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The Origin of Negro Slavery

Now that we have seen the attitude of Islam towards slavery, let us have a look at Christianity and its followers, and see what they did in this respect.

It is surprising to see that Christians, who for the reasons of their own, now-a-days pose themselves as champions of human freedom, were the most outspoken advocates of the system of slavery. They invented philosophical and moral justifications for enslaving the "uncivilised" people. One of their arguments was they were saving them from their cannibal neighbours in this world, and from eternal disgrace in the life hereafter.

Islam and its followers never thought on these lines. The vast multitude of Islamic literature is empty from this kind of pathetic effort at moralisation. But the Christian writers always mention slave-trade as though they had nothing to do with it and that it was Islam which "encouraged and legalised slavery" while they, the Christians, had always tried to abolish this nefarious system!

It is interesting to note that when speaking about the West African totally Christian slave-trade, the Christian writers and historians call it "West African slave-trade" or "Atlantic slave-trade"; but when they turn to Eastern Africa, the term changes to "Arab slave-trade".

Christianity, by such false propaganda, has succeeded to a great extent in extending its influence among those Africans whom its propaganda machinery has kept blissfully unaware of the fact that all Christian churches were active participants in African slave-trade. The following chapters will present the true picture for the readers.

"When in 1492 Columbus, representing the Spanish monarchy, discovered the New World, he sent in train the long and bitter international rivalry over colonial possessions for which, after four and a half centuries, no solution has yet been found. Portugal, which had initiated the movement of international expansion, claimed the new territories on the ground that they fell within the scope of a papal bull of 1455 authorising her to reduce to servitude all infidel people.

The two powers, to avoid controversy, sought arbitration and, as Catholics, turned to the Pope - a

natural and logical step in an age when the universal claims of the Papacy were still unchallenged by individuals and governments. After carefully sifting the rival claims, the Pope issued in 1493, a series of papal bulls which established a line of demarcation between the colonial possessions of the two states: the East went to Portugal and the West to Spain. The partitions, however; failed to satisfy the Portuguese aspirations and in the subsequent year the contending parties reached a more satisfactory compromise in the Treaty of Tordesillas, which rectified the papal judgement to permit Portuguese ownership of Brazil."[1]

But this arbitration could not bind other powers aspiring to grab as many countries as possible; England, France and even Holland began to claim their places in the sun. The Negro, too, "was to have his place, though he did not ask for it: it was the broiling sun of the sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations of the New World.

"According to Adam Smith, the prosperity of a new colony depends upon one simple economic factor – 'plenty of good land.' The British colonial possession up to 1776, however, can broadly be divided into two types. The first is the self-sufficient and diversified economy of small farmers... The second type is the colony which has facilities for the production of staple articles on a large scale for an export market. In the first category fell the Northern colonies of the American mainland; in the second, the tobacco colonies and sugar islands of the Caribbean.

In colonies of the latter type, as Merivale pointed out land and capital were both useless unless labour could be commanded. Labour, that is, must be constant and must work, or be made to work, in co-operation.. Without this compulsion, the labourer would otherwise exercise his natural inclination to work his own land and toil on his own account.

The story is frequently told of the great English capitalist, Mr. Pell, who took 50,000 pounds and three hundred labourers with him to the Swan River colony in Australia. His plan was that his labourers would work for him, as in the old country. Arrived in Australia, however, where land was plentiful – too plentiful – the labourers preferred to work for themselves as small proprietors, rather than under the capitalist for wages. Australia was not England, and the capitalist was left without a servant to make his bed or fetch him water."[2]

Thus the ideal solution was slavery.

"'Odious resource', though it might be, as Merivalle called it, slavery was an economic institution of the first importance. It had been the basis of Greek economy and had built up the Roman Empire. In modem times it provided the sugar for the tea and the coffee cups of the Western world. It produced the cotton to serve as base for modern capitalism. It made the American South and the Caribbean islands."[3]

"With the limited population of Europe in the sixteenth century, the free labourers necessary to cultivate the staple cops of sugar, tobacco and cotton in the New World could not have been supplied in quantities adequate to permit large-scale production. Slavery was necessary for this and to get slaves

the Europeans turned first to the aborigines."[4]

"But Indian slavery never was extensive in the British dominions... In the case of the Indian ... slavery was viewed as of an occasional nature, a preventive penalty and not as normal and permanent condition. In the New England colonies Indian slavery was unprofitable, for slavery of any kind was unprofitable because it was unsuited to the diversified agriculture of these colonies. In addition the Indian slave was inefficient. The Spaniards discovered that one Negro was worth four Indians. A prominent official in Hispanolia insisted in 1581 that 'permission be given to bring Negroes, a race robust for labour instead of natives so weak that they can only be employed in tasks requiring little endurance such as taking care of maize fields or farms....

The future staples of the New World, sugar and cotton, required strength which the Indians lacked, and demanded the robust 'cotton nigger' as sugar's need of strong mules produced in Louisiana the epithet 'sugar mules.' According to Lauber, 'when compared with sums paid for Negroes at the same time and place the prices of Indian slaves are found to have been considerably lower.'

"The Indian reservoir, too, was limited, the African inexhaustible. Negroes therefore were stolen in Africa to work the lands stolen from the Indians in America. The voyages of Prince Henry the Navigator complemented those of Columbus, West African history became the complement of West Indians."[5]

1. Williams, Dr. Eric, Capitalism and Slavery (London, 1964) p. 4.
2. Ibid, pp. 4–5.
3. Ibid, p. 5.
4. Ibid, p. 6.
5. Ibid, pp. 8–9.

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