignity of all humans gained importance. In 1789, The French government adopted the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,” which stated the natural rights of all men were universal. (However, slaves and women were left out of the discussion). Almost all of the

*philosophes* (French for philosopher) saw the citizens of France as political slaves of the French state, lacking the freedom such natural rights were supposed to bring. This assertion helped the Enlightenment thinkers to see some comparisons between their situation and the situation of the slaves in the colonies, and thus new ideas about the intrinsic unjust nature of slavery emerged. These new ideas, brought about by the Enlightenment and perpetuated by the French Revolution, directly influenced the abolitionists’ debates and the nature of their arguments.

Almost every influential Enlightenment *philosophe* mentioned slavery in their writings. Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau, three of the most well known Enlightenment thinkers all wrote extensively about the institution and its evils. Less well known, but no less influential, were Henrion de Pansey (a lawyer working toward the emancipation of slaves who had been brought to France illegally) and Abbé Raynal, who also discussed the horrors of slavery and the slave trade. Raynal was even exiled by the French government for his condemnation of slavery and French colonization. These Enlightenment thinkers adopted the slave as a symbol of the political domination felt by the French citizens at the hand of the French monarchy in the period leading up to the revolution.⁵ Rousseau saw French citizens as slaves of the French government, and often discussed this idea in his writings. Similarly, Montesquieu saw slavery as “the establishment of a right which gives to one man such a power over another, as renders him absolute master of his life and fortune” and believed the French government to be “enslaving” its citizens.⁶ The extensive nature of their writings reveals that slavery presented a puzzling question to the philosophes—a question to which all of them found differing yet legitimate answers.

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Scholars often criticize Montesquieu for holding hypocritical ideas on slavery, but a careful examination of his texts shows he was against the institution. In his 1784 book, *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu distinguished "political slavery" from "civil slavery"—with the latter denoting chattel slavery and the first referring to various forms of political oppression. As historian Christopher Miller notes, that notion of political slavery would be an "obstacle to the Enlightenment’s consideration of real slavery."\(^7\) Regardless, Montesquieu believed "that the right of slavery proceeds from the contempt of one nation for another, founded on a difference in customs" and that prejudices of the sort tended to "eradicate every tender disposition."\(^8\) Montesquieu went on to challenge the notion that slavery actually benefited the Africans, since it took them out of their "barbarous" homelands and into Christian hands, by making comparisons:

A murderer, for instance, has enjoyed the benefit of the very law which condemns him; it has been a continual protection to him; he cannot, therefore, object to it. But it is not so with the slave. The law of slavery can never be beneficial to him; it is in all cases against him, without ever being for his advantage; and therefore this law is contrary to the fundamental principle of all societies.

In this passage, Montesquieu used the Enlightenment method of reasoning to understand slavery as inherently bad for the people being enslaved. He compared the laws that restricted murderers and the laws that restricted slaves to show how unjust the laws accepting slavery really were. He realized that even the laws prohibiting and condemning murder provided some protection and benefit for the criminal through prisons and the legal process, but for the slave, no such benefit could be found. He made such comparisons in order to expose the inherent contradictions and the invalidity in the justifications for slavery that were popular in the time.

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\(^7\) Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Duke UP, 2008), 65.

Montesquieu’s work on the detestable nature of slavery is often considered illegitimate because of certain contradictions he makes in his narrative. Though he asserted the natural equality of all men, in *The Spirit of Laws* he did admit that slavery “should be limited to those who are incapable of earning their livelihood,” implying that slavery was not wrong for all people.\(^9\) He also paraphrased what his arguments *would* have been if he had been in approval of the institution of slavery. Scholars have tended to misinterpret this passage as a contradiction of Montesquieu’s earlier statements regarding slavery, when in all actuality, he was just presenting the opposing arguments that he did not himself accept. He again contradicted his previous statements about slavery being inherently wrong and claimed “There are countries where the excess of heat...renders men so slothful and dispirited that nothing but the fear of chastisement can oblige them to perform any laborious duty: slavery is there more reconcilable to reason...”\(^10\)

It is debatable what Montesquieu really meant by this passage. However, these failures to reconcile his beliefs should not discredit his profound ideas on the need to abolish slavery within the French colonies.

Similar to Montesquieu, many other Enlightenment philosophes saw the institution of slavery as a corrupting influence that did not contribute anything positive to anyone involved, especially the Africans. Abbé Raynal, a less popularly known Enlightenment thinker who had profound beliefs about slavery and its abominable nature, followed the path of prior Enlightenment thinkers in proposing that liberty “after reason [is] the distinguishing characteristic of man.” He argued that slaves were only unintelligent and lazy “because of their

\(^9\) Ibid., Book XV, chapter 2.
\(^{10}\) Ibid., Book XV, chapter 7.
experience as slaves rather than because of inherent character flaws.”¹¹ In other words, Raynal believed slavery had made Africans lazy, or had distorted their nature, rather than believing their nature to be perverted in the first place. Using this radical idea, Raynal directly responded to the common argument that Africans were fit for slavery because of intrinsic character flaws such as laziness, stupidity, or barbarous behavior. Instead, the oppression of the French government, slave owners, and planters that had changed the nature of the slaves for the worse.

All the Enlightenment philosophes’ arguments regarding chattel slavery were inspired by their beliefs about the political “slavery” French citizens endured at the hand of the French government. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, another noted French Enlightenment thinker, wrote extensively about the lack of freedom and respect for natural rights in France, which directly spoke to his beliefs about slavery in the colonies. He claimed that to abandon “freedom is to renounce one’s humanity, one’s rights as a man and equally one’s duties.”¹² Rousseau used the symbol of slavery to denote the unjust political authority and the excesses of the monarchy, claiming that citizens of the French state were un-free slaves of the government.¹³ Regardless of his metaphorical usage of the word slavery, Rousseau found the institution of chattel slavery abominable, and he used reason to denounce popular justifications for it. In his First and Second Discourses, Rousseau attacked the nature of civilization and the state for restricting the freedoms of all men, stating that men in the state of nature were the most free.¹⁴ He went on to criticize the popular notion that slave’s offspring were also bound to their parents’ master, stating that

¹¹ Peabody, There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancient Regime, 97.
¹² Rousseau, The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings, 45.
¹³ Peabody, There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancient Regime, 96.
such beliefs were the same as “deciding a man would not be born a man.”\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, Raynal made some radical assertions regarding the political oppression of French citizens when he posed a rhetorical question that suggested the leveling of all social hierarchies, but especially the slave/master paradigm: “Who, barbarians, will you make believe that a man can be the property of a sovereign; a son, the property of a father; a woman, the property of a husband; a servant, the property of a master; a negro, the property of a colonist?”\textsuperscript{16} Much like Rousseau and other writers of the time, Raynal attacked chattel slavery through his condemnation of the lack of political liberty found in France. Rousseau and others beliefs about the status of political slavery in France, by nature, said a vast amount about their beliefs about the atrocity of slavery in the colonies.

Many Enlightenment thinkers opposed to slavery found that the institution tended to pervert the nature of both the slave and the master. Montesquieu argued against slavery because of its ability to completely alter the nature of both sides involved:

The state of slavery is bad of its own nature: it is neither useful to the master nor to the slave; not to the slave, because he can do nothing thro' a motive of virtue; not to the master, because he contracts all manner of bad habits with his slaves; he accustoms himself insensibly to the want of all moral virtues; he grows fierce, hasty, severe, choleric, voluptuous, and cruel...\textsuperscript{17}

Montesquieu promoted the idea that slavery was bad, not only for the slave, but for the master as well. He noted that the behavioral traits picked up by different masters mirrored some the same behavioral patterns used to justify enslaving Africans: laziness, severity, and cruelty, among others. He went on to argue “in democracies, slavery is contrary to the spirit of the

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 179.
\textsuperscript{17} Montesquieu, The Spirit of Laws, Book XV, chapter 1.
constitution; it only contributes to give a power and luxury to the citizens which they ought not to have.”18 He believed that such luxury tended to pervert the nature of the slave owner to a point in which he could no longer see the humanity in their slaves, thus taking away from the democratic nature of the state. Henrion de Pansy, in his 1770 Mémoire pour un Nègre, shared these beliefs about the change in the nature of masters and slaves: “Everything is disastrous under slavery; it renders the master cruel, vindictive, proud; it renders the slave sluggish, deceitful, hypocritical; sometimes it bring man to atrocities which, without it, he would never have been capable.”19 Both of these French thinkers realized the correlation between slavery and the acquisition of negative qualities for both the slave and the master—a situation they deemed unavoidable if one got involved in the institution.

Similar to French anti-slavery, the British abolition movement was sprinkled with Enlightenment ideals, but in the context of a shift in values for different Christian groups and to a movement toward “reasonable” religious beliefs. It was in this period that, as David Brion Davis notes, ideas about slavery in Britain were shifting. This shift led people to see the institution as “contrary to the ideal realm of nature, but... part of the world of sin.”20 Seymour Drescher expanded on this notion in Capitalism and Antislavery, noting that the abolition movement in Britain was “a progressive political narrative more closely interwoven with religious than with economic and social development.”21 It was in this period, however, that people began realizing that only employing religion as a basis for abolition would not garner enough popular support behind the cause. Religious groups such as the Quakers, who formed an abolitionist group called

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18 Ibid.
19 Henrion de Pansey, Mémoire pour un negre (1770), 26; quoted in Sue Peabody, There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancient, 101.
20 Davis, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture, 165.
the Society of Friends in the mid seventeenth century, realized a reasonable form of religion, which could engage in political debates, would have wide reaching success in acquiring support. The Quakers took changing ideas on slavery a step further than most. They were the only religious group to pragmatically work through the dilemma posed by slavery and Christianity’s cohabitation. It has even been suggested that the Quakers were influenced by John Locke’s proposal that “revelation must be judged by reason.” The Quakers used religion and reason to work out the contradictions found within slavery and Christianity. Similarly, individuals such as William Wilberforce and Reverend Ramsay, who were both extremely religious figures in British society, thought the most reasonable way to abolish slavery was through political means, while still using the language of morality. Ramsay even attacked the economic rationalizations justifying the trade, showing the falsity of such arguments. Likewise, the Quakers understood how important being in the political sphere was for their cause—they allowed Anglicans to join their society in hopes that the British government would be more apt to sympathize with them than with the persecuted Quakers. Even though this new reasonable religious fervor was the initial inspiration for many of the British abolitionists, they all understood the importance of gaining secular support, and utilized legal avenues in order to convince the British people and government that slavery was inherently contradictory, not only to Christianity, but also to British law.

While the Quakers tended to focus on religious arguments opposing slavery, they employed the language of the Enlightenment in their belief that all men were created in God’s image, thus making all humans equal and all their lives sacred. As one Quaker pamphlet noted,

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22 Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 300.
We are taught, both by the holy scriptures, and by the experience of ages, to believe that the Righteous Judge of the earth chastiseth nations for their sins, as well as individuals... Will it not rather be found on inquiry, that, with respect to the enslaved negroes, its benevolent purposes have been perverted; that its terrors have fallen on the innocent, while evil doers, and oppressors, have openly been encouraged?²⁴

The Quakers constantly asserted their belief that God was the only legitimate judge of a man’s character, and thus defended the idea that humans were unable to label anyone fit for servitude. They went on to note that regardless of the supposed barbarity that made Africans more suited for slavery, the assertion that slavery civilized them was not viable since it in turn de-civilized the slave owner. This was an extremely broad based belief in the abolitionist movement in both Britain and France, and should be seen as one of the strongest points of convergence for the two interrelated debates. Such an assertion harkens back to the Enlightenment belief that all men were born naturally equal—a fact not that could not be undermined by fictitious beliefs about supposed barbarity.

The Quakers believed in using the same religious language that had previously been used to justify slavery to illuminate the reasons why it was wrong. They made comparisons in order to further their cause: “As God gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believed in him might have everlasting life; so the Devil gives his only begotten Child, the Merchandize of Slaves and Souls of Men, that whosoever believes and trades in it might have everlasting Damnation.”²⁵ Comparing slave owners to children of the devil was sure to provoke those Christians who believed slavery would make Africans believers in Christ and thus give them...

²⁴ The People Called Quakers, The Case of our Fellow-Creatures, the Oppressed Africans, Respectfully Recommended to the Serious Considerations of the legislature of Great-Britain (London, 1784), in The Slave Trade Debate: Contemporary Writings For and Against, ed. John Pinfold (Oxford: Bodleian Library Oxford UP, 2007), 35.
“everlasting life.” In this, the Quakers were still using religion, yet coupled with reasonable arguments about the equality of all mankind. Quakers knew that to seem legitimate enough to persuade the English to end the slave trade, they would have to respond to the well establish and widely held beliefs of the majority, who often used perverted Christian thought to justify their actions.

The Quakers were not necessarily a unified group of abolitionists. Quakers generally did not believe people of the same religious society should hold different opinions on matters, yet not all Quakers were supportive of the abolitionist movement. Many Quakers in the colonies actually owned slaves, but tended to treat them with more respect than many other slave masters of the time.\(^26\) Similarly, many Quakers who did not own slaves engaged themselves in the economy through the trade of “rum, molasses, sugar, and rice,” which were all heavily dependent on slave labor.\(^27\) Similarly, while many Quakers believed abolition was necessary, they did not automatically “consider bondsmen as spiritual equals.”\(^28\) While the Quakers were the first, and some of the most ardent, supporters of the abolition movement, their society was not completely unified, and some of their members even gave in to many of the popular notions of black inferiority of the time. Regardless of their infrequent contradictions, Quaker contributions to the abolition debate in Great Britain were essential due to their ability to reconcile religion and reason into a coherent message.

In order to obtain overarching support for abolition from the British people, it was necessary for the religious justifications to translate into a political message. William Wilberforce was one of the main figures in the British abolition movement who was able to rally

\(^{26}\) Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 315.
\(^{27}\) Ibid, 305.
\(^{28}\) Ibid.
popular support behind the cause, and bring the question of the legality of slavery to Parliament. After a conversion to Evangelicalism, Wilberforce, who was also an Independent member of the British Parliament, had an internal crisis about whether or not to stay in the public eye, especially in the corrupting world of politics. After being convinced by his friends to stay in Parliament and to use his newfound religious dedication for the good of all English citizens, Wilberforce took up the cause of abolition and refused to quit until the slave trade was ended. Even though religion forced him to see the unjust nature of the slave trade, Wilberforce realized that to accomplish his goals, he could not abandon the political sphere for his new beliefs, and would probably have to convince Parliament of the institution’s evils himself. As Reginald Coupland notes, this cause “appealed to his newfound conscience, untainted by party interest, involving the moral and physical welfare of countless human beings,” and was “a challenge to a Christian and a patriot to redeem his country from sin.”  

In essence, Wilberforce saw abolition as his political duty.

It can be said that Wilberforce’s conversion was the quintessential turning point in his career. It helped him appreciate the fundamental right all humans had to dignity, again echoing Enlightenment ideals. In particular, Wilberforce abhorred the conditions of the slave trade. In his 1789 abolition speech to the House of Commons, he replied to the comment that the enslaved were actually given the freedom to sing, dance, eat, and perform expressions of their culture in stating that

These miserable wretches, loaded with chains, oppressed with disease and wretchedness, are forced to dance by the terror of the lash, and sometimes by the actual use of it...it may be observed too, with respect to food, that an instrument is sometimes carried out, in order to force them to eat which is the same sort of proof how much they enjoy themselves in that instance also. As to their singing,

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what shall we say when we are told that their songs are songs of lamentation upon their departure which, while they sing, are always in tears, insomuch that one captain (more humane as I should conceive him, therefore, than the rest) threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings.  

Wilberforce became the voice of the slaves in the House of Commons, and tried to show the inhumanity of many of the practices involved in the slave trade. He saw merchants and many of those involved in the trade as “men of humanity” but saw the profits they were accumulating to be corrupting, and the evils they were engaging in to be blinding. This again harkens back to the idea that slavery perverts the nature of all involved that can be seen continuously throughout many of the abolition debates in both countries. He took it upon himself to remind the merchants and politicians in England that these slaves were people, especially in the eyes of God. While Wilberforce understood the entire world to be involved in the slave trade in one way or another, he saw England as the epicenter of abolition because of their rich Christian traditions and the beliefs of the new Christian sects that focused on the fundamental egalitarian nature of all humans in the eyes of God.

Rev. James Ramsay, one of the most influential figures in Wilberforce’s conversion and push to end the slave trade, also united religion and reason into a rational argument opposing slavery. After witnessing the abominable treatment of slaves in the West Indies, and being shunned by the planter class on the island, he moved back to Britain and became an exemplary voice in the slavery debate. While Ramsay did not altogether suggest ending the institution in his writings, he detested the treatment of African slaves and intended to convert them whenever

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31 Ibid.  
32 Sir Reginald Coupland, The British Anti-Slavery Movement, 74.
possible. He asserted the common relation all people "bear to the one great and good Creator." Ramsay was well versed in the common justifications for slavery found in England, and believed reasonably showing the erroneous nature of those statements was the best way to counter them. In his personal journal, Ramsay responded to the popular notion that Africans were happier in the New World because of the horrible conditions in Africa. "If they are happier in the West Indies, it is because the cursed Slave trade arms them in their own country against each other and renders their situations insecure; and in the West Indies being sunk to the extremity of misery they have nothing farther to be afraid of." Ramsay believed that the Africans needed Christianity, but not to be taken from their homes in Africa to work for brutally greedy masters, especially since their transport caused over 2,000 deaths of English seamen every year.

Ramsay himself was devoutly Christian, but he realized some of the economic, social, and demographic pressures the enslavement of Africans placed on the African continent as well as on the British Empire. In his journal entries, he often asserted that capturing over 200,000 Africans a year would be detrimental to the development of their continent. "How can she [Africa] bear an annual loss of 200,000 in the prime of life?" he asked. Similarly, he stated that "by drawing off the Africans from this vile business, which arms village against village, brother against brother, and a father against his children, we force them to cultivate their country and raise numberless articles for our manufactures in a trade which will be a real nursery not the grave of our Seamen." Here Ramsay showed the connections between the increased violence

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34 Ibid., 100.
35 Ibid., 161.
36 Ibid., 100.
37 Ibid., 164.
and internal upheaval occurring in Africa at the time to the slave trade. He noted that if Africans were not happy at home, it was because European contact had changed the African landscape completely. He used this assertion to remind British citizens what could be possible if the Africans were only given a fair chance—a situation in which both Africa and Britain could prosper. If the trade were to stop, he asserted, "civilization will gradually extend itself, and produce all its happy effects on their lives, their industry, and manners: But when our Neighbours shall see... that a better trade to Africa flourishes... and their produce is increased... then will they eagerly run to share the same advantages." Ramsay believed that if Britain abolished the slave trade and started a commercial relationship with Africa, other nations would see English prosperity and follow suit. This was his attempt to persuade the British Parliament towards his position. Ramsay attempted to show the two Houses what could have been economically possible if the exploitation of Africans were to end. While Ramsay’s Christian values helped him initially see the detrimental effects of slavery on Africans, he was able to translate such rhetoric into political and economic terms to make a reasonable argument against slavery.

For the British abolition movement, gaining public support for political actions was key. Coupled with this, juxtaposing religion and reason into a well-articulated and rational argument opposing slavery was also necessary. Granville Sharp, a civil service worker, writer, biblical scholar, and first chairman of the Quaker Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade became a vital religious figure working towards abolition in the political domain. While he himself was not a Quaker (which would later prove to be valuable, since Quakers were not allowed to bring petitions to the House in Britain), he was devoutly religious and well versed in

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38 Ibid., 167.
Christian ideals, and thus could not stand the treatment of blacks he had seen and experienced. After fighting a legal battle to free a slave who had been beaten by his master, left for dead, and then resold unknowingly two years later, Sharp became a leading voice in the abolition movement, especially within politics. His background in ancient religious texts and languages helped him to understand Christianity as inherently contradictory to slavery. Sharp was able to see that religion and reason did not have to be mutually exclusive—he believed that “reason, or the laws of natural right” were, “written, as it were, on the heart of man by his creator.”

In March of 1797 Sharp wrote his piece *Serious Reflections on the Slave Trade and Slavery*, in which he not only used extensive Biblical passages, but also asserted the natural rights of mankind, as laid out by Christianity. He argued the “common rights” of Englishmen were also the common rights of “the oppressed Negroes in foreign bondage,” and to deny anyone those rights was a “rebellion against God.” This language was directly influenced by the Enlightenment discourse on the natural rights inherent in all individuals, while still being understood in the context of Christianity. Sharp stated that as Christians, British citizens were given a duty by God to discriminate between “rights and wrongs and notorious corruptions” because the “rights we are bound to assert and maintain, are founded on that reciprocal consideration which is due from *every man* to the lawful interests of *all other men*.41 Sharp not only responded to the common religious justifications for slavery by using direct biblical passages, but he reconciled some Enlightenment beliefs about the rights of mankind with religion in stating that God had given all men these natural rights, and thus no one but God could justly take them away.

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 25-27.
An important distinction between the French Enlightenment arguments for the abolition of slavery and the corresponding British debates was the issue of Christianity. French writers tended to think that Christianity had actually helped to perpetuate the institution of slavery, rather than provide a reason for its abolition. Henrion de Pansey argued in his 1770 Mémoire that Christianity had brought slavery over to the colonies in the first place, and was thus not a legitimate argument for abolishing the institution.\(^{42}\) He referenced historical arguments, realizing that even in the Middle Ages, Christianity did not help to abolish slavery within France, and may have actually been the cause for French enslavement in the seventeenth century since non-Christians were generally enslaved for their "heathen" beliefs.\(^{43}\) Similarly, Raynal noted that God never acts as a master, but as a father, and therefore supposed "Christians" who owned and were cruel to their slaves were not actually acting on fatherly love.\(^{44}\) Voltaire, another influential Enlightenment thinker, agreed with Henrion and Raynal in that Christianity had done no more than "tighten the chains" of slavery.\(^{45}\) Since the Enlightenment was seen as a step away from the importance of religion, there is always the possibility that the philosophe's discussion of Christianity and slavery was actually a critique on religion, rather than on slavery itself.

Regardless, instead of coupling Christianity and reason as a justification for the abolition of slavery in the colonies, French thinkers saw Christianity as one of the main perpetrators in the introduction of slavery.

A significant point of convergence between the British and French abolition arguments was the idea that the nature of both the slave and the master was perverted through engagement

\(^{42}\) Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancient Regime*, 100.

\(^{43}\) Ibid, 101.

\(^{44}\) Raynal, *A history of the two Indies: a translated selection of writings from Raynal*, 158.

in the trade. In terms of the slave masters, the Quakers believed that the profits of the trade “tended to increase the barbarity of their manners,” realizing that their “benevolent purposes” has been tainted.\textsuperscript{46} Similarly, Wilberforce thought all men to be humane, yet saw the revenues of the trade to be corrupting for all people involved.\textsuperscript{47} Earlier, Montesquieu had argued in his \textit{Spirit of the Laws} that slavery destroyed the kindhearted disposition inherent in mankind.\textsuperscript{48} Many abolitionists understood and saw how the slave trade changed people occupied in the trade—they no longer had the ability to see that the enslaved were humans too, and therefore chose to treat them as if they were less than human. Abolitionists saw the trade as perverting Africans as well. Many, including the Quakers and Ramsay, asserted that the slave trade had fueled wars within Africa and made the continent more militaristic and war filled than it had ever been previously. Likewise, Henrion de Pansey believed that slaves only acquired bad habits that needed to be corrected due to the institution of slavery itself, not due to intrinsic character flaws they obtained while living in Africa.\textsuperscript{49} Such distinctions proved to be a strong point in the abolitionist arguments against slavery, since it brought the questionable effects of the trade into people’s consciousness.

While the wide range of arguments for abolition within France and Britain helped to secure the institution’s end, much can be said about the anti abolition debates and their lack of a strong cohesive argument with the ability to reach all people at all social levels. In the 1770s, economic theorist Adam Smith noted that the colonies were actually a drain on British funds and

\textsuperscript{46} The People Called Quakers, \textit{The Case of our Fellow-Creatures, the Oppressed Africans, Respectfully Recommended to the Serious Considerations of the legislature of Great-Britain}, 37.
\textsuperscript{47} William Wilberforce, \textit{1789 Abolition Speech}, 1789.
\textsuperscript{48} Montesquieu, \textit{The Spirit of Laws}, Book XV, chapter 3.
resources, and argued that the profits of colonial endeavors only served certain members of society—mainly the upper class, merchants, and elite planters.\textsuperscript{50} He even suggested that it was more profitable for planters to hire freemen than to have to look after slaves and provide them with the tools and resources they needed.\textsuperscript{51} Even Ramsay showed through careful calculation, that “the importance of the Slave trade to the commerce of the nation has been greatly exaggerated.”\textsuperscript{52} Both Ramsay and Smith realized that the profits of the slave trade were not reaching those in society who needed it the most—an idea that became much more widespread during the abolition movement.

Before Smith’s assertion and Ramsay’s economic estimates, many political and economic theorists had seen slavery as the reason for Britain’s economic success, and thus for the empire’s overarching prosperity. Coupland notes that before the period of abolition, people saw slavery as the only system in which true profits could be obtained to make Britain more prosperous as a whole.\textsuperscript{53} Similarly, British political advisor William Petty noted slaves “may be forced to as much labour, and as cheap fare, as nature will endure, and thereby become as two men added to the common wealth, and not as one taken away from it.”\textsuperscript{54} Regardless of the fact that these Africans were generally not British citizens to begin with, such popular notions were highly regarded and caused people to look at slavery economically (albeit, in a very short-sighted manner) as the basis for the empire’s prosperity. Even in France, people worried that if the government were to abandon the overseas colonies, sources of opulence would “disappear or

\textsuperscript{51} Coupland, The British Anti-Slavery Movement, 58.
\textsuperscript{52} Rev. James Ramsay, Personal Notebook, 159.
\textsuperscript{53} Coupland, The British Anti-Slavery Movement, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{54} Quoted in Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, Many-Headed Hydra Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic (Boston: Beacon, 2000), 147.
However, when distinguished people began to assert their negative opinions regarding the economics of the trade, average lower and middle class citizens began to realize they were not prospering from the slave trade. The "trickle down" effect, which is so essential to capitalism, was not working for the benefit of all citizens of the empire. The profits from the exploitation of Africans were only reaching the upper class, merchants, slave traders, and those in a political position to benefit from wealthy associations. It is likely that this did not resonate well with citizens of both Britain and France who saw a few their countrymen getting rich off the exploitation of humans, while the rest of the country suffered. In the end, the abolitionist’s range of arguments and opinions gave way to the failure of the economic arguments to garner true support for slavery.

Similarly, Christian justifications for slavery were employed by all anti-abolitionists, yet their validity was steadily decreasing in the eyes of the average citizen. Both British and French abolitionists employed Christianity differently to show how slavery and Christian religious thought were inherently contradictory. In Britain, new forms of Christianity that focused more on God as the only true judge of mankind, and on the egalitarian nature of all human beings made people more apt to seeing African slaves as their own brothers and sisters. In France, the new Enlightenment beliefs caused religious justifications to be overshadowed by reason, and by employing reason, the philosophes were able to see the natural rights intrinsic to all humans. These arguments were directly in response to common justifications for slavery that hinged on the heathen and uncivilized nature of Africans and the duty to convert them. As Davis notes, supporters of slavery generally believed “enslavement would promote the spread of Christianity

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and also protect the weak from being killed or devoured by the strong.”\textsuperscript{56} Jean-Baptiste Du Terre, a Dominican missionary in the French Caribbean during the second half of the seventeenth century, once stated, “to beat a Negro is to nourish him.”\textsuperscript{57} However brutal that statement may be, it had some validity in the eyes of many religious supporters of slavery. In essence, it was thought that one could beat the rebellions heathen out of the Africans, thus making them complacent and easy to convert. Du Terre went on to say that slaves were being punished for their “rebellion against God,” and made sure to speak directly to those devoutly Christian citizens of France who would sympathize with his endeavors.\textsuperscript{58} Such ideas that violence increased Christianization and consequently lead to some form of social control were widespread in the colonies of the New World. However, these religious justifications later fell apart with the increased salience of Methodism of the eighteenth century and the swell of popularity for Enlightenment ideals over religion, which stated that all men were created free.

In the end, the abolitionists won due to their unwavering beliefs, their moralistic stance, and their humanistic language which truly illuminated the horrors of the Atlantic slave system. Their arguments were accessible to everyone in society, even the poor who felt they could sympathize with the enslaved, seeing as they sometimes felt they were also in a state of subjugation imposed by the government. This proved to be a point of strength for the abolition movement because anybody had it in their capacity to see all humans as brothers if they only tried, but not everyone could visualize the economic and social benefits supposedly coming from the trade to better society as a whole. The economic justifications for maintaining the institution

\textsuperscript{56} David Brion Davis, \textit{The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture}, 173.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 174.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 175.
of slavery were far less viable than those calling for an end to the trade, and thus popular mobility behind the abolition movement grew.

The Enlightenment truly came at an ideal time in terms of the abolition movement. Without the ideas of the inherent natural equality of all mankind in people’s conscience, the movement would not have been able to gain the popularity that it did because people would not have been able to see or fully comprehend the humanity of the African people. Europeans were so far removed from those different from themselves that they tended to see those with dissimilar features and lifestyles to be less than human. However, a reduction in this trend began due to the Enlightenment thinkers’ abilities to reasonably show the natural similarities in all humans. Even though the Enlightenment in France aimed to step away from religion being of utmost importance, British abolitionists were able to combine reasonability and religion into a coherent message, reminding the faithful that all men were equal in the Eyes of God. Whether the philosophes and influential thinkers of the time actually saw themselves as equal to the enslaved Africans is debatable. However, they did understand the idea that God did not see differences in humans and loved all fairly and equally, an idea that translated well into the abolition movement. This again was a strong point for the movement—people could either employ religion and reason, or reject religion altogether. Either way, there were plenty of avenues to take on the abolition debates, thus allowing more people to find where their beliefs fit into the spectrum.

It is important not to ignore the time and effort that went into the endeavors of the abolitionists. Without their tireless devotion to the cause, the Atlantic slave trade and institution of slavery as a whole could have perpetuated long throughout the 19th century and beyond. In 1794, France abolished slavery in its colonies, only to have Napoleon reverse the law in 1802 to appease his wife’s aristocratic family with property in the Antilles. In 1807 Great Britain
abolished the slave trade throughout the entire empire, and in 1834 the government outlawed slavery in all of its colonial territories. Finally, in 1848 slavery was abolished in all French colonies as well, thus signaling an end to the legal slave trade and slavery for both the British and French colonies. This did not necessarily stop illegal slave trading and slavery from occurring, even up through the twenty-first century. Outlawing slavery did not automatically change the minds of the people involved in the trade—nor did it change the profitable nature of the institution. Today, neo-colonial relationships have replaced slavery as means for exploitation of underdeveloped countries, and ideological differences and disputes have created a world filled with violence and strife. In order to get people to see the humanity inherent in all human beings, a broad ideological shift similar to the Enlightenment is necessary, in which all people’s beliefs and religious principles can be reconciled with reasonability. There is absolutely no reason that we as humans cannot work together globally for everybody’s mutual benefit without falling into the trap of abuse and mistreatment as the European powers did throughout the period of the Atlantic slave trade.