

## In Defence of Piracy

In May 1724, in a small bookshop near St Paul's Cathedral, a small, plain, leather bound book was put on sale amongst the fine bibles and illuminated religious texts that were the majority fare of the day. Not much to look at compared to the exquisite holy works that surrounded it, this book nonetheless had one distinct advantage – an irresistible title. With its graphic descriptions of murders and rapes in far off lands, Captain Johnson's '*A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates*' was an instant hit, and the public who had flocked to the Thames to see the bodies of freshly executed pirates hanging in chains lapped it up.

No one is quite sure who Captain Charles Johnson was. Some thought he must be a pirate himself, others later claimed he was Daniel Defoe writing under a pseudonym, but what was clear was that he had tapped into society's absolute fascination with pirates and piracy, and begun a media phenomenon that continues to this day. In 1718 we had Edward Teach, aka Blackbeard, blockading Charleston Harbour and making off with his ransomed medicine chest before marooning most of his crew to increase his share of the booty. Now his pirate ancestors have branched out, and are simultaneously threatening the safe passage of our Persian oil and cheap Indian imports through the Gulf of Aden, while threatening to topple the entire music and film industries through illegal radio stations and downloads – and still finding time in recent months to hold governments to ransom and walk away from senior banking jobs with booty worth millions. Captain Johnson's book came with a fold-out copper plate of two female pirates, Mary Read and Anne Bonny; now we have full colour pictures of scrawny black lads with automatic weapons on the bridges of ships splashed across our newspapers with familiar piratical tones of exotic sensationalism, while advertisements for the latest Jack Sparrow franchise draw our eyes with busty co-stars and grotesque monsters.

Through celluloid, tabloid and factoid, what is it about these sea-faring thieves that has held our rapt attention for so long? Pirates, Johnson noted in his appendix, are '*hostis humanis generis*' – enemies of mankind – 'with whom neither Faith nor Oath is to be kept.'<sup>1</sup> Reading this, I can't help thinking of the words of St Paul - doubtless expounded in a more fine, if rather less popular book available by the Cathedral - where he urges us to think on 'whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable.'<sup>2</sup> If God was wonderful and pirates so despicable, why was it that the readers living in the large shadow of St Pauls would rather read a hundred sensational stories about these dirty robbers than spend their precious money on pages of divine contemplation? What is it about these strange characters that simultaneously makes corporations' blood boil, and children's pulses race?

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, C., *A General History of the Robberies & Murders of the most notorious Pirates*, London, Conway Maritime Press, 2002, p. 362.

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 4:8

I believe that the fascination is sustained because pirates tap into a voice we rarely hear, and I want to argue that despite Paul's fine warning, some careful reflection on piracy will actually tell us something very important about ourselves. As the innuendo-riven children's programme *Captain Pugwash* confirms, Pirates are not so much *hostis humanis generis* as *umbris humanis generis* – a shadow that outlines in darkness the places we have suppressed.

As a father of two, I've obviously had to spend many hours reading some pretty mixed parts of the pirate canon. From 'Pirates Don't Change Diapers' to 'Shiver Me Letters – a Pirate ABC' I've often wanted these saccharine eye-patch and parrot stories buried in a chest in a far-off island. But as a result of a serendipitous coincidence, I recently came across a history of the 'Pirate Utopias' that sprung up off the Moroccan coast in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, and spent some time with the head of the Somalia office for the UK's Department for International Development. Whether in reference to fiction or real life, piracy, I quickly learned, was not as simple as my children's books had made out.

For one thing, it is evident that few pirates wrote. Like much history, pirate stories are almost exclusively written from the perspective of the powerful. I have never even been close to the clearly terrifying experience of being held hostage by one (though I will admit to having used hooky software once in a while, and not paying for *all* of the music I've listened to) so my own perspective can do little to correct this. It is, however, very important to appreciate that when we read about piracy, we are mostly hearing the version of events written by those who have lost money as a result of it. This was certainly true in the time in which Captain Johnson wrote his sensational pirate history.

The world in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries was one in major flux. With the development of efficient systems of navigation, merchants and explorers from Europe were able to travel out from their own modest lands to claim for their Kings and Queens vast lands and associated wealth. It took until 1899 for the last piece of Earth to be claimed for some nation state or another, but even in 1700s the British could look at a map and claim sovereignty over huge swathes of far-flung territory.

Despite the religious overtones of the empirical project, the real motivation was economic. Merchant navies were constantly sailing back and forth with valuable exotic goods. It was from the ranks of the seamen who sailed these vessels that pirates emerged, and the reasons for their turning to piracy are clear, as Peter Lamborn Wilson points out:

*'Labour conditions in the merchant marines of Europe presented an abysmal picture of emerging capitalism at its worst. The sailor had every reason to consider himself the lowest and most rejected figure of all European economy and government – powerless, underpaid, brutalized, tortured... the virtual slave of wealthy merchants and ship-owners, and of penny-pinching kings and greedy princes.'*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lamborn Wilson, P., *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs and European Renegades*, New York, Autonomedia, 2003, p21.

For these men, virtual slaves as they were, turning to piracy was primarily a means of escape. That they turned to a life of thievery was hardly notable: they had wasted their lives shipping goods virtually thieved from colonies to make money for their rich owners; why shouldn't they make some profit themselves?

The economic imperative continues to this day of course: we know that Somalia is a desperately poor country and that piracy is seen by some as a way out of poverty. Interestingly though, it is now well attested that one of the reasons that young men have been forced to look elsewhere for income is that the fishing industry that they were a part of has completely collapsed as a result of over-fishing by European trawlers. The waters around the Somali coast have also been contaminated by toxic waste, dumped by rogue companies who knew that the dysfunctional government in Somalia would be very unlikely to be able to do anything about it.

The pirate problem in Somalia then actually forces us to think carefully about our own attitudes to property and wealth. Redundant fishermen sit on the beaches of their neutered sea, watching huge ships cruising past carrying oil and fine things to the very people who savaged their own means of making any money. Piracy for them is not about greed as much as reparation – a shore tax to pay for the damage that has been done.

These young men are no angels, but nor are they the wild savages that our media would have us see, as the case of the 2008 capture of the French luxury yacht *Le Ponant* showed very clearly. On the surface the story has everything that the pirate media storm would want: an exclusive sailing boat, carrying only 60 or so passengers at any one time, with a highly cultured French crew of both sexes. While the crew took the boat from the Indian ocean to the Mediterranean, the empty boat provided a perfect place for maritime trysts to flourish, and with a top chef on board and a cache of excellent, it was portrayed at the time as an idyllic journey that the pirates brutally interrupted.

But, as William Langewiesche explored in his excellent *Vanity Fair* article, the truth was a little more complex:

*The wages were low, the hours were long, and no retirement benefits were provided. During rotations ashore there were no wages at all. These terms were non-negotiable. They stemmed from the culture of a global shipping industry which over the past 60 years has pursued profit and efficiency in part by ridding itself of labor unions, and more fundamentally by freeing itself from the constraints of the nation-state and its laws.<sup>4</sup>*

He goes on to point out that *Le Ponant* was registered in the loosely held French protectorate of Wallis and Futuna, a tax haven that meant that the boat could fly the French flag – with all the romance that held for wealthy charterers – without having to abide by any French labour laws.

It was into this situation that a group of Somali pirates came, boarding the boat and demanding \$2.5m. The female members of the crew had been instructed to

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<sup>4</sup> Langewiesche, W., *The Pirate Latitudes*, Vanity Fair, April 2009.

hide in the bows of the ship, but after a day or so they voted to come out. Ahmed, the pirates' leader was hugely offended.

*"We do not touch women! We want money!" Referring to himself and his men, he said, "Robbers! Not terrorists!" Ahmed escorted the group aft to the luxurious lower lounge, where he ordered that the women be provided with water and food. When the water arrived, he sent it back for being lukewarm.*

Many Somali pirates have been killed in the battles that have gone on over ships like *Le Ponant*, but the pirates have killed very few to date themselves. It is perhaps stretching the point too much, but one wonders if this is because they are aware that those working the vessels are, like the crew of *Le Ponant*, themselves existing in oppressive circumstances.

Lamborn Wilson makes the point very clearly in his study of 18<sup>th</sup> Century piracy: it was not simply theft, but an act of social resistance. The seamen, living in total squalor while enslaved to rich merchants, saw their turn to piracy as two fingers up to the capitalist establishment that shackled them. It seems that the Somali pirates have a case for being seen in the same light. Having seen the Western capitalist world exploit them and leave them for dead, they have turned to resistance as an act of highlighting their plight, and fighting for their very survival.

This is perhaps why piracy continues to fascinate us. Pirates offer us a glimpse into a world that is more free and less bound to the drudgery of the rat race. From the shores of the Thames in 1724, Captain Johnson's readers would have been able to dream of an existence that was not permanently in the shadow of the imposing Cathedral church that overlooked them. Here were men and women in charge of their own destiny, living a wild and free life that – while almost invariably short – was self-determined and full of adventure.

Their rejection of the *status quo* was not purely economic, but also stretched to the spiritual realm too. Being yoked almost inseparably with the capitalist and expansionist empire, Christianity as the poor sailors experienced it was a religion of domination and of oppression. Taking the adage that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend' many of them thus turned to a form of Islam – again as an act of defiant resistance against an establishment that had gone out in battle against the Moors so often.

What is particularly interesting for us is that Lamborn Wilson sees in this pirate resistance, and the anger and fascination it threw up in equal measure at home, the development of 'heresy as a means of cultural transfer.'<sup>5</sup> Quoting the co-evolution of Druidry and Celtic Christianity once they had interfaced, he believes that:

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<sup>5</sup> Lamborn Wilson, P., *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs and European Renegades*, New York, Autonomedia, 2003, p200.

*'when a religion from one culture penetrates another culture, it frequently does so as "heresy"; only later do the Orthodox Authorities arrive to straighten everyone out.'*<sup>6</sup>

But once the penetration has occurred, things can *never* quite be straight again.

Pirates, then, can be seen to be functioning as heretics – showcasing a new rule of life, one that the establishment did not have the guts to accept initially, but which came to be accepted as normative later on. How so? Well, it is well documented but not well known that pirates regularly attacked slave ships and set the slaves free. One Captain Mission, having captured a Dutch slave ship off the coast of Africa, made a long speech to its crew, arguing that *'the Trading for those of our Species cou'd never be agreeable to the Eyes of divine Justice and that no Man has the Power of the Liberty of another; and while those who profess a more enlightened Knowledge of the Deity, sold men like Beasts; they prov'd that their Religion was no more than a Grimace!'*<sup>7</sup>

Slavery, and the acceptance of Captain Mission's view of universal human rights, was not accepted in the West until many years later: the piratical heresy had become accepted as orthodoxy. Similar movements could be claimed for the liberal attitude that pirates had to other religions: what was considered heretical by the established church is now far more normative.

This perhaps can help us mount *some* kind of defence of those who pirate music and film material. Piracy, whether of people or goods, is often about the freeing of secured goods in transit. The Somali young men who see huge wealth steaming past them in well secured containers want simply to liquefy some of that cargo for themselves. In the society of the celebrity, which celebrates pop stars and their glamorous lifestyles and total leisure, the average music lover can feel very cheated. Here are 'artists' supported by enormous music corporations who pump endless compilations and remixes into the market on the back of vacuous talent shows. Music piracy, some might argue, has returned music to its raw roots, forcing bands to innovate and change, rather than relax with their six-album deals. When people are pirating DVDs and music, they are doing so in reaction to the corporations who have sliced up and commercialized our sight and sound. The heresy of file-sharing sites like *Napster* has now been accepted as orthodoxy: the comfortable life of the pop star is over, and while this may be economically challenging for the music industry as we knew it, it is undoubtedly going to be artistically stimulating for the huge number of bands who, under the old system, were never heard.

Similarly, the original pirate radio stations of the 1960's can thus be seen as functioning as the shadows of the autocratic and staid BBC, which initially resisted playing pop music at all. These illegal and heretical broadcasters were later brought under the wing of the establishment once their heresy had been accepted as orthodoxy, with DJs like Tony Blackburn and Jimmy Young moving to the newly founded Radio 1.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 195

Pirates, whether DJs or seafarers, are endlessly fascinating because they are symbols of resistance and of heresy. When there are changes ahead that we know we have to navigate, but feel unable to, pirates are there to guide us. This perhaps explains the particular fascination of pirates to children – and by extension, given it is them making the purchasing decisions, their parents too. Every parent knows that one day their child will have to make their own way. Every parent knows that for a child to individuate they must, in some faithful way, rebel and commit heresy. Pirates offer our children a taste of this journey, and thus carry with them a hope that heresy will change both parent and child, and that liberty will result.

This, then, is the lesson that pirates hold for us as people of faith. Was not the incarnation the penetration of our culture, a rupture that we experienced as heresy, a challenge to our economics and ethics that we resisted and fought back? Was not Jesus arrested and tortured and strung up for all to see like those 17<sup>th</sup> Century lovers of liberty, chained to galleys by the Thames? Did he not also demand that *'no Man has the Power of the Liberty of another; and while those who profess a more enlightened Knowledge of the Deity [...] prov'd that their Religion was no more than a Grimace'*

Jesus was no lover of violence of course, and we should decry it wherever it is used, but was Blackbeard any more or less violent than the navy from which he came? Just War theory might not support the taking up of arms by poor Somali fishermen, but we should be very careful to ask what could possibly force them to such drastic action before we condemn them to death by US SWAT teams.

St Paul was right to urge us to focus on the noble, the right and the pure. But, like Jesus in the desert, we must also be prepared to reflect on the shadows of ourselves and our economic systems and religion too, for in piratical the heresies and fears we find there, we may see hope of a more just and true future for the oppressed and disenfranchised too.

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Kester Brewin teaches Mathematics and is a consultant for BBC Education. He is the author of *The Complex Christ* and has a second forthcoming on loving 'the other.' He lives in South East London.