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BOOK REVIEW

Reparations – Slavery and the Tyranny of Imaginary Guilt.

Forum 2025 216 pp Nigel Biggar

Chris Sugden ¹

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‘Reparations’ should be required reading for all members of the Church Commissioners who wish to retain any reputation for competence, integrity and acknowledging reliable scholarship before they dispose of £100 million of their assets, legally devoted to supporting parish ministry, for ‘reparations’ for the slave trade. Lord Biggar, the author of ‘Colonialism’ takes apart limb from limb the arguments put forward by a campaign for making such reparations, sponsored by an Irish billionaire to combat alleged racism, that began following Black Lives Matter in 2014 and the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

In 160 pages, with 33 pages of notes and 16 pages of bibliography Nigel Biggar, Emeritus Professor of Moral Theology at Oxford makes a closely argued and evidenced case based on extensive reading of current reports and scholarly works on the issue.

His case is that Britain spent far more on suppressing the slave trade globally from Brazil, across Africa to India and Australia than it ever gained through those engaged in it. It was ‘the most expensive example (of costly international moral action) recorded in modern history’ according to Kaufman and Pape cited on page 86. The neo-Marxist dogma that colonialism extracted wealth from the colonies and hoarded it in the imperial fatherland does ‘not survive contact’ with the evidence (page 109). Its profits did play a ‘significant’ – somewhere between marginal and modest - but not ‘decisive’ part in the industrialisation of Britain.

He notes that the justification advanced for reparations makes no mention of African complicity in European slave trading, or of the British Empire’s commitment to suppressing slavery from 1807 and asserts that the transatlantic slave trade as a human atrocity has never been surpassed. It holds that transatlantic chattel slavery (TCS) and colonialism are directly responsible for structural modern day racism, but ignores the fact that the suppression and abolition of the slave trade since 1807 was

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premised on the conviction that 'all persons are basically equal under God, regardless of race and cultural development' (page 115)

The gap between the economies of former colonies and their colonisers owes much to the policies of post-colonial governments and, and in the case of the UK, while owing something to the profits from slavery, owes much more to industrial, financial and institutional creativity.

As to compensation he asks the obvious questions: "Can we be sure that the descendants of slaves would have been better off had their ancestors remained in West Africa – some as slaves and sacrificial funeral fodder? Are there not some descendants of slaves who prosper rather more than some descendants of slave owners." (p 121). Many more suffered from the states of earlier centuries, women, children, industrial workers, so why pick out black slaves in particular? And why should not the descendants of African chiefs and Arab slave traders also be presented with a bill?

As for Queen Anne's Bounty, the forerunner of the Commissioners' Funds, it made no money at all from the slave trade which the South Sea Company, in which it invested for no more than nine years, operated at a loss.

Having rehearsed the arguments and evidence in detail, Lord Biggar ends helpfully with a chapter summarising his ten arguments why the Church Commissioners are so wrong and misguided in their efforts. "The racially discriminatory fingering of the British is unfair and politically opportunistic".

In closing he writes "genuine saints will not waste their time proclaiming their 'anti-racism' in defiance of historical truth about slavery and empirical truth about racism today. Rather, they will be intent upon diagnosing its actual causes in the light of all the evidence, in order to craft an effective remedy. Because they care more about solving the problem than signalling their virtue".

He proposes that by the criterion of historical association, rather than try to save the whole world, since Britain had responsibility for welfare of the West Indian colonies for several centuries and retains cultural, institutional, legal and sometimes constitutional links with post-colonial Caribbean states, it would make sense to target its overseas aid there.

His book is a tightly reasoned argument against the current proposals for reparations, which he regards as unjustified, based on the involvement of the Church Commissioners and Queen Anne's Bounty. Other aspects of the slave trade and the involvement of Britain in it, such as the growth of the ports of Liverpool and Bristol, would need to be examined if a fuller discussion of the subject was to be undertaken. But that is material for another book.

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