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SLAVERY IN ISLAM, WEST AND OTHER RELIGIONS

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PREFACE

This article is about concept of Slavery in Islam and West. The aim of this article is to develop a more sophisticated understanding of comparative study of slavery in Muslim society and west, by comparing their ideas, events and philosophies regarding human rights. In this article we will discuss the following: -

- 1- Meaning and Concept of Slavery
- 2- History of Slavery
- 3- Development of Slavery
- 4- Treatment of Slaves
- 5- Slaves in the History of Islam
- 6- Islam Attacks Slavery
- 7- Conclusion

1- MEANING AND CONCEPT OF SLAVERY

Before discussing slavery in Islam, west and other religions we should have a little bit information regarding concept of slavery itself.

In general it has been said that a slave has three defining characteristics. His person is the property of another man, his will is subject to his owner's authority and his labor or services are obtained through coercion.¹

The world book encyclopedia defines slavery as "Slavery is a practice in which people own other people. A slave is the property of his or her owner and works without pay. The owner, who is called a master or mistress, provides the slave with food, shelter and clothing."²

The concise Oxford English Dictionary gives the following primary entry for slave; Person who is the legal property of another and is bound to absolute obedience.³

The reference to legal property and the equation of slavery with hard labor reflect the specific modern sense of the slave condition, a sense fixed to a considerable extent by New World slavery in the wake of European conquest and colonization.

The second part of the Oxford English Dictionary definition refers to a condition of subordination of the person, bound to absolute obedience-for which equivalent may be found in many cultures and epochs. A French dictionary, *Littres Dictionaire* offers a similar formula: The slave is a person, male or female,

subject to the absolute dominion of the master in virtue of purchase, inheritance or war. 4

2- HISTORY OF SLAVERY

The origin of slavery is unknown but some inferences may be drawn from the data of anthropology and archeology. Man inhabited the earth for about 1,000,000 years before he learned to enslave his fellow man. During most of that time he lived in small, nomadic bands and depended for his subsistence upon hunting and gathering. Under such circumstances slave would have been useless, if not dangerous when one concurred his enemies, he killed them and perhaps ate them. About 10,000 years ago, however some where in the Near East man's life began to undergo profound change. He became a producer of food rather than a mere hunter and gatherer. He slowly discovered the art of agriculture and learned to domesticate animal. He abandoned his nomadic habits and settled down in relative permanent villages. Thus the conditions favorable to the development of slavery began to appear. 5

Then, some time prior to 300 B.C. also in the Near East, further revolutionary changes occurred. Man learned to use the energy of animals and the force of the wind. He invented the plow, the wheel, brick, and the arch and he learned to use metals most important of all he began to live in cities. Now it became profitable to capture enemies rather than to slay them, for their energies could be utilized advantageously, and the political organization made it possible to keep them under control. 6

Slavery then became a primary phenomenon of civilization. It probably began to be a prominent feature of society shortly before the dawn of written history. This is not to say that the institution of slavery had a single origin in the Near East, whence it defuses to other regions. It doubtless arose independently in other societies, both in America and in the far-East, where conditions conducive to its development appeared. 7

3- DEVELOPMENT OF SLAVERY

Though slavery was an ancient institution that started in prehistoric era of mankind. It is safe to say that slavery expanded as commerce and industry increased. This growth of trade created a demand for a disciplined labor force that could produce goods for export. As a result an ancient slavery reached its fullest development in the great empires of Greece and Rome. Slave did most of the work in these societies. Many labored in handicraft industries, in mines, or on plantations. Other worked as household servants, and some even became doctors or poets.8

I- THE MIDDLE AGES

During the middle ages the major cause of slavery was the result of fighting between two religious groups, Christians and Muslims. They fought against each other for hundred of years and enslaved their prisoners. During the Crusades, the Christians attempted to recapture Jerusalem and other areas of the Holy land from the Muslims. 9

In the holy land, the crusaders tasted sugar for the first time. Many of them then created a demand for sugar after returning to

Europe. During the 1400's Portuguese sailors started to explore the coast of West Africa and to ship African blacks to Europe as slaves. 10

In the reign of Louis the Pious the Jews imported large numbers of slaves into Spain and North Africa. At the zenith of Jew's prosperity in Spain (from the 10th to the end of the 15th cent.) many of the wealthy Spanish -Jewish families imported slaves from Andalusia.11

II- MODERN TIMES

The establishment of European colonies in the new world during the 1500's brought an expansion of slavery. The Spaniards developed sugar plantations in Cuba and other Caribbean islands that became known as the West Indies. The Spaniards also needed large numbers of laborers to mine gold and other minerals. Portuguese colonists started huge sugar plantations in Brazil. These Europeans enslaved thousands of Indians. But most of Indians died from European disease and harsh treatment. The Spaniards and the Portuguese then began to import blacks from West Africa as Slaves. 12

During the 1600's France, England, and the Netherlands established colonies in the West Indies and greatly increased the African slave trade.13

III- SLAVERY IN UNITED STATES

The Americans had recently gained their independence from Britain, and it was the new nation of the United States of America, which played the biggest part in the last fifty years of the Atlantic slave trade, taking away slaves at a greater rate than

ever before. During the 1700's noted philosophers and religious leaders in Europe and North America began to condemn the slavery. They declared that slavery violated human rights.¹⁴

IV- CHRISTIANS ORGANIZE SLAVE-TRADE

Slaves were taken from Africa even during the Roman Empire, but the real "slave-trade" started in 16th century with the advent of the Christian European Countries. From the time of the arrival of the {Christian} Europeans until 1600's about one million Africans were carried away in slave-ship. During that period, the Portuguese were the chief slave-traders in West Africa. They either took Africans to Brazil, which they owned, or else they sold them to the Spanish settlers in Mexico, Central America, South America and the Caribbean islands. In the 17th century, some seven to eight million West Africans found their way across the Atlantic. The Dutch joined the Portuguese as the leading slave-traders in the 17th century, and in the following century the British were the biggest slave-traders. By that time the Atlantic slave-trade was at its height in the eighteenth century, British ships were carrying more than half of the total of slaves, leaving the rest to be divided up between the Dutch, the French, the Portuguese and the Danes. 15

4- TREATMENT OF SLAVES

The treatment of the slaves varied greatly, but almost no slaves could legally marry, have a family, testify in court, or own property. Slaves might also serve ceremonial purposes. In the ancient world some were attached to temples. Among the Toltec and Aztecs they were often sacrificed to Gods. Among Africans

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Negroes, Polynesian islanders, and Indians of the Pacific North West they might be executed at the burial of a ruler or the building of a new house or temple. 16

Justice Ameer Ali writes about it as: -

“It found slavery a recognized institution of the empire it adopted the system without any endeavor to mitigate its baneful character, or promise its gradual abolition or to improve the status of slaves. Under the civil law, slaves were mere chattels. They remained so under the Christian domination. Slavery had flourished among the Romans from the earliest times. The slaves whether of native or foreign birth, whether acquired by war or purchase, were regarded simply as chattels. Their masters possessed the power of life and death over them... Christianity the had failed utterly in abolishing slavery or alleviating its evil.”
17

It would be of interest to note yet that the word “slave” is of European origin. It came in to existence when the French used to supply the Spanish slave market with the “barbarians” and those captives happened to be mostly the people of Turkish origin from the region known as Slovakia (now a part of Czechoslovakia). These people are called “Slav” and so all captives came to be known as “slaves”. 18

I- Attitude of Christianity towards Slavery

Slavery existed among Hebrews, as among all the peoples of antiquity, but the treatment to slaves by them was more inhuman than in either Greece or Rome, and there was nothing in Israel to correspond to vast pyramids of Egypt or buildings of

Assyria reared by the ceaseless labor of thralls working under the lash of their oppressors. 19

The following quotation graphically shows the attitude of Christianity on the subject of slavery and race.

“Take away the black man! I can have no discussion with him,” exclaimed the Christian Archbishop Cyrus when the Arab conquerors had sent a deputation of their ablest men to discuss terms of surrender of the capital of Egypt, headed by Negro ‘Ubaydah’ as the ablest of them all. To the sacred Archbishop’s astonishment, he was told that this man was commissioned by General ‘Amr, that the Muslims held Negroes and white men in equal respect judging a man by his character and not by his color”. 20

II- Attitude of Hinduism towards Slavery

Slavery is an institution fully recognized in the Sanskrit law books of India. The Code of Manu (viii.415) names seven causes of slavery viz. capture in war, voluntary submission to slavery for a maintenance, birth from a female slave, sale, gift, inheritance from ancestor, and condemnation to slavery by way of punishment, Manu adds that wives and sons, like slaves, can have no property of their own, and that Sutras, even when emancipated by their master, are not therefore released from servitude. One superior in cost cannot be the slave of his inferior. The Hindu law also recognizes the selling of children as slave, as it is stated by Vasistha (xv.2) that the father and the mother have power to give, to sell, and to abandon their son. 21.

III- Attitude of Jewish towards Slaves

Slavery was recognized feature in the ancient and mediaeval Jewish life. It is important to note that among the Jewish the treatment of slave was never debasing or cruel. The Jewish law is very clear on the point, the Mosaic legislation insists upon the rights of slaves. Besides this the Jewish legislation refuses to give slaves any right to own property independently. As the Rabbis phrased it, ' Whatsoever the slave hath acquired, the master hath acquired.' Whatever he may receive from others, or find by the way, belongs to the master. 22

IV- Attitude of Europeans towards Slaves

Laws in the European colonies of Latin America showed considerable concern for the welfare of slaves. These laws allowed slaves to marry, to seek relief from a cruel owner, and even to buy their freedom. Such laws were rarely enforced, however. Partly for this reason, slavery was as cruel in Latin America as it was, later, in the United States. But slaves in United States generally ate better, lived longer, received better medical care, and had a more secure family life than those in most other countries. 23

5- SLAVES IN THE HISTORY OF ISLAM

There is a great deal of misrepresentation in the west about slavery in Islam.

Christian writers have often represented Islam as a religion, which not only tolerated slavery but also encouraged it. This is a serious accusation leveled against Islam.

We have mentioned briefly the attitude of Jewish, Christianity and Hinduism towards slavery, now we would like to have a look at Islam and its codes regarding slavery.

As far as slavery was concerned, Arabs in the pre-Islamic days were as bad offenders as their neighbors. Slaves were a commercial commodity, and slavery was an established institution. It was a source of livelihood for thousands and a source of labor for scores of thousands. To the elite, the number of slaves in the household was a symbol of status.²⁴

This was the state of affairs at the advent of Islam. Slavery offended the spirit of Islam as much as idolatry did. But while the latter had its roots in spiritualism and hence could be countered by reason, slavery had its roots in commerce, in social structures, in agriculture undertakings. ²⁵ How was then slavery to be eradicated?

Islam's war against slavery aimed at changing the attitude and mentality of the whole society, so that after emancipation, slaves would become its full-fledged members, without any need of demonstrations, strikes, civil disobedience and racial riots. Islam achieved this seemingly impossible objective without any war. To say that Islam waged no war against slavery would not be a true statement. A war it waged, but a war in which neither sword was resorted to, nor was blood spilled. ²⁶

Islam aimed at striking at the roots of its foe and created allies by arousing the finer instinct of its followers. A three-pronged attack on slavery was launched.

6- ISLAM ATTACKS SLAVERY

To give an idea of how Islam raised the status of slaves and treated them as human beings, some of the measures taken by Islam may be mentioned under the following headings.

- 1) Quraan & Slavery.
- 2) Conduct and Sayings of the Messenger of Allah.
- 3) Attitude of Islamic State Towards Slavery.

1) Quran & Slavery

Islam believes that the creation of social setup should be based on the concept of unity of human race and the sanctity and dignity of mankind. Quran refers to this dignity of human race at various places and in different contexts. Some of the Ayat relating to it may be mentioned as bellow.

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَوَحَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً ۗ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا.

O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, His mate, and from them twain scattered (Like seeds) countless men and women;- reverence Allah, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights),

and (reverence) the wombs (That bore you): for Allah ever watches over you. 27

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْهَا ۖ فَلَمَّا تَغَشَّهَا حَمَلَتْ
حَمَلاً خَفِيفاً فَمَرَّتْ بِهِ ۖ فَلَمَّا أَثْقَلَتْ دَعَوَا اللَّهَ رَبَّهُمَا لَئِنْ آتَانَا صَالِحاً لَنُكُونَنَّ مِنَ الشَّاكِرِينَ .

It is He who created you from a single person, and made His mate of like nature, In order that He might dwell with Her (in love). When they are united, she bears a light burden and carries it about (unnoticed). When she grows heavy, they both pray to Allah their Lord, (Saying): "If Thou gives us a goodly child, we vow we shall (ever) be grateful." 28

وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَنْشَأَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ فَمُسْتَقَرٌّ وَمُسْتَوْدَعٌ ۖ قَدْ فَضَّلْنَا الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ
يَفْقَهُونَ .

It is He who hath produced you from a single person: here is a place of sojourn and a place of departure: we detail Our Signs for people who understand. 29

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ
مِمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلاً .

We have honored the sons of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good

and pure; and conferred on them special favours, above a great part of our creation. 30

2) Conduct and Sayings of the Messenger of Allah

The Messenger of Allah (S.A.W) himself set an example of voluntary emancipation as he freed all his slaves and brought about a marriage between a slave and free Quraish women, a relative of his own.³¹

There are many sayings in which the Messenger has instructed the believers to free the captives or at least treat them with kindness and justly. Some of the important saying of the Messenger in this regard may be mentioned as below.

1) Here we refer to the sermon delivered by the Messenger of Allah on the occasion of farewell Hajj: -

“You should feed them with such food as you eat yourselves, and clothes them with stiff you wear and if they commit of a fault which you are not inclined to forgive them then part them for they are the servants of Lord and not to be harshly treated.”³²

2) Narrated Ibn ‘Umar: That he used to give his verdict regarding the male or female slaves owned by more than one master, one of whom may manumit his share of the slave. Ibn ‘Umar used to say in such a case, “The manumitted should manumit the slave completely if he has sufficient money to pay the rest of the price of that slave and the other share-holders are to take the price of their shares and the slave is freed.” Ibn Umar narrated this verdict from the Messenger.³³

“Narrated Abdullah Ibn Umar Khaythamah reported: While we were sitting in the company of Abdullah Ibn Umar there came in his steward. He (Ibn Umar) said: Have you supplied the provision to the slaves? He said: No. Upon this he said: Go and give (the provision) to them, for the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) has said: This sin is enough for a man that he withholds the subsistence from one whose master he is.”³⁴

3) Some other sayings of the Messenger on this subject will deserve to be mentioned; as the following:

“He who beats his slave without fault, or slaps him on the face, his atonement for this is freeing him.”³⁵

“A man who behaves ill to his slave will not enter into paradise.”³⁶

“Whoever is the cause of separation between mother and child by selling or giving, Allah will separate him from his friends on the day of resurrection.”³⁷

“When a slave wishes well to his master, and worship Allah well, for him are double rewards.”³⁸

“Narrated Abu Hurara: The Prophet said, “Whoever frees a Muslim slave, Allah will save all the parts of his body from the (Hell) Fire as he has freed the body-parts of the slave.” Siad bin Marjana said that he narrated that Hadith to ‘Ali bin Al-Hussain and he freed his slave for whom ‘Abdullah bin Ja’far had offered him ten thousand dirhams or one-thousand dinars.”³⁹

“Narrated by Abu Dhar: I asked the Prophet, “What is the best deed?” He replied, “To believe in Allah and to fight for His

Cause.” I then asked, “What is the best kind of manumission (of slaves)?” He replied, “The manumission of the most expensive slave and the most beloved by his master.” I said, “If I cannot afford to do that?” He said, “Help the weak or do good for a person who cannot work for himself,” I said, “If I cannot do that?” He said, “Refrain from harming others for this will be regarded as a charitable deed for your own good.”⁴⁰

Narrated Asma’ bint Abu Bakr. The Messenger ordered us to free slaves at the time of solar eclipses. 41

“Narrated by Asma’ bint Abu Bakr: We were ordered to free slaves at the time of lunar eclipses.”⁴²

“Narrated Ibn ‘Umar: The Prophet said, “Whoever manumits a slave owned by two masters, should manumit him completely (not partially). 43

“Narrated ‘Abdullah bin ‘Umar: Allah’s Messenger said, “Whoever frees his share of a common slave and he has sufficient money to free him completely, should let its price be estimated by a just man and given his partners the price of their shares and manumit the slave; otherwise (i.e. if he has not sufficient money) he manumits the slave partially.”⁴⁴

“Narrated Ibn ‘Umar: Allah’s Messenger said, “Whoever manumits his share of a slave, then it is essential for him to get that slave manumitted’ completely as long as he has the money to do so. If he has not sufficient money to pay the price of the other shares (after the price of the slave is evaluated justly), the manumitted manumits the slave partially in proportion to his share.”⁴⁵

“Narrated Ibn ‘Umar: The Prophet said, “He who manumits his share of a slave and has money sufficient to free the remaining portion of that slave’s price (justly estimated) then he should manumit him (by giving the rest of his price to the other co-owners).” Nafi’ added, “Otherwise the slave is partially free.” Aiyub is not sure whether the last statement was said by Nafi’ or it was a part of the Hadith.”⁴⁶

3) Attitude of Islamic State Towards Slavery

Regardless, slavery does not exist in Islam anymore. According to the Shari’ah or Islamic law, a freeborn Muslim could not be enslaved, nor were Jews or Christians in early Islam. Slaves in Islam were only non-Muslims who were captured in war, as well as their children who were born into slavery.

In this unique form of Islamic slavery, the relationship between master and slave could be a close one in many ways, including eating and praying together, and may also continue to be so even after the slave was freed. The freed slave in Islam may even marry his former master’s daughter and/or conduct business for him.

Islam also taught that it is much more meritorious to free a slave than to hold on to one. To set an example, The Messenger Muhammad himself freed his own slave, Bilal, who later became a very prominent member of the Ummah by becoming the official caller to prayers (“Mu’azin”) in Madinah.

In fact, over 1400 years ago, Islam taught that slaves – unlike the much more recent 19th century brutal American slavery – should be treated with justice, fairness, and kindness. Also, in Islam,

slaves were considered to be full and complete human beings like everyone else.

It is the precious teaching of Islam that maintained equality between all human beings, and brought them in one rank, regardless to their color and race.

Eminent Egyptian scholar Dr. Hassan Ibrahim quotes that, "Islam uplifted the condition of the slaves and helped them in the path of freedom, Islam brought equity among the masters and slaves in the matter of eating, clothing, education, culture and matter of civil rights."

Islam has emphasized for making freedom of slaves, and also suggested different ways as Fuk-ur-raqabah, has been declared very valuable task, which is having a great reward.

In the early Makkan period, it pronounced that slave emancipation was a great deed of piety. The very initial Makkan surahs appealed to the Muslims to liberate as many slaves as they could.

The Messenger (SAW), unequivocally, directed the Muslims to raise the standard of living of the slaves and bring it equal to their own standard. This, of course, was meant to discourage people from persisting with them.

For the atonement of many sins manumission of slaves was divinely ordained.

All slave men and women who could support themselves in the society were directed to marry one another, in order to raise their moral and social status.

A permanent head in the public treasury was fixed to set free slave men and women.

Prostitution, which was largely carried out through slave women, who were mostly forced by their masters do so, was totally prohibited.

The affronting names of 'abd and amah by which slave men and women were called, were abrogated so that people should stop regarding them as slaves. In their place, the words fatah (boy) and fatath (girl) were introduced.

Finally, the law of mukatibat provided very easy access for the slaves to the gateway to freedom. Every slave who was capable of supporting himself was allowed by law to free himself, provided that he either gave a certain monetary amount to this master or carried out certain errands for him. After this, he could live as a free man. A special head in the treasury was fixed for this purpose; also, wealthy people were urged to help the slaves in this regard.

CONCLUSION

Now we would like to conclude our discussion in the light of comparison made between Islam, best and other religions, under the following points:

1. Slavery was an ancient institution that started in prehistoric era of man kind its origin is unknown.

2. The Western societies in spite of their high claims for the condemnation of slavery failed to eradicate slavery one or other reason.
3. The Western societies not only failed to stop slavery, rather it was increased as commerce and Industry increased in their societies. There is no denying the effect that the establishment of European colonies in the new world during 1500's brought an expansion of slavery. These Europeans enslaved millions of peoples for the purpose of sugar plantation, to mine gold and other minerals.
4. Though the treatment of slaves varied greatly in the Western societies but generally the slaves were devoid of any human right. A slave was considered as the personal property of his master and he was bound to absolute obedience to his master. No slave could marry, have a family or own property, they were regarded simply as chattels. Their life and death was possessed by their masters.
5. At the advent of Islam slavery was an established institution in Arabian era and slaves were a commercial commodity. When Islam came though it did not declare slavery unlawful, all of sudden, as it was very deep rooted in Arabian society. But it took necessary measures the result of which was the ultimate eradication of from the Muslim world. It recommended kindness and freeing of slaves as an act of great merit and announced certain rights and privileges of the slaves. It declared that ill treatment and harshness with slaves would raise the wrath of Allah and would deserve for the torment of Fire in the hereafter. The result of which was that slavery was diminished not from the Muslim society only but from whole world.

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