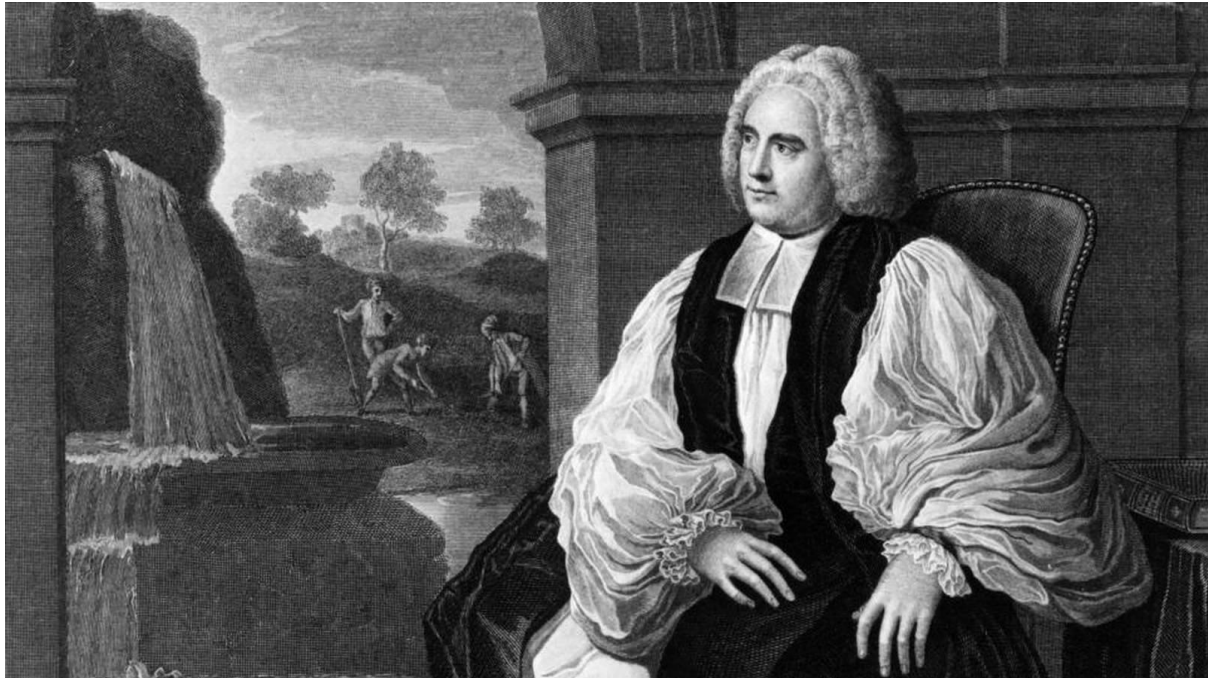


Erasing Berkeley's name from Trinity would do nothing to combat racial prejudice in Ireland

Nigel Biggar: In celebrating people, we admire them only for some things they've done



Irish philosopher George Berkeley. Photograph: Hulton Archive

Nigel Biggar

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Ireland's famous 18th century philosopher, George Berkeley, was guilty of racial prejudice and slave – owning. He once described the Irish poor as “a lazy destitute race” and he bought a slave plantation on Rhode Island. Since the Irish today deplore both racism and slavery, shouldn't they disown him? Trinity College Dublin's legacies working group is currently weighing whether his name should be removed from one of the college libraries.

What's wrong with “racism” is what's wrong with any prejudice directed at other people – whether they are members of a race, a nation, a social class, a religion, or the body of Brexit supporters – namely, that it prejudices the individual by regarding him or her simply as a member of a group, automatically attributing to the individual that group's supposed characteristics, which are stereotyped in unflattering terms.

The group is simplified pejoratively and the dignity of individuality is brushed aside. Racial prejudice is an ugly thing and Bishop Berkeley was guilty of it.

British and Irish slave-trading and slavery from about 1650 was nothing out of the ordinary

But let's be frank: prejudice against other groups and their members is a widespread human phenomenon. Human individuals like to secure their own significance by being part of a larger tribe, and they like to inflate that significance by looking down upon other tribes. Even university-educated 'progressives' have their tribal prejudices.

Further, racism was neither invented by Europeans nor monopolised by them. In the medieval period Muslim Arabs compared their own cultural sophistication favourably to what seemed to them the primitive cultures of white northern Europeans and black Africans, attributing their natural inferiority to an intemperate climate, respectively too cold and too hot. In the nineteenth century the Qing emperors in China regarded the British – and other Westerners – as barbarians and natural vassals, without any embarrassment at all.

In the 1940s the Irish novelist, Gerald Hanley, then an officer in the British Army, found Somalis unshakeable in their prejudice against other black peoples: "I had once tried hard to get the Somalis to give up their contempt for Bantu people ... 'We cannot obey slaves', Somalis told me. 'It is impossible for us to live under slave people even when they are in [British] uniform and have arms'. I could not change the memory [the Somalis] had of a time when these Bantu people were slave material for the Muslim world to the north".

According to Dr [Clare Moriarty](#), while "unquestionably a great metaphysical thinker and a brilliant writer", Berkeley "was also extremely morally fallible". Welcome to the common club of crooked humanity.

As for slavery, that was practiced from ancient times to the 20th century on every continent in a variety of forms. Long before Europeans became involved in the 1440s, Africans had been selling black slaves to Roman and Arab traders. In the mid-1600s Barbary corsairs raided the coasts of Co Cork and Cornwall and carted off whole villages into slavery on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa.

While the British were importing slaves into the Americas in the eighteenth-century, the indigenous Comanche were running a slave economy in the southwest of North America.

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In Jamaica the Maroons, slaves who had escaped into the mountainous forests of the interior, kept slaves of their own in the mid-1700s. And in North Carolina freed slaves were themselves slave-owners on the eve of the Civil War in 1860. British and Irish slave-trading and slavery from about 1650 was nothing out of the ordinary.

What was extraordinary was that from about 1770 – two decades after George Berkeley's death – an anti-slavery movement began to grow in Britain. The result was that, through their united Parliament, the British and Irish were among the first peoples in the history of the world to repudiate the slave-trade and slavery in 1807 and 1833, respectively, and they were the leading people to devote themselves to the global suppression of slavery through the British Empire for the following century-and-a-half.

It follows that there is no direct causal line between the ugly racism that justified 18th century slavery and whatever racism persists among us today, because the highly popular abolition movement and its humanitarian successors were propelled by the Christian conviction that members of all races are equal in the sight of God.

Consequently, according to the historian of abolition, John Stauffer, “almost every United States black who travelled in the British Isles acknowledged the comparative dearth of racism there. [The famous black abolitionist] Frederick Douglass noted after arriving in England in 1845: ‘I saw in every man a recognition of my manhood, and an absence, a perfect absence, of everything like that disgusting hate with which we are pursued in [the United States]’”.

Therefore, to erase Berkeley’s name from TCD would do nothing to combat racial prejudice in Ireland today. Since he has never been venerated for his racist views of the Irish poor and slave-ownership, to repudiate him would not be to repudiate them. In celebrating people, we admire them only for some things they’ve done. We admire Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King as heroic examples of non-violent resistance – despite, respectively, their disparaging view of Africans and serial infidelity.

So, we should continue to celebrate George Berkeley as the outstanding philosopher he was. And when provoked by his name to reflect on his prejudices and obtuseness, we should lament them. But then we should spare some critical attention for our own moral flaws. That would make a difference.

Nigel Biggar is Regius Professor Emeritus of Moral Theology at the University of Oxford, former Professor of Theology at Trinity College Dublin, and the author of Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning, published by William Collins on February 2nd