

Islam Attacks Slavery

Islam has often been represented by Christian writers as a religion which not only tolerated slavery but also encouraged it. This is a serious accusation levelled against Islam, and in this book I propose to show its falsity. I would have taken, if possible, the charitable view that the charge against Islam is based on ignorance of facts, but I am grieved to note that in majority of the critics the overflowing motive seems to be prejudice, and malice.

We have mentioned briefly the attitude of Christianity towards slavery, and more will be said afterwards. Here, to begin with, let us have a look at Islam and its codes.

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

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 structure, in agriculture undertakings; and reason alone was but a feeble weapon against a foe so insidious and so deeply rooted. How was then slavery to be eradicated?

The ill-informed may well suggest that the Prophet of Islam could have used force. But the ineffectiveness of force for such purpose is well recognised by all dispassionate students of sociology. Force may achieve submission but it inevitably achieves hostility, and very often hostility is so fierce that many a good cause has been lost when force has been employed for its advancement.

The sad plight of the Negroes of America is but one illustration of how ineffective the employment of force can be when the object is to achieve a social reform. The emancipation of slaves did not change the attitude of the white masters towards their ex-slaves; and what a bitter legacy of racial antipathy has it left! Toynbee writes, "The Blacks in the United States who were emancipated juridically in 1862 are, with good reason, feeling now, more than a century later, that they are still being denied full human

rights by the white majority of their fellow-citizens. [1](#)

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. And 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 blood was spilled.

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

Firstly, Islam placed restrictions on acquisition of slaves. Prior to Islam, slavery was practised with abandon. Debtors were made slaves, war captives were either killed or made slaves. In weaker nations, people were hunted like animals, killed or captured and reduced to slavery. Islam, in unambiguous terms, forbade its followers to enslave people on any pretext. The only exception was an idolatrous enemy captured in a war which was fought either in self-defence or with the permission of the Prophet or his rightful successors. This exception was, in words of Ameer Ali, "in order to serve as guarantee for the preservation of the lives of the captives." [2](#)

As 'Allamah Tabataba'i has described at great length, prior to Islam strong and dominant people, throughout the world, used to enslave weak persons without any restraint. Important among the "causes" of enslavement were the following three factors:

1. War: The conqueror could do with the vanquished enemy whatever he liked. He could put the arrested soldiers to death, condemn them to slavery or otherwise keep them under his authority or clutch.
2. Domination: A chief or ruler could enslave, depending on his sweet wish, anyone residing under his domain.
3. Guardianship: A father or grandfather had absolute authority over his offspring. He could sell or gift him or her away; could lend him or her to someone else, or exchange him or her with another's son or daughter.

When Islam came on the scene, it nullified and negated the last two factors completely. No ruler or progenitor was allowed to treat his subjects or offspring as his slaves. Every individual was bestowed with well-defined rights; the ruler and the ruled, the progenitor and the offspring had to live within the limits prescribed by religion; no one could transgress those limits.

And it drastically restricted the first cause, i.e., war, by allowing enslavement only in a war fought against unbelieving enemy. In no other way could anyone be enslaved. At the same time, Islam raised the status of slavery to that of a free man; and opened many ways for their emancipation. [3](#)

Before slave trade was started on a large scale by the Westerners (when colonisation began), it was only in wars that men were made captives. But Islam did not permit wars of aggression. All the battles fought during the life-time of the Prophet were defensive battles. Not only this, an alternative was also introduced and enforced:

“.....to let the captives go free, either with or without any ransom “(The Qur'an 47:4).

In the battles forced upon the Muslims, the Prophet had ordered very humane treatment of the prisoners who fell into Muslim hands. They could purchase their freedom on payment of small sums of money, and some of them were left off without any payment. It all depended upon the discretion of the Prophet or his rightful successors, keeping in view the safety of the Muslims and the extent of danger from the enemy. The captives of the very first Islamic battle, Badr, were freed on ransom (in form of money or work like teaching ten Muslim children how to read and write), while those of the tribe of Tay were freed without any ransom.[4](#)

Even in such enslavement a condition was attached that a mother was not to be separated from her child, nor brother from brother nor husband from wife nor one member of a clan from his clan. The Prophet and the first Shi'ite Imam, 'Ali bin Abi Talib, prescribed severest penalties for anyone who took a free man into slavery: cutting off the hand of the culprit.

Ameer Ali writes in *Mohammedan Law*:

The possession of a slave by the Koranic laws was conditional on a bona-fide war, waged in self-defence, against idolatrous enemies; and it was permitted in order to serve as a guarantee for the preservation of the lives of the captives.. Mohammad found the custom existing among the pagan Arabs; he minimised the evil, and at the same time laid down such strict rules that but for the perversity of his followers, slavery as a social institution would have ceased to exist with the discontinuance of the wars in which the Moslem [*sic*] nation were at first involved.

The mutilation of the human body was also explicitly forbidden by Mohammad, and the institution which flourished both in the Persian and the Byzantine empires was denounced in severe terms. Slavery by purchase was unknown during the reigns of the first four Caliphs, the *khulafai-rashidin*, 'the legitimate Caliphs' as they are called by the Sunnis. There is, at least, no authentic record of any slave having been acquired by purchase during their tenure of office. But with the accession of the usurping house of Ommeyya [*sic*] a change came over the spirit of Islam.

Mu'awiyah was the first Muslim sovereign who introduced into the Mohammedan world the practice of acquiring slaves by purchase. He was also the first to adopt the Byzantine custom of guarding his women by eunuchs. During the reign of the early Abbasides the Shi'a Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq preached against slavery, and his views were adopted by the Mu'tazila. Karmath, who flourished in the ninth century of the Christian era ..seems to have held slavery to be unlawful.[5](#)

Thus we see that the earnest attempt of Islam to stop its followers from acquiring new slaves was foiled by Banu Umayyah. And I must record to the lasting disgrace of a large number of Muslims that, in later times, they utterly ignored the precepts of the Prophet and the injunctions of the Qur'an, and the Arabs too participated with the European Christians in the abominable slave-trade of East Africa. The West African slave-trade was totally in the hands of the European Christians.

Secondly, Islam commenced an active campaign to emancipate the slaves. Emancipation of slaves was declared to be expiation for a number of sins. This question is related to canonical laws of Islam, but we shall enumerate a few of them to show how for small sins of commission the penalty imposed was manumission of slaves. For instance, if a man failed to fast without any reasonable excuse during the month of Ramadan, or if he failed to observe fast of *i'tikaf* or vow, etc, he had to free a slave for each day, in addition to fasting afterwards.

Similarly, a slave had to be freed for every breach of vow; or for tearing one's garment as a demonstration of grief on the death of a spouse or child; or if a woman beat herself or cut or pulled her hair in grief over the death of anyone; or for accidental homicide and, in some cases, even for intentionally killing a Muslim; or if a husband told his wife that she was to him like his mother, and for many other trespasses.⁶ From these instances, some of them trivial but deeply ingrained in Arab culture, one can see how religious laws were enacted for the emancipation of slaves, and the total eradication of the curse of slavery from the society.

It may well be argued that by prescribing emancipation of slaves as penance for sins, Islam envisaged continuance of slavery as a permanent institution. This was not so. For every instance emancipation of a slave was prescribed as a penance, an alternative was also prescribed – clearly indicating that Islam's objective was in time to create a society free from this pernicious institution.⁷

Islam also declared that any slave woman who bore a child by her master could not be sold and, on her master's death, she became automatically a free woman.⁸ Moreover; in contrast to all previous customs, Islam ordained that the child born to a slave woman by her master should follow the status of the father.⁹ Slaves were given a right to ransom themselves either on payment of an agreed sum or on completion of service for an agreed period. The legal term for this is *mukatabah*. Allah says in the Qur'an:

And those who seek a deed [of liberation] from among those [slaves] whom your right hands possess, give them the writing (kitab) if you know of goodness in them, and give them of the wealth of Allah which He has given you.. (Qur'an 24:33)

The word *kitab* in the verse stands for the written contract between the slave and his master known as "*mukatabah* – deed of contract". The significant factor in *mukatabah* is that when a slave desires to get into such a mutual written contract, the master should not refuse it.¹⁰ In the verse quoted above, God has made it incumbent upon Muslims to help the slaves in getting liberated.

When a slave wants to get himself freed, the master has not only to agree to it, but he is also directed to help the slave from his own wealth.¹¹ The only provision being the satisfaction to the effect that the slave would live a respectable life after earning his freedom. Thus, about 1400 years ago Islam dealt in the most effective way a death blow to slavery.

It also directed that the slaves seeking freedom should be helped from the public treasury (*baytul mal*).¹² Thus, as a last resort, the Prophet and his rightful successors were to provide ransom for the slaves out of state coffers. The Qur'an recognises the emancipation of slaves as one of the permissible expenditures of alms and charity.¹³

It is worth remembering that a slave automatically became free if the master cut his ear or blinded his eye.¹⁴ Also if the slaves, living in an Islamic state, accepted Islam before their masters, then they would become free automatically. If the slave became blind or handicapped he would become free.¹⁵ According to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (peace be upon him), if a slave is Muslim and has worked for seven years then he should be set free. Forcing him to work after seven years is not permissible.¹⁶ It is because of this tradition (*hadith*) that the religious scholars are of the opinion that freeing the slave after seven years is a highly recommended deed of virtue.

In addition to these compulsory ways of emancipation, voluntary emancipation of slaves was declared as the purest form of charity. Imam 'Ali emancipated one thousand slaves, purchasing them from his own money.¹⁷ The same was the number of the slaves emancipated by the seventh Imam Musa al-Kazim. The fourth Imam, 'Ali bin al-Husayn, used to emancipate every slave in his household on the eve of 'Idd (the annual celebration of Muslims). It is important to note that in all the above cases, the freed slaves were provided with sufficient means to earn their livelihood respectably.

Islam is the first and the only religion which has prescribed liberation of slaves as a virtue and a condition of genuine faith in God. No religion other than Islam has ever preached and enjoined how best we can show our love for fellow human beings in bondage. In chapter ninety of the Qur'an, liberating a slave has been prescribed as a cardinal virtue of the faith:

Certainly We have created men [to dwell] in distress. What! Does he think that no one has power over him? He shall say, "I have wasted much wealth" Does he think that no one sees him? Have We not given him two eyes, a tongue and two lips, and We pointed out to him the two conspicuous ways [of good and evil]? But he would not attempt the uphill road. What will make you comprehend what the uphill road is? It is the setting free of a slave....(90:4-13)

It should be mentioned that the setting free of a slave has been highly commended. Islam controlled slavery in such a graceful and practical way that it made the maintaining of a slave a great responsibility for the master, and at the same time it enjoined so much care and kindness to the slaves that in many cases when the slaves were set free they did not like to leave their masters.

Thirdly, Islam restored dignity to slaves and enhanced their social status. It made no distinction between

a slave and a free man, and all were treated with equality. It was this fact that always attracted slaves to Islam. It is painful to see that those who never cease to be vociferous in their unjust criticism of Islam should take no notice of this principle of equality, when even in this enlightened age there are countries where laws are made discriminating against the vast majority of population, to keep them in practical servitude.

Islam recognises no distinction of race or colour, black or white, citizens or soldiers, rulers or subjects; they are perfectly equal, not in theory only, but in practice. The first *mu'azzin* (herald of the prayer call) of Islam, a devoted adherent of the Prophet and an esteemed disciple, was a Negro slave. The Qur'an lays down the measure of superiority in verse thirteen of chapter forty-nine. It is addressed to mankind, the whole human race, and preaches the natural brotherhood of man without distinction of tribe, clan, race or colour. It says:

O you men! We have created you of a male and a female, and then We made you (into different) races and tribes so that you may know (and recognise) each other. Surely the most honourable of you with Allah is the one who is most pious among you; surely Allah is All-Knowing and Aware. (49: 13)

This verse makes clear the view point of Islam as regards human life on earth. It lays down only one criterion of superiority or honour and that is piety, which means complete obedience to the will of God. It annihilates all man-made and artificial distinctions of race and colour which we find all over the world even now. To explain the qualities of piety, let us note what Allah says:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the West, righteousness is this that one should believe in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book and the Prophets, and give away wealth out of love for Him to the near of kin, the orphans, the needy, the wayfarer, the beggars and to those in bondage and keep up prayers, pay the poor-rate; and those who fulfil their promise and the patient ones in distress and affliction and in the time of war - these are they who are the truthful and these are they who are pious. (The Qur'an 2: 177)

This verse clearly shows that by itself there is no specific virtue in turning towards any particular direction for prayer. (The unity of the *Qiblah* indicates the unity of faith which leads to spiritual unity and culminates in physical harmony.) The belief and practice enjoined in the verse are the real virtues, and apart from being ordered by God, they appeal to human reasoning. Please mark that "to give away wealth out of love for God to...those in bondage" is one of them.

In a tradition from Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, it is stated that when a person hits his slave (male or female), without any legal justification, then the only way of accounting for that act is setting the slave free even if that act of hitting is within the limits fixed by God. In another tradition, Zurarah asked the same Imam about the attitude of a master towards the slaves. The Imam answered that "an act unintentionally done by the slaves is not punishable but when they are persistently and intentionally

disobeying the will of the master, then they can be punished.” It would be of interest to know that a slave was given the right to sue his master.

A third tradition from the same Imam says that a man possessing the following four characteristics will be forgiven and will be placed highly in the values of realms of heaven:

(1) one who shelters an orphan and takes interest in the circumstances and problems in which orphan is placed and is kind to him in a fatherly way, gives him the love of parents;

(2) one who is kind and helpful to the weak;

(3) one who spends on his parents and is kind, thoughtful and looking towards them;

(4) and lastly, the one who is not furious in his behaviour towards his servant or slave and helps him in the work one has ordered, and refrains from ordering him such task which is beyond his capacity.

“Islam enjoined that a master should treat his slave as one of his family–members; he must be given all the necessities of life, just like any other dependent. The Prophet used to eat together with his slaves and servants, and sit with them; he himself did not eat or dress better than them, nor did he discriminate against them in any way.

“The masters were obliged not to put them under hardship; slaves were not to be tortured, abused or treated unjustly. They could marry among themselves (with their master’s permission) or with free men or women. They could appear as witnesses, and participate with free men in all affairs. Many of them were appointed as governors, commanders of army and administrators.

“In the eyes of Islam, a pious slave has precedence over an unpious free man.”^{[18](#)}

It is stated in reliable traditions from the Prophet that one should feed his slave what he himself eats and should dress him with what he himself dresses. In his famous sermon in 'Arafat, on 9th Dhul–hijjah 9 AH, during his last pilgrimage, the Prophet said, “...and your slaves, see that you feed them such food as you eat yourselves and dress him with what you yourself dress. And if they commit a mistake which you are not inclined to forgive then sell them, for they are the servants of Allah and are not to be tormented...”^{[19](#)}

To say that Islam treated slaves on the basis of equality would be an understatement. Because, in fact, for a number of offences, the punishment meted out to a slave was half of the punishment meted out to others.^{[20](#)} This was in contrast to the established practice of every nation to punish slaves more severely than the freemen. Professor Davis writes, “The criminal law was almost everywhere more severe for slaves than freemen.”^{[21](#)}

The Prophet of Islam always exhorted his followers to treat their slaves like family–members. He and his household always treated their servants as such. A female servant in the employ of Fatimah, the Prophet’s daughter, testifies that her mistress had made it a rule to share all household drudgery with her

and insisted that the servant should have rest every alternative days when she, Fatimah, would attend to the work. Thus, there was equal division of work between the mistress of the house and the maid-servant

It is also recorded that once 'Ali and his male servant Qambar went to a shop where 'Ali selected two garments, one a cheap coarse dress, the other expensive. He gave the expensive garment to Qambar. Qambar was shocked. "Oh Master!", he said, "This is the better one and you are the ruler of the Muslims. You should take this one." 'Ali replied, "No, Qambar, you are young and young man should wear better clothes."

Could such a treatment produce any sense of inferiority in slaves? Masters were forbidden to exact more work than was just and proper. They were ordered never to address their male or female slaves by the degrading appellation, but by the more affectionate name of "my young man", or "my young maid"; it was also enjoined that all slaves should be dressed, clothed and fed exactly as their masters and mistresses did. It was also ordered that in no case should the mother be separated from her child, nor brother from brother, nor father from son, nor husband from wife, nor one relative from another.

Let us now refer to the Qur'an:

Worship Allah (alone) and associate nothing with Him, and do good to parents, to kinsfolk, to orphans, to the needy, to the neighbour who is a relative, to the neighbour who is a stranger, to a companion by your side, to the wayfarer and to (the slave) which your right hands possess; verily Allah loves not the proud, the boastful. (4:36)

The Holy Prophet gifted a slave to Abu Dharr al-Ghifari and told him to maintain him in the best way, to feed him whatever he himself ate, to clothe him with whatever clothes he liked for himself. Abu Dharr had a robe which he immediately tore into two, and gave one piece to the slave. The Prophet said, "Excellent!" Abu Dharr took the slave home and liberated him. The Prophet was highly pleased with Abu Dharr and said, "God will reward you for it."

How Imam Zaynul 'Abidin, the fourth Imam, treated his slave-girl is well-known in Islamic history. Once while serving food to the Imam, she accidentally dropped a bowl of hot soup on him. She was deeply conscious of the injury and pain she had caused to the Imam. She knew very well the disposition of the holy Imam and began reciting the Qur'anic verse:

"Those who restrain their anger."

"I have restrained my anger," the Imam replied.

"And those who forgive the people," she went on.

"I have forgiven you," he said.

Lastly, she said, *“And God loves those who do good to others.”*

The Imam replied, “I set you free to seek the pleasure of God.”

The slave-girl had quoted those words from verse 134 of chapter 3 of the Qur'an. We reproduce the full verse here:

Those who spend (in alms) alike in prosperity and straitness, and who restrain (their) anger, and those who forgive the people, and Allah loves those who do good (to others).

Once someone remarked that the slaves of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin say to each other that they were not in the least afraid of him. On hearing this, the Imam prostrated to God in thanks-giving and exclaimed, “I thank God that his creatures are not afraid of me.”

From what we have said above it must be clear how kindly and lovingly the slaves were treated by the Holy Prophet and the Imams of Ahlul Bayt, and those who followed the injunctions of the Qur'an and the examples set by the Prophet and the Imams.

On the attitude of Muslim master with his slaves, Will Durant says, “...he handled them with a genial humanity that made their lot no worse – perhaps better, as more secure – than that of a factory worker in nineteenth-century Europe.”[22](#)

At the end of the 18th century, Mouradgea d'Ohsson (a main source of information for the Western writers on the Ottoman Empire) declared:

“There is perhaps no nation where the captives, the slaves, the very toilers in the galleys are better provided for or treated with more kindness than among the Muhammedans.”[23](#)

P. L Riviere writes:

“A master was enjoined to make his slave share the bounties he received from God. It must be recognised that, in this respect, the Islamic teaching acknowledged such a respect for human personality and showed a sense of equality which is searched for in vain in ancient civilization”[24](#)

And not only in ancient civilisations; even in the modern Christian civilisation the ingrained belief of racial supremacy is still manifesting itself every day. A. J. Toynbee says in *Civilization on Trial*:

“The extinction of race consciousness as between Muslims is one of the outstanding achievements of Islam, and in the contemporary world there is, as it happens, a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue...” Then he comments that “in this perilous matter of race feeling it can hardly be denied that (the triumph of English-speaking peoples) has been a misfortune.”[25](#)

Napoleon Bonaparte is recorded as saying about the condition of slaves in Muslim countries:

“The slave inherits his master's property and marries his daughter. The majority of the Pashas had been slaves. Many of the grand viziers, all the Mamelukes, Ali Ben Mourad Beg, had been slaves. They began their lives by performing the most menial services in the houses of their masters and were subsequently raised in status for their merit or by favour. In the West, on the contrary, the slave has always been below the position of the domestic servants; he occupies the lowest rung. The Romans emancipated their slaves, but the emancipated were never considered as equal to the free-born. The ideas of the East and West are so different that it took a long time to make the Egyptians understand that all the army was not composed of slaves belonging to the Sultan al-Kabir.”²⁶

- ¹. Toynbee, A. J., *Mankind and Mother Earth*, (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 12.
- ². Ameer Ali, *Muhammadan Law*, vol.2, p.31.
- ³. al-Tabataba'i, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn, *al-Mizan fi Tafsir'l Qur'an*, vol. 16, 2nd ed. (Beirut, 1390/1971), pp. 338–358.
- ⁴. al-Waqidi, Muhammad bin 'Umar, *Kitabul Maghazi*, ed. M. Jones, vol. I (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 129; Ibn Sa'd, *al-Tabaqatul Kabir*, Vol. II:1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1912), pp. 11, 14.
- ⁵. Ameer Ali, *Muhammadan Law*, vol. 2, pp. 31–2.
- ⁶. al-Khu'i, Sayyid Abu'l Qasim, *Minhajus Salihin*, 3rd ed., vol. II (Najaf, 1974), pp. 328–331; also see the Qur'an, 4:92, 5:89, 58:3.
- ⁷. Ibid.
- ⁸. al-'Amili, Hurr, *Wasa'ilu 'sh-Shi'ah*, vol. 16 (Tehran, 1983), p. 128.
- ⁹. Ibid.
- ¹⁰. al-'Amili, op. cit., vol. 16, p. 101.
- ¹¹. Ibid, p. 111.
- ¹². Ibid, pp. 121–2.
- ¹³. See the Qur'an 9:60, 2:177.
- ¹⁴. al-Hilli, Muhaqqiq, *Sharaya'ul Islam*, (kitabul-'itq); also see *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*., vol. I (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960), p. 31.
- ¹⁵. Ibid, pp. 31–3.
- ¹⁶. Ibid, pp. 43–4.
- ¹⁷. Ibid, p. 3.
- ¹⁸. al-Tabataba'i, op. cit., vol. 16, pp. 338–358.
- ¹⁹. Ibn Sa'd, op. cit., vol. II:1, p. 133; al-'Amili, op. cit., vol. 16, 21.
- ²⁰. al-'Amili, op. cit., vol. 18, pp. 401f, 527–8, 586–7; vol. 19, pp. 73, 154f.
- ²¹. Davis, D.B., *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (N.Y.: 1969), p. 60.
- ²². Hurgronje C., *Mohammedanism*, (N.Y., 1916), p. 128 as quoted by W. Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, vol. IV (N.Y., 1950), p. 209.
- ²³. As quoted in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. I, p. 35.
- ²⁴. Riviere P.L., *Revue Bleaue* (June 1939).
- ²⁵. Toynbee, A.J., *Civilization on Trial* (New York, 1948), p. 205.
- ²⁶. Cherfils, Bonaparte et l'Islam (Paris, 1914), p. (?).

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