



Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)  
Issue: Vol. 1; No. 4; April 2020 pp. 31-40  
ISSN 2690-070X (Print) 2690-0718 (Online)  
Website: www.jlahnet.com  
E-mail: editor@jlahnet.com

## **Revealing the Role of the Church in the Black Africans' Enslavement in the Context of American History**

**Dr. Aboubacar Sidiki COULIBALY**

Lecturer

University of Letters and Human Sciences of Bamako-Mali

E-mail: aboubacarscouly@hotmail.com

**Sory Ibrahima KEITA**

Assistant Lecturer

University of Letters and Human Sciences of Bamako-Mali

E-mail: kesoryibrahima@yahoo.fr

### **Abstract:**

The paper seeks to reveal the role of the Church in the enslavement of Blacks in America. In that dynamics, the findings showed that the Church played a vital role in the enslavement of Africans. They proved that millions of Africans would not have been deported to America if the Church had not given its approval. The Church members saw no problem in owning slaves because they were convinced that they were saving 'heathen' Africans' souls. Some did not hesitate to use the alleged biblical curse of Ham or that of Cain to justify Black slavery. Even within the Society of Friends, members were allowed to own slaves. It was only in the second part of the eighteenth century that they abolished the slave trade and slavery. This study also demonstrated that the Church remained indifferent when 'pseudo' scientists and slave-owning people tried to exclude Africans from the great family of human beings. At the end, it underlines the weaknesses of the Church regarding the abolition of African slavery.

**Key words:** Abolition, America, Blacks, Church, Justification, Slavery.

### **Résumé:**

Cet article cherche à révéler le rôle de l'Église dans l'esclavage des Noirs en Amérique. Dans cette dynamique, les résultats ont montré que l'Église a joué un rôle capital dans l'asservissement des Africains. Ils ont prouvé que sans l'approbation de l'Église, des milliers d'Africains n'auraient pas été déportés en Amérique. Les membres de l'Église ne voyaient aucun problème à posséder des esclaves parce qu'ils étaient convaincus qu'ils sauvaient les âmes des 'païens' Africains. Certains n'hésitaient pas à faire recours à la prétendue malédiction de Cham et de Caïn pour justifier l'esclavage des Noirs. Même au sein de la Société des Amis, les membres étaient autorisés à posséder des esclaves. C'est seulement dans la deuxième partie du dix-huitième siècle que les Amis ont aboli la traite et l'esclavage. Cette étude a aussi démontré que l'Église est restée indifférente quand les soi-disant scientifiques et les esclavagistes ont essayé d'exclure les Africains de la grande famille de l'humanité. Enfin l'article met l'accent sur les faiblesses de l'Église par rapport à l'abolition de l'esclavage

**Mots clés :** Abolition, Amérique, Église, Esclavage, Justification, Noirs.

### **Introduction**

Before talking about the role of the Church in the enslavement of Black Africans, it would be axiomatic to specify what we actually mean by the term: Church. The use of Church in this paper refers to the Roman Catholic Church and other Protestant denominations. These churches were well organized and complied with their religious principles. All of them were either slave owners or slave traders.

The Roman Catholic Church could have abolished African slavery in the same way it did with European or Native American slavery, but it did not do it. The Pope was highly respected by the European people. Any decision coming from him would have been respected. Unfortunately, abolishing African slavery was not in his agenda. He firmly believed that reducing an ‘infidel’ to slavery was very beneficial to him because he would be taught the principles of the ‘true’ religion, which was Christianity. The Pope’s attitude reflected that of several of his contemporary religious people. For most of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europeans, Christianity equated with whiteness and civilization.

But Africans had their own religions and they believed in God too. Several of the eighteenth-century European travelers concurred that Africans had religion<sup>1</sup>. Even if this was true, as it was, Church members did not care about it. The Church knew the violent way Africans were kidnapped in their homelands and they knew about the horrors of the Middle Passage. However, it said nothing about it. Accordingly, Davis (1975) argued that Africans were enslaved on the grounds of cultural difference. European-slave dealers used that difference to justify the enslavement of Africans. They used to say that they would bring Africans out of darkness. They also said that they would take them to a place where civilization and Christianity prevailed. This idea of otherness can be explained by the fact that Africans were Black, non-Christian and had a wide range of cultures different from those of Europeans.

The objective of the paper is to show that the Church played a vital role in the enslavement of Black Africans. At the beginning, its members had encouraged the practice because they sincerely thought that they were helping African slaves to buy their way to heaven. Then after, they changed their mind because of the profit-owning slaves generated. We would like to point out the role of the Church in the enslavement of Black Africans in the context of American history because this aspect is not well known, or is merely ignored. Several people are aware that some religious people such as Quakers, Methodists, etc. voiced against slavery. Nevertheless, they do not know that they owned and dealt with slaves before denouncing the practice. The major problem is that the Church supported the evangelization of Black Africans and overlooked their sufferings. The paper is therefore engaged to reveal such a crucial, but ignored, role played by the Church in the enslavement of Black Africans.

This paper is structured as follows: first, it accounts for the concept of slavery and how African slavery began. Then, we analyze the role of the Church in the enslavement of Black Africans. Hereafter, we point out the lethargy of the Church with the rise of a new theory, which tended to show that Blacks’ and Whites’ ancestors were completely disconnected (polygenicism). At the same time, the Bible states: “God created man in His own image”(Genesis 1:27). Finally, the paper ends with underlining the weaknesses of the Church regarding its commitment for the abolition of slavery in America and in the world.

## **1. The Changing Faces of the Concept of Slavery**

The word slavery is a complex concept to define in a unanimous way because its meaning changes according to societies and times. It must be noticed that slavery existed in all societies in diverse forms. Thousands of Europeans were reduced to slavery. They were maltreated and deprived of their rights regardless of their whiteness. Then after this was condemned and Eltis (2000) and Pétré-Grenouilleau (2004) stated that during the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church forbade Europeans to enslave other Europeans. The Church argued that slave holding was incompatible with the principles of Christianity. Despite this noble deed, the Church accepted and defended the enslavement of Africans. The Church knew that Africans were wrongly enslaved, but it closed its eyes on their sufferings. The attitude of the Church was not an aberration, it reflected the perception of the period. The Church members believed that all the people who were not Christians were ‘heathens’ or ‘infidels’ and therefore these people had to be enslaved. In doing so, they would be introduced to Christianity. The problem was that they allowed the violent conquests and conversion of non-Europeans. The foregoing entails that the concept of slavery in the West was first related to the evangelization of heathens or infidels regardless of the color factor.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information about eighteenth-century European travellers’ perception of Africans’ religions, see Benezet (1768, 1771).

Thereafter, A.S, Coulibaly and Z, Coulibaly (2019) showed that slavery in African precolonial societies was different from the meaning Westerners wrongly ascribed to the concept of slavery based on their reality. They demonstrated that slaves in precolonial Africa had some rights. For example, in the empire of Mali, a captive could aspire to become a nobleman because "... when he learns the language of the new society and integrates it fully, he becomes a *Horon*" (p. 269). Then, they gave the example of a slave who not only became free, but he became king as well: "Sakura was a captive of war but became a respected and integrated soldier in the national fabric of the Manden society. This permitted him to ascend the social ladder to become the king of the entire empire in the 13<sup>th</sup> century" (p. 269). Condé (1987) developed another argument about slavery in Segou(Africa). She showed that slavery had existed in Africa, especially in Segou and that most of the time those who were enslaved were captives of war. The female slaves were used as concubines. They lived in the same house as the rest of the family. They were given food. They were used to satisfy the lasciviousness of their masters.

However, neither they nor their children could enjoy some social rights. They could not be married to their masters who belonged to the nobility and they were all the time reminded of their social origin. This stigma followed them until their death. Condé illustrated this social division in the behavior of Tiékoro Traoré. Tiékoro came from a noble family. His father, Dousika Traoré, was both the friend of King Da Monzon Diarra and a member of the royal council. Consequently, he was very powerful and rich. Tiekoro broke the heart of a slave woman whose name was Nadie. In fact, he met her in Timbuktu when he was studying Arabic linguistics and theology. He raped Nadie and made her pregnant. When he realized that the child belonged to him, he took her with him. At first, they lived a perfect love. As she was industrious, she did everything she could to help her husband who was expelled from the University of Timbuktu. Things began to change between them when Tiekoro brought her to Segou, his native village. At that time, Segou was a place where caste system was developed. He began to avoid the woman, he had loved too much in the past. His family treated her as a slave and mocked at her. They always reminded her of her "low" social origin. To crown it all, King Da Monzon offered Tiekoro a princess as wife. Before the celebration of this marriage, Tiekoro's mother (Nya) tried to convince Nadie to forget about her son. She said:

I have to tell you that Tiekoro's marriage is going to be celebrated soon. As the bride is the daughter of one of the Mansa's sisters there will be a very large dowry... but there is a *woloso* (House slave) I consider as my son —Kosa. I've talked to him and he is ready to marry you. He will pay the dowry, and you'll both go and live on the family land at Fabougou (Condé, 1988, p. 168).

The argument of Tiekoro's mother is very clear: the union between her son and a slave woman is impossible because they do not belong to the same social stratum. The social division is clearly defined: a noble is expected to marry another noble. So is a slave to marry another slave. Nadie feels betrayed. She never thinks that the man she loves too much will abandon her for another woman. She does not know that Tiekoro's family will treat her ruthlessly. The feeling of loneliness and rejection push her to commit suicide. The fate of Nadie is representative because the same thing happened to other women in the book. Nonetheless, nobody doubted their humanity and their identity was maintained. To put it in another way, slavery in Africa was not comparable to the Atlantic slavery, which was promoted by Europeans in Europe and America in terms of humanity, freedom and rights.

In that line of thoughts, slavery in America was unprecedented. It was the complete dehumanization of the enslaved Africans. Jeffrey (1847) gave an excellent definition of Americans' conception of slavery when he said:

It is a system of wholesale robbery. It robs multitudes of our race of all the rights of their rational and immortal natures, and classes them with the beasts of the field. It robs them of personal freedom. It deprives millions of our fellow-beings of the right to their own bodies, and degrades them to the rank of mere property, to be bought and sold at the will of a master" (p. 3).

In the New World, an African slave could not do whatever he liked. He entirely depended on his owner who had the power of life and death over his person. He could not marry without the permission of his owner. Even if he did, his marriage was not recognized by the law. This non-legal sanction permitted the owner to separate married slaves and sell them at any time he wanted.

In the American legal system, a child born out of the union of two slaves always followed the status of his mother. This legal interference in the lives of slaves allowed the owner to father children from his slave women. It was very rare to see an owner who set his mulatto children free. These breed of slaves symbolized the humiliation of their white fathers because they were the very signs of their fathers' lasciviousness. A slave was worked to death just to make richer his profit-making owner. They could not aspire freedom except some who bought their freedom or were set free by their benevolent white masters. It is now congruous to shift to talk about the actual beginning of African slavery in America.

## 2. Origin and Causes of Slavery in America

The beginning of African slavery in the Americas could be traced back to the Portuguese incursions in Africa in the fifteenth century and the Spanish conquests of Central America in the sixteenth century. The incursions were actually made for covered economic reasons. In the first part of the sixteenth century, the conquistadors subdued the powerful Indians' empires of Mexico (1519) and Peru (1531). Before the Spanish conquests, these empires were politically, socially and economically organized. (History.com Editors, 2019) told us about the greatness of the Inca empire "High in the Andes Mountains of Peru, the Inca built a dazzling empire that governed a population of 12 million people. Although they had no writing system, they had an elaborate government, great public works, and a brilliant agricultural system". Their lands abounded with gold and other mineral resources. Nevertheless, the number of the Spanish was not enough to exploit these resources. They reduced Indians to slavery. They maltreated and overworked them. This physical exploitation reduced the number of indigenous people. They were not accustomed to the type of enslavement the Spanish introduced in their communities. Another factor, which considerably contributed to the decimation of Native American populations, was the diseases Europeans brought with them. These diseases included smallpox, whooping cough, influenza, cholera, etc. The foregoing reality is highlighted in the following words of Middleton and Lombard (2011):

When Old World diseases reached the Americas they caused what are known as "virgin soil epidemics" and devastated huge proportions of the population. The problem for the Indian peoples was that, as soon as one epidemic passed the survivors were often afflicted by another. Even a single pathogen could devastate a community leaving crops unattended the game not hunted, and survivors so emotionally devastated that they sometimes even lost their will to fight against the next outbreak. After an illness, communities sometimes lost the skills and resources to remain economically viable let alone defend themselves from external attack (p. 23).

The imperialistic and profit-making Spanish did not care about the sufferings of Native Americans. The only thing that mattered to them was the profit their labor generated. While Indigenous people were dying, wealth was flowing into the treasury of Spain. However, a Dominican priest, Bartholomew De Las Casas, was opposed to the maltreatment of Native Americans. In fact, he was sent to Chiapia to convert Native Americans. What he saw there broke his heart. Native Americans were dehumanized and maltreated by the Spanish. Las Casas came back to Spain to tell the Pope and the King Charles V what he saw there. He wanted to put an end to their enslavement:

By 1550, Las Casas had persuaded the emperor to instruct the Council of the Indies to convene a special committee of theologians and jurists to sit in judgment on the specific issue: is it lawful for the King of Spain to wage war on the Indians before preaching the faith to them, in order to subject them to his rule, so that afterward they may be more easily instructed in the faith." (Clayton, 2011, p. 129).

A debate was organized between Las Casas and one disciple of Aristotle, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, in the presence of the representative of the Pope. Las Casas defended Native Americans and Sepúlveda supported their enslavement. Sepúlveda, in his Aristotelian definition of slave said that:

... they [Indians] belong to another category, born to serve and to be dominated as form dominates matter, soul the body, husband his wife, father his son. This order has been established by God for the common good. The one who is born slave, if he does not have any master he will be lost. He will let himself vanish from the earth" (Carrière, 1999 p. 41).

The excerpt implies and emphasizes that Indians are naturally destined to serve the Caucasian race. In other words, a slave without a master is like a body without soul. Sepúlveda entails that Indians were not civilized, an argument, which was put forward by proslavery advocates. In the same direction, he stated that: [...] since we know about their existence, they have been unable to invent something. They are only good at imitating the Spanish, their superior, something which characterizes a soul of slave. They ignore the use of metal, weapons and wheel. They walk a long distance with their burden on their back like beast of burden. Their food is loathsome and resembles that of animals. They roughly comb their bodies and worship horrible idols. I do not even mention their human sacrifices. I add that they are described as stupid like our children or our idiots. They marry very often. They ignore the importance of money and the value of things. They exchanged the broken glass of barrel for gold!<sup>II</sup> (Carrière, 1999, pp. 26-27).

In this passage, Sepúlveda shows the legitimacy of the enslavement of Native Americans. They are not civilized and they are heathens because they worship “false” deities. On top of this, they do human sacrifices. It must be noted that he might get his information from other people who deliberately veiled the truth about Native Americans. These people needed to justify the enslavement of Indians. According to Sepúlveda, Indians deserved to be enslaved because they were heathens. To him, their enslavement by the Spanish was legitimate. He said that “... Indians deserve their fate because they are constantly offending God because of their sins and heathenism. This stands true for all the heathens. The wars that we are waging against them are just”<sup>III</sup> (Carrière, 1999, p. 20). He talked about the universal and civilizing mission of Christianity in order to move his audience to take his side. In doing this, he advocated violent conversion. He argued that “All the human beings are predestined to be Christians one day including the ignorant and the barbarians. They all belong to the Body of Christ because Christianity is universal. It is the highest kindness that we can bring to each of these peoples because it assures eternal salvation”<sup>IV</sup> (Carrière, 1999, p. 21). In this passage, Sepúlveda inadvertently recognizes the humanity of Indians because it is impossible to teach animals to believe in God. Therefore, his arguments are contradictory. Sometimes Indians are human beings, sometimes they are animals “These creatures with human appearance do not belong to His [God] people; the glad tidings have not been announced for them”<sup>V</sup> (Carrière, 1999, p. 24). While Sepúlveda was negatively talking about Native Americans, Las Casas spoke of their sufferings under the Spanish colonial rule. In doing this, he mentioned their qualities in order to dismantle the arguments of his opponent.

In talking about the qualities of Native Americans, Las Casas said that: “They are beautiful, Eminence [the representative of the Pope] and are good-looking persons. They are pacifist, meek and mild. They are not covetous of what belongs to other people. They are kind and deprived of trick... They are unable to lie. That is why they fall into our traps. They looked like man before the fall”<sup>VI</sup> (Carrière, 1999, pp. 15-16). Las Casas’ arguments belong to a literary trend, which was called “The Myth of the Noble Savage”. In the late seventeenth century and eighteenth century, this trend was fashionable among abolitionists and philosophers<sup>VII</sup>. It emerged when some Europeans distorted the image of Africans.

<sup>II</sup> D’abord, depuis leur découverte, ils se sont montrés incapables de toute invention. Ils sont uniquement habiles à copier les gestes des Espagnols, leurs supérieurs, ce qui caractérise une âme d’esclave. Ils ignorent l’usage du métal, des armes à feu et de la roue. Ils portent leurs fardeaux sur le dos, comme de bêtes, pendant de longs parcours. Leur nourriture est détestable, semblable à celle des animaux. Ils se peignent grossièrement le corps et adorent des idoles affreuses. Je ne reviens pas sur les sacrifices humains. J’ajoute qu’on les décrit stupides comme nos enfants ou nos idiots. Ils se marient très fréquemment. Ils ignorent la nature de l’argent et n’ont aucune idée de la valeur des choses. Ils échangeaient le verre cassé des barils contre de l’or ! (Carrière, 1999, pp. 26-27).

<sup>III</sup> « ...les Indiens méritent leur sort parce que leurs péchés et leur idolâtrie sont une offense constante à Dieu. Et il en est ainsi de tous les idolâtres. Les guerres que nous menons contre eux sont justes (Carrière, 1999, p. 20).

<sup>IV</sup> « Tous les êtres humains sont prédestinés à être chrétiens un jour. Même les ignorants, même les barbares. Ils font tous partie du corps mystique du Christ, car la religion chrétienne est une voie universelle. Elle est le plus haut bienfait qu’on puisse apporter à chacun des peuples, puisqu’elle assure le salut éternel » (Carrière, 1999, p. 21).

<sup>V</sup> « Ces créatures à l’apparence humaine ne font pas partie de Son [Dieu] peuple ; La bonne nouvelle n’a pas été dite pour eux » (Carrière, 1999, p. 24).

<sup>VI</sup> « Ils sont beaux, éminence (légal du Pape) de belle allure. Ils sont pacifiques et doux, comme des brebis. Sans convoitise du bien d’autrui. Généreux, dépourvus d’artifice... Ils sont incapables de mensonge. C’est pourquoi ils tombent dans nos pièges... ils étaient comme l’image du paradis avant la faute » (Carrière, 1999, pp. 15-16).

<sup>VII</sup> For more information about “The Myth of the Noble Savage”, see Benezet, A. (1771). *Some Historical Account of Guinea, Its Situation, Produce, and the General Disposition of Its Inhabitants with An Inquiry into the Rise and Progress*

At the end of this debate, Las Casas proposed to enslave Africans instead of Native Americans. This debate came to be known as the Controversy of Valladolid. Finally, the Church decided that Native Americans were human beings and consequently their enslavement had to be abolished, but unfortunately for Africans. Las Casas “suggested to young King Charles’s counselors that a license be issued to import Negro slaves directly from Spain or Africa to the islands” (Clayton, 2011, p. 137). His proposal had a dramatic consequence on the lives of millions of Africans. It marked the beginning of their sufferings and their separation from their homelands. The compliance with the Church decision shows that the European Christian Kings respected their spiritual leaders. Then, Clayton (2011) demonstrated that Las Casas later on regretted what he had said because he was not aware of the atrocities of the slave trade. When he realized that African slaves were shipped to the New World in inhuman conditions, he denounced the slave trade. Unfortunately, his protest was fruitless because the king with the approval of theologians and the Pope had already made the decision.

Did the Church really try to abolish African slavery later as it did with European slavery and Native American slavery? The answer to this question would help us understand the attitude and the role played by the Church in the enslavement of Blacks.

### 3. The Lethargy of the Church Regarding African Slavery

In the eighteenth century, the Church remained indifferent to the emergence of ‘pseudo’ sciences in Europe. Anatomists, environmentalists, ethnologists and others were trying to explain the African skin color and to show that they belonged to an inferior ‘race’, the polygenists. The Church knew about the works of these intellectuals. It could defend the idea of monogenism, but it did nothing. In 1756, the deist Voltaire talked about Black Africans in his *Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations* as follows: “their round eyes, their flat noses, their invariably flat lips, the wool on their head, even the extent of their intelligence reflects prodigious divergences between them and other species of men” (As cited in Curran, 2011, p. 31). An English intellectual Lord Kames shared Voltaire’s polygenesis. He (1775) refuted the environmental explanation of Buffon. To him, Black Africans came from a different ‘race’. As he put it “The black colour of negroes, thick lips, flat nose, crisped woolly hair, and rank smell, distinguish them from every other race of men” (p. 12). Both writers had no self-interested view in talking about Africans in this way. They were not slave dealers. However, their arguments were used as an apologia for slavery. For example, Long<sup>viii</sup> (1774, II, p. 336) (As cited in Bird, 2007, p. 51) argued that “For my own part, I think there are extremely potent reasons for believing, that the White and the Negroe are two distinct species... none but the blind can doubt it”. Long compared Black people to Orangutans. To him, they were the same and they had ‘amorous intercourse’. This perception of Africans shows that they were animals. (Cantor 1963, p. 465) (As cited in Bird 2007, p. 62) clearly pointed out “Long did not merely place the black man below the white man, he practically expelled him from the human race”. Edward Long’s position towards Black Africans can be understood. His *History of Jamaica* was written when Black people became a problem in England. It was published just two years after Lord Mansfield ruled in favor of Somerset, an African slave who was about to be deported to Jamaica by his master. This decision forbade anyone to remove his slave to the colonies by force in order to be sold into slavery. It was based on the English tradition, which did not tolerate slavery in England.

According to Bird (2007) some people like Long saw this decision as a means to corrupt the purity of the Britons’ blood because of the increasing number of Blacks (slaves and free) in Britain. Long could not remain indifferent to this decision. He had to defend the West Indian interests, which were connected to his. He needed to say that Blacks were ‘inferior beings’ and were therefore fit for enslavement. The Anglican Church could have taken advantage of this legal battle which was raging in the English society to defend Africans (free or slaves), but nothing happened. Some religious people even devised their own means to support slavery.

---

*of the Slave Trade, Its Nature, and Lamentable Effects. Also a Republication of the Sentiments of Several Authors of Note on this Interesting Subject: Particularly an Extract of a Treatise Written by Granville Sharpe.* Philadelphia on <http://www.gutenberg.org>. Release Date: March 7, 2004; Rousseau, J. J. *A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind* on <http://www.gutenberg.org>. Release Date: February 17, 2004; and Behn, A. (1688). *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave, A True History.* London.

<sup>viii</sup>According to Bird (2007), Edward Long was born in England. He was closely connected with Jamaica because he had a plantation there. He spent twelve years there. He came back to England because of ill health and never returned to the island again. As he was very influential he defended the West Indian interests through publications.

Some religious people put forward the biblical sanction of slavery. They distorted Holy Scriptures to legitimize slavery. They talked about the Curse of Ham in order to show that God ordained the enslavement of Africans. As stated in the book of Genesis, chapter 9, verses 18-25, the story of Ham goes as follows:

The sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled. Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers (As cited in Goldenberg, 2017, p. 14).

As this passage shows, it is Canaan who is cursed, not Ham. Canaan is an innocent son who pays for the sin of his father. Besides, there is no mention of skin color. In spite of that, some Europeans, Americans and religious men have distorted this biblical passage. They said that Africans descended from Canaan who turned black because of the curse he received. Consequently they were condemned to perpetual slavery. The story of Cain, who killed his brother Abel, was also used to justify African slavery. According to Goldenberg (2017), this dual form of the curse (blackness associated with servitude) was made possible because of the development of African slave trade and slavery. The Europeans who were involved in it had to justify it. As he put it "The reality of African servitude was readily explained by the dual-curse elaboration of the biblical story, handily serving the purpose of explaining and maintaining the status quo in society and justifying the slave trade" (p. 139).

Surprisingly, some religious men defended this dual Curse of Ham. Francisco de la Cruz, a Spanish missionary in Peru wrote to the Spanish Inquisition in 1575 that "The blacks (*negros*) are justly captives by just sentence of God for the sins of their fathers, and that in sign thereof God gave them that color" (As cited in Goldenberg, 2017, p. 121). In this quotation, we clearly see the association of blackness and servitude. In reading this passage from Francisco de la Cruz, one question comes to mind: why did not he remain faithful to the biblical passage? The answer to this question finds its answer in the nature of the Spanish missions in America. The missions had to have slaves. The slaves captured were taught Christianity, but they worked for the priests. De la Cruz echoed what other slaveholders thought of Africans. The Spanish missionaries were not the only slaveholding people. In North America, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel had slaves on their plantations in Georgia. In talking about the promotion of slavery by the Church Weatherford (1957, pp. 142-143) (as cited in Morrison, n. d., p 28) stated that:

The churches' acceptance of slavery went so far that in the early eighteenth century, some Swedish Lutherans in North Carolina sold some church land and used the money to buy slaves. These slaves were then hired out, and the resulting money used to support the minister. At about the same time, another Lutheran church raised funds in Europe which were then used to purchase a farm and slaves to work it for their minister.

As imprinted in the excerpt, the religious people of the period saw no inconsistency between slavery and Christianity. To them, slaveholding equated with the redemption and salvation of souls. On top of that, holding slaves contributed to solve their financial problems.

American religious people were aware that Southern slaveholders were using the Bible to justify and legitimize the enslavement of Africans, but they took no coordinate action to dismantle their arguments. They could have told them that the Bible did not promote violence. Morrison (n.d.) showed how the American advocates of slavery used the Bible to justify the enslavement of Africans. They left no stone unreturned to show the legitimacy of owning slaves. They stated that the old patriarchs had slaves and God said nothing. Therefore, they could have them, too. To them, nowhere in the Old Testament and the New one was written a denunciation of slavery. They even said that the Northern people were distorting the content of the Bible and refusing to comply with God's command:

“[...] many Southerners were convinced Northerners were abandoning the Bible. In January 1820, for example, Senator William Smith of South Carolina claimed that he would not be “astonished” to find that Northerners were attempting “a new version of the Old and New Testaments,” a “new model... to suit the policy of the times.” They would “Throw off such parts as were uncongenial to their interests, and leave the residue to God.” Smith finished with a particular concern of his: “They had already given the Scriptures an implied construction, as different from its literal sense, as they had that of the Constitution of the United States”” (Morrison, no date, p. 25).

The Southerners’ attack on Northerners was understandable because the latter had already abolished slavery in the North and they wanted to extend this abolition to the Southern states. Northerners had abolished slavery because of their religious conviction. Southerners were wrong to say that Northerners “were abandoning the Bible”. Religious people such as the Puritans, the Quakers, the Lutherans and the like peopled the North. These people knew quite well the Bible. Their abolition of slavery was partly due to their faith. Southerners just wanted to defend their interests at any cost (economic profits and advantages).

In order to understand the attitude of the Church toward slavery, we need to understand the relation between the Church and the State as well. During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church was very influential. It was highly respected by all the European monarchs. It was the Pope who crowned them and who made their authority legal. In case of misunderstanding between two states, the issue was settled by the Pope. His influence was illustrated in the territorial conflict between Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century subsequent to the discovery of the New World:

Initially it seemed that the Portuguese and Spanish would dispute control over their discoveries. However, under the auspices of Pope Alexander VI in 1494, the two crowns signed the Treaty of Tordesillas, which divided their claims with an imaginary line 370 leagues (about 1,000 miles) west of the Cape Verde Islands. Spain was to have exclusive rights to all new territories west of the line, while Portugal was to enjoy similar advantages to the east. Neither had any qualms about annexing such lands, since Christian doctrine had granted the right to the persons and property of heathens and infidels since the time of the Crusades. (Middleton & Lombard ,2011, pp. 33-36).

The Pope became the arbiter of the two most powerful European countries by dividing the World into two parts and giving to each one part. Portugal was given Africa and Brazil and Spain was given South America. The treaty came to be known as the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494). At that time, the Church was considered as an independent entity. Church members thought it was their duty to Christianize those who did not share their religious faith. They had all the means to lead this divine mission. They were respected and listened to. At that time, the Church had all the power to abolish African slavery.

However, the Church lost most of its power when the European monarchs decided to adopt the policy of “one king/queen one faith” meaning that they became the heads of states and heads of Churches. Those who were formerly appointed by the Church were then nominated by the kings such as archbishops. Consequently, the Church and the states became united and they defended the same interests. Even if some church members were against slavery, they could not do anything because the Crown supported slavery. All that they could do was to oppose the cruelty of masters and to promote religious instructions among slaves<sup>IX</sup>. Yet, the only religious group, which successfully abolished the slave trade and slavery, was the Society of Friends. According to Soderlund (1985), in the 1750s, the money-loving and God-fearing Friends began to realize that slave-owning was at odds with their religious principles. They understood that it challenged one of their basic principles which was equality. They believed that everybody was equal before God. Consequently, they abolished the slave trade in 1758 and slavery in 1776.

We have to wait for the twentieth century so that the Roman Catholic Church could recognize its role in the promotion of Black slavery and the slave trade. It happened when the Pope visited Goree in 1992 and asked pardon on behalf of the Church. MPisi (2008) told about the remorse of Pope Jean Paul II regarding the involvement of the Church in the African slave trade as follows:

---

<sup>IX</sup> It must be noted that some slaveholders were skeptical of catechism. They thought that religious people would teach their slaves the principle of equality as it was stated in the Bible, and consequently they would incite them to revolt against them.



Among all those Popes who have denounced the African slave trade and slavery or have advocated their abolition, none has thought that Africans, in order to get some peace, need the apology of the Church for the great wrong it did them. This wrong is imprinted on their mind and has regrettable psychological and social consequences. It is Pope Jean Paul II who will be the first to understand this”<sup>x</sup> (p. 12).

In his trip to Goree in 1992 the Pope indeed said “In this African sanctuary of the sufferings of Black people we beg God’s forgiveness [thinking about the deported populations of Africa]”<sup>x1</sup> (as cited in MPisi, 2008, p. 13). The attitude of the Pope shows that the Church played a role in the African slave trade and slavery. Some people might think that it is too late for the Church to repent. Pope Jean Paul II must not be blamed for that. He was not the prime mover of the African slave trade and slavery. His reign did not coincide with this dark period of African history. Nonetheless, he was just ashamed of what his predecessors and other Christians did to Africans. This thus reveals and attests the vital role that the Church had played in the enslavement of Black Africans.

## Conclusion

In the light of the above findings, we can say that the Church just took advantage of a system that was already entrenched in African societies. It indicates that slavery had been practiced in Africa before the papal condemned it. Nevertheless, it is highly important to remind that the practice of slavery in the precolonial Africa was the very converse of that of the Atlantic slavery or Western slavery in general. Initially the Church thought that through slavery Africans would buy their way to heaven because they would be introduced to the true faith. But later on, some religious people began to realize that slavery and the slave trade were a lucrative business. They did not hesitate to use the Bible to defend African slavery on economic bases. In other words, the Church had several opportunities to denounce slavery, especially at a time when it was powerful. It did nothing because of its economic profits. However, in the eighteenth century, some other religious people began to realize that slaveholding was a sin. This was the case of Quakers, some Anglicans, Puritans, Methodists, etc. It was only in the last decade of the twentieth century that the head of the Roman Catholic Church officially recognized the role of the Church in the African holocaust.

In addition, the findings have also revealed that the meanings of slavery had evolved through times and space. In the West, it was first associated with the evangelization of pagans and infidels regardless of the color factor whereas in Africa it was related to captivity (after war). Then, it changed into hidden economic profits making until its abolition in 1776 but this time it was based on the color factor (blackness). The color factor was used to justify the enslavement of Africans. Although the paper mainly deals with the role of the Church in the enslavement of Black Africans, we must not forget that some Arab Muslims were also slave dealers and they saw nothing wrong in what they were doing<sup>xii</sup>. That is, both Christianity and Islam had played vital roles in the enslavement of Black Africans.

## References

- Behn, A. (1688). *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave, A True History*. London.
- Benezet, A. (1771). *Some Historical Account of Guinea, Its Situation, Produce, and the General Disposition of Its Inhabitants with An Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade, Its Nature, and Lamentable Effects. Also a Republication of the Sentiments of Several Authors of Note on this Interesting Subject: Particularly an Extract of a Treatise Written by Granville Sharpe*. Philadelphia on <http://www.gutenberg.org>. Release Date: March 7, 2004.

---

<sup>x</sup> « De tous ces papes qui ont critiqué la traite et l’esclavage des Noirs, et/ou ont appelé à leur abolition, aucun n’a songé que les Africains avaient, pour se sentir en paix, besoin qu’on leur présente des excuses, pour le mal qu’on leur a fait, un mal indélébile qui marque tout leur être et qui a des conséquences psychologiques et sociales fâcheuses. C’est le Pape Jean-Paul II qui, le premier, comprendra cela » (MPisi, 2008, p. 12).

<sup>x1</sup> « Dans ce sanctuaire africain de la douleur noire, nous implorons le pardon du ciel [en pensant aux populations déportées du continent africain] » (MPisi, 2008, p. 13).

<sup>xii</sup> For the involvement of Muslims in the promotion of slavery, see Clarence-Smith (2006).

- Bird, R. B. (2007). *18<sup>th</sup> Century Transformations of the Jamaican Plantocracy: Edward Long and Bryan Edwards* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <http://www.pdfdrive.org>. Date of retrieval here February 16, 2020
- Cantor, M. (1963). "The image of the Negroe in Colonial Literature". *The New England Quarterly* 36, 465.
- Carrière, J. C. (1999). *La Controverse de Valladolid*. Actes Sud-Papiers.
- Clarence-Smith, W. G. (2006). *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Clayton, L. A. (2011). *Bartholomew de Las Casas and the conquest of the Americas*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- Condé, M. (1987). *Segu*. Translated from the French by Barbara Bray. New York: Ballantine Books
- Coulibaly, A. S. and Coulibaly, Z. (2019). "Precolonial African Society and Slavery in The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavo Vassa, The African". in *Revue Baobab N°26*, pp. 266-280, Retrieved from <http://www.Revuebaobab.org>.
- Curran, A. S. (2011). *The Anatomy of Blackness. Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Davis, D. B. (1975). *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. London: Cornell University
- Eltis, D. (2000). *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*. Cambridge: C.U.P.
- Garnsey, P. (1999). *Ideas of slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goldenberg, D. M. (2017). *Black and Slave: The origins and History of the Curse of Ham*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- History.com Editors. (2019). Pizarro Executes Last Inca Emperor. Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/pizarro-executes-last-inca-emperor>. Access Date: April 4, 2020.
- Home, H. or Lord Kaims (1775). *Sketches of the History of Man*. Vol. 1. Dublin: United Company of Booksellers.
- Jeffrey, G. (1847). *The pro-slavery character of the American churches, and the sin of holding Christian communion with them: a lecture delivered at the request of the Free Church Anti-Slavery Society*. LSE Selected Pamphlets
- Long, E. (1774). *The History of Jamaica*. 3 Vols. London.
- Middleton, R. and Lombard, A. (2011). *Colonial America. A History to 1763*. Fourth Edition. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Morrison, L. R. (n.d). *The Religious Defense of American Slavery Before 1830* on <http://www.kingscollege.net> date of retrieval February 6, 2020.
- Mpisi, J. (2008). *Les Évêques africains et la traite négrière « Pardon de l'Afrique à l'Afrique »*. Paris : L'Harmattan.
- Pétre- Grenouilleau, O. (2004). *Les traites négrières : Essai d'histoire globale*. Gallimard.
- Rousseau, J. J. *A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind* on <http://www.gutenberg.org>. Release Date: February 17, 2004.
- Soderlund J. R. (1985). *Quakers and Slavery: A divided spirit*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Weatherford, W. D. (1957). *American Churches and the Negro*. Boston: Christopher Publishing House. <http://www.biblehub.com/esv/genesis/1.htm>.