

Christopher Codrington and the welfare of the enslaved on his plantations

It has been suggested that Codrington exhibited 'the awakening of an Anglican conscience' with regard to enslavement.*

This display addresses the questions:

- Was he an abolitionist or in any way opposed to enslavement?
- Did he *act* to improve the material well-being of the enslaved on his plantations?
- Did he *act* to improve their spiritual well-being (as he saw it) through converting them to Christianity?
- What became of any such efforts when the plantations were inherited by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG)?

* <https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/codrington-at-all-souls-the-awakening-of-the-anglican-conscience-concerning-slavery/>

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Codrington and the welfare of the enslaved

The main evidence is a letter from Codrington to William Popple, secretary of the Board of Trade, 1699:

I have always thought it very barbarous that **so little care should be taken of the bodies and so much [less] of the souls of our poor slaves.** Their condition has cost me many a **mortifying reflection**, and yet I know not how I shall be able to mend it in any one respect but **feeding my own slaves well...***

The only way Codrington could think of for improving the lot of the enslaved was feeding them well: no mention of reduced working hours or lighter punishment. He went on to say that would entrust their spiritual welfare to monk-like clerics. The plan for these 'regular clergy' may have reflected his reading of the monastic Church Fathers and the example of Jesuit and other Catholic missionaries.

* Document no. 458, *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol17/pp249-265>

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Codrington's apparently sympathetic attitude to one slave rebellion

In December 1701, the 'Corromantee' slaves (mainly from the Gold Coast but an ethnic group invented by Europeans) belonging to Major Samuel Martin in Antigua revolted and decapitated their master. Codrington defended them:

I'm afraid he was guilty of **some unusual act of severity**, or rather some indignity towards the Corramantes, for they are not only the **best and most faithful of our slaves, but are really all born heroes...** intrepid to the last degree... **and obedient to a kind master, but implacably revengeful when ill-treated.***

Slaves should not be treated with 'unusual severity', but regular severity was acceptable.

* Document no. 1132, *British History Online* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol19/pp696-729>>

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Was Codrington an abolitionist?

In June 1699, Codrington wrote twice to the Council of Trade and Plantations about runaway slaves:

I have been pressed... to put you in mind of the **negroes who have escaped to the French and not [been] handed over notwithstanding frequent demands**. This is an affair of the last [i.e. greatest] importance... for a great number of negroes will certainly get off in sloops and boats, both from a natural **desire of changing their masters upon the least severe usage** [i.e. for better conditions], and upon the encouragement of **these many [Catholic religious] holidays the French allow their slaves...****

We are at peace with the French and **the negroes are as much our property as our cattle, etc...**

Christianity does not alter the condition of men nor destroy the right of tenure by which slaves are held.**

Converting the enslaved to Christianity was thus for him no step towards emancipation. On the contrary Codrington looked to the future and he or his manager were purchasing *enslaved children* from 1701 if not earlier. Shortly before his death in 1710, he also purchased around 100 'new negroes' from Africa. Codrington was clearly not withdrawing from the trade.***

* Document no. 576, *British History Online* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol17/pp291-308>>

** Document no. 628, *British History Online* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol17/pp327-340>>

*** The National Archives, Royal African Company, T70/950/18; 951/20; 952/21 etc. For 1710 see J. Harry Bennett, Jr., 'The Problem of Slave Labor Supply at the Codrington Plantations', *The Journal of Negro History*, 36.4 (October 1951), p. 412

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What prospects for Codrington's plan for the spiritual welfare of the enslaved?

When Codrington was appointed Governor of the Leeward Islands in 1698, encouraging **'the conversion of negroes [= enslaved]'** was among his routine official instructions from the government in London. He was also **'to endeavour to get a law restraining inhuman severities and punishing the wilful killing of Indians and negroes with death.'** That degree of concern for slave spiritual and bodily welfare was becoming more usual in Britain. But Codrington knew his chances of success with conversion were slim. Other planters were opposed to any education of the enslaved as part of their Christianisation. It would lead to demands for freedom, or, worse, rebellion. At best, they thought, it would reduce labour time.

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Before his death in 1710, had Codrington in fact sponsored any Christian instruction of the enslaved?

There is no clear evidence that he did, and some evidence suggests he did not:

In 1723 the Bishop of London sent a questionnaire to all colonial clergy. The return from one Antigua parish was made by Simon Smith, who had served in the plantations for thirty years. He had been presented to Falmouth Parish in 1701. While serving there, he 'resided with Governor Codrington'.

In answer to the question 'are there any infidels, bond or free, within your parish; and what means are used for their conversion?' he wrote simply: '**nothing done for negroes**'.*

* Lambeth Palace Library, Fulham papers, vol. 19, folios 119-20

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Codrington's will of February 1703, which he did not change or replace before his death in 1710, made no mention of eventually manumitting his enslaved. On the contrary:

I give and bequeath my two plantations in the Island of Barbados to the Society for Propagation of the Christian Religion in Foreign Parts [= SPG] ... and my desire is to have the plantations continued entire, and **three hundred negros at least kept always thereon**, and a convenient number of professors and scholars maintained there, *all of them to be under the vows of poverty chastity and obedience*, who shall be obliged to study and practice physic [medicine] and surgery as well as divinity, that by the apparent usefulness of the former to all mankind, they may both endear themselves to the people and have the better opportunity of doing good to men's souls whilst they are taking care of their bodies. [spelling modernized]

Extracts from the Will of Christopher Codrington, *USPG Online Exhibition* <<http://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/exhibition/uspg/items/show/33>>

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Codrington and the SPG

The bequest to the institution generally known as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) is striking. The SPG was a very new organisation in 1703 when the will was made.

A link with it was Thomas Bray, one of its founders.* Bray had matriculated as an undergraduate from All Souls in 1675. He had left the College before Codrington's arrival. But the two could have met after Bray moved to London from 1695 to 1699 and Codrington visited the capital from 1697 on.

As shown on the next slide, Bray's account book for the years 1695-1699 shows Codrington subscribing £140, by far the largest sum of all those listed, towards plantation libraries.**

Yet there were other connections, of perhaps equal influence. George Smalridge, Codrington's tutor when he was an undergraduate at Christ Church, Oxford, would also become involved with the SPG. Codrington's great friend Francis le Jau became an SPG missionary.

* as noted at <https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/codrington-at-all-souls-the-awakening-of-the-anglican-conscience-concerning-slavery/>

** H. Thompson, *Thomas Bray* (London, 1954), pp. 72–81

**D^r Brays Accounts
Part I**

Remoan Account of Benefactions
and Libraries for y^e Clergy & Continog
Plantations, procure by him

and
Of Charges thereunto belonging
from the time he undertook
here
Anno 1695

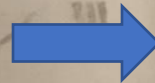
To the time of his Departure for
Mary Land
Anno 1699

As Given into the Society at
Lincolns Inn for propagating
Christian Knowledge
And audited by the same

SPG Archives, Bray Associates f11a,
reproduced by kind permission of the archivist

Brought over

Esq Spring	95	14	0
9 ^m Hooby member of Parliament	1	2	0
S ^r Edmund Turner vide page	1	2	0
S ^r John Phillips vide page			
Col ^l Richardson	20	0	0
M ^r Bonnyman	4	10	0
Esq Freeman member of Parliament	1	11	0
S ^r John Chester	5	10	0
M ^r Hales	1	2	0
Esq Howor	5	10	0
M ^r D'Alltone	4	14	0
M ^r ellon	3	0	0
M ^r King of Exeter	20	0	0
M ^r Thomas Green	3	0	0
S ^r Thomas Tookes	100	0	0
Col ^l Coddington	140	0	0
John Evelyn Esq	2	4	0
S ^r Gabriel Roberts	5	0	0
S ^r Cooke of Norfolk Esq	50	0	0
S ^r Birkley Grey	5	0	0
Edward Chamberlain Esq vide page			
M ^r James Huffer	2	5	0
S ^r Richard Lomas	10	15	0
Esq Howor	50	0	0
M ^r Tretman	1	5	0
M ^r Yates	1	0	0
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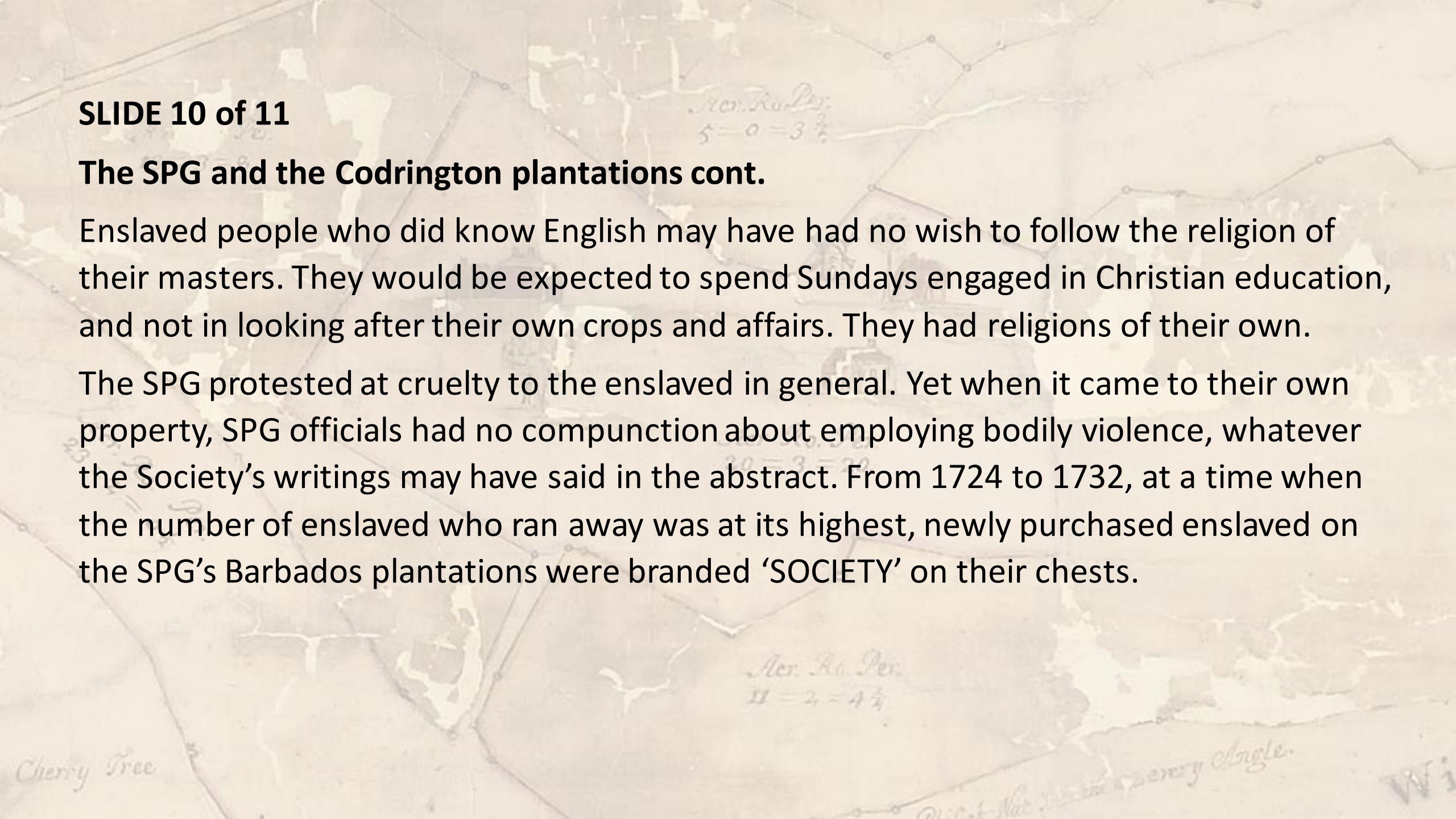
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The SPG and the Codrington plantations

Missionary work on the SPG's plantations was unsuccessful: very few converts are recorded. By 1730 only 37 individuals had been baptized, 15 of them children. By 1745 missionary Joseph Bewsher found fewer than 20 on the SPG Codrington plantation 'who could repeat their catechism', and these were no older than 12 or 13.

Many enslaved people who had been transported from Africa had not learned enough English to understand those preaching to them. Joseph Holt was minister of St Joseph's Church, Barbados, and he replied bitterly to the Bishop of London's questionnaire of 1723 concerning the conversion of 'infidels and atheists' in his parish: 'Transported slaves are stupidly ignorant, and it's a long time before they understand anything of our speech.'* Of course, he did not allow the possibility that some at least were feigning ignorance as a form of protest.

* Lambeth Palace Library, Fulham papers, vol. 15, folio 207

A historical map of Barbados showing plantation boundaries. Handwritten notes include 'Ac. Ro. Per. 5 = 0 = 3 1/2' in the upper center, 'Ac. Ro. Per. 11 = 2 = 4 1/2' in the lower center, 'Cherry Tree' in the bottom left, and 'Cherry Angle' in the bottom right. The map is overlaid with a semi-transparent text box.

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The SPG and the Codrington plantations cont.

Enslaved people who did know English may have had no wish to follow the religion of their masters. They would be expected to spend Sundays engaged in Christian education, and not in looking after their own crops and affairs. They had religions of their own.

The SPG protested at cruelty to the enslaved in general. Yet when it came to their own property, SPG officials had no compunction about employing bodily violence, whatever the Society's writings may have said in the abstract. From 1724 to 1732, at a time when the number of enslaved who ran away was at its highest, newly purchased enslaved on the SPG's Barbados plantations were branded 'SOCIETY' on their chests.

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SUMMING UP

Did Codrington ever contemplate abolition?

It seems not.

Was he concerned for the physical and spiritual welfare of his enslaved?

Yes, in terms of feeding them better (only), and of converting them.

Did he act on that concern?

There is no clear evidence that he did, and what evidence we do have suggests that, on the spiritual front, he did not.

When the SPG took over the plantations he bequeathed it, was its record much better?

No, not in the first half of the eighteenth century.

presentation compiled by Peregrine Horden

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