William Wilberforce, born 1759
William Wilberforce devoted himself to God after a spiritual awakening as a young adult, adopting a lifestyle and worldview that greatly affected his political career. Within a few years of the beginning of his conversion, after conversations with individuals such as William Pitt, Wilberforce wrote in his journal, “God almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.” In this way, Wilberforce’s Christianity motivated him to take on a balanced approach to achieving progress in England. In practice, Wilberforce did not view his “two objects” as separate goals to be attained. Instead, he realized that both were closely related, and that achieving one without the other would be problematic, and potentially difficult. Essentially, he understood that a society untouched by Christian goodwill and morality would have no problem continuing to support a system involving the trade of human beings for forced labor. And since his own personal motivation was a primarily moral one, he was convinced “that England’s destiny lay safest in the hands of men of clear Christian

principle.” However, he also believed that Christianity would be insufficient as a means to convince Parliament that the slave trade should be brought to an end, causing him to adopt a more academic approach for that setting. Thus, Wilberforce’s strategy for achieving the abolition of the slave trade in Britain consisted of encouraging Christian morality in the people of Britain while utilizing rhetoric grounded more in appeals to facts, logic, and general humanity for his Parliamentary speeches.

Wilberforce’s approach to the reform of public views did not merely consist of condemnation of the slave trade, but instead took the form of a more comprehensive attempt at reform of public morality and Christianity in general, since he “believed that ultimately culture needed to change if politics were to change.” One method that Wilberforce utilized for expounding his views and exhortations was writing. One of the most popular of Wilberforce’s writings was a book specifically about Christianity published in 1797, entitled *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious Systems of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*. In this aptly titled book, Wilberforce discussed his own views on how Christianity should look in people’s lives, urging for reform of the faith and morals of the individuals of his time, and, by extension, the church itself. He perceived several prevalent moral issues in his society, such as not observing the Sabbath, drinking, gambling, religious hypocrisy, holding church traditions that oppose Scripture, and many others; he believed a strong Christian faith would combat those problems in an individual


Wilberforce also touched specifically on the idea of showing benevolence toward others, a concept which applied quite well to the topic of the slave trade. When discussing the idea of human pity and emotion, Wilberforce wrote, “We read of slaughtered thousands with less emotion, than we hear the particulars of a shocking accident which has happened in the next street,” and later continued to say, speaking of people becoming engrossed in the reading of novels, “We become so much interested by these incidents of the imagination, that we cannot banish them from our thoughts, nor recover the tone of our minds; and often, we scarcely bring ourselves to lay down our book at the call of real misfortune, of which perhaps we go to the relief, on a principle of duty, but with little sense of interest or emotion of tenderness.” Thus, working in the framework of discussing ethics enabled Wilberforce to further encourage sympathy for his cause, by arousing in his readers the same emotion and Christian convictions concerning slavery that drove him to despise it.

Wilberforce’s writings also sometimes addressed the issue of the slave trade directly, as in his work, A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade; Addressed to the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of Yorkshire. Wilberforce used it to compile much of his evidence and logical arguments in prose that also makes several references to Christianity. In this way, Wilberforce presented the public with the logical sides of his argument against the slave trade in addition to the moral objections. Interestingly, however, Wilberforce did not publish A Letter… until 1807, shortly before Parliament

4 William Wilberforce, A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious Systems of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1829), 124.

5 Ibid., 124.
passed the bill that finally abolished the slave trade. Much of Wilberforce’s time spent gaining the public’s sympathies in his writings was focused on religion, and not the logical arguments used before Parliament, which he did not personally write about for the public in the exhaustive manner that *A Letter...* used until that work was released at the last stage of his campaign to end the slave trade.

Several individuals and groups supported Wilberforce’s aims at encouraging public Christian morality, such as the “Clapham Sect”, a term applied to a group of wealthy reformers (which included Wilberforce) who lived together for a time and dedicated themselves to expounding public morality and abolition. One of the group’s efforts consisted of the publication of a monthly journal called *The Christian Observer*, which is self-described as aiming “to recommend plain serious and practical religion, and to affirm the great evangelical doctrines of our Church without too much encouraging nice theological distinctions.” The group at Clapham thus aided Wilberforce in one way through further publication and spread of the encouragement of Christian morality. The Clapham Sect also provided Wilberforce with great support for his campaigns, assisting him with research, knowledge, experience, rhetoric, and political connections (one member acting as chairman of the East India Company’s Court of Directors). And the circle always, like Wilberforce himself, led by example in morality and monetary generosity, contributing to a wide variety of charitable and other causes. Wilberforce certainly took advantage of his circle of like-minded colleagues to help him in his fights

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Wilberforce: Abolition of the Slave Trade

for reform, thus allowing him to get more accomplished. The Clapham circle especially assisted in conducting and compiling research to use to support the case for abolition, as Wilberforce and the others constantly read about and investigated the slave trade, with many members becoming rightful experts. Speaking of Zachary Macaulay, one member of the Clapham group, historian Kevin Belmonte writes, “His knowledge was so encyclopedic that whenever the circle needed information, Wilberforce would quip, ‘Let’s look it out in Macaulay’.”8 It is not altogether likely that a strategy by Wilberforce to achieve progress that excluded this vital support circle would have been as successful.

Wilberforce also sought to increase public morality through the creation of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, an organization that tried to curb immorality following the king’s “Proclamation for the Discouragement of Vice”, the passage which Wilberforce encouraged. Wilberforce got the king to issue the proclamation in 1787 (though the society would not be founded until 1802), around the same time as Wilberforce was beginning his campaign for abolition, thus highlighting the importance and connection of his two goals. Since Wilberforce perceived in his day a need for great moral improvement, this society, with reference to the Proclamation, provided him with the means to effectively organize lobbies and reporting regarding immorality, pressing for punishment of relevant vices and enforcement of relevant laws. The committee, inspired by similar organizations in the previous century, consisted of Wilberforce and only a small, select group of individuals to guard against the possibility of hypocrisy by allowing too many members, some of whom would inevitably fail to abstain from the

very vices they condemned. The moral recommendations and policies that were instituted condemned “excessive drinking, blasphemy, profane swearing and cursing, lewdness, profanation of the Lord’s Day” … public gaming, disorderly houses, unlicensed places of entertainment, and ‘all loose and licentious prints’, and Wilberforce’s strategy for achieving moral reform was thus greatly aided by his ability to back some of his recommendations with political power and organization.9

While he certainly appealed to the common people with encouragement of Christian morality, Wilberforce made an effort to persuade through more objective means in his speeches before the British legislative body, in this way giving a presentation more likely to convince his fellow members of the British Parliament. During the introduction to a 1789 speech before Parliament on the slave trade (one of his first and most famous on the subject), Wilberforce stated, “I wish exceedingly, in the outset, to guard both myself and the House from entering into the subject with any sort of passion. It is not their passions I shall appeal to—I ask only for their cool and impartial reason; and I wish not to take them by surprise, but to deliberate, point by point, upon every part of this question.”10 Thus, Wilberforce desired to make it plain to his audience that the rationale for abolition of the slave trade did not simply consist of emotion, but was instead grounded in facts and logical reasons.

To uphold his standard of logically debating the issue, Wilberforce utilized a style of rhetoric founded in the principles of debate and formal argument, making sure to


address every issue brought forth logically before anything else. For example, in a May 1806 debate concerning a slave importation bill, “It had been stated, that very considerable trade in slaves had existed for a long time between the merchants of this country and the Spanish colonies in South America, He [Wilberforce] thought, in justice to his late right hon. friend (Mr. Pitt), and to himself, it was necessary to state the nature and origin of this trade.”

Wilberforce then used his historical and political knowledge to go on to describe how the situation being referred to was actually an unauthorized scheme in which the smuggling of slaves was being disguised as normal shipments. Wilberforce then backs up these facts by noting “To confirm his statement in this respect, he should move for copies of the instructions given to the captains of his Majesty's cruisers upon this subject, on the 20th of November, 1797.”

Later on in the same debate, Wilberforce also effortlessly refutes claims made about economics (for example slaves helping to increase British trade, especially in Spanish America), by noting that “The Spanish colonists could be supplied directly with slaves from the free ports under neutral flags, and therefore the 7 or 8 that might be brought in a British vessel could not be the reason of allowing the sale of British manufactures.” He finally concludes (yet only after laying forth his formal arguments) with a witty quip alluding to the immorality of the slave trade, saying of his opponent’s response, “He thought that this

11 Slave Importation Bill,” *Hansard*, accessed March 13, 2014, [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1806/may/02slave-importation-bill#S1V0006P0_18060502_HOC_8, 1.](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1806/may/02slave-importation-bill#S1V0006P0_18060502_HOC_8, 1.)

12 Ibid., 1

13 Ibid.
would not be a very safe doctrine for him to preach to his friends on the southern coasts of England."\textsuperscript{14}

As demonstrated in the 1806 debate on the slave importation bill, Wilberforce’s reasoned approach featured a constant use of references to extensive research, which he compiled in order to base his arguments on fact and evidence. Much of the strongest impact of the research lay in Wilberforce’s desire first to instruct his audience by shedding light on the poor conditions of the slaves, and how they contrasted with popular false notions of slave treatment. In the famous 1789 speech, Wilberforce notes that someone had previously stated, “Before dinner, they [the slaves being transported] are amused after the manner of their country. The song and the dance are promoted.”\textsuperscript{15} In actuality, “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. ‘I,’, says one of the other evidences, ‘was employed to dance the men, while another person danced the women.’”\textsuperscript{16} He continues in this way for several other points as well, detailing just how misconstrued the popular image and testimonies of House members concerning the conditions of slave trading truly were, backing up his assertions with references to his research and the reports of those with actual experience in the trade. In this he especially referenced a massive Privy Council report completed in 1789 that cited “former Governors, naval officers, captains of slavers, civil servants, doctors, 

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{15} Wilberforce, “Debate on Mr. Wilberforce’s Resolution,” 46. 
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 47.
Whenever there was a dispute over the facts, Wilberforce generally was more credible, given his sources were more reliable and that he himself was quite knowledgeable on the subject. That at the heart of his powerful and touching rhetoric was a very well-prepared and reasonable argument based on facts, precisely Wilberforce’s goal. He utilized research so that he could present the facts of the slave trade with confidence and authority. This emphasis on authoritative rhetoric was important to Wilberforce, since his strategy was often to adopt his speech to the most effective means of persuasion for his particular audience, which was in this case Parliament, an entity requiring a more academic and authoritative approach.

Within the framework of referencing research, Wilberforce also often specifically appealed to numbers, as in his usage of statistics for death and disease rates amongst slaves. Further on in his 1789 speech, Wilberforce refers to statistics from a report by a committee of the Jamaican legislature, saying of the slave mortality rate, “not less than 12 ½ per cent. perish in the passage … not less than 4 ½ per cent. die on the shore before the day of sale … One third more die in the seasoning … Upon the whole however, here is a mortality of about 50 per cent, and this among negroes who are not bought unless quite healthy at first.”18 Thus, Wilberforce further emphasized the extremity of the harsh conditions of the slaves by using numbers (which are more undisputable than simple rhetoric). Since Wilberforce aimed for credibility, numbers added a higher level of

believability to his case, and when joined with his previous references to other reports and facts, resulted in a convincing speech, something he would continue to strive to do.

Yet, Wilberforce also understood that cool logic alone could not likely bring Parliament to reach a firm decision to end the slave trade, which is why he made appeals to the general humanity of his audience, though not usually tying that rhetoric to direct references to Christianity. While Wilberforce certainly pressed this issue of conscience much more fervently for the general public, he still realized the necessity of maintaining a degree of that appeal to his listeners’ consciences. A clear example of the necessity of ties to emotion and morality is seen in Wilberforce’s use of facts and figures in and of itself, since no one would care if the slaves were being grossly mistreated if they did not themselves care for their fellow humans. Thus, he encouraged humanity in his audience by tying this appeal to conscience with explanations of the extremely poor conditions of the slaves, urging his listeners to consider the inhumane treatment and conditions of the individuals as a justification for abolition. In a February 1805 debate on the slave trade, he stated, “the general state of the negroes in the West Indies would never be materially improved, if the African importation was permitted to continue; they would always be in a state of degradation, below that which ought to be the lot of the human species.”[^19] In this way, Wilberforce makes an appeal to his listeners in hope that they will consider slaves to be worthy of consideration as humans, an argument which in itself requires a moral background in his audience of the kind that his concurrent campaigns for Christian

morality were encouraging. Later in an 1806 debate Wilberforce would also say, when discussing members of Parliament who had verbally spoken against slavery later declaring abolition to be impractical, “But it was to be regretted, that the feelings of benevolence were too apt to be evanescent, while interest was a cool and calculating principle; and the feelings of interest had gradually overpowered the dictates of philanthropy and the compunctions of humanity,” in this way urging his hearers to listen to their “philanthropy” and “humanity”. He demonstrates through these arguments his realization that abolition was an issue which callous logic could not adequately refute when purely by itself, requiring him to include appeals to humanity in his rhetorical strategy.

In spite of his appeals to humanity, Wilberforce rarely used direct references to Christianity or God in his Parliamentary speeches, only making occasional passing remarks alluding to God, most often in the simple usage of the not necessarily religious term “evil” when referring to the slave trade. In fact, he made it clear that he desired the parliamentary proceedings to stray from arguing through religious appeals in a June 1806 debate on the slave trade, during which a speaker brought forth the argument of religion justifying slavery. After briefly, yet adequately responding to the point and making the argument that Christianity in fact condemns slavery, Wilberforce quickly and forcefully added “But he should ever deprecate the introduction of such appeals to sacred authority

into that house, as tending rather to ridicule than to any satisfactory result.”

Essentially, Wilberforce believed that religion was too subjective and personal to enter as a serious issue in a formal parliamentary debate. While he certainly believed that Christianity had a strong place in the rationale for abolition, he did not believe that Parliament was the proper place to discuss such matters in a fair and reasonable manner.

Wilberforce was convinced that the best path to successfully abolish the British slave trade consisted of expounding Christian moral principles to the people of Britain while speaking more about facts and statistics when before Parliament. Wilberforce utilized his tremendous skills of judgment, work ethic, passion, rhetoric, and commitment to Christianity to craft a plan that addressed his audiences with the respective approaches that suited each best, and ensured the greatest possibility for not only abolition of the British slave trade and eventually slavery itself in that country, but also the reformation of the morals and Christianity of the people of his day. He was successful in both goals, and “ultimately prevailed because he understood the futility of attempting to end a systemic evil without also changing citizens’ values and dispositions.” Wilberforce sought to achieve his two great callings of moral reform and abolition by intertwining them both, using greater concern for morality to fuel desire and sympathy for abolition of the slave trade. It is in no small part this very balance and thoughtful pursuit of each goal that allowed Wilberforce to eventually succeed in accomplishing both of them.

21 Ibid., 7.
