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Submission concerning the proposal that the name of George Berkeley be removed from the library called after him in Trinity College, Dublin.

I understand that, in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement, a campaign has been underway, to have the name of Berkeley removed from the library called after him at Trinity College, Dublin on the grounds that he happened to have once been the owner of slaves. While I fully sympathize with the Black Lives Matter movement, and consider slavery morally reprehensible, I think the proposed 'de-naming' of the library is unjustified and for the following reasons.

First, during Berkeley's life time, 1685-1753, the slave system was part of the economic order in the western world, as it had been for centuries, and its existence was seldom challenged on either religious or moral grounds. Whatever criticism of slavery was raised in those days usually concerned the harsh and unfair treatment of enslaved people by those who held power over them. Such criticism was analogous to that made of those within western society itself who treated servants or apprentices unjustly. It was only towards the end of Berkeley's lifetime that some minority quietist religious groups, including some members of the Society of Friends (the Quakers) in the English-speaking world, began to criticize slavery. However such criticism usually related to the slave trade rather than to enslavement of people. and even some Quakers, especially in the British West Indies, continued to be owners of slaves well into the eighteenth century. It was only some decades later, in the 1780s and 1790s, that opposition to slavery was mobilized in the western world –and most effectively by Protestant evangelical groups in Britain. Even their objections, at this point, usually concentrated on the inhumane treatment of slaves especially during the trans-Atlantic passage from Africa to the Americas. Therefore there seems no reason to question the contention of David Brion Davis, the leading authority on slavery in western culture, that what was novel concerning western thinking on the subject of slavery during the later eighteenth century was the emergence of moral objections to slavery, since the enslavement of people had previously been accepted from time immemorial as part of the social order. The voicing of moral objections to slavery, of which Davis has also written, did not therefore become commonplace until long after the death of Berkeley in 1753.

This means that during Berkeley's lifetime slavery, like poverty, was accepted as a dimension of the human condition. Berkeley himself, as a classical scholar at Trinity College Dublin, would have been familiar with the existence of slavery in the Ancient World which he considered to have been highly civilized, and Berkeley, as an ordained minister of the Church of Ireland, would have known that the slave condition was mentioned, without condemnation, in the Bible. Moreover where the major European Christian churches were concerned all of them benefited –directly or indirectly- from the practice of slavery. For example, major Catholic religious orders, such as Jesuits, Franciscans, and Dominicans, in the overseas empires of Portugal, Spain and France possessed property that was operated by slave labour without which they would have been unable to

maintain a Christian presence in their colonies. The Church of England also held land, operated by slaves, in the British West Indies, and had a substantial interest in the Royal African Company that flourished from 1660-1731. This company (on which K.G. Davies, once of Trinity College, Dublin, was the leading authority) had made substantial profits from purchasing slaves on the coast of West Africa and selling them to planters in the British West Indies. Such vested interests did not prevent clergy from both Catholic and Protestant denominations from voicing concerns over abuses in the operation of slavery and from searching for remedies for such lapses. For example in the course on my own research on the French Antilles during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries –that is during Berkeley’s life span- I have encountered Dominican communities whose very existence on the French islands was reliant on their possession of land worked by slaves because the white planters, who dominated life on the islands, refused to pay any tithe towards the maintenance of a Christian church. Even in such straitened circumstances these Dominican priests believed themselves to be doing Christian work by treating their slaves in what they considered a humane manner and by catechizing the children of slaves in the Christian faith. They contrasted their behaviour in these respects with that of most major slave owners, who they criticized for treating their slaves as a commodity, for refusing to have slave children catechized, and for the sexual exploitation of their female slaves.

Such observations underline the fact that for most educated people in the western world throughout most of the eighteenth century, slavery was a largely unquestioned dimension to life that contributed to their own relative comfort. There were individuals, mostly clergy, who were alert to abuses in the operation of the system and who tried to remedy these by example and exhortation. However hardly any people challenged the existence of slavery itself, and most who thought about the topic were able to rationalize something they considered vital to the well-being of the communities to which they belonged.

George Berkeley was one of those who did think about the subject and was one of those also who strove to ameliorate the system. It was in this context that he became involved in a project to establish a College in Bermuda that was designed primarily to provide an education for the children –presumably the sons- of planters on the various islands of the British West Indies. Such a College was considered desirable since critics of slavery in Britain (and presumably also in Ireland) were aware that some white settlers of modest backgrounds and limited schooling who had made fortunes as planters of sugar and other commodities in the West Indies (especially on the islands of Barbados and Jamaica), were leading debauched lives, and indulged in the exploitation and abuse of the very slaves whose labour had enabled their enrichment. Such critics, and even senior government officials, attributed these lapses from Christian and civilized living to the inadequacy of the education that planters, and their agents, had received before they had migrated to the islands. One proposed remedy for this, at least in the next generation, was to establish a College, of which Berkeley would have charge, at which the sons of the wealthier families from all the British islands in the West Indies would attend. It seems likely that if the plans to establish such a College been proceeded with it, its students would have been both exposed to an

educational curriculum analogous to that provided at Trinity College, Dublin, and would have been alerted by Berkeley to the fact that Black slaves were human beings endowed with eternal souls who were therefore entitled to be treated respectfully and introduced to the truths of salvation. We, today, may smile cynically at the expectation that such an education would have effected an improvement in the behaviour of planters bent on profit. However since the College was to have been endowed by a grant from the British Exchequer it is possible that Berkeley would have been sufficiently independent to use it as a platform from which to criticize planter behaviour. In this respect it was very different from Codrington College, which, after the Berkeley venture had failed, was established in Barbados in 1745 with an endowment from the wealthiest planter family on the island.

It was when Berkeley was on his way to establish his proposed college at Bermuda that he disembarked in 1729 at Newport, Rhode Island, where he remained until the negotiations concerning the funding of the proposed college in Bermuda were seen to have failed. Newport, like most coastal town in the New England colonies at that time, had profited from trade with the British West Indies, and some of its wealthier families had followed West Indian practice by becoming the owners of slaves who they put to work on the docks, in domestic employment and as farm workers. It is unsurprising therefore that when Berkeley purchased a farm in Middletown, Rhode Island, to sustain him and his family as he awaited the outcome of the negotiations concerning the proposed College in Bermuda, and as he ministered at Trinity Church, Newport, he also purchased three slaves to work the farm for him. The mere fact of ownership does not mean that Berkeley was associated with the harsh treatment of slaves or with the break up of slave families. On the contrary he was concerned that his slaves be inducted into the Christian faith. Moreover, if we are to judge from Berkeley's behaviour towards subordinates in Ireland after he had become Bishop of Cloyne in 1734, and from his concern for the welfare of the poor of east County Cork during the dire famine year of 1741, it is likely that Berkeley proved himself a humane patriarchal master who was satisfied that his conduct towards his social inferiors, whether slave or free, was guided by the Christian principles he professed.

In conclusion, the memory of George Berkeley was honoured when his name was chosen for the undergraduate library at Trinity College, Dublin, where he had studied and taught for many years. This, in my opinion, was a deserved honour because, in academic terms, Berkeley is one of the truly outstanding graduates of the university and is, with John Scotus Eriugena, one of two philosophers of international stature that were proud to describe themselves as belonging to Ireland. The proposal to remove his name from the library because he was, for a short interlude, technically the owner of slaves is, to my mind, entirely unjustified, because, by the moral standards of his own time, there was nothing reprehensible about owning slaves provided their owner treated them fairly. Moreover, Berkeley's principal association with slavery was in the course of planning for a College on the island of Bermuda the purpose of which was to render the slave system that operated in the British West Indies, less harsh. In these respects the position of Berkeley was significantly different from that of

such as George Washington or Thomas Jefferson who are still honoured by many universities in the United States today. Their positions were different because Washington and Jefferson resided in Virginia which was *a slave society* in which the wealth and social position they enjoyed was reliant entirely on the operation of the slave system. Berkeley, on the other hand, owned a farm for two years that was worked by some few slaves, and this in Rhode Island, which was but *a slave owning society, where* slavery was not vital to its prosperity. The second major difference was that in Berkeley's generation slavery was seldom subjected to criticism other than when the mal-treatment of slaves was in question, whereas Washington and Jefferson lived through an era when calls for the abolition of slavery were loud and they chose to rationalize the slave system that had made it possible for them to become leaders of their country.

Finally it is my belief that when the authorities at Trinity College, Dublin, decided, a generation ago, to commemorate George Berkeley by naming the principal undergraduate library of the college after him, they did so because his international standing as a philosopher remained undimmed and because he was known to have been considered a person of probity by his contemporaries. Berkeley's reputation still holds good by these standards. However, I appreciate that many today, especially in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement, are less attracted by a patrician member of the eighteenth-century establishment who, by seeking by example to render the slave system of his day appear less harsh, was, in effect, giving reason why it should be perpetuated. To carry any revulsion over what some may consider self-serving hypocrisy, to the point where Berkeley's name would be removed from the library in question, would mean that, for the future, the College Authorities should name a building after a person of distinction, or after a generous benefactor, only after they had first conducted a character investigation similar to that operated by the Catholic church when it selects candidates for sainthood. Nothing less would provide the College with reasonable assurance that no questions concerning that person's past behaviour that might, in the present *or in the future*, cast doubt on the candidate's integrity to the point where it would justify a re-naming of the building in question.