

## The Islamic position on Slavery: A refutation of doubts

Question : What is the significance of the superiority of a free person to a slave if slavery is not condemned or abolished ? The way the issue of slavery is raised by Christian missionaries and critics of Islam outrages the sensibility of honest people. It is more than probable that such issues are raised with the most dishonest purposes. We say that after examining Jewish and Christian scriptures where slavery is legitimized in its worst forms. The practice of slavery is accepted and praised throughout those texts. Therefore, we may counter their attack by asking : How do the missionaries call people to be converted to Christianity, when this religion legitimizes slavery ? In other words we wonder here : why do these people express abhorrence at an issue which is clearly part of their belief? As against these beliefs, Islam presents an entirely different picture, contrasting with both the two earlier religions and with the state of slavery in the world just before the advent of Islam. Some elaboration is necessary here to exonerate Islam of the undeserved aspersion cast on it in connection with its position on slavery. Islam and Slavery It is an Islamic principle that God created man as a fully responsible creature to carry out all religious duties, to be accountable for doing so, having the necessary volition and free behavior. No other human may restrict that freedom, and if he does he is an oppressor. This is as plain a principle in Islam as plain can be. When someone wonders " How was it that Islam legitimized slavery?"; we reply without embarrassment: "Yes, Islam did legitimize slavery." But fairness and on honest search for truth would demand that one follow up his inquiry and try to comprehend in detail the Islamic legislation concerning slavery. He should comprehend how a slave is treated in Islam, the equality between a free person and a slave in rights and duties, and also he should learn how many methods have been provided for in shariah for freeing slaves. Such legislation will be all the more admirable if it is contrasted with other systems, and if contrasted with the modern version of slavery in the so-called civilized world. The reader will observe that there are here numerous quotations from the Qur'an and sunnah, as the practice of the Prophet, peace and blessings of God be upon him, is of special significance here, and to emphasize the importance of separating faulty applications from the original teachings. We may say here that Islam's position on slavery is superior to that of any other creed or system. If things had developed in accordance with the teachings of the Islamic shariah the unfortunate practices that were perpetrated later on would have been avoided. One major faulty practice has been the enslavement of free people through snatching, overpowering, or trickery in both old and recent past. This has led to a horrible custom of slavery in all continents, especially in Europe and America in the last few centuries. Islam takes a very strong exception to such practices. In a qudsi [1] tradition the Prophet says :

"Three types of people will stand apart on the day of Resurrection as My enemies - and an enemy of Mine will be doomed; a man who vowed in My name then betrayed, a man who sold a free person as a slave and appropriated his price, and a man who employed a worker and had him do the assigned work then failed to pay him his wages." [2].

The Prophet, peace and blessings of God be on him, says : "Three types of people will not have rewards for their prayer : a man who forces himself as an imam [3], a man who postpones prayer until its time is out and a man who enslaves a free person." [4] It is interesting to note that there is no statement in Al-Qur'an or sunnah ordering a Muslim to enslave, while statements abound in the hundreds which urge the setting free of slaves. At the advent of Islam the ways and means of enslavement were numerous while the outlets to freeing were almost nil; so Islam reversed this formula, by multiplying the outlets to freedom and drying up the sources of enslavement. One such source of enslavement were captives taken in war who were routinely enslaved or killed off. But Islam introduced a third alternative in which a prisoner-of-war is treated well and set free. This is the purport of the following verses of the Sacred Qur'an :

" (The devotees of God ).. feed, for the love of God, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive, -(saying), " We feed you for the sake of God alone : no reward do we desire from you, nor thanks." (76, 8-9)

The above verses indicate such sympathy and kindness that need no commentary. We may quote here a tradition of the Prophet's, peace be upon him, exhorting noble conduct :

"Visit the sick, feed the hungry, and set free the captives" [5].

In the first clash between Muslims and their enemies, the Battle of Badr, the Muslims won, and a number of the noblest Arabs fell captives in the hands of Muslims. If such dignitaries were punished severely they would have deserved such punishment - they had done so much harm to Muslims at the early stage of Islamic da'wah (call to Islam). Nevertheless, the Sacred Qur'an directs the Prophet and his companions in these words :

"O Apostle ! say to those who are captives in your hands : 'If God findeth any good in your hearts, He will give you something better than what has been taken from you, and He will forgive you : for God is oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. But if they have treacherous designs against thee (O Apostle), they have already been in treason against God, And God is He who hath (full) knowledge and wisdom." (8, 70-71).

Since the beginning of the Islamic da'wah and up to the battle, those men had done Muslims all kinds of injury and cruelty with the intention of overpowering and exterminating them. In a state like this, would it have been good policy to set the captives free at once ? The situation is

obviously related to the state's high interests. Therefore, the Muslims accepted ransom to free prisoners-of-war after the Battle of Badr, while after the fall of Makkah its inhabitants were told (by the Prophet): "You may go, for I give you your freedom." At the Raid of Al-Mustalak the Prophet married a noble captive from the defeated tribe, thus raising her status. The result of this was that all Muslims set free all the captives in their hands. It must be clear by now how few ways of enslavement were left open through Islamic legislation. To abolish it completely would not do, since the disbelieving captives had been fierce in confronting the cause of justice and truth at least in being a tool in the hands of oppressors. To set them free as a routine would only have led to the supremacy of oppression and tyranny. After all, the chances of regaining freedom in Islam are numerous and frequent. And the rules of treating slaves are just and merciful. Let's just mention some of the ways of freeing slaves : A share of zakat (i.e. the enjoined charity) is allotted to the freeing of slaves, the atonement for unintended killing, the vow of thihar[6], atonement for broken oaths, for breaking the fast during the day of Ramadan. There is besides this a general appeal to the human sentiment of Muslims to set slaves free for the pleasure of God. As for the treatment of slaves, let's survey here some of the rules laid down by Islam to ensure a decent and kind treatment for them. 1/ Giving them the same food and clothing as taken by their masters Abu Dawood reports on the authority of Al-Ma'roor bin Suwaid that he said : "We entered Abu Thar's house at Al-Ribthah [7] and found him dressed in a garment called 'burd', and found his slave dressed in an identical 'burd'. So we said : ' Why don't you, O Abu Thar, wear that 'burd' of your slaves so that you may have a full suit, and give him instead a less sumptuous garment ?' He replied : 'I heard the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings of God be upon him say : " Those slaves are your brothers, only God gave you an upper hand over them. So let that who has his brother (i.e. slave) under him give him the same food he himself eats, and the same clothing as he himself wears. The master may not give his brother a task that is beyond his ability. If he does give him such task, let him lend him a hand." 2/ Recognizing their dignity Abu Hurairah narrates that the Prophet of Repentance (i.e. Prophet Muhammad) said : " Any one who slanders his slave with adultery, and it is a false charge, will receive on the Day of Resurrection the same punishment his slave would have received in the world had the charge been true." [8] Abdul-Lah bin 'Umar freed a slave of his then picked a twig from the ground and said: " I shall not receive for freeing him the worth of this in the Hereafter. I heard the Messenger of Allah say : ' If a man hits or beats his slave, his atonement is the freeing of that slave."[9] 3/ A slave is given the lead in religious or mundane matters which he is skilful at. He can be imam (i.e. to lead the prayer). Aishah had a slave who led her prayer. The believers are even ordered to heed and obey if a slave becomes their ruler, so long as he proves to be better qualified than others. Freedom is man's natural right. No one may be deprived of this right except for an exceptional reason. Although Islam recognizes slavery within the limits we have explained, it strictly warned those who have the upper hand of freedom against manipulating their position for cruel ends. Beyond that, we assert that it is justified to hold a person who falls captive as a result of his aggression, but it is necessary to treat him nicely. If someone does fall a captive and becomes a slave, then shows signs of repentance, gives up his old way of life, forsakes the way of evil and follows a well-guided life, such a person should be set free : Islam favours such response to a slave's conduct. Some Islamic jurists enjoin freeing him and other recommend it ! The Prophet, peace and blessings of God be on him, again and again ordered kindness to the slaves. For instance, when the captives taken in the Battle of Badr were distributed he directed : "Be kind to your captives." Uthman bin 'Affan once punished a slave of his by pinching his ear-lobe. But he told him later : " come and pinch my ear." And when the slave would not do, he insisted. So the slave proceeded to pinch Uthman's ear lightly, but Uthman said : "pinch more painfully, I have no endurance for punishment on the Day of Resurrection." "Well Sir," rejoined the slave, "the day you fear I fear, too." When Abdul-Rahman bin 'Awf walked in the company of his slaves, people would not know who is master and who is slave - nor did he have smarter clothing. 'Umar bin Al-Khattab once walked in Makkah and saw some slaves standing aside waiting, while their master ate. He was angry at this and inquired of the master : "Why do some masters regard themselves as superior to their slaves ? " Then he ordered the slaves to advance and eat. A man once entered the house of Salman, may God be pleased with him, and saw him kneading his dough. "What are you doing, Abu 'Abdullah[10]? " " I have sent my servant on an errand, " he answered. " So I didn't like to give him some more work." This is some of what Islam did for slaves !

The Jews' Attitude to Slaves According to the Jews, people are of two classes, Jews and gentiles. As for Jews, they may be enslaved in some cases within the teachings of the Old Testament. All the others are worthless gentiles. They may be enslaved through subjugation and conquest. They are condemned races who have been written off for misery since an early age. In this regard, some verses from the Book of Exodus are significant:

"When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. If he

comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone. But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl; and he shall serve him for life. When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt faithfully with her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money." (21,2-11.) As

for enslaving a non-Israelite, it might be effected through overpowering or snatching, because they believe that their race is superior to other races. They try to justify such enslavement by referring to texts in their Old Testament. According to that Scripture Ham, son of Noah, father of Canaan, raised the anger of his father. That was because Noah drank wine one day and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. Ham, the Father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father. When his father knew what Ham had done to him he said: "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers." He also said, "Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave." (Genesis, 9, 24-27).

Queen Elizabeth I used the above text to justify her trading in slaves in which she was, as we shall see, an active trader. The Christians' Attitude to Slavery There is no condemnation or prohibition of slavery anywhere in the Bible. It is surprising, therefore, that historian William Moyer should reprimand our Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of God be on him, for failing to abolish slavery at once, while he condones the Bible's attitude. Neither Christ, nor his apostles, nor the church make any statement in that connection. On the other hand, St. Paul commands slaves to be loyal to their masters, as may be seen in his Epistle to Ephesians. St. Thomas Aquinas, for his part, added the voice of philosophy to that of churchmen. He did not object to his master Aristotle who had accepted slavery as a natural state suitable for a certain type of people. The saints asserted that nature had prepared certain types of people to be slaves. In the Grand Larousse of the nineteenth century one reads: "It is no wonder that slavery lingers among Christians up to the present - the formal representatives of religion still assert its legitimacy and justify it." It also adds: "To sum up, Christianity approved completely of slavery, and it still does, so that no one can prove that this religion endeavoured to abolish slavery." In the 'Dictionary of the Bible' by Dr. George Joseph, it is stated that Christianity did not object to slavery on either political or economic ground. It did not exhort the believers to argue with their generation about slavery, and not even to raise the issue. It said nothing against the rights of slave owners, nor did it rouse the slaves to seek freedom. It neither discussed the woes and cruelty of slavery, nor did it ordain the immediate freeing of slaves. It is unanimously agreed that Christianity did nothing to alter the relative status of master and slave - it rather endorsed the rights and duties of both parties.' So we call upon all white fathers of the church and the respected reader to contrast the Islamic legislation and the other systems in the world. Modern Europe and Slavery The reader would be right to inquire at this time of progress and development about the attitude of Europe, the pioneer of progress and development, toward slavery. When Europe found its way to Africa it was a disaster for the latter that lasted for five centuries. The Europeans had a genius for devising ways to ensnare the Africans, to take them to Europe or its colonies, and to force them to such drudgery that contributed to a development of economic life. Later on, America joined Europe in subjugating the Africans, and the latter had to serve one more master. The Encyclopaedia Britannica has the following to say about slavery:

"The hunting of slaves from their villages in the midst of jungles was effected by setting fire to the straw used in building barns around the village. Once the villagers ran out for their lives, the English hunted them." Apart from Africans who died during their flight, or on the way to the coast for shipment, one third of the survivors died of bad weather, 45% in transportation overland, 12% during the sea voyage, and some more died on plantations. The English companies were given the monopoly of trading in slaves by a license from the British government. But, at a later stage, all citizens were given a free hand to import slaves. Experts estimate the total number of Africans imported by the British alone to be slaves between 1680-1786 A.D. at about two million one hundred and thirty thousand. One article of the so called 'Black Code' states that any slave who attacks his master is to be executed, and if he runs away his hands and feet are to be cut off. If he runs away a second time, he is to be killed. (Although how he can do that with his hands and feet cut off beats me. Maybe he will risk it as the kind of life awaiting him is worse than death). One article prohibits education for blacks. Another prohibits a black person from professions preserved for whites. In America one of the laws decreed: It is a felony for seven slaves to meet, and if a white person passes by and sees that they have met, he has the right

to spit on them and to give each twenty lashes. Another law stated : Slaves have no souls, no wit, no intelligence, and no will. The life is concentrated in their muscles. In summary: the slave had to take full responsibility for duties, and if he failed to do his full service he was to be punished; but as for his rights, he was no better than an animal without soul or feeling. It is only in this century that the Westerners felt the prick of conscience. It is great injustice on their part to feel superior to Islamic legislations, which were ordained more than fourteen centuries back. It is rather a case of 'projection'; charging others with one's own faults.

1 A tradition in which the prophet speaks for God. 2 Reported by Al-Bukhari. 3 A person who loads congregational prayer. 4 Reported by Abu Dawood and Ibn Majah, both on the authority of Abdul-Rahman bin Zaid Al-Ifreegi. 5 Reported by Al-Bukhari. 6 A vow by which a husband would not cohabit with his wife for a known period. 7 A village in the suburbs of Al-Madinah. 8 Reported by Al-Bukhari. 9 Reported by Muslim and Abu Dawood. 10 I.e. father of Abdullah, a traditional Arabic way of calling a man as father of his eldest son.