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The Two Conversions of John Newton: Politics & Christianity in the British Abolitionist Movement

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Politics & Christianity in the British Abolitionist Movement

Megan Keller

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ABSTRACT

This thesis interrogated the relationship between British abolition and the eighteenth-century evangelical revival through the life of John Newton. Newton, though not representative of every abolitionist, was a vital figure in the abolitionist movement. His influence on Hannah More and William Wilberforce along with his contributions to the Parliamentary hearings made him a key aspect of its success. How he came to fulfill that role was a long and complex journey, both in terms of his religion and his understanding of slavery. He began his life under the spiritual direction of his pious, Dissenting mother, became an atheist by nineteen, and then an influential, evangelical minister in the Church of England in his later adulthood. In the midst of that journey, Newton was impressed, joined the crew of a slave ship, was himself enslaved, became a slave ship captain, and then, eventually, a fervent abolitionist. Though he was influenced by any people and ideas, his development of an evangelical Calvinistic theology seems to have driven him to ultimately condemn the slave trade. Understanding the relationship between Newton's two conversions—to evangelical Christianity and abolitionism—gives modern readers' insight into the intellectual roots of the abolitionist movement more broadly, the dynamics between Christianity and politics, as well as how individual moral choice can affect history.

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Introduction: An Unlikely Event

Viewed from a modern perspective, British Abolitionism sometimes looks like an inevitability, however in a greater historical context, it seems anything but. It was certainly not the first instance in which people had questioned social hierarchies or even particular instances or methods of enslavement. In a sense Britain had even undergone similar shifts before. At one time, the majority of England's population was composed of *villians*, a loose label which denoted an unfree worker.¹ Not only did villenage fall out of use in the early sixteenth century, but attempts in the Tudor era to create similar programs of enslavement for vagrants failed for a lack of support.² That decline was compounded by an increasing legal precedents limiting unlawful imprisonment.³ And in the centuries preceding abolition, Britons had already grown to think of Britain as a nation which singularly guaranteed freedom to those within its borders.⁴ This combined with the tentative legal grounds for slavery in Britain led many Britons to think, incorrectly, that slavery was illegal in Britain itself.⁵ And these conceptions of liberty often generated resentment and distaste for slavery among Britons, even in the early eighteenth century.⁶

¹ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Oxford University Press, 1966), 39.

² Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 44.

³ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 93.

⁴ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 46-48.

⁵ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 92.

⁶ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 37.

Still, as Christopher Brown argues, though anti-slavery sentiment may well have been common in Britain, very few Britons could have pictured themselves being “abolitionists” before the 1780s. “[W]ith the exception of Granville Sharp, there was no such thing in Britain as ‘abolitionists’” at that time.⁷ Brown’s observation stands out from most scholars’ work on British abolitionism, which tends to conflate antislavery notions and abolitionism.⁸ Antislavery sentiments or ideas were moral condemnations of the institution or practice, where abolitionism was the positive pursuit of the political abolition of the slave trade. And for that reason it is important to emphasize the tremendous gap between them. Even if one accepted slavery was a moral abomination, it still took quite a jump to decide to pursue a radical and unprecedented policy to eliminate it. To embrace abolition, one had to believe it was logistically possible and, to some degree, politically practical. Eighteenth-century Britons had every reason to think that neither were the case.

While modern readers tend to consider slavery an aberration, at the time of abolition it was a long standing element of reality. Britons’ historical examples—such as Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, as well as Incan and Aztec society—relied on slavery. Villeinage had lost its foothold in Britain, but slavery was still pervasive in the world. In the eighteenth century, a solid three quarters of the world population carried on their lives in some sort of slavery or serfdom.⁹ Even if one could conceive of abolition in principle, there were no standing institutions or precedents for antislavery Britons to

⁷ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 293.

⁸ This will be dealt with in greater depth as the chapter proceeds.

⁹ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 2.

follow. Domestically, there were few equivalent examples of mass organizing available to potential abolitionists. The British population had never mobilized for such a cause before and those who were passionate about it had to develop their own ways of generating public support.¹⁰

These barriers to abolition were nothing compared to the massively complex logistical problem that enforcing it in the colonies posed. There was no legal precedent or administrative structure through which Britain could involve itself in restructuring its empire's slave system in the eighteenth century. "From the first years of colonization forward, legal historian Jonathan Bush has stressed, neither the Privy Council, Parliament, nor the common law courts at Westminster attempted to write slave laws for the colonies or revise the codes enacted by colonial assemblies."¹¹ There were a few attempts to protect slaves from the most severe abuses and murder, but these regulations were rarely effectively enforced.¹² Even if it were politically possible to build the necessarily massive administrative framework, the traffic itself was simply enormous¹³ and Britain had the largest slaving empire in the world.¹⁴

The economic and political importance slavery seemed to hold for Britain and its empire further impinged the case for abolition. Hochschild puts it colorfully: "If, early that year [1787], you had stood on a London street corner and insisted that slavery was morally wrong and should be stopped, nine out of ten listeners would have laughed you

¹⁰ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 292.

¹¹ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 241.

¹² Brown, *Moral Capital*, 241-242.

¹³ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 3.

¹⁴ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 3.

off as a crackpot. The tenth might have agreed with you in principle, but assured you that ending slavery was wildly impractical: the British Empire's economy would collapse."¹⁵ Of course, not every Briton supported the Empire to the same degree or even at all. And as Brown observes, there was a notable, but small contingent of the British intelligentsia which saw conquest oriented Empires like those of Rome and Spain, as destructive and dangerous. In their minds, such endeavours brought "debt, depopulation, tyranny, and cultural decline."¹⁶ These critics sometimes specifically went after the slave system as an emblem of that kind of empire. David Hume and Adam Smith in particular contended that chattel slavery was "cruel, wasteful, and emblematic of the unique principles guiding Atlantic enterprise."¹⁷ However, even for Smith and Hume, slavery was not an issue of much importance. Even for those who consistently and vigorously deplored slavery, like Josiah Tucker and Samuel Johnson, often treated it like a peripheral aim.¹⁸ Until James Ramsay's piece in 1784, abolition simply seemed too impractical in the public eye.¹⁹ The vast majority of Britons thought an empire and their own economic well-being necessitated chattel slavery and they were subsequently reluctant to dismantle it.²⁰

And yet, somehow antislavery sentiment and ultimately abolitionist fervor found a uniquely strong foothold in Britain and not in other enlightened European nations, which were undergoing similar industrial growth, if at a much slower pace. As David Brion Davis argued, in the decades surrounding British abolition, continental European

¹⁵ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 7.

¹⁶ Brown, *Moral Capital* 159.

¹⁷ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 159.

¹⁸ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 159.

¹⁹ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 237.

²⁰ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 210.

nations who participated in the slave trade experienced weak antislavery movements if they existed at all. Even after Britain took it upon itself to eradicate the slave trade around the world, it was met with rampant hostility. There were some other Europeans who spoke out against slavery, however the change in discourse did not precede meaningful political action. For some reason, Britons made the jump from distaste to policy, while most of Europe did not.²¹

Why that jump occurred is curious. Brown argues that its origin was inescapably individual. “These men and women...were not abolitionists by nature, in essence, ontologically...Instead, over the course of their lives they *became* abolitionists.”²² Understanding what it was in their experiences of the world which led them to such an unlikely conclusion, is integral to understanding abolitionism itself.²³ For Brown, the goal in revisiting the lives and ideas of the Clapham sect ‘saints’ was not to idolize them, but to understand how they became dedicated to such a radical and unprecedented cause.²⁴ And it something which must be done if scholars are to understand such an odd time in history. Oftentimes, scholars skirt past these stories and focus on sweeping narratives of economics and class interests. However, these histories, while useful, are descriptions and not explanations. Brown articulates at length how they make one rely upon tautologies of coincidence: because there were great economic changes at the time, they must have had *something* to do with abolition. He explains that such assumptions are no

²¹ Thomas Bender, John Ashworth, David Brion Davis, and Thomas L Haskell, *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism As a Problem in Historical Interpretation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 297. <https://cc0.on.worldcat.org/oclc/44964414>.

²² Brown, *Moral Capital*, 25.

²³ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 20.

²⁴ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 24.

better than those who say Evangelicals or Britons supported abolition because they were evangelical or British. Instead of dealing with the reality of the situation, these explanations assume their ends before they begin. Though a person's recollection or first hand account of their behavior and decision making is flawed and limited by their perspective, it provides a concrete account of how larger historical trends or ideas played out in their lives. This is not to underplay the importance of other historical sources. However, if those are the only or central sources from which one ascribes motives to individuals, the complex reality in their lives is often blotted out in favor of what historians assume Capitalism, Evangelicalism, or Britishness meant to them. In a sense, the only way to ascertain why these people did what they did when they did is to consult how they described their own experience.

This actually lets one better interrogate the validity of their ideas than simply asserting that they only acted from interest. Human beings are creatures who largely deal in abstract concepts. Ideas inform our emotions as well as actions, and alter us in strange ways. It is a phenomenon which Williams James details in *Varieties of Religious Experience*: "This absolute determinability of our mind by abstractions is one of the cardinal facts in our human constitution. Polarizing and magnetizing us as they do, we turn towards them and form them, we seek them, hold them, hate them, bless them, just as if they were so many concrete beings."²⁵ However, not being automatons, those abstract ideals inform individuals' actions in ways which are often multifaceted and

²⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 54.

beguiling from a distance. Their behaviour follows from their ideas, but also what they want, how they feel, and their strength of will in a given moment.²⁶ And so to understand the real impact of different concepts, it is often necessary to see how they played out in the messy lives of real individuals. Of course, that does not prove anything at all about the truth of those ideas, but looking at the stories they underlie gives us another view at their nature. It tells us something about their rhetorical power in different articulations as well as, to use a somewhat inelegant phrase, their social utility. Many variables affect a society, but the ideas which prevail among its members are of critical importance. Understanding how these ideas helped form different outcomes tells us more about how they can alter our own societies.

This thesis aims to aid in answering those larger questions by exploring the messy life of one central but particularly controversial figure in the abolitionist movement: John Newton. Newton lived from August 1725 to September 1807 and, over the course of his life, changed rapidly and radically. These changes were multifaceted, nuanced, and many. The two that most stand out are those that affected his religious beliefs and opinions of slavery. Newton began his life under the instruction of his pious, dissenting mother, found himself an ardent atheist at nineteen, and ended his life as a prominent Evangelical Anglican minister. And between these three points Newton underwent a variety of smaller but nonetheless significant changes. In the midst of this roving spiritual journey, Newton was impressed, briefly enslaved on the Guinea Coast, worked at a trading post which dealt in slaves, captained a slave ship on three triangle voyages, only to become an

²⁶ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 46.

outspoken critic of slavery and proponent of abolition. These snapshots of his life do not adequately capture its many twists and turns and how they affected Newton. In his biography of Newton, William Phipps quotes Marcus Loane, who wrote: “[Newton’s] life story might have formed the background for a Defoe to work upon had it not been even stranger than the strangest fiction.”²⁷ Had he varied so greatly in only his religion or his opinions of slavery, Newton would perhaps now be only an interesting but relatively uncontentious historical character—like Saul of Tarsus or James Ramsay. The fact that he ranged so widely in both makes him a vital rhetorical device to those who insist on the corruption or complex virtue of the Clapham Sect. If Newton’s religious journey drew him to abolition then he is vital in an argument for the Evangelical movement’s relevance to British abolitionism. However if his faith—as powerful and enthusiastic as it ended up—did not lead Newton to antislavery opinions then he is an important point against its importance in the fight against slavery. And Newton’s life is complicated enough that he has been used to prove both.

Modern scholars use him mostly to disprove the Evangelical movement’s importance. A subtle, but quintessential example comes from David Brion Davis’ *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. He writes that Newton became “increasingly devout” after surviving a storm aboard the *Greyhound* in 1748: “[b]ut while Newton used his experiences in the Guinea trade to symbolize his early depravity, his upward climb was no more complete than was that of his country.” Newton had seen the horrors of the

²⁷ William E. Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton: Slave-Ship Captain, Hymnwriter, and Abolitionist* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001), xi.

slave trade up close, “But Newton had never had the least scruple about the justice of the trade nor had any friend suggested that it was not a legitimate employment.” Davis suggests that Newton ultimately denounced the slave trade because it fed his public image of a redeemed figure: “No other Evangelical minister had established such a record of ascent from depravity.”²⁸ And by the time he did confess, he knew not doing so would be ““criminal.”” To Davis, Newton’s “uncertain progress toward this decision was virtually an allegory of the progress of Great Britain.”²⁹ Brown uses Newton much the same way in *Moral Capital*. To bolster his argument that Evangelicals reacted in a variety of ways to slavery he inserted this sentence: “Slave ship captain John Newton continued in the Atlantic trade several years after his first conversion to vital religion and publicly opposed the slave trade only after William Wilberforce asked him to do so in 1788.”³⁰

Some, like Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, take Newton still further and use him to impugn Western Civilization, Christianity, or capitalism in general. Newton’s persistence in the slave trade after he reaffirmed his faith in God, “makes [Yenika-Agbaw] (as a reader) wonder about the actions of people who claim deep religious piety, and brotherly love while simultaneously participating in vicious acts against humanity.”³¹ Even Newton’s work in abolition confirms Yenika-Agbaw’s conception of the modern world. She details how Newton worried over the remarkably high death rate among sailors on

²⁸ Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 389.

²⁹ Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 390.

³⁰ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 337.

³¹ Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, “Capitalism and the Culture of Hate in Granfield’s Amazing Grace: The Story of the Hymn,” *Journal Of Black Studies* 36, no. 3 (2006): 356.

slave ships and explains that “even in his plea for abolition of slave trade, he still placed a higher value on European lives, the perpetrators of the trade. It is only after he had made a case for their lives that he later described the condition of the slaves. This White supremacist legacy continues to affect race relationships even in contemporary times.”³² In her view, Newton is only evidence of a broad avaricious and racist system, of which transatlantic slavery was only a facet, which promoted (and still promotes today) personal gain at the expense of others.³³

Meanwhile, William E. Phipps employs Newton to argue for a thesis almost directly opposed to Yenika-Agbaw’s. Where she sees Newton as evidence for a progressive view of human nature and society, Phipps principally uses Newton forward the anti-marxist view that real Christianity fuels the advancement of human rights. Phipps specifically goes toe to toe with Ludwig Feuerbach and Marx’s contention that religion drugs the masses into uncritically accepting the culture around them. Phipps sees Newton’s early religious life (from about 1748-1764) as nominal, rather than real Christianity. In this state, Newton illustrated to Phipps that there was a little truth to Marx’s theory. Phipps contends that Newton’s superficial beliefs at that time allowed him to focus on his own spiritual life and ignore the material evils he was inflicting on the people around him.³⁴ However, Phipps argues, as Newton’s religion deepened and infiltrated more of his life, he found himself driven to oppose injustices in the status quo.

³⁵ Phipps found that Newton’s story ultimately disproved Marx’s thesis, in that real

³² Yenika-Agbaw, “Capitalism and the Culture of Hate in Granfield’s Amazing Grace,” 357.

³³ Yenika-Agbaw, “Capitalism and the Culture of Hate in Granfield’s Amazing Grace,” 359.

³⁴ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 246.

³⁵ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 248-249.

religion led Newton to fight material injustices around him. Phipps writes: “The life and times of Newton provide an example to show that Marx’s philosophy is not supported by historical facts.”³⁶ Therefore, where Yenika-Agbaw found Newton to be a quintessential example of a person’s prejudice and interest overruling their supposed moral conditions, Phipps sees Newton’s transformation as evidence of the power of religion to overcome injustice in the face of immense interest and prejudice.³⁷

There are limits to using Newton’s story to explicate these larger patterns in the history of abolition, let alone in the nature of religion and politics as well as individual moral choice. Newton was not representative of all abolitionists. For Olaudah Equiano, the experience of being stolen from West African stolen from his village and enslaved was enough to commit him to the abolitionist cause. While in bondage, Equiano “chafed ceaselessly at his own enslavement.”³⁸ And it was through this story of his forced servitude that Equiano was able to reach many Britons.³⁹ George Walpole came by his abolitionism while commanding the British force fighting against the Maroons in Jamaica. The then Major General Walpole gained a great respect for his adversaries throughout his campaign. When he had defeated them, Walpole went unarmed to negotiate with the Maroons. They agreed that the Maroons would surrender, ask the King’s pardon, and return those runaways who had joined them. In exchange, they would only be relocated elsewhere on the island. Walpole swore no Maroon would be taken from Jamaica. However, though he ratified the agreement Walpole negotiated, Balcarres,

³⁶ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 243.

³⁷ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 249.

³⁸ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 35.

³⁹ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 4.

the governor of Jamaica, and the Jamaican Assembly refused to honor the it. They flogged and imprisoned some of the rebels. 568 Maroons were deported to Nova Scotia.⁴⁰ Walpole was furious and wrote to Balcarres, excoriating him for his behavior. He left the army to begin a public campaign to force the British government to respect the treaty and in 1807, when the abolitionists brought slavery to a debate in parliament, Walpole was a firm supporter.⁴¹ James Cropper, a quaker abolitionist, saw slavery as an archaic and barbaric system of privilege that violated the natural economic laws. To Cropper, these laws were entwined with the moral character of reality. Slavery *would* lose to free labor both because the latter was more efficient and moral.⁴² Newton's tale might reflect small parts of Equiano, Walpole, and Cropper's experiences, however it would be a mistake to say any one story represented the others.

Still, Newton served a central role in the abolitionist movement and so his choices are important to a history of that movement. In its early stages, Newton's insider knowledge of the slave-trade was invaluable to its critics. Of his own accord, Newton volunteered his memory and ships' logs towards their cause.⁴³ From these he constructed his own abolitionist treatise, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, which was published in 1788.⁴⁴ Some writers have used Newton's distance from politics prior to the abolitionist movement as reason for his unimportance in its history. However, Phipps persuasively argues that Newton's unpolitical life gave his testimony against slavery

⁴⁰ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 284.

⁴¹ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 305-306.

⁴² David B. Davis, "James Cropper and the British Anti-slavery Movement, 1823-1833," *Journal Of Negro History* 46, no. 3 (1961): 15, accessed July 12, 2017, www.jstor.org/stable/2716584.

⁴³ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 183.

⁴⁴ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 184.

special potency. Newton was a figure who transcended political and religious divides, and so could reach the widest possible audience within Britain. And *Thoughts* does seem to have effected a range of pivotal figures in abolition's history. Phipps details how Newton's treatise inspired Wesley to return to the fight against slavery and relays Daniel Mannix's claim that *Thoughts* spurred Prime Minister Pitt to open the parliamentary hearing into the slave trade.⁴⁵ Newton went on to submit vital testimony before the House of Commons in these hearings.⁴⁶ *Thoughts* also sparked Hannah More's anti-slavery poem "The Slave Trade."⁴⁷ And Newton's prior descriptions of the trade's horrors fed William Cowper's anti-slavery poetry.⁴⁸

Yet Newton's most important contribution to the abolitionist movement was likely his spiritual mentorship to Hannah More and William Wilberforce. Central to Brown's thesis on the origin of the slave trade is the religious motivation which pushed prominent figures in the movement from passive disapproval of the trade to actively campaigning against it.⁴⁹ For Hannah More and William Wilberforce, it was certainly Newton's influence which converted them to the abolitionist cause. When More met Newton in 1787, she was a prominent figure in the London literary world.⁵⁰ She was a famous member of 'polite society,' which looked down on religious enthusiasm.⁵¹ And More initially disparaged Methodists, in keeping with her circle's standards.⁵² However,

⁴⁵ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 189.

⁴⁶ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 196-197.

⁴⁷ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 194.

⁴⁸ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 191-193.

⁴⁹ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 18, 24-25.

⁵⁰ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 381.

⁵¹ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 382.

⁵² Brown, *Moral Capital*, 383.

in the 1780s she underwent a religious awakening. Driven by her conscience to act differently from her peers, More considered withdrawing from London and her position of prominence. She did not believe she could remain entangled in societies of power and influence without denying what her faith demanded of her.⁵³

Wilberforce faced a similar decision when he experienced his own religious rebirth. The winter of 1785-1786 was a particularly turbulent time for him internally as he struggled to reconcile his position and his faith. At this time, there was no real place for open Evangelicals in British politics.⁵⁴ A close friend of Wilberforce, Pitt warned him that his flirtation with religious enthusiasm would ““render your virtues and your talents useless both to yourself and mankind.””⁵⁵ Adopting Evangelical beliefs was not just a socially undesirable decision, it was viewed with suspicion and fear by those in power. In the words of Brown, “No one had forgotten the civil wars that arose from religious divisions a century before. To some, the emphasis that Evangelicals placed on the natural depravity of human beings, the necessity of divine grace for redemption, and the spiritual legitimacy of sudden ‘conversions’ looked like a recrudescence of Puritanism.”⁵⁶ For More and Wilberforce to remain within their spheres of influence and retain their integrity, they would have to behave contrary to those around them and insist on values that their friends and allies mocked and feared. They would have to conduct a quiet revolt.

⁵³ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 381.

⁵⁴ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 380.

⁵⁵ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 383.

⁵⁶ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 380-381.

It was Newton who convinced them to do so. He had not always believed that a good Christian must not only remain in society but resist its normal rhythms when they violated his conscience. As this thesis will go on to argue in the proceeding chapters, Newton began his own religious reawakening in almost social isolation. This was particularly true from 1750-1754 when Newton served as a captain of a slave ship. His spiritual life was almost purely internal. However, by the time he left his position in Olney and moved to London in 1780, Newton was sure that a Christian's duty was to remain embroiled in society while still in constant combat with it.⁵⁷ And this is precisely what he advised More and Wilberforce in their moments of internal torment. He urged both to remain within their respective social circles and strive to fight, peaceably and with humility, against what they saw as unchristian. "The Christian life is a warfare," he told More. "Much within us and much without us must be resisted."⁵⁸ More and Wilberforce embraced this idea and raced to find ways in which they could use their positions in society to do good. Both found a variety of causes, but the one which captured their attention was abolition. So they set out to affect an unprecedented policy because they believed it their moral duty to do so.⁵⁹

As with all counterfactuals it is possible that More and Wilberforce would have found their way to such fervent convictions had Newton not advised them as he did. However, it is important to emphasize how difficult it was to embrace religious enthusiasm and, by extension, abolition when they did. To embrace the Christian revival

⁵⁷ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 384.

⁵⁸ Newton to More, n.d., 1787, in Roberts, ed., *Memoirs of Mrs. Hannah More*, II, 93; Newton to Wilberforce. Quoted in Brown, *Moral Capital*, 384.

⁵⁹ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 386-387.

was to embrace a much more egalitarian view of politics and society. It meant seeing humanity as equally wretched before God, regardless of station or ability. And it was a religion which demanded its adherents carry those ideas into all their actions, private, public, and political. This, combined with the relatively memory of civil unrest a century before, made embracing evangelical Christianity a socially and politically dangerous proposition. As Brown argues, the earl of Dartmouth demonstrated for a long time the difficulties of remaining in a position of influence while holding Evangelical beliefs. On the one hand, Dartmouth did by far the most of any of the laity to advance Evangelical ministers within the Anglican Church (with the exception of the countess of Huntingdon). However, he perplexed and perturbed his pious friends with how devoid he kept his politics of his faith. Dartmouth let his own antislavery sentiments go when it came to policy, as well as any desire he had to encourage Evangelical revival.⁶⁰ According to Brown, “It would have taken exceptional courage to do otherwise.”⁶¹ The bravery which spurred More and Wilberforce to flaunt social convention was their own, but probably would not have gained sufficient strength without Newton’s encouragement. Phipps takes this point still further: “Being a father figure to Wilberforce at a critical time for vocational determination, Newton helped effect not only an individual conversion but eventually the conversion of British culture on the pressing issue of slavery.”⁶²

This influence was part of what gives Newton importance in questions regarding moral choice and the effect of religion on society. All historical narratives have some

⁶⁰ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 380.

⁶¹ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 380.

⁶² Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 180.

philosophical and political implications. The way someone conducts historical analysis, what it focuses on, who it listens to, and how it weighs information, reflects a certain philosophy (consciously or unconsciously) and has implications for how future students understand the patterns underlying reality. This is all the more the case with something so seemingly out of the ordinary, which this thesis has striven to establish British abolitionism was. In the same way that an abnormal experimental result forces us to reconsider our scientific theories, a seeming aberration in what one might consider to be normal historical patterns provides an opportunity to question our theories of human nature and society. Why British abolition caught on when it did and where it did has important implications for the philosophy and rhetoric undergirding arguments for liberty and human equality. Still, it runs deeper. If abolition came about as a result of economics, there are certain implications for the role of industrialization in liberty and oppression. If it came about as a result of political philosophy and the example of political revolution in America, then the role of revolution and ideas has more weight in modern discourse. And, perhaps most controversially, if the British abolitionist movement can be credited partially to the evangelical movement or other religious changes in Britain, there are important arguments to be had regarding Christianity, morality, and the role of religion in politics.

In the next chapters, this thesis will contend that Newton's faith was integral to his ultimate embrace of abolitionism. It will argue that his conversion was longer and more complex than Davis and Yenika-Agbaw allow. In this argument, Newton's "conversion" was not so much a moment of perfect realization as an arduous and nuanced

struggle which began in his childhood lessons with his mother. This thesis agrees that the storm Newton encountered on the *Greyhound*, which most accounts peg as the moment Newton regained his Christianity, did have important spiritual significance to him. However, it also argues that his understanding of Christianity changed significantly throughout the years that followed. And it changed so much that Newton looked at his early faith and behavior as unchristian. Moreover, it contends that the faith he matured into spurred him to accept antislavery opinions and then leap the gap to abolitionism, when it was still unpopular to do so.

In making this argument, this thesis is not attempting to redeem Newton. It will endeavour to lay his cruelties and kindnesses bare for the reader, in the interest of thoroughly exploring his story. As Brown said, his work was “to make sense of their [the abolitionists’] concerns, their purposes, their choices, but, this time, in order to understand the abolitionists rather than to praise them.”⁶³ And among all the figures in the abolitionist cause, Newton needs some more thorough understanding. Perhaps as a result the rhetorical value of Newton’s story, accounts of him on all sides have entailed gross inaccuracies. According to Phipps, one of the most prevalent misunderstandings about Newton is the common belief he was a slave ship captain and a religious conversion caused him to change vocations.⁶⁴ In fact, it is quite clear from the primary sources, written largely by Newton himself that he underwent a great spiritual change before he became captain of a slave ship. Moreover, Newton is explicit about the fact that he left

⁶³ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 24.

⁶⁴ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, xi.

the trade as a result of health problems, not moral conviction.⁶⁵ As Phipps explains, there are also plenty of negative misrepresentations of Newton. A number of “otherwise well-researched books,” including the works of Albert Belden, Daniel Mannix, and Jack Gratus, describe Newton as penning his hymn “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds” while slaves cried out below deck.⁶⁶ Robin Furneaux uses this image to argue that “one can only regard its author [Newton] as being among the most insensitive men who ever lived.”⁶⁷

Phipps and Bruce Hindmarsh have done much to explain Newton’s life more thoroughly. And their explanations closely mirror my own, in some ways. As this chapter touched on above, Phipps explicates some complexity in Newton’s religious journey. And he ties the changes in Newton’s faith to his involvement in British political questions. He details how Newton came to see the harsh penal laws as contrary to biblical edicts.⁶⁸ And Phipps argues that Newton plausibly learned abolitionist positions from his friendship with John Wesley and the work of Granville Sharp.⁶⁹ And he asserts that by 1785 Newton believed “the slave trade was inimitable to basic Christian ethics and that he must do all that he could as a pastor and as a citizen to remove the British form involvement in it.”⁷⁰ He explicates this further by use of Hindmarsh’s analysis, which dates Newton's conversion nine years after his last command of a slave ship. The events

⁶⁵ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, xi.

⁶⁶ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, xi.

⁶⁷ Robin Furneaux, *William Wilberforce* (London: Hamilton, 1974), 38. Quoted in Phipps, xi.

⁶⁸ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 181.

⁶⁹ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 174 & 176.

⁷⁰ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 178.

of 1763, Hindmarsh argues, spurred Newton from “a life of private reflection to public commitment.” And it was in that year he became an Anglican minister.⁷¹

While Phipps’ account grants Newton far more nuance than most scholars do, it does not dig into how Newton’s ideas changed, the theologies and philosophies he formed around the events of his life. So he does not dig deeply into what Newton thought in the years before, what Phipps calls, Newton’s ‘mature’ Christianity, which he articulates in more detail than the average scholar. He does explain it in greater measure than other writers; explicating how Newton’s interpretation of the Golden Rule intensified over time.⁷² And Phipps’ argument regarding Wesley, Sharp, and their effect on Newton’s antislavery sentiments does not rest on Newton’s writings or Wesley’s. Instead, he draws out the possibility that Newton could have conceivably learned such ideas from them. My account will attempt to rest more heavily on Newton’s own testimony as to how his ideas changed, as well as analyzing patterns in his thought, in order to articulate his narrative, after Brown and James’ models of how to deal with large-scale ideological changes.

Moreover, a vital aspect of Newton’s story, which Phipps leaves unexplored, is how he went from being withdrawn from society to feeling compelled to alter it. As mentioned above, it is this thesis’ contention that in the years immediately following Newton’s experience aboard the *Greyhound*, he was disconnected from those around him, particularly as captain of a slaving vessel. Phipps observes this on some level, but does not extend it into any sort of comparison with his later behavior: “Page after page of

⁷¹ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 90.

⁷² Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 184.

his diary could have as easily been written by a hermit, for he provides little indication of his physical situation or environs.”⁷³ Yet over the course of his time as a slave captain from 1750-1754⁷⁴ and into his first years as a minister in Olney, a position he entered in 1764, Newton became consciously more involved in the lives and wellbeing of those around him. It happened in small, wandering steps. Ones which are not initially clear to someone simply glancing over his life. And one day, Newton reached the point that his care for those around him became a sort of quiet rebellion against the world. He leapt to befriend and care for everyone in his reach, regardless of station. The more mature Newton, treated the incredibly powerful Lord Dartmouth⁷⁵ with the same candor and warmth as he did the children and the poor in Olney.⁷⁶ And that change seems to have been the same one which urged him to join in political causes, such as abolition and penal code reform. This thesis will argue that Newton’s story was much like Hannah More and William Wilberforce’s. He went from being a man with little and then no religion, to one who was just learning what to do with it. And even when he had reformed himself, he had to learn to leap the gap between sentiment and action, to become involved in the society of imperfect men and women in the name of his God, to the point of working to effect abolition.

⁷³ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 58.

⁷⁴ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 20.

⁷⁵ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 92.

⁷⁶ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 98, 100-101.

Chapter One

How To Know A Conversion When You See One

The scholarly community has not been able to settle when precisely Newton converted to Christianity. Most historians of British abolition confine Newton's conversion to his survival of a storm aboard the *Greyhound* on March 21st, 1748. In his book, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, Marcus Rediker lays out a timeline in which Newton left his atheism completely behind in that one stormy night.⁷⁷ From there, Rediker notes when Newton began keeping a spiritual diary in 1752, insofar as it signalled that "Newton's life had taken a deeper religious turn,"⁷⁸ and that concludes his interest in Newton's religious development. Rediker still inserts instances in Newton's religious life, however he presents him as a spiritually static creature. Adam Hochschild tells much the same story in *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Flight to Free an Empire's Slaves*. According to Hochschild, Newton was made a Christian in March of 1748 and never experienced any religious changes again.⁷⁹ As this thesis already alluded to in the previous chapter, Davis also pegs Newton's conversion on March 21st and does not reference any other religious struggle on his part.⁸⁰ Davis does talk about Newton's conversion in the larger context of his moral progress, but the only other point Davis identifies is when Newton adopts the abolitionist cause. He does not date this point but

⁷⁷ Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (London: John Murray, 2007), 162-163.

⁷⁸ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 174.

⁷⁹ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 19.

⁸⁰ Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 389.

pulls a quote of Newton's on the matter from his autobiography, which Newton published in 1764.⁸¹

In contrast, scholars of Christianity have generally treated Newton's coming to real faith as distinct from the events on the *Greyhound*. Though Hindmarsh uses the word "conversion" to describe the events of March 21 1748, he treats it as a more minor event in Newton's life. The label he uses on his timeline of Newton's life encapsulates its relative lack of significance: "Near shipwreck of the *Greyhound* in North Atlantic storm provokes spiritual crisis."⁸² Hindmarsh is especially careful to distinguish Newton's theology at the time of the storm and the ideas he later came to embrace about the Bible. Specifically, Hindmarsh is adamant that "Newton's introduction to evangelicalism begins only as his slave trading career ends. His understanding of evangelical theology comes later."⁸³ Instead of 1748, Hindmarsh divides Newton's life roughly at 1764. "The thirty-nine years to 1764 were tumultuous in the extreme, and the contemporary observer would have been hard pressed at most points to predict what manner of man he would become.... The forty-three years from 1764 until his death in 1807 appeared, however, as the reverse image of the earlier period of stability and conservatism." And its stability launched from the publication of Newton's autobiography and his ordination as an Anglican minister.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Newton, John, and Richard Cecil. 1850. *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*. New York: American Tract Society. <https://ccl.on.worldcat.org/oclc/600134799>. 5.

⁸² D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1996), xvi.

⁸³ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, viii.

⁸⁴ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, 44-45.

It is from Hindmarsh that Phipps draws his alternative narrative of Newton's conversion. Phipps does pull evidence from Newton's own writings—namely a particular section of his autobiography which will be addressed later—but his analysis ultimately resembles Hindmarsh's, as Phipps acknowledges. In Phipps estimation, Newton's true spiritual turning point came *in direct conjunction* with Newton's abolitionist behavior: “A strong case can be made that Newton recognized that his complete conversion, or full spiritual enlightenment, came when he turned from actively or passively accepting the economic status quo to becoming a part of the forces determined to eliminate the slave trade.”⁸⁵ Newton argued throughout his later life that a person's knowledge of Christianity and religious life increased little by little over time. They were not instantaneously made new.⁸⁶ Phipps explains that Newton later reflected back on his religion after the storm aboard the *Greyhound* and saw it as insufficient. And, in Phipps' opinion, it was. This was “perverted religion,” which gave him a framework by through which he could compartmentalize spiritual and material suffering, and devote himself only to ameliorating the former. Real Christianity would drive him to lessen both. It was only after Newton “became gradually converted to authentic Christianity, [that] he became convinced of the heinous sin of slavery.”⁸⁷

Phipps work in turn, has provoked more recent scholarship on British abolition to employ more nuanced accounts of Newton's conversion. As mentioned in the preceding section, Christopher Brown uses the condensed narrative of Newton's conversion in the

⁸⁵ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 209.

⁸⁶ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 210.

⁸⁷ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 248.

same rhetorical way as Davis and Rediker. He writes that Newton “continued in the Atlantic [slave] trade] several years after his *first conversion* to vital religion.”⁸⁸ [emphasis added] Brown’s phrasing allows Newton a more complex spiritual story than a single, perfect moment of miraculous understanding, however it still uses his experience aboard the *Greyhound* to leverage a greater argument against the Evangelical movement’s importance in British Abolition. However, Brown goes on to detail the ways in which Newton’s mature Christianity positively influenced William Wilberforce and Hannah More to take on the abolitionist cause and, more generally, incorporate their religious beliefs into their public lives.⁸⁹ Though he does not directly tell the reader he is doing so, Brown traces a more complex spiritual journey than other historians of the abolitionist movement, while still initially using Newton rhetorically in much the same way as Davis, Hochschild, and Rediker.

In the midst of these conflicting accounts how is one meant to understand when Newton really became a Christian? The first hurdle is actually conceptualizing what it means to convert, which is surprisingly difficult. In a loose sense, the idea of conversion is very straightforward. One moment you believe one thing and the next another. However, the steps between those two states and the line delineating them are much less clear. There is certainly quite a difference between appreciating parts of Christianity, agreeing with its general principles, wanting to be a Christian, calling yourself one, and being one. Yet these changes are rarely obvious to an outside observer. Often, different

⁸⁸ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 337.

⁸⁹ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 380-388.

sects of Christianity publically mark conversions with particular rites (such as baptism or first communion), but that practice does not clear up Newton's case. Though one might be warranted in assuming Newton was baptized as a child, there is no account of him being inducted into the Church of England or any other sort of church before his ordination as an Anglican Minister 1764.⁹⁰ Even if there was a specific rite to point to, it would not necessarily tell one anything concrete about Newton's internal state. Surely everyone has met a self-espoused Christian who did not act or think much in line with her purported beliefs. Just as most have met a self-identified atheist or agnostic who conducted his life much in line with Christian principles. Who is more the Christian between them?

The answer, comes down to a theological question: what does it really mean to be a Christian? For a history thesis, it is a question which seems to elude a sufficiently specific answer. Nonetheless, one cannot know when Newton became a Christian if one cannot identify what that means. Hence, other scholars of British abolition often base their of Newton's conversion on theological arguments. The most overt case of this is probably Phipps' analysis. He distinguishes between Newton's nominal and real Christianity by building a larger argument regarding the nature of Christianity from biblical passages. Phipps quotes Amos and Isaiah, as well as Luke and Peter on Jesus' ideas and actions. In them, Phipps traces the idea that real Christian faith is expressed in works, particularly those which lift up the disenfranchised and oppressed.⁹¹ And so he

⁹⁰ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, 45.

⁹¹ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 247-248.

goes on to divorce Newton's early life, in which his religion was largely internal, from his later Christianity, which rested on a sense of social responsibility to those around him. The key transition rested on what Phipps seems to see as a fundamental truth of the Bible: "Newton came to recognize that the quintessential freedom theme of the Bible pertained to release from physical as well as spiritual bondage."⁹²

Though it is perhaps less obvious, other historical accounts of British abolition which touch on Newton's conversion also rely on theological claims. There are some subtle differences between their accounts, but Hochschild, Davis, and Rediker all argue that Newton converted to Christianity in March 21st, 1748. Rediker leaves out any direct description of Newton's young piety, but implies some sort of prior religious state when he notes that Newton "became a freethinker, a libertine, and a rebel" as an adolescent.⁹³ Likewise, though Rediker does not describe Newton as being an atheist, he implies as much when he writes that "the moment of his [Newton's] religious conversion was at hand" in the midst of that fateful storm.⁹⁴ Davis spends even less time on Newton's conversion, but does isolate it entirely, by implication, to the events on the *Greyhound*.⁹⁵ Hochschild does not use the word 'conversion' to describe Newton's experience on the *Greyhound*, but he articulates an almost identical narrative. Hochschild does not describe Newton's early struggles with faith and so does not literally call the moment aboard the *Greyhound* a conversion.⁹⁶ However, it is the only change he marks in Newton's

⁹² Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 249

⁹³ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 159.

⁹⁴ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 162.

⁹⁵ Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 388.

⁹⁶ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 18-19.

narrative and quotes Newton's words describing the moment as follows: "The Lord had wrought a marvellous thing; I was no longer an infidel."⁹⁷ Given his silence on Newton's other spiritual oscillations, Hochschild effectively presents the same argument as Davis and Rediker. It may seem that these accounts make no theological claims and instead rest on Newton's own categories of Christian and non-Christian, however anything deeper than a cursory look into Newton's writings indicates this is not the case.

When reflecting back on his early life in his autobiography in **1762**, Newton does emphasize the importance of his experience aboard the *Greyhound* in 1748 towards his faith. Newton details how he tipped between faith and doubt in his early years only to fully embrace atheism in his adolescence.⁹⁸ The moment in the storm was, by his account, a unique instance in which God bent to change Newton's heart by divine providence. Without the storm, he would not have found his faith. Through it, he was utterly transformed: "I was a new man."⁹⁹ However, on the very next page, Newton went on to write: "But though I cannot doubt that this change, so far as it prevailed, was wrought by the Spirit and the power of God; yet still I was greatly deficient in many respects."¹⁰⁰ Newton went on to detail his many failings in knowledge and behavior, concluding that fuller understanding of Christianity he thought he then possessed in 1762 took many years to acquire. He was not "brought in the way of evangelical preaching or conversation (except a few times when I heard but understood not) for six years after this

⁹⁷ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 19.

⁹⁸ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 18-22.

⁹⁹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 88.

¹⁰⁰ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 89.

period. Those things the Lord was pleased to discover to me gradually.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, Newton wrote: “I consider this [the events of March 21, 1748] as the beginning of my return to God, or rather of his return to me; but I cannot consider myself to have been a believer (in the full sense of the word) till a considerable time afterward.”¹⁰²

These passages seem to indicate that Newton in 1762 considered himself a real Christian and his past self in 1748 a rather false one. This does not prove or disprove that Newton converted in the midst of the events aboard the *Greyhound*, but it certainly disputes a simpler narrative. By passing by this contention, and isolating Newton’s conversion to 1748, Rediker, Davis, and Hochschild all effectively dispute Newton’s theology as it stood in 1762. Why they disagree with Newton’s conception of Christianity does not emerge in their writings. The fact that Newton makes this distinction does not feature in any of their accounts, though both Davis and Rediker directly cite Newton’s autobiography. So at least in their case, their explanation of Newton’s conversion relies on implicit claims regarding the nature of Christianity, claims which Phipps and Newton would certainly both dispute.

Unfortunately, effectively asserting what makes someone a Christian is rather outside this thesis’ scope. So understanding how Christianity, as a whole religion, did or did not influence Newton's abolitionist stance and British abolition more generally, is beyond its reach. The definition exact of Christianity has been a subject of debate for centuries and disagreements over it have spurred several, bloody wars. And thus far, it

¹⁰¹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 89.

¹⁰² Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 90.

does not seem as though any descriptions of Newton's conversion have sufficiently asserted a definition. Even Phipps, who took the unprecedented step of making an argument from biblical sources, only does so in his Afterword and barely touches on the complex relationship between doubt, faith, and behavior. Take for example, the story of Peter from the Bible. Following Pontius Pilate's arrest of Jesus, Peter—his discipl—is sitting beside a fire, when a servant girl recognizes him as one of Jesus' companions. She asks if Peter was indeed with him and he denies it. She insists and he again says, no, he did not know him. Another man beside the fire asks him a third time and, as the story goes, Peter denies knowing Jesus, fulfilling Jesus' earlier prophecy.¹⁰³ Prior to Jesus' arrest, Peter was arguably one of the most outwardly passionate disciples, one who was quite ready to turn against the social order for that in which he believed. During Jesus' arrest, Peter was the only one of the twelve disciples who drew a weapon and attempted to stop the guards, cutting off a high priest's servant's ear in the process.¹⁰⁴ And yet, hours later, readers see him acting as though he had never met Jesus.

There are similarly complex stories one can draw out of the Bible, but just taking this one and looking at Newton's life, it almost appears that he was a Christian from his childhood. Judging from his autobiography, scholars know that Newton began his life under the religious tutelage of his mother. She was a woman for whom the dissenting Christian faith was everything; more than twenty years later, Newton found that she was

¹⁰³ *The Bible*, New International Version, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+14%3A66-72&version=NLT>, Mark 14:66-72.

¹⁰⁴ *The Bible*, New International Version, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+18&version=NIV>. John 18.

still spoken of highly among London dissenters.¹⁰⁵ She taught him to read and “stored [his] memory, which was then very retentive, with many valuable pieces, chapters and portions of Scripture, catechisms, hymns and poems.”¹⁰⁶ His mother wished him to believe fully in God and enter the dissenting ministry. Newton wrote that he took to these lessons joyfully, though their impact fell away after his mother’s death in 1732. However, in view of Peter’s story and Newton’s resurgence of faith, is it fair to say he was only a Christian following his experience aboard the *Greyhound*? What is the difference between years and moments of denial? Perhaps Newton, like Peter, was only undergoing an interlude of doubt and, in a meaningful sense, was a Christian the whole time? If not, why? Perhaps it comes down to a temporal difference. Newton simply took too long in his wallowing, but then where does one draw the line? Maybe instead the matter rests on the state of each man’s heart. Then, still, there is the trouble of delineating between things we cannot accurately measure or even conceptualize. These questions are just on the surface of a deep theological debate that includes the definition of grace, what it means to *know* God, to what degree if at all one should consider the Bible an actively spiritual document, and much much more. Frankly, the specifics of these things have not been something which Christianity as a whole has been able to resolve to everyone’s satisfaction, just like any other religion. Certainly, there is a true answer, but it is not something this thesis can effectively assert. Therefore, it is well beyond its ability to say

¹⁰⁵ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 53.

¹⁰⁶ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 15.

whether or not Christianity, as a whole religion, urged Newton to embrace antislavery views or pursue abolitionism.

However, this thesis can explore how Newton's philosophy and theology changed over time and what influence his particular beliefs seemed to have over his behavior. And it is necessary that it do so in order to answer the questions outlined in its Introduction.

Not in the least because Newton's life time was a period in which such questions were up for heated debate. As noted in the previous chapter, public expressions of passionate religious piety were seen as not only impolite, but dangerous. Even the Anglican Church itself was devoid of enthusiasm. The institution was rife with career priests, who handed out positions to friends and family.¹⁰⁷ Some ministers even preferred to preach sermons they had bought rather than consider biblical passages and write one themselves.

Hochschild notes how Reverend Dr. John Trusler had a lucrative business of "abridging the sermons of eminent divines, and printing them in the form of manuscripts, so as not only to save clergymen the trouble of composing their discourses, but even of transcribing them."¹⁰⁸ The Evangelical movement was a response to social stigma against religious expression as well as the theology they saw underlying it: one which divorced an individual's behavior and involvement in society from her religion. In the Evangelical view, was meant to purify the soul and direct a believer's every action.

Biblical principles had to direct everything from cooking to politics.¹⁰⁹ In the case of the latter, many, though not all, Evangelicals found their faith led them to dispute the slave

¹⁰⁷ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 72.

¹⁰⁸ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 73.

¹⁰⁹ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 66.

trade.¹¹⁰ One can see then how explaining Newton's own conception of his Christianity and the extent to which he acted on it is a vital part of understanding how his religion did or did not impact his abolitionism. Needless to say this all then dictates how his story impacts larger questions regarding moral choice and Christianity's relationship to politics. So, difficult as it is, Newton's faith has to be parsed apart.

William James provides a model of how to do so in his book *Varieties of Religious Experience*. A psychologist as well as a philosopher, James does not deal with abstract, theological or philosophical categories in his famous work, but rather people's primary accounts of their own experiences. This gives him insights into the concrete consequences of faith in people's lives without having to deal with the particular theological terms attached to them. And so he is still able to explore how different ideas affect individual's actions and internal states, as with his description of the difference between whether one approaches hardship with "the drab discolored way of stoic resignation to necessity, or with the passionate happiness of Christian saints."¹¹¹ He is simply not hemmed in by the need to theologially categorize the processes at work. He does not need to fall back on abstracts to say who is a Christian and who is not, he instead relies on people's individual testimony to that fact. By treating religious experience as a more general phenomenon, James is able to duck questions regarding the validity of these experiences. And he does so quite honestly. As he wrote: "In the natural sciences and industrial arts it never occurs to anyone to try to refute opinions by showing up their

¹¹⁰ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 336-337.

¹¹¹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 41-42.

author's neurotic constitution. Opinions here are invariably tested by logic and by experiment, no matter what may be their author's neurological type. It should be no otherwise with religious opinions."¹¹²

So this thesis is not really going to address when precisely Newton became a Christian, but rather exploring what beliefs Newton held when and how they influenced his behaviour. *Where* they came from is incredibly important. The ideas he derived from the Bible, Shaftesbury, Wesley, or his wife - Mary - all say something about their sources and his relationship to them. As in the case of James' analysis, none of Newton's behaviors directly contribute to the abstract truth of the ideas he held. And Newton's writings are not a perfect source on even his own internal world. Each was written with a particular intent, with an audience in mind. So this thesis will attempt to deal with these complexities so that his words are appropriately contextualized. However, Newton is still the only appropriate source on the state of his own heart. This thesis will attempt to follow James' example and describe Newton's experience as he articulates it.

And it will take a similar tack in the case of Newton's antislavery sentiments. Similar to Newton's Christianity, historians seem unable to agree what specifically led Newton to speak out against the slave trade. Some accounts treat Newton's antislavery sentiment as though it was isolated to the moments in which he published abolitionist papers. When describing, Newton's abolitionism, Hochschild references only Newton's pamphlet on the subject, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, which was published in

¹¹² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 23.

1788. He does not give a direct cause for why this pamphlet was printed,¹¹³ but does imply Newton's abolition came about suddenly, in the midst of growing national antislavery fervor: "during the better part of a decade in the slave trade, and for some thirty years afterwards, John Newton seems never to have heard God say a word to him against slavery."¹¹⁴ Similarly, Davis wrote: "John Newton did not abandon his 'genteel employment' as captain of a slave ship when he became a pious Christian; he simply ran a tighter ship and had divine communion on deck, while the Negroes groaned in their chains below."¹¹⁵ The only instance of Newton's antislavery ideas in Davis' account was the publication of *Thoughts*.¹¹⁶ Others trace Newton's antislavery ideals much earlier. Phipps argues that Newton may have learned to despise slavery when Wesley convinced him of a Christian's general social responsibility sometime around 1757.¹¹⁷ Phipps also argues that Granville Sharp must have influenced Newton on the subject sometime early in Sharp's career, simply due to Sharp's immense influence in the abolitionist movement more generally.¹¹⁸

As Phipps notes, much of the confusion arises from the fact that Newton did not leave any explicit, written record what particular person or events led him to speak out against the slave trade.¹¹⁹ However, it is probably made worse by a conflation of terms. As the previous chapter alluded, Brown argued that historical scholarship on British

¹¹³ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 130.

¹¹⁴ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 29 & 130.

¹¹⁵ Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 388.

¹¹⁶ Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 390.

¹¹⁷ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 174.

¹¹⁸ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 176.

¹¹⁹ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 174.

abolitionism rarely makes distinctions between different aspects of antislavery and abolitionism. And by his estimation they should. Antislavery and abolitionism, though interrelated are distinct: “Antislavery values were not enough in the eighteenth century, or after. The decision to act involved more than thinking of slavery as abhorrent, although clearly this was crucial.”¹²⁰ Antislavery was still more complex. Brown outlined three distinct aspects of British antislavery: “(1) the development of ideas and values hostile to slavery and the slave trade; (2) the crystallization of programs to reform or transform imperial and colonial policy; and (3) the achievement of abolition and emancipation.”¹²¹ Moreover, Brown made the important clarification that individual’s antislavery and abolitionism were not generally isolated ideas. Usually, they were informed and articulated in terms of an individual’s larger ideas about the world’s moral and political character.¹²²

So though Newton does not explicitly say who or what led him to throw his weight behind abolitionism, one can map the requisite changes in his general moral and political framework. And it makes some sense one would have to do this. Newton did not know when he was writing that Britain would abolish slavery in her colonies. He died over two decades before the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. It would be strange if Newton had the prescience to point out exactly when he decided to back a political policy he had no reason to think would come to practical fruition. He had no idea some undergraduate student pour over his writings nearly 300 years after he was born,

¹²⁰ Brown, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 3.

¹²¹ Brown, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 17.

¹²² Brown, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 23-24.

searching for an explanation of his behavior. It would be unreasonable to expect him to have. So when looking at Newton's writings and recorded actions for hints of antislavery ideals, one cannot look only for a clear declaration of abolitionism. Before he would put his weight behind the abolitionism specifically, Newton had to reach important conclusions regarding slavery and politics more generally. Ones he seems not to have held in his early life, particularly given his years as a captain of a slave ship. And his distaste for slavery would have emerged as part of his more general understanding of the world's moral and political nature. So looking through what has been preserved of his writings, one has to keep a look out for those ideas which logically drive antislavery sentiments. And that is what this thesis has tried to do.

Chapter Two

An ‘Apparent’ Conversion & Accompanying Philosophy

Newton attributed special importance to the events of March 21, 1748 above other moments of spiritual realization in his life. From early on, he described it as something close to a miracle, a moment in which God knelt down to alter his heart with awe and terror. In a letter to his wife, Mary, written August 30, 1751, Newton recalled it as the moment in which he was saved from “dreadful wickedness.” In that instance, it “pleased god to meet with me. Oh! I have reason to praise him for that storm; for the apprehension I had, first of sinking under the weight of all my sins and into the ocean, and into eternity, and afterwards of being starved to death.... He whom the winds and seas obey, in a manner little less than miraculous, brought me in safety to Ireland.”¹²³ As time went on, Newton continued to treasure the memory of that day, marking it annually with quiet reflection and praise, even into his eightieth year.¹²⁴

In his public descriptions of it, Newton treated the storm as nearly the central event of his life. In his autobiography, Newton built the narrative around the storm. He detailed how he waffled between disciplined piety and rebellion as an adolescent before falling into atheism, isolating the storm as the moment he described as his “Apparent Conversion.”¹²⁵ Here, also, Newton wrote of it as a sort of miracle. In one striking

¹²³ John Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*. Ecco. (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1793), <https://ccl.on.worldcat.org/oclc/644088489>. 91.

¹²⁴ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 13.

¹²⁵ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 86.

description, Newton compared his state before the events aboard the Greyhound to the biblical story of a man possessed by a multitude of demons: “Till then [the storm] I was like the man possessed with the legion. No arguments, no persuasion, no views of interest, no remembrance of the past, more regard to the future, could have constrained me within the bounds of common prudence. But now I was in some measure, restored to my senses.”¹²⁶ In the biblical story of Legion, Jesus freed a possessed man from his torment and released the spirits into a herd of pigs, which raced to the edge of a cliff and flung themselves off.¹²⁷ More generally, Newton’s use of Biblical parallels made his story more personal and gripping for those familiar with the tales. That Newton compared himself to this particular case, underscored both his own helplessness in the grip of his sin and disbelief and the holy power he saw in the storm. In his mind, he was so wretched that he was comparable to a man possessed by spirits of pure evil. For an almost supernaturally evil being to come back to belief, God had to manifest Himself miraculously in the wind and waves.

Newton further emphasized the storm’s miraculous nature through the story of Saul of Tarsus. In the introduction to his autobiography, he described how individuals find their way to Christianity, delineating between the majority of cases and those who sinned “with a high hand” then were made examples of God’s glory. Newton wrote that God spoke to both and drew them to Himself, but the change in the latter especially served to glorify Him: “A case of this sort indicates a divine power no less than the

¹²⁶ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*. 93.

¹²⁷ *The Bible*, New International Version, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+5%3A1-20%2CLuke+8%3A26-39&version=NIV>, Mark 5:1-20.

creation of a world: it is evidently the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in the eyes of all those who are not blinded by prejudice and unbelief."¹²⁸ Saul of Tarsus was one such case.¹²⁹ One of the main authors of the New Testament, Saul initially persecuted Christians, intent on eradicating the religion. Then, when travelling to Damascus, Saul had a conversion experience and became an outspoken Christian.¹³⁰ Another miraculous calling was that of Colonel Gardiner, a contemporary of Newton's whose conversion story had gained him fame in evangelical circles.¹³¹ Besides these men, Newton placed himself. He was quite clear that this was due to what a terrible sinner he had been and accordingly, how gloriously God had to appear to call Newton back to Him. It was "a very humbling distinction" for Newton, not a glorifying one.¹³² And, even as he wrote his autobiography more than ten years after the event, Newton still felt this was true. He was ashamed he had not provided a sufficient return for what he received.¹³³ "But, if the question is only concerning the patience and long-suffering of God, the wonderful interposition of his providence in favor of an unworthy sinner, the power of his grace in softening the hardest heart, and the riches of his mercy in pardoning the most enormous and aggravated transgressions; in these respects I know no case more extraordinary than my own".¹³⁴

¹²⁸ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 9.

¹²⁹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 9-10.

¹³⁰ *The Bible*, New King James Version, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+9&version=NKJV>, Acts 9.

¹³¹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 10.

¹³² Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 10.

¹³³ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 11.

¹³⁴ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 11.

And though Newton thought Divine Providence had interceded throughout his life, he emphasized the storm aboard the *Greyhound* as the moment which particularly glorified God. There was almost no other way he could conceive to explain it. He had been a wretch among wretches and yet Newton reported that he was the only one aboard the *Greyhound* who emerged from the storm with a rekindled faith. If his companions were affected, and few were, the change was short lived. This, Newton wrote in 1762, had nothing to do with his own abilities. “I was the most unlikely person in the ship to receive an impression, having been often before quite stupid and hardened in the very face of great dangers, and having always, till this time, hardened my neck still more and more after every reproof.”¹³⁵ The only conceivable reason he had changed, at least to Newton’s mind in 1762, was that the reformation of Newton’s incredible depravity displayed God’s sheer power.

However, for all his regard for the events aboard the *Greyhound*, Newton himself was quite clear on its limits. From his perspective in 1762, Newton wrote about the miracle as the start of his return to God, not the entire affair: “I consider this as the beginning of my return to God, or rather of his return to me; but I cannot consider myself to have been a believer (in the full sense of the word) till a considerable time afterward.”

¹³⁶ As aforementioned, he considered it only an “Apparent Conversion” and nothing more or less. Newton had a desire to be moral and follow after God, but he was not

¹³⁵ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 86-87.

¹³⁶ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 90.

instantly made righteous or granted a full understanding of the evangelical, Calvinist theology he would later adopt for much of his life.

Immediately following the events aboard the *Greyhound*, Newton certainly believed the storm was a miraculous event, that he had been saved by God's grace. However, Newton's conception of grace in 1748 went no further. He thought he had to make improvements to his character by his own strength. "I had no apprehension of...the hidden life of a christian, as it consists in communion with God by Jesus Christ; and a continual dependence on him for hourly supplies of wisdom, strength and comfort, was a mystery of which I had as yet no knowledge. I acknowledged the Lord's mercy in pardoning what was past, but depended chiefly upon my own resolution to do better for the time to come."¹³⁷ If Newton was going to improve in the years following 1748, he thought it would be by the methods he understood then: self-denial and intellectual investigation. Writing in 1764, Newton lamented the fact that "I had no christian friend or faithful minister to advise me that my strength was no more than my righteousness." He set himself to reading books, but "not having spiritual discernment, [he] frequently made the wrong choice."¹³⁸ By wrong choice, Newton seems to have meant that he did not see the world in an evangelical framework. Immediately following the sentence quoted above, Newton wrote: "and I was not brought in the way of evangelical preaching or conversation (except a few times when I heard but understood not) for six years after this period."¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 89.

¹³⁸ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 89.

¹³⁹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 89.

The implications of this statement are buried in the early parts of the paragraph. When he began listing the many respects in which he was deficient following the storm, he began by writing: “I was, in some degree, affected with a sense of my more enormous sins.”¹⁴⁰ By more enormous sins, Newton likely meant his previous disbelief and blasphemy as this is how he described them in other writings. This might strike modern readers as a strange or even abhorrent way to categorize his wrongdoings, given that Newton was engaged in the slave trade in the years following 1748. However, if one steps back and views the situation from his perspective, it makes some sense. His other sins, which he thought of as just as surely evil, were either against his fellow men or himself, but Newton’s previous impiety was a sin directly against the God he now saw as his loving and ever patient savior. He had behaved like God’s archetypal enemy—the Devil—Newton had rebelled directly against God.

And yet for this awareness, Newton was ignorant of “the innate evils of [his] heart.”¹⁴¹ This is a curious statement and is perhaps best understood as the converse of what he claims to have understood following the storm. If Newton knew in terrible detail the ways in which he could sin against God, perhaps he did not fully understand the ways in which he could sin against his fellow man. Of course, that would still include a wide swath of behavior. However, it seems a bit narrower in the context of his other statements. As he described his shortcomings in his autobiography, Newton wrote: “I had no apprehension of the spirituality and extent of the law of God.”¹⁴² This phrase harkens

¹⁴⁰ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 89.

¹⁴¹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 89.

¹⁴² Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 89.

to the evangelical movement in general, but also to the specific idea that a Christian's faith should invade and transform all of his behavior. There would be no realm of his life that should not be governed by God. That rather pointedly included his profession and politics. As one can see from the example of More and Wilberforce, that often meant drawing one's faith into the public realm—one's employment and social circle—often in the face of what was prudent. Clearly, Newton's early religious behavior was entirely opposite to this principle.

All of this was enough to convince Newton in 1764 that his spiritual transformation in 1748 was not sufficient to really make him a Christian. He completed his account of his deficiencies following the storm with this summation of the situation: "I consider this as the beginning of my return to God, or rather of his return to me; but I cannot consider myself to have been a believer (in the full sense of the word) till a considerable time afterward."¹⁴³ In light of this statement, it would seem inappropriate to label the March 21, 1748 as the date of Newton's conversion. By the standards he held in 1764, he simply did not view himself as having been a Christian at that time. He had not fully developed a coherent ideology which accurately—by Newton's later estimation—portrayed the Bible. And he did not transform his thoughts and actions in light of it. He held a much diminished understanding of God's law and so too few of his actions were affected by it.

Now, it could be the case that the fact that Newton inaccurately minimized the storm in his autobiographical account of his faith, however this seems unlikely. Newton

¹⁴³ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 90.

seems to have geared his autobiography towards using his experiences to teach others the greater theology he subscribed to. As Hindmarsh has recorded, Newton believed that Biblical truths could be demonstrated through believers' life experiences. He stated this perhaps most clearly in *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*:

The wisdom and goodness of God is pleased to make his people instrumental in teaching each other. This not only secures the honour of the success to him alone, but it conduces to their comfort and advantage. An angel could only speak historically, *that the thing is so*, but it comes nearer to our level when delivered by men who have been in the very case of others, and can say experimentally, *that they have found it so*. Who so fit to commend the physician's skill and tenderness, as those who have been themselves cured by him of a desperate disease?¹⁴⁴

Hindmarsh contends, "this [understanding] made his autobiography a kind of emblematic literature dramatizing the predestinarian order of salvation: effectual calling, justification, sanctification, and glorification."¹⁴⁵ Newton's fall from piety, helpless sinfulness, and awesome salvation all served to demonstrate what he saw as Biblical truths.

And nothing demonstrated Newton's belief in radical grace than the narrative of a soul-altering storm. By the time Newton wrote his autobiography, Newton had adopted an evangelical faith, one which emphasized the depravity of man and the transformative power of grace.¹⁴⁶ Newton's evangelicalism had a Calvinist bent and he saw grace and conversion as a thing moved by the Holy Spirit, rather than man. Redemption was so beyond a given man's control that Newton often articulated it as an aspect of predestination.¹⁴⁷ Newton also firmly opposed Wesley's idea that God's grace destroyed

¹⁴⁴ John Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History: So Far As It Concerns the Progress, Declensions and Revivals of Evangelical Doctrine and Practice; with a Brief Account of the Spirit and Methods by Which Vital and Experimental Religion Have Been Opposed in All Ages of the Church* (London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, in the Poultry, 1770) 120-121.

¹⁴⁵ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 42.

¹⁴⁶ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 116.

¹⁴⁷ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 157.

sin in man, made him perfect.¹⁴⁸ To Newton's mind, a man still needed to struggle against his worse nature, even after he had been brought to faith. However, he nonetheless thought that coming to faith had to be effected by God. And a story which emphasized the storm's importance and Newton's own helplessness before the redeeming power of God fit that theology. A story in which the storm was only one of many encounters with the Holy Spirit did not so easily. None of this is to say that Newton exaggerated the importance of the storm in his public account of his life. The fact that he remembered the storm into his eightieth year is proof enough that he treasured the event. It simply means that readers have little reason to think Newton inaccurately minimized the storm's importance in his autobiography.

Of course, one could still argue that Newton's description of the storm was perhaps tempered by interest. However, one would not have much of a case. First, because Newton did not seem to have written the account with general consumption in mind. It was not his idea and, from the start, Newton was reluctant to write about his spiritual experiences.¹⁴⁹ A friend asked him for an account of his conversion and when Thomas Haweis, a chaplain at the Lock Hospital in London, saw it, he asked Newton to send a fuller account for his perusal. These letters were passed around more and more widely for eighteen months until Newton and Haweis resolved to publish the account before a false one went to press.¹⁵⁰ Still, it is true that Newton's autobiography did help win him the ordination he had long sought. As Hindmarsh writes "Newton's conversion

¹⁴⁸ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 138.

¹⁴⁹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 33.

¹⁵⁰ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 31-32.

narrative was, in fact, a kind of curriculum vitae.”¹⁵¹ Haweis brought the account to Lord Dartmouth, who has asked for a copy before the narrative was published. The *Authentic Narrative* certainly spurred Dartmouth to later obtain Newton an ordination in the Church of England, which had previously eluded him.¹⁵² However, it is unlikely Newton could have foreseen that very unusual set of circumstances. For seven years, his evangelical enthusiasm had kept him from gaining a position as an Anglican minister.¹⁵³ And even if he somehow knew Lord Dartmouth would be so impacted by his work, Newton would only have an incentive to magnify the storm’s drama and weight. For all his secrecy, Dartmouth still subscribed to and admired evangelical theology.

Moreover, the Newton’s writings from this period bear out his description of his theology and behavior. First, his actions and beliefs after March 21st bear more similarities than differences to those he held as a doubtful adolescent. When reflecting back on his tumultuous struggles with an inconstant faith from his mother’s death in 1732¹⁵⁴ to his embrace of unbelief in 1744,¹⁵⁵ Newton wrote: “In this period my temper and conduct were exceedingly various. At school, or soon after, I had little concern about religion, and easily received very ill impressions. But I was often disturbed with convictions.”¹⁵⁶ He returned to faith only to lose it again “three or four different times” before he turned sixteen.¹⁵⁷ Newton was shuttled off to school in the years following his

¹⁵¹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 47.

¹⁵² Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 47.

¹⁵³ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 83.

¹⁵⁴ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 16.

¹⁵⁵ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 34.

¹⁵⁶ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 18.

¹⁵⁷ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 20.

mother's death, where he fell away from his early faith, only to recover it. "I was presently religious in my own eyes; but, alas! This seeming goodness had no solid foundation, but passed away like a morning cloud, or early dew."¹⁵⁸ Then, around the time Newton was twelve, his faith was reawakened when he was thrown from a horse and nearly killed. This too, was fleeting. He experienced yet another notable return to religion when, through happenstance, Newton was saved from an accident which took his friend's life. Again, it was a short lived change. "These struggles between sin and conscience were often repeated; but the consequence was, that every relapse sunk me into still greater depths of wickedness."¹⁵⁹ Reflecting back, Newton noted that even when he was at the height of these moments of Christianity "I was so strangely blind and stupid, that sometimes when I have been determined which I knew were sinful, and contrary to my duty, I could not go on quietly till I had first despatched my ordinary task of prayer, in which I have grudged every moment of my time; and when this was finished, my conscience was in some measure pacified and I could rush into folly with little remorse."

¹⁶⁰ In other words, the tenants faith did not remotely dictate his behavior.

Like his younger self, Newton in 1748 was rather flighty in his faith. The most dramatic instance came six months after his profession of faith, when Newton collapsed again into impiety. It was only another brush with death—in this case a terrible fever—that brought him back to his belief. Hindmarsh reports how he crawled across the ship of which he was captain to an isolated spot and found, in the words of his

¹⁵⁸ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 18.

¹⁵⁹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 19.

¹⁶⁰ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 20.

autobiography, ““a renewed liberty to pray.””¹⁶¹ Newton did not experience another fall of that magnitude, but he still struggled to fulfill Biblical morals. From 1751-1756 in particular, Newton’s religious devotions were dominated by a defeated tone.¹⁶² He always seemed to fall below his estimation. Each time he set himself to a new resolution of piety, Newton found he shortly violated it. As Hindmarsh observes, Newton’s pattern of oaths and collapses during this time greatly resembled his practices as an adolescent.¹⁶³ Newton described it bitterly one day in Liverpool: ““I resolve and fall of every day.””¹⁶⁴ These failures tormented him and as he looked inward, Newton found only more weakness. As Hindmarsh puts it, ““Like boxes within boxes, he found only an endless regress of spiritual inadequacy within himself.””¹⁶⁵ He was determined to earn his salvation, but found it thoroughly beyond him.

Beneath this poor behavior, lurked an old sort of approach to morality and theology of Newton’s, which emphasized intellectual understanding and self denial. Hindmarsh describes how Newton’s early education in Watts’ hymns and his mother’s Old Dissenting Christianity, along with his own adolescent studies of Shaftesbury, Addison, and Steele, led him to hold refinement as an aesthetic ideal that permeated his life more generally. ““Seeking to write polite letters, striving after an epigrammatic wit, and most of all, embarking on a massive course of self-study in the classics—all of this

¹⁶¹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 60.

¹⁶² Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 226.

¹⁶³ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 61.

¹⁶⁴ John Newton, *Diary (1751-6)*, 29 May 1755. Quoted in Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 61.

¹⁶⁵ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 60.

pointed to Newton's desire to achieve an ideal of refinement.”¹⁶⁶ Moreover, the idea of being refined, particularly as Shaftesbury presented it in his *Characteristics*, went beyond a general state of self-improvement and self-awareness and into a moral endeavour. Through real philosophizing, an individual could make himself more moral, if he combined the endeavour with self-discipline.¹⁶⁷

While this idea probably gained its fullest form in the midst of Newton's atheism, it definitely laid the groundwork for his fleeting adolescent patterns of devotion, particularly those he took on during his last reformation. Where Newton's earlier adolescent attempts at piety had been very short lived, his last endured for more than two years.¹⁶⁸ And it penetrated his daily life much farther than his previous bouts of religion. Newton reformed nearly all of his behavior to submit to his understanding of what was right and wrong. Thinking of his religion like philosophy, Newton sought to refine himself through abstract understanding and self-discipline. He dedicated the bulk of each day to studies: “reading the Scriptures, meditation and prayer.” Newton kept himself to a strict pattern of physical self-denial, fasting often, even abstaining “from all animal food for three months.” Following from the idea that he controlled, and was thus responsible for, his own righteousness, Newton spurned socialization and anything which might lead him into sin. “I would hardly answer a question for fear of speaking an idle word.” And he took his failures to be good very emotionally, lamenting them, at times, with tears. “In

¹⁶⁶ Himmelfarb, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 285.

¹⁶⁷ Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, and Lawrence Eliot Klein. *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), viii-ix.

¹⁶⁸ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 20.

short, I became an ascetic, and endeavored, so far as my situation would permit, to renounce society, that I might avoid temptation.”¹⁶⁹

When describing it in his autobiography in 1764, Newton did not describe this period as a real conversion. He insisted that it was a “serious mood,” writing “I cannot give it a higher title.”¹⁷⁰ Newton explained that this last reformation led him to do “everything that might be expected from a person entirely ignorant of God’s righteousness, and desirous to establish his own.”¹⁷¹ These are the words one would expect from a man dedicated to a vast vision of God’s grace and a universally wretched picture of human nature. From such a perspective, the idea that a man could remake himself with his intellect and a little willpower was a prideful heresy. In 1764, Newton’s prior behavior appeared to him entirely un-Christian. “I may say in the apostle’s [Paul’s] words, ‘After the strictest of our religion, I lived a Pharisee.’”¹⁷² He did everything in his power to appear good and right, he took up strange habits to affect this persona. However, his faith did not drive him to help or love those around him. In fact, we know it made him do the opposite, pulling away from the people near him in an attempt to make himself good. Newton wrote in 1764 that “it was a poor religion; it left me, in many respects, under the power of sin; and, so far as it prevailed, only tended to make me gloomy, stupid, unsociable and useless.”¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 20-21.

¹⁷⁰ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 21.

¹⁷¹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 20.

¹⁷² Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 20.

¹⁷³ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 21.

Following his experience aboard the *Greyhound*, Newton seems to have largely maintained his adolescent habits of viewing the world and worshiping God. After the storm, Newton seems to have been gripped by a terror that he would be thrown into hell for all the sins he had committed prior. He particularly winced at his blasphemy and those he had turned away from Christianity as he proselytized for Deism.¹⁷⁴ Besides this desperate sense of guilt, he seemed to be bitterly aware of his shortcomings as a new believer. As afraid as he was, Newton was just as desperate to make himself righteous. And though he could not see how he could fulfill what he found in the Bible, it was the only way forward he could see: “Upon the Gospel-scheme I saw at least a peradventure of hope but on every other side I was surrounded with black, unfathomable despair.”¹⁷⁵ This, Newton thought he would principally follow through study. Hindmarsh records how Newton frequently prayed, “[T]each me to act agreeable to Thy commands, that I may have a comfortable evidence in myself that I am Thy real disciple.”¹⁷⁶ The request to “teach” in particular harkens back to Newton’s sense that his new faith could be best gripped intellectually. Similarly, in a letter to Mary from 1751, Newton wrote of religion as “the best philosophy”¹⁷⁷ and therefore a framework which could prepare him “in a measure, for every event, at least, for all but one.”¹⁷⁸ The one exception was Mary’s death, but short of that, Newton thought the logical framework he had taken on was quite fit for anything the world could offer. He thought it could make him righteous.

¹⁷⁴ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 57.

¹⁷⁵ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 80.

¹⁷⁶ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 64.

¹⁷⁷ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 72.

¹⁷⁸ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 72.

So he set about isolating himself from those around him in favor of a rigorous study schedule. in the patterns he had adopted during his last adolescent reformation. Though Newton spent much of his time from 1748 to 1754 aboard a crowded ship, he lived almost as a recluse. As mentioned in the Introduction, Phipps goes so far as to say Newton's diaries at this time could have easily been written by a hermit.¹⁷⁹ He kept a rigorous schedule. In the years following the storm, Newton set devotional patterns he would follow for much of his life. He took time in the mornings and evenings for rigorous prayer and self-reflection.¹⁸⁰ In addition to these daily exercises, Newton dedicated each Saturday evening to a weekly confession of his sins and reflection on God's majesty.¹⁸¹ Those Saturdays which fell before his partaking in communion, which occurred monthly on land and as possible while at sea, Newton took on a particular solemnity.¹⁸² He augmented these with yearly remembrances of particular days. These prayers did not follow a strict form. Sometimes, Newton spoke them aloud, other times he wrote or merely thought. Generally though, they included four main elements: praise, reflection, self-examination, and resolution.¹⁸³ He praised God for His graces and reflected on His nature as it seemed to exhibit itself in the Bible and Newton's own life. Then he scoured his mind and soul for flaws and set himself a new resolution for piety. Of course, as mentioned above, he only found more weakness.

¹⁷⁹ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 58.

¹⁸⁰ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 222.

¹⁸¹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 224.

¹⁸² Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 225.

¹⁸³ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 56.

The final element of Newton's old habits, which significantly influenced his approach to religion in the years immediately following the storm was his continued reverence for Mary Catlett. Long before 1748, Mary possessed an important spiritual significance in Newton's mind. He had had met Mary in 1743, in the midst of a dark stupor. The Catletts had been close friends with Newton's late mother and when Newton finally encountered them, he was struck by Mary emotionally and existentially. By this time, Newton had lost his childhood religion entirely and was only weakly clinging to his admiration of Lord Shaftesbury's more secular pictures of virtue. As Newton described later, "I was nearly a misanthrope."¹⁸⁴ The "violent and commanding passion" which swept through him upon meeting Mary reawoke his awareness of morality and meaning, much like his earlier near death experiences.¹⁸⁵ The idea of obtaining her favor gradually dominated his sense of purpose as he lost hold of his childhood understanding of piety.¹⁸⁶ And his interest in her drove him to incredible lengths, both constructively and destructively. Reflecting back upon this time in his autobiography, Newton wrote: "My heart being now fixed and riveted to a particular object, I considered everything I was concerned with in a new light."¹⁸⁷ Accordingly, immediately after meeting her, Newton resolved he could not do as his father had planned and go to work in Jamaica for four or five years. So he simply stayed at the Catletts until the opportunity had passed. Similarly, when he was impressed aboard the *HMS Harwich* and it seemed as though he would be committed to a lengthy voyage to the East Indies, Newton deserted for fear of being

¹⁸⁴ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 25.

¹⁸⁵ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 25.

¹⁸⁶ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 27.

¹⁸⁷ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 27.

parted from her for so long time.¹⁸⁸ After he was caught, stripped, bound to the deck, and flogged for his betrayal, the only thing which kept him from killing the captain and then himself was the thought of what Mary would think.¹⁸⁹ The idea of her approval which generally restrained his more destructive behaviours after he abandoned all his childhood ideas of morality.¹⁹⁰ By the time, he arrived in Britain again in 1748, Mary was central to his sense of purpose. In a letter he wrote to her 5 July 1751, Newton summed up his sentiments succinctly: “You caution me to be careful of my own life for your sake, which is indeed the most engaging argument you can assign; for I know nothing but yourself that makes a continuance in this life very desirable, unless it is a state of improvement for a better.”¹⁹¹

Mary continued to occupy this high position in Newton’s regard, after the storm in 1748. In a letter he penned to her on September 5, 1751, Newton explained how he viewed her as an instrument of his salvation and therefore someone to whom he was deeply obligated:

I infer, secondly, (which I have often mentioned before, but cannot too often repeat) how great my obligations are to you! I will not compliment you as the first and principle cause, (for that I look higher) but surely I may consider you as the chief mean and instrument of rescuing me from guilt and misery, and forming me to a true taste for the enjoyment of life. In gaining you, I gained all at once. The empty shews of pleasure, which daily ruin thousands, have no more charms for me; and the difficulties and troubles which are, more or less, inseparable from this mortal state, appear light and tolerable for your sake.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 37.

¹⁸⁹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 25.

¹⁹⁰ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 42-44.

¹⁹¹ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 73-74.

¹⁹² Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 96.

In this way Newton's views of Mary were bound up with his views of God. And the inadequacy he felt before one seems to have bled into his relationship with the other. To Newton, Mary and his marriage to her was a divine blessing of which he was entirely undeserving. In a letter Newton wrote **September 5, 1751**, he expounded: "The dispensations of divine Providence towards me have surely been extraordinary. All the evil I suffered was the immediate result of my own folly and wilfulness; but the good I have experienced was wholly unmerited, and for a long time unhopd for...Could my wretched course of life, for several years that I pretended to have you so much at heart, entitle me to this blessing? Alas! I was unworthy of you, in every sense of the word!"¹⁹³ Just as he feared his salvation might be snatched away for his continued failures, Newton lived in terror that Mary would be harmed or killed for his transgressions. He brought up the issue to her as early as 1752, but articulated it clearest in a letter he wrote to Mary on July 13, 1754:

And thus, he [God] has continued to me, in your love, and its endearing consequences, all that I hold valuable in life, for so many years; though I have not endeavoured, in the manner I ought to deserve you, for one whole day. Often, the consciousness of my disingenuous behaviour, has made my heart tremble, upon your account. I have feared, less you should be snatched away, for my punishment.

Newton had reason to feel less than deserving of Mary during this time, beyond his general torment over his sins. When he returned to Britain in 1748, it seemed terribly unlikely he could obtain her hand in marriage. He arrived in Liverpool with almost no prospects. Despite his father's continual machinations, Newton had burned nearly every

¹⁹³ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 95.

opportunity laid before him in his rebellious youth.¹⁹⁴ Though in 1743 they had welcomed Newton into their home, the Catletts' regard for him had chilled somewhat by 1748. His determined interest in Mary and her seeming reciprocal affection for him displeased them. They had little intention of marrying off their eldest daughter to such an demonstrably irresponsible young man. Mary's parents were not the only ones who disapproved of the match. Mary's extended family, including her aunt, seem to have barred Newton's way to her. A number of Mary's friends seem to have worried he would make a poor husband. In a letter to her posted to Mary in August 1751 Newton described a conversation between him and one such friend after his and Mary were married,

I divert myself sometimes with the recollection of what passed between Mrs. P and me, when I first saw her after we married. It was this purpose. Dear Madam, with me joy. Of what, Sir? Of my marriage. With whom pray? With my dear M[ary]. What M; M.C [Mary Catlett]? Yes; she owned that name lately, but has now cast it off, and desires you would know her by mine. Ah! Says she, sighing and shaking her head both at once, I wish it was true. Her sister interposed, He only jests. She answered, then he is much altered; very lately he would not have jested upon this subject. No really, it is downright earnest; why are you so backward to credit it? Nay - only - because - I do not know - stay - no - it is impossible. When she had repeated this or something like it, two or three times, I begged her to collect herself, and give me her reasons. She did not care to speak out, but hinted at unsuitableness of tempers; that you were cheerful and sprightly, and I heavy and dull; and though I might be made enough to match at a disparity, you were more mistress of yourself than to make such a wild experiment. This she minced up as complaisantly as she could, not to offend me; but I am confident of her real sentiments, and those of most of our acquaintance, were as I have expressed. I told her she had judged rightly of me, but it was plain she did not so well know you.¹⁹⁵

The general pressure upon Mary and Newton not to remain in contact was such that, when Newton arrived in Liverpool in 1748 and did not find a letter of permission from

¹⁹⁴ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 22.

¹⁹⁵ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 86.

Mary's aunt allowing him to see her, Newton resolved to break of all contact with Mary "with a heavy heart, and with watery eyes."¹⁹⁶ Even after Mary's aunt informed him he could visit, he was quite anxious for his situation. Mary had not refused his advances, but, as he recalled later in a letter to Mary in August 1751, "I was sure you had too much honour and goodness to trifle with me after I had stated the affair in so serious a light."¹⁹⁷

Even after he and Mary were wed, Newton seems to have worried after the ways in which those around them thought he was not worthy of Mary. Most of her acquaintances were baffled by what possible motives should cause her to marry him.¹⁹⁸ Newton was awkward, unrefined, and had spent the first two decades of his life as a self-serving rebel and tremendous disappointment. Now that he had been gifted Mary, Newton hoped to prove them wrong. He strove to demonstrate that he was a man who deserved her hand. And he was still striving years after their marriage. In a letter he wrote to Mary January 10, 1754, he declared about his imperilled position as a slave ship captain:

I am here for your sake. And I am glad of the opportunity of manifesting, that neither difficulties, nor dangers, nor distance, nor time, can abate the sense of what I owe to you. However the case may be now, I can remember the time, when you could have done very well without me. The first obligation, was entirely on your side; and I still think myself far short of repaying it. Though, if I could cancel that, you have taken care to super-add new ones, every succeeding day since.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 92.

¹⁹⁷ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 93.

¹⁹⁸ Newton, *Letters to a Wife*, 60

¹⁹⁹ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 233-234.

No matter what Newton seemed to do, he did not think he deserved Mary. And just as his terror before God exacerbated his discomfort beside his wife, Newton's fears of inadequacy in his marriage seem to have influenced his approach to religion.

In part, Newton conducted himself almost as a hermit because his conception of redemption and righteousness led him to think he had to isolate himself from society. However, his idea of refinement had an additional, social element. As Newton's regard for Mary grew, he was particularly determined to become more refined for her sake. She possessed a superior elegance in his eyes, both in comparison to himself and most of the world.²⁰⁰ In 1748 and the years which followed, Newton's need to refine himself to please Mary did not abate. Accordingly, he threw himself after his studies, with the idea of pleasing Mary and God, somewhat simultaneously. When he set out on his first of four triangle voyages Newton spent the bulk of his leisure time relearning Latin, with the aid of Horace's poetry and Castalio's Latin Bible.²⁰¹ He continued his studies when he embarked on his next slaving voyage in August 1750, this time as captain. Newton read Horace, Livy, Caesar, and Sallust as well as a Latin dictionary by reading Horace's poetry and a Latin Bible.²⁰² Then to these he added Terence, Virgil, Cicero, Buchanan, Erasmus, and Casimir. Newton in particular admired Cicero and recalled in his autobiography how, "[a]t length I conceived a design of becoming a Ciceronian myself, and thought it would be a fine thing indeed to write pure and elegant Latin."²⁰³

²⁰⁰ Himmelfarb, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 285.

²⁰¹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 100.

²⁰² Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 108-110.

²⁰³ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*, 110.

The value Newton placed on refinement not only drove him towards books, but away from most of the people around him. To Newton's mind, common sailors were unrefined, an idea he framed particularly in contrast to Mary's elegance. In a letter he wrote to Mary in April 1751, during his first voyage as captain, he described his thoughts when he had not received Mary's letters as quickly as he expected: "For I had long given them [Mary's letters] over for lost, or worse than lost, exposed to the ill-bred curiosity of some sea-bear, who, incapable of understanding, much more of valuing your delicacy, might have insulted them by some shocking jest, to the diversion of his brother animals, over a can of nasty flip."²⁰⁴ Besides, referring to sailors as animals, it is notable that Newton focused in on their ill-breeding in concurrence with their intellectual inability to understand Mary's elegance. The wording echoed his own desire to be more refined and so to become more deserving of Mary. And it is on her behalf that he demeaned them in his letters. In a letter he penned later that August, Newton mourned the death of the ship's surgeon and the loss of his companionship: "Besides my personal regard, I shall miss him upon your account. For from the time I knew him so well as to judge him worthy of the subject, I have often found some relief by venting my mind to him in talking about you. I have none with me now but mere sailors, to whom I should degrade your name if I mentioned it; and shall therefore keep my pleasures and my pains to myself."²⁰⁵

The sailors' seeming lack of social refinement also seems to have made them seem less morally capable in Newton's mind. If a man's morality depended, in part, on

²⁰⁴ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 58.

²⁰⁵ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 83.

his ability to philosophize, then, even though Newton frequently came up short, the sailors were not as moral as Newton was. He observed in his letters to Mary how they fell short of righteousness. In one letter he posted in September 1751, Newton lamented the sailors' ignorance of the divine providence he saw clearly in their escape from frequent perils: "Need we go farther for the proof of a Providence always near, always kind? kind to the unthankful and the evil. For though these marks of his care are repeated every minute, they are seldom acknowledged by seamen."²⁰⁶ Particularly from the pen of a man who had been saved from the depths of depravity by such a display of God's power and mercy, this statement would seem to imply that sailors were often incapable of finding salvation. This may not seem like a particularly remarkable idea for a captain to hold, but it was distinct from how Newton would eventually understand society and rank. Newton put the view he held as an element of his evangelical, Calvinist theology, succinctly in his *Review of Ecclesiastical History*, which was published in 1770: "Men differ considerably in capacity, rank, education and attainments, they jar in sentiments and interests, they mutually revile, hate and destroy one another; but in this point they all agree Whether Greeks or Barbarians, wise or ignorant, bond or free, the bent and disposition of their minds, while unrenewed by grace is black and implacable enmity against the blessed God."²⁰⁷

In 1748 and the six years which followed, Newton was far from that belief and much closer to those he had held throughout his adolescence. This old philosophy,

²⁰⁶ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 105-107.

²⁰⁷ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, vi.

augmented by his fears before God and anxieties over his place with Mary, served to make him as he had been before. His twin desires to earn his place beside Mary and before God twisted together in his moral reasoning, at times seeming to take one another's place. So the values accompanying them became entangled in his mind. Newton saw his guilt before God as something deeply connected to his place with Mary. His sense that he could earn the former if only he made himself refined and sociable, wove with his desire to study and discipline himself before the Lord. In combination, they seemed to serve to make him what he was following his last adolescent reformation: aloof, dower, wrapped up in his own intellect, and, in a grand sense, rather useless. He was a pharisee. He would weep bitterly over his own inability to please God in one moment, while he spoke of common sailors as "sea bears." In both instances, it was Newton's sense of an insurmountable debt combined with his continued sense that he could and must pay it back, which drove him to behave thusly.

Chapter Three

A Captain's Regard for Custom & Interest

It seems as though it was this particular view of theology and his accompanying place in the world, which led Newton to reenter the slave trade as chief mate and remain as a captain for three additionally triangle voyages. When Newton arrived in Britain in 1748, he was faced with the consequences of his previous twenty-three years of misbehaviour. As mentioned in the last chapter, he arrived, madly in love with Mary Catlett, but with almost no chance of marrying her. Her family understood that Newton's past meant he had little to no prospects of providing well for their daughter and they were not willing to give her to a man who did not have a respectable profession. Newton knew that Mary, who had a great regard for her family and their wishes, would not marry him without their approval.²⁰⁸ When John Manesty offered him a position aboard a slave ship as chief mate, he saw it as the way to earn his position beside Mary. In a letter Newton wrote to Mary on September 18, 1750, during his first voyage, he explained:

When I left Africa, in the Greyhound, I seemed resolved never to return thither again; but my resolution was formed when I had no hope that you would ever make it worth my while; and I knew that nothing else could. But upon the encouragement (though slender) which you gave me when I arrived there in the Brownlow, every thing appeared with a different aspect.²⁰⁹

When Newton's entangled sense of inadequacy before Mary and God did not abate, but rather worsened over the few years following 1748, he came to see his

²⁰⁸ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 97.

²⁰⁹ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 31-32.

profession as a slaver as a way to chip away at his debt. Through throwing himself at the mercy of a perilous profession, Newton hoped to pay back what he believed he owed Mary as a woman of greater elegance and a symbol of his salvation. He wrote as much to her in a letter on January 10, 1754:

And I am glad of the opportunity of manifesting, that neither difficulties, nor dangers, nor distance, nor time, can abate the sense of what I owe to you. However the case may be now, I can remember the time, when you could have done very well without me. The first obligation, was entirely on your side; and I still think myself far short of repaying it. Though, if I could cancel that, you have taken care to super-add new ones, every succeeding day since.²¹⁰

Just as Newton tried to make himself refined through study, he aimed to make himself socially worthy of Mary by taking on this position as a slave captain. Because he had entangled his sense of Mary so deeply with his understanding of God, considering her as an undeserved divine blessing and the secondary cause of his salvation, it is reasonable to think his sense of guilt before God also urged him to take on this profession. If he deserved Mary, he would be significantly closer to earning his salvation. His ideas of station, refinement, and salvation blended together to give him the impetus to enslave as well as the framework by which he could rationalize his behavior.

First, the idea that a man could deserve his place before God lent itself to a generally hierarchical view of society. At this time, Newton seems to have held firm to the idea that a man could earn his righteousness and that he could do so through a combination of intellect and self-discipline. If this was the case, then there was a moral hierarchy among people. Some can think through abstract concepts more clearly than others, either by advantage of genetics or the resources available to them. Likewise, some

²¹⁰ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 233-234.

are more self-disciplined than others, by temperament, upbringing, or a combination. In a world in which a man had to earn their righteousness, some people were lower than others. The common sailors Newton ruled over were certainly lower than he was and he himself was below Mary. In a sense, he was right to have the authority he did over them.

This logic condemned him to a subservient position as well. When the storm hit in 1748, Newton was a little wretch, with no real worth and no real standing. And even if he bettered himself, the debt he had accrued in the first twenty-three years of his life was immense. And the gifts God and Mary had given to him, which he had not deserved, he still failed to improve upon these mercies. As this thesis explained in the previous chapter, Newton continually bemoaned his own moral failures throughout his time in the slave trade, worrying over his seeming inability to be what he should. It would not only have been unusual if someone who saw himself as being so low thought he had the right and ability to act contrary to thousands of years of custom and say that slavery was contrary to God's law. It would have been blind ego, verging on insanity to say that he, the wretched John Newton, could declare that slavery was an evil, no matter how useful it was to Britain, and that it should be eschewed accordingly. No, he was in no position to question the wisdom of others and the prevailing opinion was that slavery was an unfortunate, but necessary part of the world.

This explanation fits with what Newton himself described when he reflected back on how he understood his profession as a slave trader in the midst of his burgeoning Christianity. There were two principle instances in which Newton did this. The first was in his autobiography, which Newton published in 1762. The second was in a footnote in a

volume of letters he had written to Mary, which Newton published in 1793. The two reflections have very different tones. Newton's autobiography came out well before abolition got underway in the 1780s, while *Letters to A Wife* reached the public at a time when antislavery sentiment was in foment. Newton himself had made his most notable contributions to the abolitionist movement well before, appearing as a witness before Parliament in 1789 and publishing his own abolitionist treatise in 1788. The two passages reflect the changes which both Newton and his audience underwent in the almost 30 year interim. The section in his autobiography does not explicitly condemn slavery and instead speaks of it as something Newton found unfit for himself. The language implies a certain moral derision from Newton's perspective in 1762 towards his actions as a slave ship captain from 1748-1754, but that is far as Newton goes.²¹¹ In contrast, the footnote in *Letters to a Wife* calls it a "vile traffic" and takes a clearly anti-slavery stance, stating, "had I thought of the slave trade then, as I have thought of it since, no considerations would have induced me to continue in it."²¹²

For all their tonal differences, Newton's two explanations paint a similar picture of his frame of mind as a slave captain. In his autobiography, Newton wrote: "During the time I was engaged in the slave-trade I never had the least scruple as to its lawfulness. I was, upon the whole, satisfied, as the appointment Providence had marked out for me;...However, I considered myself as a sort of *jailer* or *turnkey*, and I was sometimes shocked with an employment that was perpetually conversant with chains, bolt and

²¹¹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 126.

²¹² Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 158-159.

shackles.”²¹³ In this explanation, readers see two interesting things of note. First, that Newton, while he had no sense that his work was unlawful in God’s eyes, was in some degree discomforted by its harsh realities. Second, that Newton understood his profession then as something inhumane, but a given part of reality, like the work of a jailer. In one sense, this is certainly representative of how normal slavery had been throughout history. As this thesis discussed in the introduction, it had been a long-standing element of life like imprisonment and law. Yet, Newton’s words also harken to the idea that the established social order was a fixed institution the morality and efficacy of which Newton was in no position to question.

In his note in *Letters to a Wife*, Newton digs deeper into a similar explanation.

Custom, example, and interest, had blinded my eyes....I felt the disagreeableness of the business very strongly. The office of gaoler, and the restraints under which I was forced to keep my prisoners, were not suitable to my feelings; but I considered it as the line of life which God, in his providence, had allotted me; and as a cross which I ought to bear with patience and thankfulness, till he should be pleased to deliver me from it. Till then, I only thought myself bound to treat the slaves under my care with gentleness, and to consult with the safety of the whole family, of whites and blacks, on board my ship.²¹⁴

In this version of the explanation, Newton reiterated much of the same points, but readers get a greater sense of the tension within his understanding of his role as a slaver. At the time, he thought that slavery was something almost natural to the world, and so it was not unlawful before God. It was an element of the status quo. One could make moral or immoral decisions within the slave trade, but the institution itself was not subject to moral judgments. Behind this, readers can again see how highly Newton regarded society

²¹³ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 126.

²¹⁴ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 158-159.

and social standing, both personally and philosophically. Personally, he had a distinct interest in working in the slave trade and earning his place beside Mary and before God. Philosophically, Newton saw what was customary as what was, as something that had to be worked within, not altered itself. He was too deplorable to question it.

Newton's journals from that period and the evidence of his conduct bear out his later reflections. He was a full participant in the slave trade and performed the inhumane actions inherent to it. On his first triangle voyage, Newton served under Captain Jackson aboard the *Brownlow*. Jackson was a particularly sadistic figure among slave ship captains who frequently flogged and tortured both his crew and slaves. Rediker argues, rather convincingly, that Newton likely helped administer those punishments as chief mate. The extent to which that was the case is unclear from Newton's records, but it was certainly a strong possibility. What is almost certain was his involvement in putting down a violent slave rebellion, which claimed the life of 62 of the *Brownlow's* 218 slaves. That meant killing slaves himself, in all likelihood.²¹⁵ Once Newton took on captainship himself, brutality was still integral to his profession. His first two voyages as a captain were punctuated by various attempts at insurrection by either the sailors or the slaves, both of which Newton met with violence. His first journey began with a mutiny attempt. Newton caned and clapped multiple men in irons. One unfortunate soul, Newton chained to the deck for three days.²¹⁶ As his ship made its way across the Atlantic with the men, women, and children he had kidnapped, Newton uncovered plans for a slave insurrection.

²¹⁵ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 219.

²¹⁶ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 165-166.

The men who had been planning the escape attempt were flogged with cat-o'-nine-tails and tortured with thumbscrews, perhaps by Newton himself but at least by his orders.²¹⁷ On his second triangle voyage as a captain, Newton's ship almost suffered another mutiny. He had two of the ring leaders whipped and traded off to another ship.²¹⁸ The others he gave a reprieve, judging them to have been led by the bad example of the two. Shortly after, Newton found the slaves plotting to take over the vessel and affect their freedom. Among the conspirators were several enslaved boys who had been given a greater range of the ship than the imprisoned adults. Upon learning of their involvement, Newton clapped the boys in irons and tortured them with thumbscrews. From their coerced testimony, he was able to identify the eight men who were leading with the rebellion effort. These he also seized and pressed with thumbscrews. When he did ultimately punish six of them, it was likely with the cat-o'-nine-tails. For he placed in collars, which kept the men in discomfort and made sleep impossible.²¹⁹

Newton's personal records of the insurrections speak of them as dangerous events which had to be negotiated, but were part and parcel with reality, like disease or perilous weather. He regarded all potential disasters as warnings from God of his imminent mortality and reminders of his undeserved mercies. After barely escaping a hurricane in the midst of his first voyage as a captain, Newton recorded in his diary during his first voyage as a captain: "Had a strong SE. tornado all the way to the cape with hard rain and a great sea, that I was several times afraid that the punt would have filled with us, but by

²¹⁷ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 171.

²¹⁸ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 177.

²¹⁹ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 178.

the favour of the good Providence, got safe round the rock at 4 p.m., and on board the *Surprize* by 6.”²²⁰ ²²¹ He likewise recorded the hand of God in his preservation from disease. In a journal entry from his third journey in 1753, Newton wrote: “I have been indisposed of a fever and not capable of observing till today. I have little or no correction to make if my observation is good, but my eyes were very weak. I hope I am now (by God’s blessing) recovering.”²²²

Newton thanked God for preserving him from mutiny and insurrection in much the same language, blessing God for the undeserved mercy of his continued existence. In June of 1751, Newton recorded how he had heard reports that the slaves were attempts to poison the ship’s water supply, but found they had attempted to do so with a talisman: “if it please God they make no worse attempts than to charm us to death, they will not much harm us.”²²³ He similarly described in November of 1752 his discover of a plot by some of the sailors to seize the ship: “I cannot but acknowledge a visible interposition of Divine Providence, for tho I cannot yet find the bottom of it, I have reason to think this sickness we have had on board within these 3 days has prevented a black design when it was almost ripe for execution, and the unexpected stay of the boat brought it to light.”²²⁴

²²⁰ John Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader (John Newton) 1750-1754*, Edited by Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell, (London: Epworth Press, 1962), 18-19.

²²¹ *The Journal of a Slave Trader* is an edited compilation of Newton’s journal logs over the course of his time as a slave trader from 1750-1754. Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell, the editors of the collection, also supplemented these sources with sections from Newton’s letters to his wife Mary (both from the published *Letters to a Wife* and the few unpublished which survived), his diary from that time, and his letters to Reverend David Jennings from this period. Martin and Spurrell wrote that they edited the content for redundancies. What precisely this means is unclear and readers should keep the limits of the source in mind as they read.

²²² Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 93.

²²³ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 56.

²²⁴ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 69.

Likewise, Newton blessed God for preserving him from a forming slave insurrection in December 1752: “By the favour of Divine Providence made a timely discovery to day that the slaves were forming a plot for an insurrection. Suprized 2 of them attempting to get off their irons, and upn farther searching in their rooms, upon the information of 3 of the boys, found some knives stones, shot, etc., and a cold chissel.”²²⁵

Moreover, just as Newton did not discuss storms or disease as something with moral intent, he did not describe insurrections as immoral acts. He wrote of those which occurred aboard his ship and beyond it almost coldly, with the exception of his gratitude to God for staving off his death. Those which occurred on other vessels, he recorded as he did the weather or another, perilous logistical concern. In one entry from November 1752, Newton wrote, as a single nod to the event: “I heard the *Adlington* had near 200 slaves at the time of the insurrection and that besides the mate, there were 3 or 4 whites killed.”²²⁶ In the following sentence, he immediately resumed his description of the practical events of the day, with no emotionality or condemnation of the event. He described those crewmembers as ‘killed’, in stark contrast to the language he employed regarding another slaving ship’s assault on a French slave ship in March of 1752: “The boat returned, brought 6 casks of water and 6 slaves from Mr. Tucker’s, 2 men, 1 woman, 1 boy, 2 undersized girls, most of them brought to him for sale from the villains from Jamaica who cut off the french snow, that has been in some months in and about the river, a night or two agoe, and, I am informed, murdered the captain and every white on

²²⁵ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 71.

²²⁶ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 70.

board.”²²⁷ Where a slave insurrection seems to have struck Newton like a storm, an amoral given of reality but a threat to his mortality and so a strong reminder of his dependence on God, the colonists’ treatment of their fellow traders was a deeply immoral act. Unlike the slaves’ interest in being free and his response to their attempts to be so, how slavers treated one another was a moral concern. The former was instead equatable to keeping the ship free from rats or wear, it was just a practical concern about a natural element of the world.

Newton seems to have carried this moral divide in his mind as he dealt with his crew. On the one hand, he recorded disciplining the men aboard his ship with lashings or irons without any seeming emotion, as he did fixing the rigging. When, in November of 1752, Newton became aware that there was a plot among the crew to mutiny, he was quick to locate and punish those involved harshly. When the ship’s carpenter “behaved very mutinously...daring the officers and refusing his duty,” abused a man named Mr. Billinge, and refused to go forward building a barricado for the ship, Newton “gave him 2 dozen stripes” with the cat-o’-nine-tails without any reflections on the subject.²²⁸ Similarly, when Newton found three men had committed barratry, he put the suspected in irons and punished those he found to be guilty with lashings, eleven for the sailor and seventeen for the officer involved.²²⁹ Nowhere in these accounts did Newton question whether it was necessary to publicly flog someone for misbehaving, he simply wrote of it as a thing which had to be done. As Newton wrote to Mary in September 1751, the

²²⁷ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 40.

²²⁸ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 88.

²²⁹ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 87.

absolute power he exerted was a requisite to the work: “My condition when abroad, and even in Guinea, might be envied by multitudes who stay at home. I am so absolute in my small dominions (life and death excepted) as any potentate in Europe....I would have you judge from my manner of relating these ceremonials, that I do not value them highly for their own sake; but they are old established customs, and necessary to be kept up; for, without strict discipline, the common sailors would be unmanageable.”²³⁰

Within the scope of that view, Newton tried to improve the situation of his crew. Newton seems to have been thorough in investigating claims of misbehavior and eager to punish only as was strictly necessary to the inhumane profession he had chosen, sometimes to the detriment of his business. Such was the case with his boatswain on his first voyage as a captain. In October of 1750, Newton recorded how “the officers and all the ship’s company to a man complained that the boatswain had behaved very turbulently, and used them ill, to the hindrance of the ship’s business. Having passed by several of the like offences before, I thought it most proper to put him in irons, *in terrorem*, being apprehensive he might occasion disturbance, when we get slaves on board.”²³¹ Likewise, Newton abjured many of the more barbaric practices which were customary, but not necessary to the trade. In a letter Newton wrote to Mary in July 1752, he explained one of the cruel practices common to slaving vessels that he kept off his ship:

We crossed, the supposed line of this boundary, to-day. On these occasions, all the people on board a ship who have not passed it before, are subject to a fine, which, if they refuse to pay, or cannot procure, they must be ducked; that is,

²³⁰ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 110-111.

²³¹ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 12.

hoisted up by a rope to the yard arm, and from thence dropped source into the water. This is such fine sport to the seamen, that they would rather lose some of the forfeiture, (which is usually paid in brandy) than that every body should escape the ducking. And in many vessels, they single out some poor helpless boy or landsman, to be half-drowned for the diversion of his shipmates. But as I do not choose to permit any arbitrary, or oppressive laws to be valid, in my peaceful kingdom, I always pay for those, who cannot pay for themselves. If this poor relation does not entertain you, the thought that I wrote it, and the persuasion that my inclination to send you something better is not wanting, will, I doubt not make you some amends.²³²

Generally, Newton worried after his crew's wellbeing in a way which was uncommon among captains in the slave trade.²³³ Where most captains did not seem to particularly care if a crewmember died,²³⁴ Newton kept careful track of how many survived the trip and was troubled by casualties. Newton also tried to look after his subordinates' spiritual wellbeing, conducting mass for those aboard twice every Sunday.²³⁵

Moreover, Newton seems to have cared for his crew, if in a distinctly limited way, because of his recent experience aboard the *Greyhound* in 1748. When Newton held power over other men aboard the *HMS Harwich* in his adolescence, he had frequently acted the tyrant so that no one attempted to help him when he fell on hard times.²³⁶ At the time he had only the remnants of his secular moral framework, born from his reading of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, but even this was slipping from him. After the storm in 1748, Newton took a more consciously compassionate view towards his crew. In part this was due to his own experience being oppressed and abused aboard the *Harwich* and as a slave on the Guinea Coast. Newton wrote to Mary in 1751, that though he held up the

²³² Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 133.

²³³ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 185.

²³⁴ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 244-247.

²³⁵ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 108.

²³⁶ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 38.

harsh discipline, customary to slaving ships, “I do not forget (I hope I never shall) what my situation was on board the Harwich, and at the Plantanes.”²³⁷ However, Newton seems to have understood this narrow change largely in terms of his rediscovered religion. In 1752, following the misbehavior of two men aboard his ship, Newton wrote in his diary:

‘I can sincerely say that I have...endeavoured to do my duty by them, without oppression, ill language or any kind of abuse as remembering that I also have a Master in Heaven and that there is no respecter of Persons with him. And I resolve to entertain no personal hatred or ill will...I will treat them with humanity while under my power and not render their confinement unnecessarily grievous, but yet I do not think myself at liberty to dismiss the affair in silence lest encouragement should be thereby given to such attempts.’²³⁸

Newton dealt with the slaves aboard his ship in much the same way. He recorded the violence and barbarity necessary to slavery with no seeming emotion or a second thought regarding the institution within which he had chosen to work. Newton discussed the people he was kidnapping by number, rather than name. In December 1750, he wrote: “At 2 a.m. the yaul came on board, brought 6 slaves, 1 woman, 2 boys, and 3 girls, all small, No. 38 to 43.”²³⁹ Likewise, he wrote of the slaves and his trading in them coldly and with a utilitarian eye towards their value as goods. In one striking sentence from Newton’s journal in February of 1751, he noted: “Will Grey sent me off a woman slave with a young child, but I refused her, being very long breasted.”²⁴⁰ In another, from January 1750, Newton wrote: “Yellow Will brought me a woman slave, but being long breasted and ill made, refused her, and made him take her on shoar again, tho I am not

²³⁷ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 110-111.

²³⁸ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 71.

²³⁹ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 26.

²⁴⁰ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 35.

certain I shall be able to get one in her room.”²⁴¹ As with his crew, Newton treated his slaves violently when it kept them in line and discussed it as matter of factly as he did other practical problems aboard the ship. There are a number of examples of this.

Following one attempted slave rebellion in 1752, Newton wrote, “The boy slaves impeached the men of an intention to rise upon us. Found 4 principally concerned, punished them with the thumb screws and afterwards put them in neck yokes.”²⁴² If he had any remorse for the act or second thoughts regarding a profession which required it of him, Newton seems to have not recorded them.

Yet, within the bounds of Newton’s perspective, he attempted to watch out for the slaves’ welfare as he did his sailors. This tense, moral dance pervaded Newton’s career as a slaver. He kidnapped men, women, and children for a life of brutal servitude, but only those who were already enslaved. Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell, in their edited compilation of Newton’s journal from 1750-1754, take a section Newton wrote in March 1751, “Redeemed a free boy out of captain Keith for Mr Hall, that was carryed off the last voyage to Rhode Island.” and note, “Newton wrote ‘Redeemed a boy slave’, then altered ‘slave’ to ‘free.’ The incident supports, what Newton elsewhere asserted, that at this period the ships were careful to take only those who were already enslaved.”²⁴³

Similarly, Newton willingly tortured the enslaved boys who had been carrying information and supplies for adult slaves planning an insurrection, but he wrote, in his journal, that he did so “slightly” and “to urge them to a full confession” rather than to

²⁴¹ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 32.

²⁴² Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 77.

²⁴³ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 38-39.

punish, as he did the men.²⁴⁴ And Newton seems to have looked after the slaves' wellbeing, in so far as it was possible within the bounds of the oppressive institution he had joined.

He did so beyond the norm. On the vast majority of slave ships, sexual abuse of female slaves was common.²⁴⁵ Newton was odd in that he seems to have worked to keep his men from taking advantage of the women on board. In January 1753, Newton wrote: "In the afternoon while we were off the deck, William Cooney seduced a woman slave down into the room and lay with her brutelike in view of the whole quarter deck, for which I put him in irons. I hope this has been the first affair of this kind on board and am determined to keep them quiet if possible. If anything happens to the woman I shall impute it to him, for she was big with child. Her number is 83."²⁴⁶ Though not entirely clear and lacking important details, this quote encompasses the strange moral balance Newton held during his time as a slave trader. The phrase "keep them quiet" may have meant anything from a desire to protect his reputation as a pious man to a plan to keep abuses events from occurring in the future. Regardless, it showed that he viewed Coonie's actions as something deplorable enough to erase in one way or another. That, combined with the the fact that Newton hoped this was the first incident of its kind, indicates that he attempted to keep his men from assaulting the slave women. However, as one can see in this quote, he still considered the women he attempted to protect from

²⁴⁴ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 71.

²⁴⁵ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 242.

²⁴⁶ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 75

abuse as objects to trade. He wrote of her by her number, 83, and described little additional concern for her wellbeing.

Just as with his crew, Newton's treatment of his slaves was a vast improvement upon his behavior before the storm in 1748 and one which he credited to his newly retrieved faith. Newton had first entered the slave trade when he got himself traded out of the brig of the *HMS Harwich* and on to a slaving guinea at age nineteen. There is little obvious evidence of how he treated the slaves at that time, but historians have pieced together indirect pictures of his behavior. Generally, he appears to have been someone who had little regard for the wellbeing of others. When Newton left the *HMS Harwich* he wrote in his autobiography that his only guiding principle at this time was Mary's approval, and it was a weak restraint. "The Lord had now, to appearance, given me up to judicial hardness; I was capable of any thing. I had not the least fear of God before my eyes, nor (so far as I remember) the least sensibility of conscience."²⁴⁷ What exactly this meant, Newton does not specify. Hochschild makes the argument that, during his work there, Newton sexually assaulted slaves under his charge: "[Newton] does not give us the details, but his diary mentions his 'brutish lusts.' In memoirs he wrote twenty years afterwards, he refers to the Bible passage about adultery and then adds, 'I was exceedingly vile indeed... I... sinned with a high hand.'"²⁴⁸ Hindmarsh takes up this point as well, though with more caution. He argues Newton's use of 2 Peter 2:14 likely described Newton's generally loose sexual behavior on the Guinea Coast, likely with

²⁴⁷ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 43.

²⁴⁸ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 16.

prostitutes, given their prevalence in Madeira, where Newton resided. He writes only that Newton wrote later in his piece essay against the slave trade that sailors frequently assaulted their female captives, but that there is no evidence one way or the other as to Newton's guilt.²⁴⁹ However, generally speaking, Newton was a man who had little to no guiding morality in the years between his time aboard the *Harwich* and the storm in 1748 and he behaved accordingly. That Newton strove at all to care for the slaves aboard his vessel after the storm was due to his returning interest in Christianity.

This theory of how Newton understood his involvement in the slave trade after 1748 is supported by a lack of alternative explanations. Newton seems to have known that the men, women, and children he was imprisoning, torturing, and, at times, killing, were human beings. And he seems to have known the horrors of what they faced in grim detail and felt empathy and compassion for their situation. That simply seems not to have been enough to move him to an anti-slavery, let alone an abolitionist, stance. Unlike many Britons who were apathetic towards the slave trade, Newton was not ignorant of the horrific particulars of slavery. He had worked in the slave trade for years before 1748. After he was caught attempting to desert the *HMS Harwich* and imprisoned in 1744, Newton managed to get himself traded off to a ship captained by a friend of his father. That ship happened to be a slaving guinea and so, at age nineteen, Newton first joined the slave ship. From there, Newton made his way to the Guinea Coast and took up work for a slaver there, before finding his way to a trading post which dealt in slaves, among other things. Nor was Newton unempathetic to the plight of being enslaved. Newton had been

²⁴⁹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 57-58.

impressed as a teenager and then enslaved again on the Guinea Coast. Though it was not the same as being condemned to chattel slavery, Newton knew what it was like to be forced into a deadly business, away from the woman he loved, and to be starved and abused by those above him. These experiences seem to have left a distinct impression on him. As already noted above, Newton kept both experiences in mind as he dealt with his crew, and presumably did the same in his relationship with his slaves.

Moreover, Newton seems not to have put much stock in a person's race. The man he seems to have regarded most highly among those engaged in the slave trade was a successful, mixed-race slave trader named Harry Tucker. As Martin and Spurrell observe, Newton referred to Tucker as "my friend Harry" when he wrote Mary of him.²⁵⁰ They seem to have dined together with some frequency²⁵¹ and Mary conferred at least one gift to one of Tucker's wives, in friendship.²⁵² In December 1750, Newton recorded in his journal, "I depend more upon Mr Tucker than any of them, or should not trust my boat an hour in the river, for I believe them to be all villains to a man except him."²⁵³ Newton's wariness towards all others engaged in the trade extended regardless of a man's race. In November 1750, he observed as much in his journal: "I find whites blacks, and mulattoes are all double and designing alike here."²⁵⁴ Those he chose to socialize with, he selected by virtue of their station and behavior, not their skin. He records dining with Mr Tucker as well as other black and mixed race people.²⁵⁵ The few men he wrote positively of were

²⁵⁰ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 15.

²⁵¹ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 23-24.

²⁵² Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 88.

²⁵³ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 24.

²⁵⁴ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 16.

²⁵⁵ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 23-24.

frequently black or biracial. In November 1750, Newton also recorded his interaction with a powerful African prince, noting that the man's behavior outstripped that of his white compatriots: "Mr. William Ansah Setarakoo, one of the African princes, as they were stiled [*sic*] in England, who is on his passage to Anamboo in the *Surprize*, came on board with me, and spent the evening with me very much to my satisfaction, being master of a great deal of solid sense and politeness of behaviour I seldom meet with any of our complexion hereabouts."²⁵⁶ The only non-white individual Newton seems to have written of with specific animosity was P.I., a slave trader and african woman who, along with her husband, had previously enslaved Newton. It was her, in particular, who took pleasure dangling the prospect of food in front of the then starving Newton, before snatching it away. However, by the time Newton returned to Africa after the storm, he was determined to treat his old foe graciously and seems to have done so.²⁵⁷

Moreover, Newton seems to have held these beliefs even during his original involvement in the slave trade. They never seem to have cause him to pause or question his involvement. After being enslaved aboard the *HMS Harwich*, Newton immediately took up a job aboard a slaving ship himself. The same was true following his time as a slave on the Guinea Coast, when Newton found a job at a trading post which dealt in many goods, including slaves. Likewise, Newton seems to have held little regard for race during his time in Guinea. In fact, in his autobiography, Newton wrote that he was so comfortable among the Africans living on the coast that he would have been happy to

²⁵⁶ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 19.

²⁵⁷ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 18.

stay there, working at the slave trading post, had he not been lured back to England with the promise of Mary's interest and a false inheritance.²⁵⁸ Still, Newton traded in men, women, and children and with a greater brutality than he displayed after 1748.

The principal belief Newton seems to have been missing during his time as a slave trader both before and after the storm was the idea of a radically gracious God. Before the storm, Newton had no faith in God to speak of or interest in moral behavior. After, he had an infant belief in God's existence and Christ's divinity, but his theology was one which rested on his old suppositions. He saw righteousness as unevenly distributed among human beings by virtue of their intellect and self-discipline, their refinement. Consequently, Newton saw those who were less refined as under his authority (as the previous chapter noted, he even referred to them as animals). Following this logic further, he saw himself as under the authority of custom and the more refined in society. He was eager to please them by conforming to what was considered respectable, which the slave trade was. So his theology, as it stood in 1748, did not convict him to abhor an institution which was evil to its core.

²⁵⁸ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 62-63.

Chapter Four

A Stumbling Journey to Evangelical Theology

Despite its impact in the short term, it seems as though Newton's internal torment in the face of his continued moral imperfection ultimately led him to embrace the evangelical, Calvinist theology he held from the last half of 1754 to the end of his life.²⁵⁹ The path between the two was neither smooth nor linear. As discussed in the second chapter, Newton's earliest years were spent immersed in Dissenting ideas, hymns, and literature. Hindmarsh makes a compelling case that Newton's mother's influence stayed with him throughout his younger years.²⁶⁰ Though Newton seems not to have held on to her theology through his atheistic period, Hindmarsh argues that her instruction was psychologically formative. Newton continued to write of his mother with obvious regard and warmth throughout his private papers and autobiography. In conjunction with Newton's poor relationship with his nominally Anglican father and step-mother, Hindmarsh believes that Newton's mother's influence put him in a position to be open to Calvinism, when it was unusual to be so.²⁶¹ Hindmarsh asserts that "best estimates place the numbers of Independents in London in the early eighteenth century at approximately 1 percent of the population."²⁶²

²⁵⁹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 49.

²⁶⁰ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 52.

²⁶¹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 53-54.

²⁶² Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 51.

So, though Newton emerged from the storm in 1748 with a theology clumsily assembled from his childhood memories and secular moral framework, his fond memories of his childhood piety drew him to those he associated with it. One of these figures was David Jennings, a staunch Calvinist and the Independent pastor of the church Mrs. Newton attended while she was alive.²⁶³ In 1750, Newton reached out to Jennings, looking for guidance in his new faith.²⁶⁴ The ideas Jennings presented were largely new to Newton, but he took an almost immediate interest in Jennings' theology. Hindmarsh records how, after two letters from Jennings, Newton seemed to be intrigued with the idea of "final Perseverance."²⁶⁵ The grand picture of grace and universally dark image of human nature encompassed in the idea of final perseverance, or the idea that God's salvation overwhelmed the wretched state of sinners and saved them regardless,²⁶⁶ would become an important part of Newton's theology. However, Newton's initial interest in it was just that and it took much longer for him to take on the basic elements of the theology and make it his own. Other than Jennings' correspondence, Newton was largely bereft of religious companionship or guidance from 1748 to his exit from the slave trade in 1754.²⁶⁷ Though he had Jennings to suggest more Calvinistic ideas, he did not have much external urging towards them.

Instead, Newton's journey to a broader idea of grace seems to have been propelled largely by his experiences and internal turmoil. It is an argument that

²⁶³ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 67.

²⁶⁴ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 54.

²⁶⁵ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 68.

²⁶⁶ Taylor, Gene. "Calvinism VI: Perseverance of the Saints." Centerville Road Church of Christ. <http://www.centervilleroad.com/articles/calvinism-6.html>. 2015.

²⁶⁷ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 89.

Hindmarsh makes most convincingly in his own account of Newton's theological progression.²⁶⁸ Hindmarsh points to Newton's fall from faith six months after the storm as the crisis which sent him after a wider conception of grace.²⁶⁹ The experience certainly made Newton's immense weakness real to him. He realized that he was no more righteous, no stronger or more disciplined, than the adolescent who had renounced God aboard the *HMS Harwich*. His experience in the storm had not made him any more worthy of salvation and, apparently, it could be snatched away from him at anytime. Hindmarsh records how Newton wrote to David Jennings a year after, despairing of his own righteousness, saying that he would have to rely on God's strength if he was to improve. Still, this event did not cement the idea in Newton's heart and mind. He continued to act as though he had to make himself a righteous person through self-discipline and intellectually understanding morality. It took a variety of other, similar failures before he incorporated a broader idea of grace into his understanding and behavior. The actual process was one which seems to have occurred day to day, however there are several key moments in which Newton's theology apparently changed.

On his third triangle voyage, this time as a captain for Manesty, Newton's continued failure to be righteous and fears that he would slip back into unbelief, led him to begin to give up his ideal of intellectual refinement. Over the course of his first and second triangle voyages (1750-1752), Newton bent his mind largely towards his refinement. He devoted some time each day to religious devotions. However, he spent the

²⁶⁸ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 50.

²⁶⁹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 60.

bulk of his leisure time relearning Latin, with the aid of Horace's poetry and Castalio's Latin Bible.²⁷⁰ He continued his studies when he embarked on his next slaving voyage in August 1750, this time as captain. Newton read Horace, Livy, Caesar, and Sallust as well as a Latin dictionary.²⁷¹ Then to these he added Terence, Virgil, Cicero, Buchanan, Erasmus, and Casimir. Newton in particular admired Cicero and recalled in his autobiography how, "[a]t length I conceived a design of becoming a Ciceronian myself, and thought it would be a fine thing indeed to write pure and elegant Latin."²⁷² It was on his third triangle voyage that Newton rethought this use of his intelligence. In his autobiography, Newton recorded: 'I began to think that life was too short (especially my life) to admit of leisure for such elaborate trifling. Neither poet nor historian could tell me a word of Jesus, and I therefore applied myself to those who could.'²⁷³ Accordingly, Newton relegated reading the classics to once a week until putting them down altogether. He also set aside mathematics, instead committing himself to a deeper study of Christian works.

Desperate to make himself deserving of salvation, Newton poured more and more of his time into forming his theology and relationship with his newly, rediscovered God. The fear behind Newton's decision to set aside his secular, intellectual pursuits is perhaps not all that obvious in the above quotation, though it certainly peeks through in his mention of his own impending mortality. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Newton saw studying the Gospel, in order to "be more and more confirmed in it" as the only way to

²⁷⁰ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 100.

²⁷¹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 108-110.

²⁷² Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 110.

²⁷³ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 110.

save himself from his hopelessly unworthy state in which he found himself after the storm. That Newton saw himself needful of more Christian reading and more prayer, in light of his quickly approaching death, alludes to Newton's powerful desire to hastily compose himself for salvation before the grave took him. This despairing fear is more obvious in his description of his increasing theological studies. When Newton returned to England in 1752, he augmented his reading and prayer with a diary. In his autobiography, he recorded why: "I had in this interval [between voyages] repeated proofs of the ingratitude and evil of my heart. A life of ease in the midst of my friends, and the full satisfaction of my wishes, was not favorable to the progress of grace, and afforded cause of daily humiliation."²⁷⁴ Besides using the diary to better focus the time he spent in prayer, Newton kept a record of his failings and successes (though more the former) across the week.²⁷⁵ He went on to add a variety of works to his studies while at sea. Newton added Henry Scougall's *Life of God in the Soul of Man*, Hervey's *Meditations and Contemplations*, and Philip Doddridge's *Some remarkable passages in the life of Colonel James Gardiner* to his collection in order to instruct himself better on Christian doctrine.²⁷⁶ Himmelfarb also records Newton as having read Gilbert Burnet's *The life and death of Sir Matthew Hale* as well as various works by Robert Boyle, Isaac Watts, Matthew Hale, William Beveridge, and John Howe. Burnet's work in particular provided Newton with a "model for [a] detailed devotional scheme at sea."²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴ Newton *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 112.

²⁷⁵ Himmelfarb, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 221-222.

²⁷⁶ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 112-113.

²⁷⁷ Himmelfarb, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 333.

Underlying Newton's decision to throw himself after religious studies rather than the enlargement of his intellect, was a shift in his understanding of grace. Newton initially threw himself into his religious studies not only with the desire to better analytically understand Christian doctrine, but to gain the Spirit "by which the whole [of the Bible] was written, in order to understand it aright."²⁷⁸ This idea that wisdom was achieved through a combination of reason and Grace, one which was a human design and the other a miraculous manifestation of God's mercy, would be an important element of the evangelical theology Newton eventually adopted. In its nascent form, Newton's concept of reason's dependence on grace had seemingly little effect on his behavior, but, fully fleshed out, the idea was entirely contrary to his regard for refinement. The process by which it grew was just as halting and daily as Newton's overall journey to his Calvinist, evangelical theology. Still, the moment in 1752 on Newton's third voyage, it gained concerted ground. In his autobiography, Newton recalled that, at that time, "I found they [mathematics and classics] not only cost me much time, but engrossed my thoughts too far; my head was literally full of *schemes*. I was weary of cold contemplative truths, which can neither warm nor amend the heart, but rather tend to aggrandize self."²⁷⁹ Newton's comparison between religious and secular knowledge, alludes to the spiritual experience he perceived to be present in the former and not the latter. That this experience could "amend the heart," shows an idea of God's grace that was contrary to the idea that man became more righteous through philosophical studies.

²⁷⁸ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 80.

²⁷⁹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 110-111.

By that idea, it was not man's intellect, but the Holy Spirit that dwelled in Christian texts which made a man better. Intelligence was cold; grace was warm. Philosophy was dead; theology was alive.

Newton's writings from this time bear out his recollection, but show that this idea of an all powerful grace upon which reason depended was far from fully grown. Its limits were perhaps best captured in Newton's letter to Mary, written in May 1753. In it, Newton gave us a look at his study schedule. Part, he spent praying for Mary "twice or thrice a day."²⁸⁰ Part, he devoted to pouring over the Bible. The rest of his freetime, he split between reading, writing, and mathematics. His readings seems to have focused on "the actions of Caesar, Pompey, and twenty other hot-headed heroes of antiquity." Despite his resolution in 1752, Newton had returned to his old division of his leisure time. Newton still considered secular knowledge and success to be largely vanity. When he looked over the classics and the values and goals of figures within, Newton wrote that he often asked himself, "sometimes with a smile, What trifles are these compared with eternity? The latter question brings my censure home to myself; and forces me to confess, that the greater part of my own schemes and prospects, are no less vanities, than those which I pity in others." He expounded upon this idea as he recounted his work at mathematics. "Yet even in these, I am discouraged; for the more I advance, the more clearly I perceive, that the greatest human knowledge, amounts but to a more pompous proof of our ignorance, by shewing us how little we know of any thing, and how many inquiries may be started, concerning which, we can know nothing." It is notable that

²⁸⁰ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 177.

nowhere in this accounting does Newton mention the grace of God as the root of wisdom and the right use of logic, as he would later describe the two. Instead, he only expounds upon how deeply man lacks the ability to do that to which he aspires and how weak he seems to be, in the end. He seems to have had no idea how to escape that despair. And this, somewhat conversely, seems to have led him to the reason for which he continued his secular studies: deserving Mary. Newton concluded his letter: “However, I still jog on in this road, partly, to keep me from idleness, which is the source either of sin, or disquiet; and partly, because I consider every little improvement I can make, to be valuable, so far as it may enable me to appear to more advantage, in the character of your husband.” Newton’s high regard for Mary, as it entangled with his religion, seems to have kept him bound to his idea of refinement and deserving his salvation throughout much of his time in the slave trade.

Still, Newton’s continual internal anguish over his lack of righteousness and general inadequacy in his own eyes gradually eroded his religious regard for her. As the idea that his intellect could affect his righteousness lost its sway over Newton, he continued to turn to his previous practice of self discipline. He found that the addition of a diary and his focus on Christian studies in 1752 did not make him the man he wished to be. So, in October 1752, Newton formed a covenant with God.²⁸¹ This oath marked an important point in the slow destruction of the philosophy Newton held when he exited the storm in 1748. Rather than emphasizing study, Newton's covenant was geared towards self-denial. Hindmarsh explains, “his covenant of 15 October 1752 was reviewed

²⁸¹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 225.

frequently, if not daily; as a part of his private devotion.²⁸² Still, this approach failed him too. Newton found he was much less than he wished to be and could not seem to make himself close the distance. Hindmarsh records how Newton's continued failures slowly eroded his belief in the power of self-discipline and human behavior to affect righteousness.²⁸³

It was around this time that Newton also began to think he had incorrectly equated Mary and the feeling he deserved her with God and security in his salvation. It is hard to say, from the source material, when precisely Newton began to reconsider his religious regard for his wife. He first seems to note it in a letter he wrote to Mary in August 1752 on his third triangle voyage, describing the general pattern by which some married couples became too wrapped up in one another to follow God.

But they who judge so ill as to place a dependence upon each other, which interferes with what they owe to their common preserver [God], oblige him, if I may so speak to quash their purpose, either by sickness, sufferings, death, or what to me seems worse than all, a change of affection, to make them feel their offence in their punishment. I dare not say, that you and I have not been guilty of this error. But since it has pleased God, as yet, to forbear afflicting us for it, I hope, for the future, we shall be more upon our guard and not farther displease him.²⁸⁴

In December of that year, Newton still feared that he over-regarded Mary, though he thought he had made some progress towards not doing so. He wrote to her then: "A long time it was, before I durst appeal to my conscience, that I did not behold you with a regard, which belongs only to God. And even to this day, I fear my heart deceives me. But I am endeavouring to avoid this error; no less for your sake than for my own; lest I

²⁸² Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 61-62.

²⁸³ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 61-63.

²⁸⁴ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 138.

should provoke him to wound me in the most sensible part, and to afflict you, for my punishment.”²⁸⁵

Though he had begun to separate it from his religion, Newton seems to have still been terribly aware of his lack of refinement and desirous of improving upon it. The letter quoted above, in which Newton wrote of his need to make himself deserving of Mary through his studies, he wrote in May 1753, well after these initial reflections in 1752 on his overregard for secular knowledge and Mary herself. Moreover, he seems to have maintained his sense that his role in the slave trade could earn him his position beside her well after even the fever. In a letter to Mary written January 1754 which Chapter Two already quoted, but part of which bears repeating, Newton stated baldly about his position as a slave ship captain, “I am here for your sake. And I am glad of the opportunity of manifesting, that neither difficulties, nor dangers, nor distance, nor time, can abate the sense of what I owe to you.”²⁸⁶

A bad fever which visited Newton in April 1754 seems to have gone a long way towards dismantling this last aspect of his old philosophy. That year had been a particularly perilous time to be on the Guinea Coast. Newton wrote to Mary on April 8, “I think I never before heard, of so many dead, lost, or destroyed, in one year.”²⁸⁷ A terrible fever was sweeping through the population and, on April 15, Newton contracted it. He wrote to Mary on the 18th; telling her of the development and that he was reflecting on the possibility of his imminent death. He was attempting to “compose [himself] to the

²⁸⁵ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 150.

²⁸⁶ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 233-234.

²⁸⁷ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 253.

summons” and was “in some measure, ready to live or die, as may be appointed.”²⁸⁸ He regretted that he might not live to “have opportunity of doing something for the glory of God, and the good of my fellow-creatures; that I might not go quite useless out of the world.” Yet he was ashamed to hope after it, given how little he had done with what God had already provided for him. Newton comforted himself with the idea that he would see Mary again, but reflected that they had been over reliant on each other and that had lured them into forgetting their duty to God. “It has been too much the case already: I have greatly failed myself, and I have been but a poor example for you.”²⁸⁹ This point bothered Newton so much that he thought if his death could help Mary hope only in God then it was a happy thing. The pain it would cause her rend his heart, but he had faith God would “moderate and sanctify it.”²⁹⁰

Eventually, Newton recovered, but a severe impression that he and Mary should not be more enthralled with one another than with their moral calling seemed to stick with him. When he wrote to Mary on April 30, telling her of the good news, he added: ‘But let us not be too secure. A relapse may soon happen; or twenty unforeseen events, may, without sickness, prove equally decisive.’ When he wrote to her again about the affair on May 16, Newton’s solemnity had an added dimension, which had previously been somewhat uncommon in his writing. It had a little hope. Newton wrote about how painful it was to lose his friend, Captain L—, and told Mary that he thought losing her would be the one trial he could not stand, given how weak his heart and conscience had

²⁸⁸ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 254.

²⁸⁹ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 256.

²⁹⁰ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 257.

proven to be. However, rather than despairing at this fact, Newton wrote: “I humbly trust I shall be [strengthened from above], if I am ever called to a scene, which, at present, overpowers my spirits, when I but transiently think of it. Yes! God could enable me, to resign you also! He has promised strength according to our day; and he is compassionate, and faithful.”²⁹¹

When the idea of over-regarding Mary emerged again in a letter to Mary on July 13 that year, in much fuller form, Newton’s hope seemed to have gained great ground over his despair. It went on at length about the subject of marriage and over-regarding one’s spouse in general, before turning to their particular case. Newton began by noting that he could not think of a piece on married life, which dealt with “the great evil of all; I mean our wretched propensity, to lay the foundation of our proposed happiness, independent of God.”²⁹² Spouses who saw each other as the source of their happiness, rather than God, set themselves up for individual moral collapses and the destruction of their bond. “Dreaming of sure satisfaction, in the prosecution, or enjoyment, of our own desires, we do but imitate the builders of Babel, who said, Go to, let us build a tower, to get ourselves a name.”²⁹³ Since there was no good outside of God, Newton thought that this only could make a marriage unhappy. And he thought it was likely the true cause of many people’s marital troubles. “Not for want of good-will at first, nor for want of any necessary qualification in themselves; but because, neglecting to own, and to seek God in their concerns, he has refused them that blessing, without which no union can subsist.”²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 260.

²⁹² Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 273.

²⁹³ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 274.

²⁹⁴ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 276.

And yet, Newton observed, his and Mary's marriage flourished. It was certainly not because they had disciplined themselves to hold a singular regard for God. Newton wrote, "I cannot pretend, that it is owing to my being duly dependent and humble in ascribing all my blessings to the Lord; or to my having enjoyed them, with an eye to his glory. (Alas, I have given way to evils, which I knew, I ought to avoid; and have neglected the good, to which my conscience called me.)"²⁹⁵ Instead, he ascribed their success to God's grace. Nothing in Newton's behavior warranted Mary or any other blessing from God. And that caused him to fear he would lose Mary. "But the Lord is God, and not man. As in a thousand instances, so particularly in this, I may well say, He has not dealt with me, according to my sins, nor rewarded me after my iniquities."

Likewise, Newton thought he had abused his intellect.

Philosophy, and reasoning, have their use; but religion alone can teach us, how to use the good things of this world, without abusing them; and to make our earthly comforts, blessings indeed; by improving them to a farther view; by tracing them, as streams to their fountain; by extending our views, from time to eternity; and making our mutual affection, a mean of raising our desires to the great Lord of all. But herein, alas! I have greatly failed hitherto.²⁹⁶

It was for these reasons that Newton thought they may have been separated for so long.

Had he remained home with her, where he most wished to be, Newton thought he "might have been hardened, into an entire neglect of my duty to God, and my most essential duty to you."²⁹⁷ Being separated from her, he could not become too comfortable and had plenty of time for reflection and repentance.

²⁹⁵ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 277.

²⁹⁶ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 278.

²⁹⁷ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 279.

Finally, he confessed to Mary: “You have been much mistaken, in your opinion of me. Your kind partiality has thought me very good, when, indeed, I have been very bad; very insensible, and ungrateful, not only to God, but even to you. I have not properly answered, the trust you have reposed in me; but, I hope, I shall be enabled to amend.” He extolled how deeply he loved Mary and how happily he would give up anything to remain hers. He

would welcome any temporal troubles, that might be a mean of final good to you.—Thus far I can go.—There was a time, when I could have gone farther. Do not think my love impaired, because I now desire to stop here. There was a time, (what a mercy, that the Lord did not tear my idol from me) when you had that place in my heart, which is only due to him, and I regarded you as my chief good. But I hope that time is past; and never did I wish so earnestly, for the first proofs of your affection, as I do now, that you may be enabled to restrain it within due bounds; and that your regard may not prevent you, from considering me as a frail, poor, mutable creature, unable of myself, to procure you any real good, or to shield you from the smallest evil. Oh, may we adore him, who provided us for each other; who brought us together, and has spared us so long! May we love each other till death, yea, I hope, in a future state, beyond death! And, in order to this, may we, in the first place, love him with all our heart, and soul, and strength, who first loved us, and gave himself for us, to renew our forfeited title, to the good things of both worlds, and to wash us from our sins, in his own blood. Where were the sensibility, and ingenuousness of spirit, which we sometimes think we possess, that this unspeakable lover of souls, has been no more noticed, no more admired, and beloved, by us hitherto. Lord! make us partakers of thy divine nature, for thou art Love!²⁹⁸

Though this entire letter marks great changes in Newton’s thought, this section particularly encapsulates his burgeoning sense of hope in God’s grace. In contrast to his earlier philosophy, by July 1754, Newton not only distinguished between his desire to deserve Mary and his desire to be good before God, but identified their potential conflict. If he gave himself to what he thought would please Mary, then Newton would shirk his

²⁹⁸ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 280-281.

duty to love and obey God. If either he or Mary grew to enamored with one another, they would give up what had preserved them thus far, in their marriage and in life. Moreover, readers can see a small, but present idea of God's grace as the root of righteousness.

Where Newton's work for Mary was best kept to "temporal troubles," to practical and material affairs. He still seemed to think that could be achieved through his own efforts within that realm. However, the righteousness and salvation, Newton wrote about as something he passively received. Newton did not refine himself to perfection, the blood of Christ cleansed him of his sins. Newton drew out the dichotomy most clearly in the last two sentences quoted above. Whatever gifts he and Mary thought they possessed, they were too poor to make them think of the Lord as they should. He was brilliantly good and they still preferred to turn their eyes to less impressive concerns. Instead of asking, as he had before, for God to teach him to be obedient and secure in his salvation,²⁹⁹ Newton beseeched God to make Mary and him a part of his "divine nature." Rather than asking for him to learn, intellectually, how to behave righteously and thus feel he deserved salvation, Newton asked for God's presence and divinity, for his love. This request, to love and be loved, rested on a far greater view of grace than Newton held in the years prior.

There were still limits to Newton's belief. His previous theology's continued inability to make newton as he wished to be had greatly damaged it and he had begun to gain some rough sense of an alternative belief in God's grace. Still, being something he had formed on his own and from his own experience and emotion in the space of a few

²⁹⁹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 64.

years, it was not as yet a well-formed theology. This left him well mired in despair, as can be seen from a note he penned to Mary in July 27 1754, ten days after the letter quoted at length above. He thought over his usual, rigorously discipline Sunday routine and reflected:

But alas, when I look back, upon a day spent in this manner, I cannot express how much I have to mourn over, and be ashamed of, at night. Oh! the wanderings, and faintness, of my prayers; the distraction of my thoughts; the coldness of my heart, and the secret workings of pride, which debase, and corrupt, my best services. In short, every thing is wrong. But I remember, that I am not under the law, but under grace. I rely on the promised mediation of my Saviour;...Lord, not unto me, but unto Thee be the praise. It was wholly the effect of thy grace; for thou would'st be found of me, when I had not the least inclination to seek thee!³⁰⁰

This balance, between Newton's continued insistence on a life of self-discipline, coupled with his awareness that it did not make him the man he wanted to be, seems to represent his state of mind during his last triangle voyage. He had a growing awareness of a more radical interpretation of grace, which verged closer to the evangelical, Calvinist one he would eventually adopt. However, he had not yet fully conceived of it, let alone incorporated its tenants into his actions. As he put in 1762, in his autobiography, "Thus far, that is, for about the space of six years, the Lord was pleased to lead me in a secret way. I had learned something of the evil of my heart; I had read the Bible over and over, with several good books, and had a general view of *Gospel-truths*; but my conceptions were, in many respects, confused, not having in all his time met with one acquaintance who could assist my inquiries."³⁰¹ Newton still acted as though he could make himself righteous through self discipline and as if his profession as a slave trader and reading

³⁰⁰ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol I*, 286-287.

³⁰¹ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 124.

could make him refined. And he seems to have, in large part, still believed this, though his fear, guilt, and doubt left him open to alternative understandings. These were rare. Newton had Jennings' correspondence, but, while engaged in the slave trade, Newton was largely without challenging evangelical company.

The one exception came near the end of his last voyage in 1754 in the form of Alexander Clunie. Newton encountered Clunie, who was also a captain and a religious Independent, at St. Kitt's. Hindmarsh argues convincingly, from Newton's letters to Jennings on the subject as well as his correspondence with Clunie, that it was this relationship which spurred Newton to articulate the theology he went on to hold for the rest of his life. Hindmarsh records how, in a letter to Jennings on 31 October 1756, Newton placed his main transformation to Calvinistic beliefs in late 1754, after he had completed his last middle passage: "I think within these two years or thereabouts the Lord has favoured me with much encrease of light, with respect to the nature and properties of his covenant of grace, especially its immutability; tho my believing in Christ was (I trust) of 3 or 4 years longer standing."³⁰² Hindmarsh argues that this relatively sudden increase in understanding came from Newton's encountering Clunie in 1754. Newton credited Clunie with teaching him a broader and more radical idea of grace in the context of their contemporary religious and theological surroundings. Until then, Newton seems to have been largely unaware of the state of religion in society at large. Hindmarsh argues that, Newton was largely unaware of the popular, evangelical revival of

³⁰² Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 68.

Methodism until the winter of 1754/55.³⁰³ He could see little difference between preachers in Charleston, South Carolina, when he visited in 1749, though one he heard was the Independent minister Josiah Smith. He had no idea of the common debates or differences even within the English Revival.³⁰⁴ Clunie's instruction went far to show Newton both the theology he would eventually adopt and the argumentative landscape surrounding him. In particular, Newton wrote Clunie that through him Newton "began to understand the security of the covenant of grace." Part of this influence certainly came from Clunie's introduction of Newton to a wider circle of dissenters in London.

For a year after an epileptic fit forced Newton to exit the slave trade in 1754, Newton was in frequent contact with this group. From August 1754 to August 1755, he lived with Mary and her parents in Chatham in Kent, from which it was relatively easy to spend time in London. Hindmarsh records: "He did not write in his diary for the last half of 1754, but during the first half of 1755 he recorded five visits to London comprising more than thirteen weeks in all."³⁰⁵ He searched out and devoured religious thinking throughout the city, frequenting many Independent and Presbyterian gatherings. "Judging from his sermon reports, it was a steady Calvinistic diet."³⁰⁶ One influence which stood out from the rest was that of Clunie's pastor Samuel Brewer. Like Newton, Brewer had been greatly influenced by Jennings. Hindmarsh notes that, though he is "largely unnoticed in modern scholarship, Samuel Brewer (1723-96) was an important figure in

³⁰³ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 70.

³⁰⁴ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 71.

³⁰⁵ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 69.

³⁰⁶ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 69.

Dissent and in early evangelicalism.”³⁰⁷ As an ordained pastor of an Independent meeting at Stepney, Brewer grew his congregation from thirty-two members to somewhere between two to three hundred. Newton attended Brewer’s meetings frequently and “claimed that of all his many friends he was most indebted to Brewer.”³⁰⁸ Besides articulating to him a fuller idea of evangelical, Calvinistic theology, Brewer introduced Newton to many of the other religious groups he frequented during his time in London.

Socializing with these groups in London as well as the Methodist elements in Chatham revealed a world of which Newton was at first wary, but soon left to with joy and eagerness. Newton first read some of Wesley’s work in January 1755 and Whitefield’s soon after, however neither caught his attention much at the time.³⁰⁹ Hindmarsh argues that, as Newton befriended young Congregationalists in London, their relative eccumenicalism gradually ameliorated his stance. These young evangelicals were more comfortable hopping party lines than older generations. Brewer in particular embraced Methodism and had a close relationship with Whitefield himself.³¹⁰ It was him and Samuel Hayward who introduced Newton to Whitefield in June 1755. Hindmarsh records that Whitefield won Newton at a three-hour communion service, of which Newton wrote in his diary, ““Never before had I such an idea or foretaste of ye business of heaven.””³¹¹ Whitefield’s ideas of Calvinistic free grace in particular captivated Newton and he revelled in the doctrine’s increasing sway across the country. Newton’s

³⁰⁷ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 69.

³⁰⁸ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 69.

³⁰⁹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 71.

³¹⁰ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 72.

³¹¹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 73.

affection for Whitefield only grew when he and Mary moved to Liverpool in 1755. He met with him frequently and the two became close.

Newton's interest in a more radical idea of grace grew during his time in Liverpool. There, Newton connected with some Calvinistic Baptists, whose faith he found more in keeping with his own, though he continued to take communion at the Anglican church.³¹² He attended two different Baptist meetings in Liverpool each week, before settling on that of a more traditionally Calvinist inclined preacher, John Oulton (the other being of a more high Calvinist and sectarian tone).³¹³ Though he never became a member, Newton strongly considered it.³¹⁴ It was also there that Newton became personally acquainted with John Wesley. He had first encountered the man's writings in 1755 and found them somewhat lacking, though he admired their seeming virve for the Gospel.³¹⁵ In April 1757, John Wesley arrived to preach at Liverpool and Newton found that the man was quite contrary to his expectations. This marked the beginning of Newton and Wesleys' warm, but sometimes conflictual relationship, as well as a point at which Newton's belief in a broader view of grace solidified. Phipps writes that Wesley's testimony of his own conversion particularly moved Newton and he found his heart "strangely warmed."³¹⁶

This period from his exit of the slave trade in 1754 to his ordinance as a minister in Olney in 1764 was one of tremendous growth for Newton. He still lamented his

³¹² Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 76.

³¹³ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 77.

³¹⁴ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 73.

³¹⁵ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 71.

³¹⁶ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 72.

failings before God and intensified his religious scholarship,³¹⁷ while maintaining his readings in secular literature. However, the philosophy behind these actions was quite different and it showed. During this period, Newton had an increasingly articulate and powerful view of a radical grace, which was entirely responsible for his salvation and utterly beyond his control. In the first page of the spiritual diary he began in September, 1756, Newton inscribed a passage from James Hervey's *Dialogues between Theron and Aspasio*, in which he detailed the ways in which all other sources of salvation failed man. The section, which is quite long, goes into greater detail, but the core of it is here:

We trust salvation, Not our external duties. This were to build our house upon the sound. Which when the rains descend, when the torrents pour, when the winds blow with tempestuous violence, will certainly fall; and bring the builder with all his vain hopes to irretrievable ruin....All that he [Christ] did, in conformity to the command of the law; and all that he suffered in submission to its penalty. Both which, immensely dignified by his divine nature, are a basis for our faith which nothing can shake; and a foundation for our assurance, which can never be removed. Nothing else in any creature, or in all works, could expiate the least sin. This not only expiates all sin, but gives a title to every blessing: to the blessings of Grace and of Glory; of evangelical holiness and everlasting happiness.³¹⁸

That idea is carried through his entries and with it a continual emphasis on both man's dual irredeemable wretchedness and his sure salvation in Christ.

Along with gaining this belief in his own weakness and God's strength, Newton seems to have lost his reverence for Mary and the ideal of refinement he once held. This comes through in part in his diary entries on his studies and meditation. Newton wrote that he hoped to serve God and, as he began to pursue ordination, serve God's people. He no longer seemed to care for making himself a better man, though he pressed himself to

³¹⁷ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 78.

³¹⁸ Newton, John. *Autograph Diary, Sep 1756 -Dec 31 1772*, Diary. From The Morgan Library & Museum, *Pierpont Morgan Library Dept. of Literary and Historical Manuscripts*, 0.

some of the same tasks. Instead, he frequently worried over his pride and wrote of his desire “to be very humble in my censures of others remembering that I am not myself a whit better than those I am most ready to condemn.”³¹⁹

His increasing disinterest in refinement also comes through in his increasing involvement with the Methodist and Baptist elements. Despite the evangelical movement’s increasing popularity, it was still certainly not a faith for polite society. As the Introduction of this thesis touched upon, higher social circles often viewed religious enthusiasm with disgust and some genuine fear. Newton’s close involvement with Oulton’s society in particular earned him the ire of Mary’s relations and many in Liverpool.³²⁰

Increasingly, Newton found himself associating with those distasteful to polite society, among the poor and dissenting, as he became increasingly impolite himself. For his promises to Mary, found that he could not care for the opinions of those around him and act as he thought was right. In a letter he penned to her on September 23, 1755, Newton wrote: “I find I cannot be consistent, and conscientious in my profession, without incurring the charge of singularity. I shall endeavour to act with prudence, and not give needless offence; but I hope I shall never more be ashamed of the gospel.”³²¹ Where he had once feared those he considered ungodly, Newton’s new faith in God’s grace set him to draw those he would have termed “worldly” into a more evangelical faith. He wrote to Mary on 26 September 1755, recording one such instance: “When I first asked Mrs. D— to hear Mr. Wh—d [Whitefield], she could hardly give me a civil answer (though

³¹⁹ Newton, *Autograph Diary, Sep 1756 -Dec 31 1772*, 6.

³²⁰ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Movement*, 77.

³²¹ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol II*, 29.

otherwise she is very obliging and respectful). But, curiosity, or a better motive, prevailing, she went on the second day. She returned very well disposed, and asked me, if I had any of his printed sermons. . . . She has borne the reproach and laugh of many of her neighbours, very well. They call her a methodist, and she seems as easy under the charge, as I am. SO we see, very unlikely things may be brought about.”³²²

It was still a somewhat gradual process, but Newton was quickly committed to his newfound theology, at the expense of even his wife’s family’s approval. In a letter he wrote to Mary in October 1755, he assured her:

I shall endeavour to temper my zeal with prudence. I am far from proposing that you shall keep company with washerwomen, in this world. (Hereafter, I doubt not, we shall be glad to join with such.) The religious acquaintance which I wish to cultivate, with any degree of intimacy, will, I think, be confined to three or four families, all of whom, are better ot pass in the world, than ourselves. And, who, though perhaps they do not aim, in all things, at the top of the polite taste, are sufficiently well-bred, to be received as visistants any where, if their principles did not hinder.³²³

However, he went on to point out that any real religiosity would be just as poorly received in society. They faced a choice as a couple between serving God and doing what was expected of them by society and family. “Unless you can confine yourself wholly to the gay and careless, and go all their lengths, you will certainly have a bit of the cross to carry, and must prepare yourself to be thought altered for the worse, by some of your acquaintance.” After his experience of internal torment and misery, Newton was far more afraid he and Mary would hold their tongues when it was necessary and right to speak, than that they would be imprudent. He would rather his fellow human beings be ashamed

³²² Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol II*, 30.

³²³ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol II*, 34-36.

of him than his God. Newton acceded that they need not be quarrelsome and should carry themselves honorably, but he insisted that “experience will convince you the less we are connected with worldly people the better. And as the Lord by his providence has placed us in a state of entire independance and there is no consideration of trade or customers, to prevent us from living, in all points, just as we please, I hope we shall judge better, than to sacrifice our happiness and true interest, to an empty sound.”

In part, his disinterest in the opinions of Mary’s relations’ came about because Mary herself was becoming an evangelical. It is hard to know exactly what beliefs Mary held and how they may have changed across her relationship with Newton because very few of her own writings have survived. However, Newton’s writings give modern reader’s some insights. In the letter quoted above from October 1755, Newton went on to say “But I perceive that you, likewise, have picked up, a fine set of methodistical acquaintance. Should your aunt know it, she would let you down as almost ruined. But I, who love you better than a thousand aunts could do, congratulate you upon the acquisition.”³²⁴ And it seems that Mary stood beside Newton in his increasingly evangelical endeavours, at the distaste of her relations. That alone credits her with some belief in such things. Still, it seems as though Newton was the less reluctant of the two to forge ahead into this realm, contrary to social pressure.

What led him to do so was his newly articulated belief in God’s immense grace and man’s equal wretchedness before him. Where Newton had previously looked at humanity through a hierarchy of refinement and righteousness, he now saw them as equal

³²⁴ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol II*, 36.

in their weakness. The only thing which distinguished him was God's grace, which he had not and could not deserve, but he was duty bound to spread the word of as best he could. Contrary to his early assurances to Mary, he did frequently associate with the poor in Liverpool. Though he likely still felt the sting of social approbation, he was far more awestruck by God. So he began to see men and women as all being equal, if not materially, in a far more fundamental sense. They all had equal moral autonomy. Newton held that human beings could not be perfected in this life, contrary to Wesley's doctrine, and remained free beings until their death. However, what goodness they possessed came from God, not their knowledge or will. Every individual had just the same right and ability to be a good Christian, and that was all that mattered. The rest was vanity and window dressing.

Though Newton's pride in his own abilities had deteriorated, his confidence before others had increased. He had nothing to fear from those who were not yet in close communion with God. Whether he was among them or not, he was a wretch without God and His glory would not be foiled by a few imperfect human beings. If that was possible, Newton's own wretchedness would have halted his salvation before it began. Moreover, he had confidence that God loved him and desired that he serve him, despite his imperfection. That might not seem like a terribly interesting or complex idea, but it actually is. Where Newton in his previous philosophy had every reason to think himself unworthy of questioning those above him, he now believed that he was no worse than they were in a final sense. Just as he had equal moral autonomy with a washerwoman, Newton and Lord Dartmouth had the same standing before God. It was an incredibly low

position to be sure, but that only emphasized how little it mattered. God stood far above every being, King or pauper, and His judgment was far more terrible than any other's and His mercy was more wonderful. This led Newton, as early as September 2 1755, to write to Mary:

Greater is He that is with us, than he that is in the world. Changes you must expect. The Christian life is a warfare; and though the Captain of our salvation, by conquering for us, has secured us the final victory, we may be sorely pinched, and sometimes wounded, while on the field of battle; but there is healing balm provided, and He will be always near to apply it. There may be fightings without, and fears within, but He is faithful that has promised, who also will do it.³²⁵

These were almost the exact words Newton would give to Hannah More when she despaired of remaining in polite social circles and yet doing what was right. They were the words which would lead her to stand contrary to public opinion, to end an evil institution which had existed since the beginning of history. They were the words which, in part, affected the abolitionist movement in Britain.

³²⁵ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol II*, 13-15.

Chapter Five

For The Singular Love of the Truth

By 1788, Newton became publically a part of the abolitionist movement with the publication of his *Thought upon the African Slave Trade*. As this thesis mentioned in its first chapter, he never overtly explained the precise process by which he came to write that treatise and go on to testify before Parliament in 1789. The most that Newton explicitly stated his reasons for joining was in the beginning of the treatise itself, where Newton wrote:

If I attempt, after what has been done to throw my mite into the public stock of information, it is less from an apprehension that my interference is necessary, than from a conviction that silence, at such a time and on such an occasion, would, in me, be criminal. If my testimony should not be necessary or serviceable, yet, perhaps, I am bound in conscience to take shame to myself by a public confession, which, however sincere, comes too late to prevent or repair the misery and mischief to which I have, formerly been accessary.³²⁶

This gives readers a sense of how Newton considered the slave trade and his previous involvement in it from his perspective in 1788, but it does not give modern onlookers any deep sense of how he arrived there. It goes without saying that a man who saw his previous actions as evil and that his testimony could have some help lessen the impact of the larger despicable institution of which he had been a part, would publicly confess if he thought his actions had moral consequence. What is of interest is how he arrived there, when in 1752 he was willing to torture enslaved children, in the name of custom and

³²⁶ Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, 98.

necessity. Given the sparse direct evidence, it is hard to say with certainty how Newton made that transition. However, one can map out the course he probably took, if one traces how his theology and understanding of its relationship to politics and society developed more generally.

As seen in the last chapter, the framework by which Newton had previously understood and rationalized his involvement in the slave trade was essentially gone within a few years of his association with the evangelical elements. In its place, Newton developed a set of beliefs which were meaningfully egalitarian and politically motivating. Previously, Newton had considered righteousness as something one earned through self-discipline and correct abstract thinking. Now, he saw every human being as equally wretched because their righteousness was fundamentally something they could not earn. Chapter Two quoted Newton from his *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, but it is worth referring to again here: “Men differ considerably in capacity, rank, education and attainments, they jar in sentiments and interests, they mutually revile, hate and destroy one another; but in this point they all agree Whether Greeks or Barbarians, wise or ignorant, bond or free, the bent and disposition of their minds, while unrenewed by grace is black and implacable enmity against the blessed God.”³²⁷ This, taken with the idea that there was no good apart from God, which one can find scattered throughout Newton’s papers, meant that every human being began life on essential equal moral footing, regardless of material circumstances. He stated this positively elsewhere in his *Review*, in his analysis of Colossians 3:25 “The Lord is not moved by outward distinctions and

³²⁷ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, vi.

differences among men, to which we often pay regard...He neither receives or rejects any for being Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, bond or free, male or female, but is rich in mercy to all who call upon him.”³²⁸

This did not lead Newton to a sort of moral relativism, in which all human actions were too complex to judge, but it did lead him to a doctrine which argued for the fundamental equality of all human beings, regardless of outward characteristics or circumstances. Nothing about a person could make them good and any goodness a person displayed was a product of divine grace. This emerges in a number of his writings, but is succinctly encapsulated in a section from a letter Newton penned to his friend, a dissenting minister, in February of 1785. Newton recommended that his friend procure financial support for a third minister who, largely by his own errors, had fallen into poverty:

I do not therefore recommend him to you as a faultless character, but rather as one who has been entangled and overtaken, to the wounding of his peace, character, and usefulness; but who has for some time past has given evidence of a repentant humbled spirit, supported by an unblameable and proper line of conduct. Happy for me that my case has not resembled the former part of his. My heart is made of no better materials than his. I likewise have been exposed to the snares of the world, and the stratagems of the enemy. It is owing to a power and goodness superior to my own, that when others have fallen, I have been enabled to stand.

Newton was quite comfortable in condemning the actions of the unfortunate minister in question, and in roughly assessing whether he was really intent upon following God. However, he did not think he was any better than the man for not having fallen into the particular trap that he did. Any good of his came from grace.

³²⁸ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 125.

In Newton's view, this grace functioned in a way which eluded human reason. In his view, grace was ineffable and its distribution was likewise so. As Newton wrote in *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*,

The doctrine of the gospel is not like a mathematical problem, which conveys precisely the same degree of truth and certainty to every one who understands the terms. If so, all believers would be equally enlightened, who enjoy the common privilege of the written word. But there is in fact an amazing variety in this respect. Where this doctrine is truly understood, though in the lowest degree, it inspires the soul with a supreme love to Jesus, and a trust in him for salvation. And those who understand it best, have not yet received all the evidence, comfort and influence from it, which it is capable of affording. The riches and grace and wisdom in this dispensation are unsearchable and immense, imparted from time to time, according to the good pleasure of the spirit of God, who furnishes his people with light and strength proportioned to their exigences, situation, and the services or trials he calls them to; not without respect to the degree of their diligence, obedience a simplicity in waiting upon him.³²⁹

This was the core of Newton's calvinistic tendencies. He did not ascribe to an idea of predestination, but neither did he agree with a broad, Arminian idea of free will.³³⁰

Goodness was a miracle, beyond human control or even categorization. It overruled all material human weakness, no matter what and with no regard to an individual's feeble attempts at righteousness apart from God (which was a contradiction in itself, by Newton's view). Where it dwelled was not then predictable in any sense and certainly did not correspond to a person's material characteristics or wealth. In fact, Newton was did much, particularly throughout his *Review of Ecclesiastical History* to emphasize that the best were often the most materially pathetic. In one description of early church history, Newton wrote:

Their envy and hatred were still more inflamed, by observing the character of his [Christ's] followers. These were chiefly poor and illiterate persons, and many of

³²⁹ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 19.

³³⁰ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 75.

them had been notoriously wicked or accounted so; publicans and sinners, whose names and professions were vile to a proverb.

This led him to an eccumenical scepticism regarding the limits of human reason.

Newton thought that it was because of the fact that the root of goodness was essentially ineffable and miraculous, one saw such a wide variety of articulations of the Gospel's message.³³¹ This did not mean that there were a wide variety of *correct* interpretations, but rather that every interpretation failed to wholly encompass the truth. This included Newton's own interpretation as well: "Neither do I presume to think myself capable of displaying it [the Gospel's truth] in its full light and beauty."³³² For that reason, Newton wrote: "I chiefly consider myself as belonging to THE ONE CHURCH; and, therefore, all who love the Lord Jesus are my brethren, of whatever denomination."³³³ Newton took his eccumenicalism to the fullest extent. He not only embraced dissenters and Anglicans alike, but happily socialized with Catholics as fellow members of the one church he envisioned. He considered their theology with the same scrutiny and humility he did anyone else's. In August of 1760 he went with two of his friends to visit a monastery. In his diary, Newton wrote:

"As I have often had a desire to see something of the Brethren with my own eyes (showing I believe being imposed on by others) I resolved to return by way of Putsey, brother and Sister A went with me, we were at the Chapel morning and afternoon, and found nothing displeasing, the discourses and prayers were (in substance and so far as they went) good, the hymns excellent, and the singing and music vastly solemn and agreeable, yet I must question whether so sequestered a life is attended with all the advantages proposed - the Gospel does not recommend it, and a true knowledge of human nature does not (I think) encourage it - at best

³³¹ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 19.

³³² Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 20.

³³³ John Newton, *Correspondence of the late Rev. John Newton, with a dissenting minister, on various subjects and occasions. With a brief sketch of his character, and a ministerial charge, by him revised and recommended* (London: Maxwell and Wilson, 1809), 49.

if withdrawn from some kind of temptations, it seems more eminently exposed to others, but this is not my business.”³³⁴

The desire to see with his own eyes, and determine himself what was right or wrong in monastic life is indicative of the other element of Newton’s eccumenical scepticism. He did not trust remotely in arguments from authority. This followed logically from his understanding of grace. If the root of wisdom was ineffable, something given to infants and denied to wise men,³³⁵ then he had no reason to consider one man’s testimony of the truth over another’s. Newton was adamant that no man was free from sin but Christ. And he was quick to critique even the Apostles’ errors and to point out that those figures Christians rightly admired from the Bible were pathetic, apart from God.³³⁶

Newton was not just sceptical of human theology, but the limit of all use of human reason. Where Newton had questioned in 1752 whether any secular knowledge was anything but vanity, in his solidified theology he believed: “REASON, when exercised in its proper department, is an excellent gift of God and a noble distinction of our species from the brutes that perish.”³³⁷ However, abstraction that did not begin from the miracle of grace, from divine wisdom, led to evil behavior and beliefs—regardless if the abstraction was theological or not. He wrote to his friend, a dissenting minister, “I TRUSTED once to the *Ignis fatuus*, my own Reason, and it led me into many a miserable bog. It placed me in the chair of a scorner, and made me an infidel and a profligate, before I was twenty years old...I BLESS the Lord, Reason is now on my side.”³³⁸ Though

³³⁴ Newton, *Autograph Diary, Sep 1756 -Dec 31 1772*, 243.

³³⁵ Newton, *Autograph Diary, Sep 1756 -Dec 31 1772*, 247

³³⁶ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, xiv.

³³⁷ Newton, *Correspondence of the late Rev. John Newton*, 130.

³³⁸ Newton, *Correspondence of the late Rev. John Newton*, 132.

he did not specify the limits of this position, Newton would not likely not have literally extended this to mean that any conclusion articulated by a non-Christian was incorrect. In part because, as one sees in the quotation above regarding the ineffability of God's grace, Newton clearly recognized that some fields of inquiry (like mathematics) were precise enough that they could communicate their truths uniformly, regardless of the morality of those who received them. Rather, it seems that Newton was more likely articulating that reason, apart from God's grace, was a corrupting force, which led people into misery.

This might all seem largely disconnected from the issue of Newton's antislavery sentiments, but that theology contained a pointedly egalitarian view of human nature that emphasized an individual's right sovereignty over her or himself. By Newton's understanding, every human being (regardless of outward characteristics) possessed the same basic moral autonomy. Everyone, King to pauper, was entirely despicable on their own, but, through the miracle of grace, could understand good and affect wonderful things in the world. This made all human beings basically equal. Moreover, Newton was quite adamant that humans were deeply fallible beings, regardless of their intellect or other gifts. In particular, because grace was ineffable, no person could precisely articulate what was good. All human theology failed to fully contain God's glory, the inarticulate knowledge of which He imparted to Christians as he saw fit. This severely curtailed how well one human being could understand and articulate with certainty what another should and should not do. These two things together made it difficult to justify one person's authority over another, regardless of his station or characteristics. In particular, it made it difficult to justify coercive authority. As Newton wrote in his critique of the persecution

of Catholics: “[there is] no warrant from His word to inflict pains and penalties upon any sort of people in matters pertaining to conscience.”³³⁹

One might argue that that egalitarian, individualist image of human nature only applied to a person’s religious expression, not to their everyday life; therefore it could not extend into wider view of society and politics. However, Newton’s final theology, unlike his earlier philosophy, did not allow for a person to quarter off their religion to one particular area of their lives. One’s Christianity was supposed to dictate all of their behavior, both public and private, at the expense of custom and prudence. This meant that religious expression effectively included essentially every aspect of life. For a real believer, God was his singular resource and goal:

He derives all his strength and comfort from his [Christ’s] influence, as the branch from the root. He entrusts himself to his care, as the wise and good shepherd of his soul. Sensible fo his own ignorance, defects, and his many enemies, he receives Christ as his teacher priest and king, obeys his preceptor, confies on his mediation, expects and enjoys his powerful protection. In a word, he renounces all confidence in the flesh, and rejoices in Christ Jesus as his Saviour; and thus he attains to worship God in spirit and in truth, is supported through all the conflicts and trials of life, possesses a stable peace in the midst of a changing world, goes on from strength to strength, and is, at length, made more than conqueror, through him that has loved him. This is the life of faith. . . . And nothing less than this faith is sufficient to give any man a right to the name of Christian.³⁴⁰

This is why Newton’s scepticism towards reason’s reach in theology extends to reason’s use in general. All good came from God, in his view, and everything else was vanity. All good done with God came from God’s grace. Therefore, anything good had to come from the individual’s relationship with God, which could not be easily manufactured through

³³⁹ William Barlass, *Sermons and Correspondence* (New York, Eastburn, 1818), 592. Quoted in Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 163.

³⁴⁰ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 36-37.

someone else's authority. This view of human nature indicated that individuals were often better left in charge of their own affairs. And this was true for everyone, poor and rich, women and men, bond and free.

This lent itself to antislavery sentiments in two ways. First, this vision of human nature, in which the only real good came from an individual's reception of Grace from God rather undercut any argument for slavery as a positive good to society, even on an economic level. Those who were enslaved might not have overwhelmingly been Christians, but this theology meant that they nonetheless had the same capacity for being so as anyone else in the world. They were just as wretched and just as loved by God as every other human being. And, like all people, what good could come of their lives would do so by God's grace. Therefore, enslaving them, keeping them from learning about the Gospel,³⁴¹ could not result in real good, only evil. Second, Newton's view of a right Christian behavior did not allow for tyranny. Throughout his *Review of Ecclesiastical History*, Newton wrote about the dangers of pride and power generally: "A desire of pre-eminence and distinction is very unsuitable to the followers of Jesus, who made himself the servant of all; very unbecoming the best of the children of men, who owe their breath to the mercy of God, have nothing that they can call their own, and have been unfaithful in the improvement of every talent."³⁴² In Newton's universally despicable view of humanity, who could possibly claim to deserve ultimate power over another?

³⁴¹ By and large this was the case in the British Caribbean colonies. See Michael Craton. "Christianity and Slavery in the British West Indies 1750-1865." *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 5, no. 2 (1978): 141-60. <http://www.jstor.org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/stable/41298714>.

³⁴² Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 78.

Particularly if they used that power to abuse and oppress those over which they wielded it?

Third, and most importantly, Newton's theology insisted that a Christian had to act like one, in all aspects of life and even when it was contrary to what was practical. As this thesis sought to articulate in the Introduction, while antislavery sentiment was generally relatively common in Britain around this time, abolition must have appeared to be entirely unlikely. Slavery, in one form or another, had existed since the beginning of time and it was materially beneficial to Britons to continue the practice. If one saw, as Newton seems to have during his time as a slave trader, morality as something bounded by prudence, then abolition was entirely out of the question. It was impractical by almost every measure. A person had to either be blind to the material realities, which Newton certainly was not, or certain that they were secondary to the moral question. That took a very particular belief in the power of grace, the ineffable and miraculous root of good, to overcome obstacles. This is what Newton articulated to Mary in 1755, as this thesis previously quoted in Chapter Four in full. God called Christians to live a life of combat with the World, custom and interest. However, no matter what came up against them, God would triumph. They were only called to be faithful.³⁴³ It was this particular argument which Newton used to convince Hannah More and William Wilberforce of the importance of carrying their religion through their public lives. It was a Christian's solemn duty to imitate Christ as best they could in the world. As Newton wrote to Wilberforce when he inquired upon the subject: "Christ has taken our nature into heaven

³⁴³ Newton, *Letters to a Wife Vol II*, 13-15.

to represent us; and has left us on earth, with his nature, to represent him.”³⁴⁴ So though it would cause them social, and in Wilberforce’s case political, problems, they were required to act as little Christ’s in the world. It was this idea which seemed to undergird his own commitment to abolitionism, as it did all of his forays into politics.

However, just as it took Newton years to develop his theology, it took him quite a while to explore and understand all its social and political implications. A few years after he entered evangelical circles, Newton’s behavior seems to have begun living out his theology in his social life. Contrary to his statement to Mary in 1755 that they would only mix with believers of equal refinement, as Newton’s theology solidified, he seems to have treated people with respect, regardless of station or traits. In April 1760 he recorded a pleasant visit with someone he described in his diary as “a plain sensible poorman.” More than anything, Newton hoped he had not failed to do right by him in their discourse and he prayed: “the Lord make his meeting me profitable to him, and make me thankful for the honour of speaking a word in his name.”³⁴⁵ Likewise, Newton wrote to his friend, a dissenting minister, in November 1796 of a woman who went by the name Dame Cross, with whom the Newtons dined rather regularly from before Newton became a minister in 1764.³⁴⁶ Newton described her as “very poor when I knew her, and I believe through her whole life.”³⁴⁷ Newton wrote of her piety with admiration: “she appeared to me one of the

³⁴⁴ Cecil, “Memoirs of John Newton,” 1:62. In *The Works of the Rev. John Newton Containing an Authentic Narrative, etc., Letters on religious Subjects, Cardiphonia, discourses Intended for the Pulpit, Sermons Preached in the Parish Church of Olney, a Review of Ecclesiastical History, Olney Hymns, Poems, Messiah, Occasional Sermons, and Tracts, to Which Are Prefixed Memoirs of His Life, &c. By the Rev. Richard Cecil*. Two Volumes. Edited by Richard Cecil. (Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt, 1831). Quoted in Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 180.

³⁴⁵ Newton, *Autograph Diary, Sep 1756 -Dec 31 1772*, 237.

³⁴⁶ Newton, *Correspondence of the Late Rev. John Newton*, 86.

³⁴⁷ Newton, *Correspondence of the Late Rev. John Newton*, 85.

greatest and most exemplary Christians I ever met with.”³⁴⁸ By his account, she had a remarkable trust in God, throughout hardship, and would “usually burst into tears” if he “spoke of the Lord Jesus, his love to sinners, his sufferings, his glory, or the like.”³⁴⁹

In 1757, Newton wrote that his association with Wesley brought him to understand better the reach of God’s law into his profession at the Liverpool Custom House. Though Newton had sworn he would not take any bribes when he took on the position of customs officer, he had in fact taken money from unlawful traders. For seemingly the first time, Newton thought through the ways in which this small violation of his ethics had had much larger consequences. “The vending smuggled goods, or the buying them, if known to be so, is...injurious to the fair trader, who, conscientiously paying the prescribed duties, cannot accord to sell so cheap as the smuggler, and therefore must expect the fewer customers.”³⁵⁰ This moment of understanding marked a point of growth in Newton’s sense of the reach of God’s law, and his growing conception of its implications.

That same year, Newton began to consider seeking ordination³⁵¹ and committed himself to the prospect in 1758.³⁵² This too was a sort of noticeable landmark along Newton’s journey to abolitionism. In committing himself to doing so, Newton chose to follow what he believed God had called him to do at significant social and monetary cost. Already dismayed with his association with lower class and Methodistical elements, the

³⁴⁸ Newton, *Correspondence of the Late Rev. John Newton*, 87.

³⁴⁹ Newton, *Correspondence of the Late Rev. John Newton*, 86.

³⁵⁰ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 73.

³⁵¹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 83.

³⁵² Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 86.

Catletts worried that Newton's ministerial position would pay far less than his previous position.³⁵³ Phipps reports that Newton wrote back to Mary's brother's reproof of his aspirations: "I am not mad...No circumstance of my life was ever conducted upon so much deliberation and advice...I do not like disgrace or poverty, but I fear God more than either."³⁵⁴ Newton's prospects of achieving ordination in the Anglican Church as an openly evangelical Christian were slim and the process itself took six years of continuous disappointments. He repeatedly came close to obtaining orders, only for them to slip from his grasp. During this time, Newton considered pursuing positions as an Independent pastor, a Methodist preacher, and a minister of an Independent Congregation he would raise himself in Liverpool.³⁵⁵ This last idea in particular did not have his wife's approval and also earned Newton Clunie and Brewer's reproof. All three's central concern was that Newton might lose the job he then held at the Custom House and so his only source of income. Newton attempted to reassure them he would not attempt it, but seemed to keep the idea in mind as his pursuit of ordination dragged on.³⁵⁶ When he was not faced with it from without, Newton had plenty of doubt within. In December of 1759, Newton confessed to his diary:

I am so far from the knowledge the experience the gifts and the graces which ought to shine in a Minister of the gospel - especially this last article, was this better the rest would come in course, if my heart was right it would influence my studies and my designs in a different manner. It is long I know not how long since I had liberty and warmth in secret prayer. I embrace but few opportunities and

³⁵³ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 83.

³⁵⁴ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 83.

³⁵⁵ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 98.

³⁵⁶ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 97-98.

even of the too man in the most degenerate into lip service in which the heart is sadly absent.³⁵⁷

Still, Newton held firm that he was following the Lord and wrote in that same entry: “I have a distant view that vile as I am the Lord will not wholly reject my desires and vows towards his sanctuary service.” Eventually, Newton’s perseverance won out. As described in Chapter Two, the publication of Newton’s autobiography swung things in his favor. Lord Dartmouth quietly interceded on his behalf and secured him a position as an Anglican minister in Olney.³⁵⁸

It is his autobiography, that one can see a first hint of public antislavery sentiment. Near the end of Newton’s account, he touched upon how he understood his involvement in the slave trade:

During the item I was engaged in the slave-trade I never had the least scruple as to its lawfulness. I was, upon the whole, satisfied, as the appointment Providence had marked out for me; yet it was, in many respects, far from eligible. It was, indeed, accounted a genteel employment, and usually very profitable, though to me it did not prove so, the Lord seeing that a large increase of wealth would not be good for me. However, I considered myself as a sort of *jailer* or *turnkey*, and I was sometimes shocked with an employment that was perpetually conversant with chains, bolts and shackles. In this view I had often petitioned, in my prayers, that the Lord, in his own time, would be pleased to fix me in a more humane calling, and, if it might be, place me where I might have more frequent converse with his people and ordinances, and be freed from those long separations from home, which very often were hard to bear.

At first glance, this might not look particularly critical to the slave trade, however, in the context of Newton’s piece it was. As Chapter Two touched on, Newton wrote his autobiography as a justification of evangelical Christianity and in a time in which doing so was not particularly popular. When he wrote it, Newton was in the midst of his

³⁵⁷ Newton, *Autograph Diary, Sep 1756 -Dec 31 1772*, 226.

³⁵⁸ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 85.

ordination and knew full-well the public ire towards believers of his ilk. He knew when he put the account to print that it would be controversial. In that context, it would have been odd to cap off his account with a full-throated rebuke of the slave trade. The piece was controversial enough as things stood. And Newton was quite cognizant of the line between being overly offensive and just offensive enough to get his central point across.

³⁵⁹ Taken in that context the quote has distinct antislavery tones. Newton's statement that he did not consider the trade's lawfulness during his time as a captain implies that, as of 1762, he had at least become aware of the question. Where he fell on it is not explicit, but the implication is that he had at least begun to change his mind. The only concrete descriptors in this section of the slave trade are negative. Newton found the brutalities of his employment emotionally upsetting and inhumane so that he requested God remove the position from him. What positive views he presents are those of others—his younger self and the general public which “accounted [it] a genteel employment.” The logical conclusion one would draw from the evidence presented in this paragraph would be that slavery was an inhumane and brutal profession, though some accounted it not so.

This seems all the more likely if one takes Newton's statement that he “never had the least scruple as to its lawfulness” in the context of his earlier statements regarding the reach of God's law. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Newton described himself after the storm as lacking in his theology and religion. In particular, he wrote: “I had no apprehension of the spirituality and extent of the law of God.”³⁶⁰ Within that description

³⁵⁹ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 213.

³⁶⁰ Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton*, 89.

of his spirituality after 1748, Newton did not expand upon what precisely that meant. As Chapter Two contended, it seems probable he was referring in some sense to his treatment of other people and how far he thought his Christian calling extended into his public life, his profession and his relationships. It seems likely that Newton, in 1762, thought that his previous conception of God's law had particularly fallen short in its complacency with his profession as a slave trader. Out of his entire account, Newton used referred to Biblical law twice. Once in the description of his religion after 1748 and once in the section quoted above regarding the slave trade. This did not amount to a full articulation of an antislavery position, but it strongly implied it at a time when the abolitionist movement had yet to exist.

When he took power in Olney, Newton carried through his egalitarian notions of human nature and was made further aware of their practical political consequences. Just as he had in Liverpool, Newton continued to associate with all sorts of people, regardless of station and denomination.³⁶¹ Newton spent much of his ministry one on one with town members, helping them through spiritual crisis. He was able to expand his help with the charity of John Thornton, an evangelical merchant who gave Newton £200 a year to give to those who needed it.³⁶² Newton saw these visits as his duty but also his primary mode of spiritual edification. Newton reflected back later: ““The most of [God's] people there were poor, afflicted, ignorant and illiterate, but they were taught of God *before I saw them*. I was their official teacher from the pulpit; but I taught them chiefly by what I first

³⁶¹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 211.

³⁶² Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 204.

learned from them in the course of the week, by visiting and conversing with them from house to house”³⁶³ From this idea of the people’s equal access to divine knowledge and his memories of his own experience in evangelical societies in Liverpool and London, Newton was eager to involve the people of Olney in ministry.³⁶⁴ He organized three principle meetings, ““One for the children, another for young and enquiring persons, and a third to be a meeting with the more experienced and judicious, for prayer and conference.””³⁶⁵ Newton encouraged members to speak and pray before those gathered at these meetings. In addition, Newton was eager to teach the children and youth of Olney. Though it was a staple of their duties, very few eighteenth-century ministers educated parish children for their eventual confirmation on a regular basis throughout the year.³⁶⁶ Almost immediately upon his arrival, Newton set up catechism classes for the parish children every Thursday and kept up the practice throughout his tenure there. Newton’s goal was always the children’s relationship with God and he saw the classes as largely unrelated to confirmation. At its largest, Newton had a regular class of over 200 children.³⁶⁷ Newton loved the societies in Olney and they became the center of his ministry. As Hindmarsh reports, Newton ““commented on the prayer meetings in 1766, ‘I think nothing has been more visibly useful to strengthen my heart, and to unite the people closely together in bonds of love.’””³⁶⁸

³⁶³ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 203.

³⁶⁴ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 212.

³⁶⁵ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 196.

³⁶⁶ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 192.

³⁶⁷ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 197.

³⁶⁸ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 200.

As he lived out his theology more and more, Newton seems to have gained a greater sense of its social implications. One can see that growing awareness in *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, which Newton wrote and published in 1770. As is evident from the quotations from the book referenced above, Newton's analysis of early church history emphasized his egalitarian, individualist view of human nature and society. He drew out a picture of Christianity as a faith for human beings who understood their inherent weakness, rather than those who thought themselves respectable.

This is an illustrious peculiarity of the gospel, which the proud, fallen nature of man, cannot but resist and find fault with, 'till the conscience is truly affected with the guilt and demerit of sin. The whole tenor of our Saviour's ministry was suited to depreciate the most specious attainments of those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and to encourage all who felt and confessed themselves to be miserable sinners. . . . This was the chief cause of the opposition he met with in his own person, and has awakened the hatred and dislike of the bulk of mankind against his doctrine since.³⁶⁹

From this idea of a struggle between humility and pride within each individual, Newton drew out a picture of a larger conflict between the World and real morality within nominal Christian society. In this dichotomy, real Christianity was not a rejection of material wealth, power, or society, but the submission of those things to God's law. Those who instead chose to follow the world, chose not to rest on God for support but instead strove to affect their material comforts in the name of custom and prudence. This idea was the theoretical expansion of what Wesley had taught Newton back in 1757 and the complexities of which he would come to further understand during his time in Olney. The same flaw Newton had found in himself under Wesley's instruction, he thought was

³⁶⁹ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 27-29.

most common among Christians, that they limited their conduct to fit “the prevailing taste around us.”³⁷⁰

Even in 1770, Newton seems to have had some conception of the political implications of this wider, social picture of spiritual conflict. He recorded how real Christianity (in contrast to nominal faith) had often met with the accusation of political radicalism:

The accusation was, that the preachers of the gospel, who, from the effect of their doctrine in disturbing the false peace of sin, began to be sufficiently described, when spoken of, as ‘men who turned the world upside down, and threw all into confusion wherever they appeared, were come thither also; that Jason had received and countenanced them, and that their fundamental tenets were inconsistent with obedience to government, since they professed and inculcated subjection to one Jesus, whom they stiled their king. By such misrepresentations the enemies of the gospel doctrine have often aimed to render it obnoxious to the civil powers.’³⁷¹

Though he called it a misrepresentation, the fact that Newton recorded the incident as something which continued across time indicates that he saw something within the theology he ascribed to that tended towards anarchy. And it is not hard to see how this was the case. His idea of human nature was one in which every human being, to some extent, was the best left to rule themselves. If taken to its fullest extent and left untempered by other principles, this idea logically ended in anarchy. Newton firmly resisted this tendency by tempering his critique of religious and secular authority with an analysis of the examples of apostles James and John. Where the establishment had been too cool in their moral zeal and too restrained by prudence, James and John were too

³⁷⁰ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, xi.

³⁷¹ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 161.

filled with rebellious anger against their persecutors and “demand[ed] that fire might be sent from heaven to devour their adversaries.”³⁷² In their example, Newton explicated how this sort of retributive violence went beyond the Gospel.

Though he kept it short of violent revolution, the Christianity Newton outlined in *A Review of Ecclesiastical History* was political and seemingly antislavery. In his argument that God granted that the Holy Spirit and moral autonomy regardless of any outward characteristics, Newton made a point of articulating that it was for “rich or poor, bond or free, male or female.”³⁷³ This meant that the very people Britons were enslaving were equal in a fundamental and transcendent sense. And it seems likely that Newton would have been aware of the idea’s antislavery consequences. Though there is no apparent written account of Newton articulating antislavery ideas more explicitly during this time, it seems that he must have shared some in conversations with his friend William Cowper. When he later penned abolitionist poetry, Cowper said he took the descriptions of the trade’s horrors from his conversations with Newton.³⁷⁴ As they only lived together while they were both in Olney, it seems likely that those discussions would have taken place in this period.³⁷⁵ Beside this idea, Newton argued that a Christian’s life was one of perpetual conflict against the influence of the World, custom and interest, both within and without their hearts. The highest position a real Christian could take was “the painful pre-eminence of standing in the fore-front of the battle, to sustain the hottest

³⁷² Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 79.

³⁷³ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 125.

³⁷⁴ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 191-193.

³⁷⁵ Matthew Wyman-McCarthy, "Rethinking Empire in India and the Atlantic: William Cowper, John Newton, and the Imperial Origins of Evangelical Abolitionism." *Slavery & Abolition* 35, no. 2 (2014): 309.

brunt of every storm.”³⁷⁶ To some extent this was certainly a figurative, but the literal example Newton provided was no less severe. A Christian was most distinguished when he followed the example of Stephen, the first martyr for the Christian cause who died asking God to forgive his persecutors. Newton believed that Christians should be as he was, in a state of constant, peaceful, social rebellion against the World, against prudence and pride. When this came in conflict with the interests of the state, Christians were expected to continue professing the truth but trust in God for their victory and not resort to violence. Newton argued states were subject to the will of God. Whenever a government did something contrary to His will, they were ultimately stymied. If they sought to stifle the truth, it only spread further.³⁷⁷ Taken all together, these ideas composed the arguments he would ultimately make to More and Wilberforce to convince them to propel the abolitionist movement. And in a book which was meant to vindicate a movement that was already viewed with a suspicion of political radicalism, the fact that Newton included these elements indicates how seriously he took these concepts.

Newton came to understand them more fully as he watched the political implications of his theology play out in his parish. As in Liverpool, Newton incurred the ire of those around him for his methodistical tendencies.³⁷⁸ However, this time the accusations were not simply that he was unsociably singular in his religion, but that Newton and his people possessed political disloyalty to the government. In June of 1775, one of Newton’s societies, which had flagged in the midst of a meager harvest the year

³⁷⁶ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 103.

³⁷⁷ Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*, 106-107.

³⁷⁸ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 206.

before. The first meeting, the society focused on the ““present troubles in America”” as the news of gunfire in America had just come that week. Hindmarsh writes, “They met for an hour; for the first ten minutes Newton spoke about the state of the nation, and then the balance was spent in singing and prayer.” By the fall, the meetings were energetic enough to bring down accusations on Newton and Olney of their disloyalty to the British cause and inappropriate sympathy for the Americans. To combat the allegations, Newton preached a patriotic sermon at the start of October, but his group was apparently still suspiciously fervent in their politically radical sentiments. The accusations did not fade and Newton was forced to write to Lord Dartmouth, stating that he “was not meddling in politics or complaining against the government.”³⁷⁹

While Newton found himself drawn into more radical political circles, his experience in Olney also taught him the dangers of social instability. One incident in particular in autumn of 1777 left the impression upon him that men, even those who seemed to earnestly seek God, could be destructive and violent creatures. His first Thursday evening lecture in November was on Guy Fawkes Day. Particularly worried about the possibility of a fire, Newton attempted to encourage the townsfolk to hold off from destructive behavior. The Baptists ““in a body”” resisted Newton’s imploring.³⁸⁰ That night they terrorized the town in a mob, burning down twelve houses in the process and threatening Newton and the vicarage. Newton eventually convinced them to desist with the offer of money, but the event left a strong negative impression upon him. What

³⁷⁹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 202-203.

³⁸⁰ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition*, 212.

upset him most was that the mob's encouragement came from men he thought would have worked to reduce evil in the name of God. It was a living embodiment of the anarchic tendencies he had sketched out in *A Review of Ecclesiastical History*. In conjunction with Newton's own dealings with political radicalism and accusations of disloyalty, this experience likely fleshed out Newton's conception of the concrete political implications of his theology. He had seen with his own eyes the ways in which his beliefs could lead to peaceful and violent political radicalism. By that alone, one can expect the concrete political implications of his theology became more clear to him.

Newton left Olney for St. Mary Woolnoth, London, in 1780 and by the mid 1780s he seems to have developed a virulent distaste for slavery and abolitionist ideas. Newton met William Wilberforce in 1785 and Wilberforce reported that, "he never spent one half hour in his company without hearing some allusion to it [the slave trade]."³⁸¹ Newton's fervor on the subject was such that he converted Wilberforce to an antislavery position.³⁸² As always, he seems to have seen politics, and so presumably the issue of slavery, in Biblical terms. As Newton wrote to his friend, a dissenting minister, in June 1786, "YOU ask, what I think of the Times? I think they are 'evil times,' and call for much humiliation and prayer. But the Lord reigneth, and it shall all be well with them that fear him. The whole compass of my politics lies in Psalm Ixxvi. 10, '*Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.*' The wicked will do what they can; but they shall not do what they will. He [God] will limit their

³⁸¹ Robert Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *Correspondence of William Wilberforce* (London: Murray, 1838), 1:x. Quoted in Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 183.

³⁸² Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 183.

attempts in subservience to his own purpose and glory.”³⁸³ From this theological position, Newton advised Wilberforce and More to throw themselves after the abolitionist cause, at the expense of their social standing. He believed that the seemingly impossible gap between their moral convictions and what seemed possible could be bridge with God. More than that, he believed it was part of their obligation to act as Christ would and submit themselves and all they possessed to God and what was right. And Newton seems to have thought this meant taking on the institution politically. When Wilberforce thought that perhaps he should simply speak out against the trade from a pulpit, Newton convinced him to take the issue to the House of Commons. Moreover, Newton seems to have brought himself into the political conflict as soon as the opportunity to do so presented itself. In 1787, Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp organized the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Newton, unprompted, reached out to the Society and offered his records of his time in the slave trade and the horrors commensurate to it.³⁸⁴ From these, Newton also set about composing his abolitionist treatise, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, which he published the following year.³⁸⁵ This piece helped in large part bring about the parliamentary hearings, which ultimately slew the slave trade.³⁸⁶ Here too, Newton proved integral to the abolitionist cause as the privy council’s expert witness.³⁸⁷

³⁸³ Newton, *Correspondence of the late Rev. John Newton*, 72-73.

³⁸⁴ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 183.

³⁸⁵ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 184.

³⁸⁶ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 189-190.

³⁸⁷ Phipps, *Amazing Grace in John Newton*, 190.

Still, modern readers may find Newton's journey to lackadaisical for their liking. Some will say that his theology could not have brought him to an abolitionist stance. The gap between his adoption of it and his profession of abolitionist values was simply too long. Something else beyond his theology must have led Newton to his abolitionist convictions, though he seems to have understood his own fervor in that context. And, of course, it is possible they would be right. As reiterated throughout this thesis, Newton did not leave historians a detailed explanation of how he came to support the abolitionist cause. However, it is hard to imagine what that might have been. Newton was already better acquainted with the horrors of the slave trade than many others who would populate the abolitionist movement long before he seemed to adopt antislavery ideas. And he seems to have had some sense, perhaps during his time as a slaver but certainly soon after, that those things were inhumane. What he lacked was a framework by which he could see them as a political cause, as something which was not integral to the world, but could, and therefore should, be combatted. That idea required a firm faith in the power of God to overwhelm what must have seemed insurmountable circumstances. And such a faith required years to articulate to its fullest consequences.

Conclusion: An Unlikely Man

In a sense, it is the unlikeliness of Newton's case side by side with that of British Abolitionism, which makes him so useful to understanding the latter. It is doubtful that anyone who saw John Newton when he first joined the slave trade at nineteen, an atheist with no moral framework beyond the distant opinion of Mary Catlett, would have thought he would go on to oppose slavery from religious conviction. Likewise, it is unlikely that anyone standing in the midst of eighteenth-century Britain, the metropole of the largest slave trading empire in the world, could have predicted the rise of the abolitionist movement and its tremendous success. And yet, that is precisely what happened in both cases. While there are limits to what Newton's story can tell modern readers about the dynamics wound up in that process and their implications, his life and how he changed over the course of it provides an important example of how abolitionist fervor could find a foothold in the most improbable places.

Newton's story indicates a complex but powerful relationship between the evangelical revival in Britain and the development of abolitionism around that time. As this thesis explained in its introduction, Newton is often used as a sort of rhetorical punching bag for those who argue that the two were disconnected. These writers articulate Newton's story in a very simple narrative: Newton converted to Christianity in 1748 and from shortly thereafter until 1754 he was a slave trader, therefore there could not be a positive relationship between his evangelical Christianity and eventual

abolitionism. However, as the last hundred or so pages have attempted to demonstrate, this is far from the complete story. Newton's journey to his ultimate theology was far more gradual and winding than that summation would have you believe. In actuality, Newton held very different religious beliefs in 1748-1754 than he did for the rest of his life, including his time as an active abolitionist. Moreover, it seems as though his development of his evangelical faith seemed to logically feed his ultimate abolitionism. In the years immediately following the storm, Newton's respect for custom and interest led him to treat his crew and slaves harshly. During his time in the slave trade, this old philosophy decayed until, in a flurry of religious edification, Newton adopted his evangelical, Calvinistic theology in 1754. From then onward, Newton seems to have gradually articulated his beliefs and all their implications more and more. As his fear of impropriety faded and his belief in God's ability to overcome impossible circumstances brightened, Newton's antislavery sentiments strengthened until he became an active abolitionist in the 1780s.

So, rather than standing as an example of the evangelical movement's irrelevance to British Abolitionism, Newton's story shows how the former could lead directly to the latter. In the interest of accuracy, it is important to reiterate that Newton's life did not represent everyone involved in the abolitionist movement. The fact that his evangelical theology seems to have led him to his abolitionist stance does not prove its relevance to the abolitionist movement as a whole. However, his story does provide a compelling narrative of how a person could go from a distaste for slavery to fighting the political battle to abolish an institution which had existed almost from the beginning of history. As

this thesis explained in its opening section, the average Briton had every reason to think that eradicating the slave trade was impossible. That some eventually looked at the British Empire's massive slave trade and thought they could abolish it would require a powerful belief in their own abilities, or, more likely, the power of their cause. Of course, any given abolitionist would have seen their cause in a larger framework, by which they understood the meaning and morality of all their behavior. So the potency of their cause would rely upon what made all of their behavior meaningful and moral, it would rely upon the root of their belief. In the case of a Christian, this would be Christ.

Following from that idea, one can perhaps better see how a belief in the unshakeable sovereignty of God over the material world and its institutions, particularly as it manifested itself in individuals' moral engagement with society, would allow one to leap the gap from distaste for to action against slavery. As one can see from Newton's story, the key to his conversion to abolitionism was not brought about by an awareness of the horrors of slavery or empathy for the lot of a slave. He had both at the same time he busied himself transporting them to a brutal life in the Caribbean. What he lacked was a belief that these things could be changed. That he seems to have only gained from his evangelical theology. It is conceivable that other Britons followed this pattern. They came to see themselves as peaceful warriors for Christ and in so doing, felt compelled to go to battle for Him against the British slave trade.

This would seem to indicate vital Christianity's close connection to the defence of individuals' rights and democratic principles. A Christianity which emphasized the power of God's grace would logically lead a believer to the belief that every person, regardless

of her outward characteristics, was equally weak and equally loved. Not only that, every individual was equally fallible and equally commanded to pursue the truth and do good. From these two premises, one gains the fundamental assumptions necessary to the defense of individual rights and democratic principles. If every individual is equal then it does not make much sense for one to have a great deal of authority over the other, particularly given that God reigns over each one's entire life. If God told them to do something contrary to the law, then this brand of Christianity would seem to demand they do so. The makers of the law, being just as imperfect as anyone else, could easily be incorrect in their politics. However, that insistence on equal fallibility cuts both ways. The man insisting the law was wrong could also, easily, be incorrect in his assertion. The logical conclusion of all these complexities would seem to be a restrained government, which defended the rights of an individual to follow what God asked of her, so long as it did not impinge upon any other individual's ability to do so.

While there are other arguments for all of these premises, the christian contention's moral tone makes it inviolable in a way which secular statements do not. If a person reaches the conclusion that all human beings are essentially equally imperfect, that does not mean that it is expedient to order society and the government along those principles. There are arguments which support the idea that a limited government is more practical, but those only stand so long as no one offers a more convincing proof that violating individuals' rights would be more practical. As one can see in Newton's story, there is no guarantee that the former will win out. Newton knew that what he was doing hurt other human beings and they were, in some sense, not that different from him. He

had been enslaved, first to the navy and then on the Guinea Coast. He was well acquainted with the concrete evils of slavery. None of that stopped him from being a part of the slave trade. What did convince him was the idea of a tremendously powerful God, who lovingly reached down to save his feeble creations from themselves. Not only that, it led him to the conviction that he could, and should, destroy the system itself. It did not matter how useful slavery was, only that it was contrary to God's law.

That transformation says something important about individual morality. Most anyone reading this paper will agree that the transatlantic slave trade was evil. Not just a little evil, but tremendously, horrifically evil. So, understanding how it came to be destroyed, in the face of very poor odds, tells us something about the potency of individual moral choice on a grand scale. Something which seems to frustrate modern readers is that John Newton did not see his moral education in abolitionist terms. He did not attend one evangelical sermon and immediately sit bolt upright, convinced that he had to destroy a massive economic system which had existed from the beginning of time. Instead, he saw himself as a feeble creature, utterly lost, and in desperate need of personal reformation. It is likely that he would have thought that he, the then unemployed and spiritually infantile John Newton, could have affected such a thing. That he went on to is a testament to an underlying truth within the vital Christian conception of reality. Small, feeble creatures, if they seek to humbly serve the truth and those around them, can do immeasurable things. No one looking at John Newton in his early life would have thought the rather awkward, ridiculous creature who bumbled his way from cruel act to cruel act, would have been the key to liberating millions of people from bondage and

preventing the subjugation of millions more. The fact that he did so is not really even a credit to him, but the idea which he chose to serve.

Which should cause us to reflect deeply on what ideas we choose to serve.

Though we would all agree that slavery was wrong, it is likely most of us believe that almost by instinct. It is true. Slavery is horrific and evil. However, as one can see from Newton's case, it is very important to understand why that is true, or else we are likely to fall into similar evils without knowing. In its opening section, this thesis quoted William James statement on the power ideas hold over our minds: "This absolute determinability of our mind by abstractions is one of the cardinal facts in our human condition. Polarizing and magnetizing us as they do, we turn towards them and from them, we seek them, hold them, hate them, bless them, just as if they were so many concrete beings."³⁸⁸ If anything demonstrates the truth of James' statement, it is the story of John Newton. And that should be just as frightening as it is exhilarating. What we believe has an incredible power over us, to turn us to overcome or perpetrate horrific pain and suffering in the world. As human beings, it is our unique curse that if we do not examine our ideas rigorously, following them to all their implications, they will lead us places we do not want to go. This requires us not only to think through our beliefs and actions, but often to stand in conflict with our own immediate interests and the people whose opinions matter most to us. At the same time, it is our unique gift that if we humbly strive after what is true and work to carry our understanding through all of our actions, even the most pathetic of us can entirely alter the world.

³⁸⁸ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 54.

WORKS CITED

Manuscripts

Newton, John. *Autograph Diary, Sep 1756 -Dec 31 1772*, Diary. From The Morgan Library & Museum, *Pierpont Morgan Library Dept. of Literary and Historical Manuscripts*.

SUM: Newton's diaries from 1756-1772, largely concerning his spiritual life as well as the day to day goings on.

USAGE: This was very useful for understanding how Newton's concrete understanding of evangelical theology developed over this period of time as well as how it differed and resembled his other religious ideas.

Primary Sources:

Newton, John, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History: So Far As It Concerns the Progress, Declensions and Revivals of Evangelical Doctrine and Practice; with a Brief Account of the Spirit and Methods by Which Vital and Experimental Religion Have Been Opposed in All Ages of the Church*, London, printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, 1770.

SUM: Newton's treatment of the Old Testament and early church history.

USAGE: This provided a lot of useful insights into Newton's understanding of the relationship between Christianity, politics, and society.

Newton, John. *Correspondence of the late Rev. John Newton, with a dissenting minister, on various subjects and occasions. With a brief sketch of his character, and a ministerial charge, by him revised and recommend*, edited by W McDowall, London, Maxwell and Wilson, 1809.

SUM: An anonymous friend of Newton's, a dissenting minister's, compilation of some of Newton's letters to him from 1784-1802 along with a brief discourse Newton wrote regarding Jonah, to be directed at sailors.

USAGE: These letters provided useful insight into the later years of Newton's life as well as his mature, evangelical theology.

Newton, John. *Letters to a Wife Volumes I & II*. Ecco. London, printed for J Johnson, 1793.

<https://ccl.on.worldcat.org/oclc/644088489>

SUM: A compilation of letters Newton wrote to his life over the course of her life, which he published in memorial of her following her death.

USAGE: These letters provided useful glimpse into Newton's life during his time in the slave trade, particularly his relationship with his wife. They also gave me glimpses of his thought as it developed across his later years, where the correspondence compiled here was more sporadic.

Newton, John. *The Journal of a Slave Trader (John Newton) 1750-1754*, Edited by Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell. London, Epworth Press, 1962.

SUM: An edited compilation of Newton's logs over the course of his time as a slave trader (1750-1754), interspersed with sections from *Letters to a Wife*. Newton's abolitionist treaty, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*.

USAGE: The compilation of Newton's journals was very useful towards understanding his thoughts and behavior during his time in the slave trade, following the storm. The copy of Newton's treatise was also quite useful to understanding what he contributed to the slave trade.

Newton, John, and Richard Cecil. *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London*. New York, American Tract Society, 1850.

SUM: A series of letters Newton originally wrote for distribution to an immediate circle, detailing his life thus far.

USAGE: The autobiography provided useful information regarding Newton's life leading up to 1748, of which there is very little other record.

Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, and Lawrence Eliot Klein. *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

SUM: An important piece in the intellectual history of Britain, on aesthetics, politics, and morality.

USAGE: This provided important context for Newton's beliefs up to 1754.

The Bible, New International Version. Biblegateway.com. Mark 5:1-20.

SUM: The section in the New Testament describing the story of legion, which Newton references in his autobiography.

USAGE: This source provided useful context for the implications of Newton's usage of the story.

The Bible, New International Version. Biblegateway.com. Mark 14:66-72, John 18.

SUM: Two sections from the New Testament regarding Peter and his conduct at Jesus' arrest and immediately after.

USAGE: This source was useful as an example of the complexities regarding conversion and faith within Christian canon.

The Bible, New King James Version. Biblegateway.com. Acts 9.

SUM: The section in the New Testament which describes the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (the Apostle Paul).

USAGE: This source provided useful context for the implications of Newton's reference to the story.

Secondary Sources:

Brown, Christopher, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

SUM: An examination of what conceivably did and did not affect Britons to pass from antislavery sentiments to abolitionism, particularly focusing on the effect of the American revolution.

ARGUMENT: He argues that British Abolition likely did not strictly depend upon the Revolutionary War, but that its character would have been very different without it. Looking at the political logistics involved, it appears that abolitionism could not have been an effective national movement without the American revolution.

USAGE: Brown's book, being an intellectual history, provided a backdrop for the ideas surrounding British Abolitionism. This thesis also drew heavily on his argument that antislavery sentiment and abolitionism were distinctly separate as well as his contention that British abolitionism was more unlikely than we often credit it.

Bender, Thomas, John Ashworth, David Brion Davis, and Thomas L Haskell, *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism As a Problem in Historical Interpretation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 297. <https://ccl.on.worldcat.org/oclc/44964414>.

SUM: The section cited, is a response by Davis against Haskell's earlier quoted rebuttal to him. It is an intellectual history piece regarding the influence of Christianity and capitalism on British Abolition.

ARGUMENT: Davis argues that Haskell overstates the sway industrialization had on those involved and that his argument was weakened by its lack of concrete details.

USAGE: Davis' article provided important details as to why arguments regarding economics' sway over British Abolition were suspect.

Craton, Michael. "Christianity and Slavery in the British West Indies 1750-1865." *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 5, no. 2 (1978): 141-60. <http://www.jstor.org/ccl.idm.oclc.org/stable/41298714>.

SUM: A short intellectual-history examination of the relationship between Christianity and Slavery in the Caribbean. Gives examples of legislation regarding Christianity in the West Indies.

ARGUMENT: Argues that Abolition all came down to the effective combination of utilitarian-like ideas and benevolence.

USAGE: This provided useful information regarding the conflict between missionaries and slavers in the Caribbean as well as the arguments by which some tried to hold purportedly Christian views and slaves.

Davis, David B. "James Cropper and the British Anti-slavery Movement, 1823-1833," *Journal Of Negro History* 46, no. 3 (1961): 15, accessed July 12, 2017, www.jstor.org/stable/2716584.

SUM: David Brion Davis explains Cropper's involvement in the later abolitionist movement in terms of his uncommon brand of antislavery sentiments.

ARGUMENT: He contends that Cropper's antislavery ideas were a result of his economic beliefs and Quakerism.

USAGE: This was useful context for the range of opinions held by those within the abolitionist movement.

Davis, David B. *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. New York City, Oxford University Press, 1966.

SUM: David Brion Davis chronicles the entirety of Western Culture's intellectual engagement with slavery; Starting with the Hellenic period and moving forward.

ARGUMENT: He contends that the concept of man as property always led to contradictions and tensions within a society. Challenges idea that the American South and British colonies treated slaves worse and with "uniform severity" than the French, Spanish, and Portuguese; this leads him to conclude that the religious and cultural developments in the English speaking world had a greater influence on abolition, than some peculiar evilness of English/American slavery (as compared to the other systems).

USAGE: Davis provides a well regarded intellectual history of abolition and slavery. His argument also is somewhat similar to mine, in that he argues British abolition was connected to the ideas brewing in Britain at the time, rather than the British's emotional response to the experience of slavery.

Hindmarsh, Hochschild. *John Newton and the Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996.

SUM: Hindmarsh details the life of Newton as it related to the larger Evangelical movement developing during his lifetime.

ARGUMENT: Hindmarsh argues that Newton stood out as an eccumenical figure, who worked to bring a variety of sects together and demonstrated a version of low Calvinism, which rejected the idea of perfection. He particularly sought to combat the critiques of Newton's Calvinism's negative influence on Cowper, which some historians have blamed for the poet's mental disintegration.

USAGE: Hindmarsh's work provided a great deal of useful context for Newton's life in general as well as the way in which his beliefs developed over time. In particular, his argument that Newton became an evangelical in 1754 as a result of the internal turmoil he experienced from 1748-1754 was the basis from which I built my analysis throughout Chapter Four.

Hochschild, Adam. *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves*. First Mariner Books edition 2006 ed., Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.

SUM: Hochschild provides a clear overview of the abolitionist movement, focusing in on the Clapham Sect and its activities.

ARGUMENT: Hochschild contends that British abolition was largely sparked and then fueled by a growing awareness of the horrors of slavery and the natural empathy Britons felt for the enslaved.

USAGE: Like in the case of Brown, this thesis utilized Hochschild's argument that British Abolition appeared unlikely to eighteenth-century Britons. Hochschild also provided valuable historical context for the larger development of the abolitionist movement.

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1985.

SUM: William surveys individuals' records of their own religious experiences, from a psychological and philosophical perspective.

ARGUMENT: James argues for the potency of ideas and religious experience in individuals' lives. He contends that such experiences are not psychologically suspect and should be treated as powerful aspects of human development.

USAGE: James provided an example for how to negotiate the complexity of describing religious experience as a legitimate part of a person's life and critically examine it for a non-religious audience and in a way which does not depend upon theology.

Phipps, William E. *Amazing Grace in John Newton: Slave-Ship Captain, Hymnwriter, and Abolition*. Macon, Mercer University Press, 2001.

SUM: Phipps details the life of John Newton, particularly regarding his hymnody and involvement in abolition.

ARGUMENT: Phipps principally uses Newton to argue against the Marxist idea that religion acts as a social opioid. Instead, Phipps argues that nominal Christianity led Newton to ignore injustice, but vital Christianity brought him to abolitionism.

USAGE: Phipps provided an important background for Newton's life and his analysis of Newton's nominal and vital Christianity informed my examination of Newton's early philosophy and later theology.

Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. Clays Ltd, 2007.

SUM: Rediker pulls from a variety of primary sources to establish a vibrant picture of what existence on a slave ship was like, from a number of perspectives.

ARGUMENT: He described a variety of perspectives to evoke an accurate picture of a slave ship because he believed that scholarship which detailed the concrete reality of a slave ship would better advance social justice.

USAGE: Rediker provided a useful context in which to understand Newton's experience in the slave trade, as well as a counterargument against my analysis of Newton's behavior and beliefs.

Taylor, Gene. "Calvinism VI: Perseverance of the Saints." Centerville Road Church of Christ. <http://www.centervilleroad.com/articles/calvinism-6.html>. 2015.

SUM: An educational summation of the idea of perseverance in Calvinist theology.

USAGE: This provided useful information regarding the particulars of Calvinist theology on this point.

Wyman-McCarthy, Matthew. "Rethinking Empire in India and the Atlantic: William Cowper, John Newton, and the Imperial Origins of Evangelical Abolitionism." *Slavery & Abolition* 35, no. 2 (June 2014): 306-327. *Historical Abstracts*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 22, 2017).

SUM: Goes through Cowper and Newton's relationship, mostly Cowper.

ARGUMENT: Contends that the calls for the reformation of abolition from the evangelical movement (specifically from William Cowper and John Newton) led to an intensification of empire in the early 19th century.

USAGE: This provided useful secondary context for Newton's later political life.

Yenika-Agbaw, Vivian. 2006. "CAPITALISM AND THE CULTURE OF HATE IN GRANFIELD'S AMAZING GRACE: THE STORY OF THE HYMN." *Journal Of Black Studies* 36, no. 3: 353-361. *Historical Abstracts*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 12, 2017).

SUM: Yenika-Agbaw criticizes John Newton as a figure in Linda Granfield.

ARGUMENT: She portrays Newton is a hypocrite for continuing to pursue material ambition after his experience aboard the *Greyhound* in 1748. She sees him as part of a larger pattern in enlightened, upper-class circle.

USAGE: Yenika-Agbaw provides an important counterargument against my analysis of John Newton as well as an example of how Newton's life has larger implications for the relationship between religion and politics.

WORKS CONSULTED

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