

# The Role of Religion in the Abolition Movement

“We are taught, by both holy scriptures, and by the experience of ages, to believe that the Righteous Judge of the whole earth chastiseth nations for their sins, as well as individuals: and can it be expected that he will suffer this great iniquity to go unpunished?”

*The Case of Our Fellow Creatures*

## Religious Ambivalence to the Question of Slavery

In 2006 the Church of England voted in favour of apologising for their involvement in the slave trade over 200 years previously. The Archbishop of Canterbury believed the apology to be necessary in order to 'share the shame and the sinfulness' of their predecessors and to admit their part played in this disturbing history.

Throughout the campaign for abolition the Church of England had been ambivalent about emancipation, if not complicit in the trade. Instead of taking an open stance in favour of total abolition the Church directed its efforts on the conversion of slaves to Christianity in order to ensure salvation of the soul and the rewards of heaven as promised in the bible. Abolitionists succeeded in widening the debate on the slavery by focusing on religion as a means to persuade those undecided on the issue. It was left to a few outspoken individuals to voice their concerns that the notion of slavery was at odds with their Christian faith.

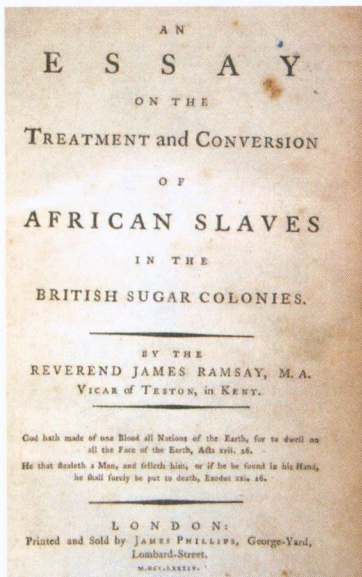


*A Negro's Friend*  
(Special Collections)

## Reverend James Ramsay

Reverend James Ramsay from Aberdeenshire was the leading abolitionist of the 1870s. Whilst serving as a naval doctor in the West Indies he witnessed first hand the horrendous conditions endured by slaves whilst being transported from their homeland to slavery in America. The scenes he saw onboard a slave ship in 1759 profoundly shocked him and inspired him to work with slaves and campaign for their freedom. Soon after, Ramsay left his position at sea and became an Anglican minister on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts for over ten years. Whilst there Ramsay accumulated many enemies, particularly enraging the local plantation owners with his sermons which proclaimed liberty for all human beings.

On his return to England, where he secured a parish in Kent, he began writing seriously on the subject publishing many pamphlets and working behind the scenes on the Wilberforce campaign. The gradualist approach that he took towards emancipation endeared him to those with more conservative views who were concerned most with the economic repercussions of abolition. Unfortunately Ramsay did not live to witness the end of slavery having died in 1789.

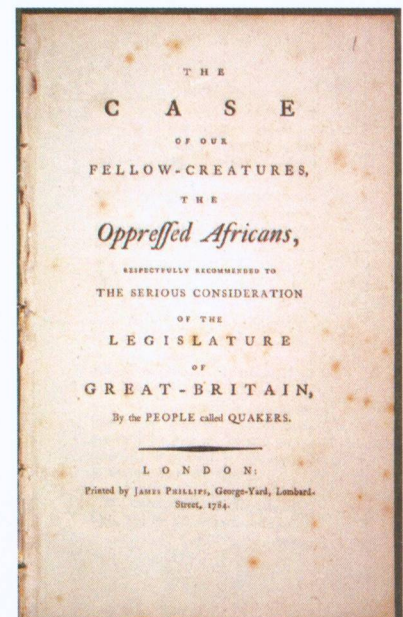


(Special Collections)

## The Quakers

The Quakers were the first religious denomination to declare themselves anti-slavery and expressed their clear disapproval of this practice as early as 1727. It was therefore the Quakers, a minority religious group consisting of approximately 20,000 in the late eighteenth century, that established a determined campaign of anti-slavery agitation.

At that time Quakers were isolated from wider society and were treated with suspicion, which also involved being barred from Parliament until 1828. As a result, they agreed that an all-Quaker abolition committee would achieve very little in mainstream media and politics and another approach was adopted. In 1787 the Quakers teamed up with Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson to form the 'Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade'. The committee consisted of nine Quakers out of a total of twelve members with the MP William Wilberforce accepting the role of parliamentary spokesman for the campaign and beginning his lifelong campaign for a total ban. Despite being small in number the Quaker support to this campaign was invaluable. By supporting the campaign financially and by utilising a network of contacts, consisting of some high profile wealthy members of society, the Quakers were fundamental in swaying the public opinion to that of total emancipation. The campaign adopted shrewd tactics including the boycotting of slave produced goods and a printing and distribution campaign which culminated in the production of approximately 2,400 anti-slavery tracts.



(Special Collections)