

Christianity and Slavery

Though slavery was an ancient institution which started in pre-historic era of mankind, it is safe to say that the volume of this trade reached its zenith through the Christian nations of Europe and America who, as is their nature, turned it into a meticulously organised commerce and started capturing slaves by thousands. Before we describe the nefarious trade in slave started by the Portuguese, the Spaniards and other maritime powers of the Christian West for their newly acquired colonies, let us see if Christianity, as a system and as a creed, did anything in the earliest period to alleviate the lot of slaves.

Justice Ameer Ali writes about Christianity:

It found slavery a recognised institution of the empire; it adopted the system without any endeavour 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 had failed utterly in abolishing slavery or alleviating its evil.¹

Will Durant describes the position of the Church as follows:

The Church did not condemn slavery. Orthodox and heretic, Roman and barbarian alike assumed the institution to be natural and in-destructible. Pagan laws condemned to slavery any free woman who married a slave; the laws of Constantine [a Christian emperor] ordered the woman to be executed, and the slave to be burned alive. The Emperor Gratian decreed that a slave who accused his master of any offence except high treason to the state should be burned alive at once, without inquiring into the justice of the charge.²

The only redress prescribed by Christianity is seen in the letter of St. Paul to a certain Philemon sending back to him his slave, Onesimus, with a recommendation to treat him well. Nothing more. It is interesting to note that the word “slave” of original Hebrew has been changed to “servant” in the Authorised Version of the Bible, and to “bond servant” in the Revised Standard Version, because, in

words of *The Concise Bible Commentary*, “this word [i.e., slave] is avoided because of its association.³ One wonders whether a translator has a right to change the original just because of “associations”?

It would be of interest to note here that the word “slave” is of European origin. It came into existence when the Franks 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”.

The following quotation graphically shows the attitude of Islam and 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 Moslems held Negroes and white men in equal respect judging a man by his character and not by his colour.⁴

This episode gives you in a nutshell what I propose to explain at length in this booklet.

¹. Ameer Ali, op. cit., pp.260–261.

². Lecky, W.E., *History of European Morals*, vol.II (New York, 1926), p.61, as quoted by Will Durant, op. cit., vol. IV, p.77.

³. Clarke, Rev. W.K.L., *The Concise Bible Commentary* (London: S.P.C.K., 1952), p.976.

⁴. Leeder, S.S., *Veiled Mysteries of Egypt* (London, 1912), p.332.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/slavery-islamic-and-christian-perspectives-sayyid-saeed-akhtar-rizvi/christianity-and-slavery#comment-0>