

“Foreword,” to George Walters-Sleyon, *The Rush for Black Diamonds*, 2 vols. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock)

### **Abstract**

*This brief text introduces a two-volume work that documents the anomaly, if not hypocrisy, of John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and other liberals who defended the natural rights and liberties of all but nonetheless profited from or participated in the abusive American chattel slavery system*

Keywords: chattel slavery, liberalism, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson

### **Foreword**

Chattel slavery was America’s *original sin*, Justice Thurgood Marshall once said. It was *original* in that chattel slavery was unique to the Americas. Slavery was an ancient and perennial institution in the West and well beyond -- born of conquest, surrender, or treaty, or imposed for debts, crimes, or torts. But the status of the slave in earlier legal systems was usually neither permanent nor color-coded, and masters were more closely restricted by law. By contrast, the *chattel* slavery system that slowly emerged in colonial America and culminated in the brutal slave laws and practices of the new American republic was far more sinister. That chattel system reduced each enslaved person to an item of personal property -- a piece of “living chattel” like an animal, to be sold, bought, leased, rented, used, abused, beaten, raped, and discarded at the will and whim of the master. American chattel slavery was also color-coded and racist, inflicted primarily on Blacks. It was an inherited condition, too. A child born to an enslaved mother was, by definition, a slave, even if she had been raped by her white master. And chattel slavery was presumptively permanent. Only emancipation by the master (or in rare instances by a court) would break the bond of slavery. Even a once enslaved person, who escaped to a free state, remained a slave, the U.S. Supreme Court infamously held in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857).

Chattel slavery was also a kind of original *sin*, Justice Marshall insisted. Christian theologians describe Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God in the Garden of Eden as the “original sin” of humanity. That first human sin, theologians tell us, destroyed the perfection of creation. It perverted all our human natures. It inclined us all to commit actual sins. And it left all of humanity in need of redemption. The chattel slave system was roughly analogous in effect to the original sin of Adam and Eve, Justice Marshall insisted. To be sure, America was never a perfect Garden of Eden. But the American colonies and young states became increasingly “perverted” in their contorted efforts to routinize chattel slavery even while building an expansive system of rights and liberties for all. The U.S. Constitution likewise perversely extended the chattel slave trade, expanded the fugitive slave laws, and enhanced the power of slave

states and masters, even while ratifying an elaborate Bill of Rights. Not all Americans condoned or practiced slavery, and a steady stream of critics and abolitionists challenged this odious institution from the beginning. But all of America benefited from the massive economy built on the backs of the ten million plus chattel slaves condemned to work for nothing, and all American states participated in the lucrative trans-Atlantic slave trade. Not all Americans committed the “actual sins” of kidnapping, battery, rape, murder, and other abuses of Blacks that were protected by the chattel slave laws, and not all those sins and crimes went unpunished. But America was and remains ravaged by the racism, hatred, and distrust born of the chattel slave system. And American institutions, notably its states and churches, were deeply stained and divided by the vicious battles over slavery and the “badges of servitude” that have persisted to this day. Yes, the American Civil War, the Thirteen through Fifteenth Amendments, the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1964, and countless statutes, cases, and policies have provided measures of liberation and “redemption” for all. But the calls for “truth and reconciliation,” let alone for fees and reparations, has only grown louder in recent years, as America continues to struggle with de facto if not de jure “Jim Crow” regimes in many areas of public and private life, not least its vast prisons filled with Black inmates held in a veritable “penal servitude” from which the establishment amply profits.

In this sweeping two-volume work on *Black Diamonds*, the Reverend Rd. George Walters-Sleyon strives to come to terms with this “original sin” of chattel slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. He works hard to understand its political, legal, economic, and philosophical origins, motivations, and justifications; to identify and study some of its perpetrators, apologists, and beneficiaries; and to document its perversions and permanent stains on Anglo-American culture and institutions.

In the first volume, George (as I know him from his McDonald Fellowship in our Law and Religion Center) zeroes in on John Locke’s early casuistic contributions to the development of chattel slavery and Thomas Jefferson’s more blatant exploitation. Locke has long been held up as an ardent defender of natural rights, an early architect of democratic government, and a stern critic of any notion of inherited status whether of royalty or slavery. Indeed, Locke’s teachings provided important fuel for the democratic revolutions and constitution-building in America and in many other parts of the vast British Commonwealth, including in twentieth-century Anglophone Africa. Yet, as George shows in this book, Locke early on invested in the Royal African Company that he knew profited from the trans-Atlantic slave trade. And the Carolina Constitution of 1669 that Locke helped to draft made blunt provision for slavery: “Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves.” Locke held no slaves in his lifetime, and he seems to have explicitly rejected chattel slavery two decades later in his influential *Two Treatises on Government* (1689). But Locke was one early and influential example – there were many others -- of

the pervasive casuistry that helped support the early development of the American chattel slavery system.

A century later and an ocean away, pervasive casuistry about chattel slavery gave way to more perverse self-contradictions in the life and thought of many slaveholders in the young American republic. Thomas Jefferson was a glaring case in point, George shows in later chapters of the first volume. Jefferson was the enlightened liberal founder of America, who pressed Lockean and other political teachings into the famous Declaration: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." He was Virginia's governor and then America's president and was famous for his liberalizing reforms of many legal, political, and social topics. Yet Jefferson owned some 600 enslaved persons in his life, including the long-enslaved Sally Hemmings whom he kept as his secret concubine and the mother of his illegitimate and presumptively enslaved children.

At the heart of this casuistry and hypocrisy, George argues, was a perverse and pervasive racist greed and lust for power and exploitation of those shiny "black diamonds" that those enslaved Black bodies represented. And that same racist greed and lust has continued in America, George shows in the second volume, notwithstanding the Reconstruction Amendments and the Civil Rights Acts. So many Blacks over the past century and a half have been forced into exploitative "share cropping" or forced to work multiple menial jobs needed to make thin ends meet. So many Blacks have been consigned to poor and underserviced neighborhoods and cities. So many Blacks have been blocked from advancement. So many Blacks have been threatened and brutalized by the police. So many Blacks have been exploited for their athletic, musical, or entertainment gifts – yes, a few making it big time, but so many others used for others' profits. So many Black men have been dumped into prisons, which has become its own perverse lucrative industry in America today. The original sin of slavery and servitude continues to infect America, George concludes. We need to find better ways to live together and love each other across racial, economic, and political lines; there are hopeful signs, examples, and pathways that are opening.

The Reverend Dr. George Walters-Sleyon brings learning and experience to these two volumes. He is a scholar, professor, minister, musician, poet, and most importantly devoted family man. George was born in Liberia and completed his undergraduate education in Ghana, one of the early African capitals in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. He earned his B.A. at Central University College in Accra, two master's degrees in theology, social ethics, and philosophy from Boston University, and a PhD. in practical theology and ethics with extra training in criminology and comparative criminal justice from the University of Edinburgh. He has known economic hardship both in his youth and now as he struggles to teach and raise his family in Boston, a city known for soaring liberal rhetoric and

pervasive structural racism. George has felt the sting of racism; already as a newly arrived American emigrant from Liberia, he was arrested and thrown in prison for a time in 2008 for not having the exact right documentation of his status. He has seen the “new Jim Crow” regime at work in American and British prisons, and he has studied, supported, and written at length about the work of prison chaplains who have sought to ameliorate the lives of the incarcerated. And George has shown us in his ministry, messages, and music how to use Scripture, liturgy, art, literature, and just plain faithful and loving living to chart a better way to love God, self, and all neighbors.

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