

# Islam, Slavery, and Racism: The Use of Strategy in the Pursuit of Human Rights (1987)\*

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Slavery is one of the most controversial and arresting topics in human history. The question of Islam in relation to slavery has been an issue of concern among scholars for a long time. It became a question in which many Orientalists found a convenient gap to pass through in their attacks against the system of governance and justice in Islam. This self-righteous criticism against the attitude of Islam towards slavery is part of a long Western tradition of scholarship based on stereotyping, overstating, and selectivity of Islam in particular and the Orient in general. Most of the time, the statements of these scholars are presented in a sugar-coated style of language that is more dangerous than if they were presented in a critical, open, and direct language. Thomas Carlyle, Renan, Goldziher, Macdonald, von Grunebaum, Gibb and Bernard Lewis are good examples and representatives of this tradition.<sup>1</sup>

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The aim of this article is to use *ijtihad*, or informed intellectual effort, to show through textual and historical evidence that Islam, in its battle for justice, which is identical to human rights, fought against slavery and initiated a humane and practical plan for its abolition. Only deviation from Islam prevented elimination of slavery within the first few decades of Islam. In Arabia itself within forty years, except for temporary prisoners of war, slavery had disappeared.

We shall begin with a brief historical survey of the institution of slavery before Islam. The body of this article will concentrate on discussion and analysis of some related texts from the Qur'an and the Hadith as well as some historical data that reflect the practical attitude of devoted Muslims towards slavery and slaves. The attitude of Islam towards race, color, and slavery in the context of the trans-Saharan slave trade are two issues that this paper will deal with since they have a direct bearing on the question of slavery in Islam.

## Historical Background

It might not be an overstatement to say that slavery is as old as mankind. We learn from history that slavery was common during the Pharaonic period. Black African slaves, as well as white slaves from elsewhere were captured and put to work building the famous Pyramids of Old Egypt.<sup>2</sup> The Greek fables tell us that the Phoenician merchants traded in every commodity; even in men, women, and children whom they bought or kidnapped. The Carthaginians had large numbers of slaves employed as skilled cultivators to work their fields. The Balearics seem to have been the main slave market for the Carthaginians because the inhabitants of these Islands were willing to sell three or four men to obtain one woman.<sup>3</sup>

Slavery was also well established among the Greeks; its legality was sanctioned by the law of the State. The two famous Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, considered slavery the natural law of humanity. They argued that human beings by nature belong to one of the two groups: the first group is free and the second is slave. Plato related slavery to political considerations and thus maintained that slaves should be treated with severity in order to maintain the balance in his Republic. On the other hand,

Aristotle related slavery to economic necessity and thus recommended good treatment for the slaves.<sup>4</sup> As a reaction to the wide-spread practice of slavery and the bad treatment the slaves received, other Greek schools of thought, poets, and orators raised their voices against slavery.<sup>5</sup> Reform was needed because the Greek practiced the enslavement of prisoners of war and Greek law sanctioned the enslavement of the debtor by his creditor.<sup>6</sup>

During Roman times, slavery became a deeply entrenched institution in Roman military, economic, and cultural life. The Romans were very active and deeply interested in slave trade, and their sources of slaves were related to their wars of conquest. For the Romans, the sources of slave supply in Europe and Asia were almost unlimited. The famous uprising of Roman slaves led by Spartacus not only demonstrates that slaves were in abundant numbers, but also demonstrates that they were maltreated by their masters.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the maltreatment of slaves during the early Roman times became proverbial in the history of slavery. At that time, the slave had no rights and was not even considered as a human being. Rather, slaves were things and commodities to be bought and sold. When the Romans became Christians later on, however, the lot of the slaves improved, thanks to teachings of Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

Other civilized nations of antiquity knew slavery as well. In China, the major cause of enslavement was poverty. A person would sell himself or his sons as slaves for economic reasons.<sup>9</sup> Among the Hindus of India, the institution of slavery was part of the class system and was sanctioned by their religious law. The slaves among the Hindus constituted the large majority of the people and their rights were virtually non-existent.<sup>10</sup> Among the Persians, rulers were considered descendants of the gods, constituting a class above their people. The masses were then considered slaves of the ruling class.<sup>11</sup>

If we move to consider the attitude of two of the world's revealed religions, Judaism and Christianity, we find striking facts. The religious law in the Old Testament sanctions slavery. This law permits a poor Jew to sell himself to a rich Jew, and it allows a creditor to enslave his debtor. The law limits this form of enslavement, however, to a maximum of six years.<sup>12</sup> In war, all the inhabitants of a conquered city became slaves of the conquering Jews.<sup>13</sup>

As for Christianity, one fails to find in the New Testament any text that criticizes slavery, legislates for it, or encourages the liberation of slaves. In deed, the fathers of the Church only spoke about the obligation of the slave to obey his master.<sup>14</sup> Some commentators have considered this as evidence to support the conclusion that Christianity approved of and gave sanction to the institution of slavery.<sup>15</sup>

The foregoing historical background leads us to the conclusion that the institution of slavery is of great antiquity. It was known, sanctioned, and practiced by the civilized nations of ancient history. Among these nations, several forms of slavery were known: individual enslavement, collective enslavement, feudal enslavement, class enslavement, and sacerdotal enslavement.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the causes and the sources of slavery varied. There were slaves of war, slaves of captivity and piracy, slaves of purchase, slaves of debt, and slaves of birth.<sup>17</sup> With the exception of a few individual voices now and then throughout history,<sup>18</sup> humanity before Islam did not witness an organized, conscious, serious, and practical effort to do away with slavery.

The Arabs of the pre-Islamic times knew slavery also. They obtained their slaves basically by raiding each other. They were also known, however, to have imported slaves from Ethiopia. Slaves among the pre-Islamic Arabs were considered a sub-class and they could not be freed, even if they were born of a free father and a slave mother. The well-known story of the pre-Islamic hero and poet, 'Antarah al-'Absi, reflects the attitude of the Arabs towards slaves. 'Antarah's story, however, is an unprecedented breakthrough in the caste system practiced among the Arabs before Islam.

## The Attitude of Islam towards Slavery

When the Qur'an was revealed, the institution of slavery was a well-established tradition among the old civilized nations across the globe, a tradition that predates Islam by many centuries. To show the true attitude of Islam towards slaves and slavery, which is a task of *ijtihad*, we are going to be dealing with the issue as presented in the Qur'an and confirmed by the sayings and practices of the Prophet (SAAS) and the

early pious Muslims (*ṣaḥāba*). First of all, it is significant to remember in regard to the slavery issue, that Islam dealt initially with an institution that was already well established across the globe. Slavery was not a local, limited problem; it was, rather a very touchy global economic and social issue, as well as a delicate moral problem. With wisdom, far sightedness, and a deep sense of practicality, I believe, Islam dealt effectively with this issue.

In regard to the subject of slavery in general, although the Qur'an did not abolish it in clear, direct language, the Qur'anic teachings did attempt to raise the moral and material status of slaves and to encourage their freedom.<sup>19</sup> The freeing of slaves is regarded as a meritorious act, an act that brings a human being closer to Allah. The Qur'an initiated the idea that the emancipation of a slave might serve as a form of legal expiation (Arabic: *Kaffārah*) for some wrong doing or violation of the teachings of Islam. The legal expiation for non-intentional homicide includes the freeing of a slave.

It is not for a believer to kill a believer unless it be by mistake. He who killed a believer by mistake must set free a believing slave, and pay the blood money to the family of the slain, unless they remit it as a charity. If he [the victim] be of a people hostile unto you, and he is a believer, [the penance is] to set free a believing slave. And if he cometh of a folk between whom and you there is a covenant, then the blood money must be paid unto his folk and [also] a believing slave must be set free. And whoso hath not the wherewithal must fast two consecutive months. A penance from Allah. Allah is Knower, Wise.<sup>20</sup>

It should be noticed that the freed slave should be a believing one since the slain was a believing person. The concept of making believing slave equal to a believing freeman is implicitly understood from this verse.

The legal expiation for breaking an intentional oath includes the option of freeing a slave.

Allah will not take you to task for that which is unintentional in your oaths, but He will take you to task for the oaths which ye swear in earnest. The expiation thereof is the feeding often of the needy with the average of that wherewith ye feed your own folk, or the clothing of them, or the liberation of a slave, and for him who findeth not [the wherewithal to do so] then a three day fast. This is the expiation of your oaths when you have sworn; and keep your oaths.<sup>21</sup>

The penalty for those who put away their wives<sup>22</sup> and afterwards would go back on that which they have said is freeing a slave.

Those who put away their wives [by saying they are as their mothers] and afterward would go back on that which they said, [the penalty] in that case is the freeing of a slave before they touch one another. Unto this ye are exhorted; and Allah is informed of what ye do.<sup>23</sup>

It should be noticed that the freed slave in this case does not necessarily need to be a believer, implying that the Qur'an was concerned with the freeing of slaves in general, not only Muslim slaves. Also, it should be noticed that there are no options here; freeing a slave is the only accepted expiation for its behavior.

At this point, we pause to make an important comment. The habit of swearing, pronouncing oaths, and putting away wives through a *zihar* type of swearing, were very commonly practiced among the Arabs. One can only appreciate how wide a channel for the freeing of slaves developed under Islam after considering this habitual practice among the Arabs.

Besides considering the freeing of slaves as legal expiation for some wrong-doing, the Qur'an also regards it as a meritorious act, one worthy in reaching salvation and coming closer to Allah. In Chapter XC, Allah talks about the penetration of certain ascents in order to reach salvation and become one with those who are on the right path. One of these ascents is the freeing of a slave.

Did we not assign unto him [the human being] two eyes, and a tongue and two lips, and guide him to the parting of the mountain ways [the ways of good and evil]? But he hath not attempted the Ascent Ah! What will convey unto thee what the Ascent is? It is to free a slave ...<sup>24</sup>

It is important to note in the immediately subsequent verses that freeing a slave is associated in this context with feeding a hungry orphan in the day of hunger or some poor wretch in misery. Also, it is associated with believing and exhorting to perseverance and pity, all of which would qualify a person to reach salvation in the hereafter.<sup>25</sup>

The practicality of the Qur'an in solving the problems of the slaves can be appreciated, on the one hand, in the encouraging of rich individuals to spend part of their money for the emancipation of slaves and, on the other hand, by sanctioning part of the state revenue from the *zakat* for the freeing of slaves. In relation to the first aspect, Allah says:

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believeth in Allah and the Last Day and the Angels and the Scriptures and the Prophets; and giveth his wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observeth proper worship and payeth the poor-due ...<sup>26</sup>

Here we can see that Allah associates spending money to set slaves free with believing in Allah, praying and paying the poor-due (*zakat*), all of which are considered pillars of Islam.

In another passage, Allah reproaches the wealthy for not sharing their wealth with their slaves so that they can be equal to them.

And Allah hath favored some of you above others in provision. Now those who are more favored will by no means hand over their provision to those whom their right hands possess [i.e.

slaves], so that they may be equal with them in respect thereof. Is it then the Grace of Allah that they deny?<sup>27</sup>

In another verse, we hear that part of the alms should be devoted by an Islamic government to free slaves.

The alms are only for the poor and the needy, and those who collect them, and those whose hearts are to be reconciled and to free the captives and the debtors. and for the cause of Allah, and for the wayfarer; a duty imposed by Allah. Allah is Knower, Wise.<sup>28</sup>

In the above quoted verses, which deal with the money that should be devoted to the cause of freeing slaves, the Qur'an shows that part of the slavery problem is economic, and that therefore economic means should be used to solve it. The verses dealing with freeing slaves through legal expiation were intended to deal with the moral aspect of the problem of slavery. The wrong doers, by purifying their souls, were to recognize that slavery is morally wrong.

Another channel through which the Qur'an addressed the problem of slavery can be seen in the prescription of a written contract of emancipation (Arabic: *al-Mukatabah*). The slaves are encouraged to seek this contract and the masters are ordered to grant it to them:

And let those who find not the wherewithal for marriage keep chaste till Allah give them independence by His grace. And such of your slaves as seek a writing [of emancipation], write it for them if ye are aware of aught of good in them, and bestow upon them of the wealth of Allah which He hath bestowed upon you ...<sup>29</sup>

This is, no doubt, a great concept for dealing with both the moral aspect and the practical aspect of the problem of slavery. This concept encourages the slave to take the initiative in gaining his own freedom. The slave asks for a written contract between himself and his master, according to which he earns his freedom after paying a certain amount of money to his master. The contract grants the slave the right to work



for others besides his master in exchange for a wage. The money he then saves from these wages are paid as the price for his freedom.<sup>30</sup> The concept apparently is intended to prepare the slave psychologically and physically for the post-emancipation period. Psychologically, the slave would feel good by knowing that he can initiate the process of his own freedom. Also, it would give him a great psychological satisfaction to know that he can conclude a contract with his master on an equal basis. Moreover, this solution gives the slave the satisfaction of working for his freedom from within and knowing that this freedom is not given to him cheaply from without. The practical aspect of this concept rests on the fact that this exercise would prepare the slave to be independent by his own work and effort after the emancipation period. For the master, this process would teach him a moral lesson in accepting the equality of the slave and the admission that the slave can be an independent human being.

The Qur'an recognizes that slavery is a social problem, a problem of caste and classes. Nothing can be more effective in eliminating it than intermarriage between the people of these different classes. Thus, we find in the Qur'an several passages where the Muslims are encouraged to marry their slaves and emancipate them:

And marry such of you as are solitary and the pious of your slaves and maid servants. If they be poor, Allah will enrich them of His bounty. Allah is of ample means, Aware.<sup>31</sup>

In another verse, the Qur'an warns men against marrying more than one free woman if they fear to be unjust to them. Marrying slave women, however, was left unlimited in number.

And if ye fear that ye will not deal fairly by orphans, marry of the women, who seem good to you, two or three or four; and if ye fear that you cannot do justice [to so many], then one [only] or the ones your right hands possess [i.e. slaves]. Thus it is more likely that ye will not do injustice.<sup>32</sup>

The wisdom behind encouraging men to marry slave women is related to the intent of the Qur'an to break the social barriers between masters and slaves, as well as to give these slave women the opportunity

to realize their freedom. Freedom for many of these slave women arrived in the form of pregnancy after their marriage to a free man. Once a slave woman gets pregnant, she becomes free by virtue of the fact that she is the mother of a free child sired by a free man. In not limiting the number of slave women that a free man can marry, one can see the intention of giving more women the opportunity to be free through this process. This attitude of the Qur'an is unique and has no precedented examples in any of the teachings of the religions and schools of thought that antedated Islam. Indeed, in most of these religions and philosophies, a person who would marry a slave is considered an outcast.<sup>33</sup>

What is yet more instructive is that the Qur'an in another passage encourages men to marry slave women in the same manner they marry free women:

And whoso is not able to afford to marry free, believing women, let them marry from the believing maids whom your right hands possess. Allah knoweth best [concerning] your faith. Ye [proceed] one from another so wed them by permission of their folk, and give unto them their portions in kindness, they being honest, not debauched nor of loose conduct. And if they are honourably married, and they commit lewdness, they shall incur the half of the punishment [prescribed] for women [in that case] ...<sup>34</sup>

So here one can see that the Qur'an is trying to elevate the status of slave women by encouraging the Muslims to marry them after paying them their allocated portions and after asking for their hands from their masters (which the Qur'an calls "folk" here). The tolerance of Islam towards slave women reaches such a degree that after trying to elevate them to the social status of free women, the Qur'an then goes on to reduce a slave woman's punishment for improper behavior to half of that of a free woman.

The other passages in the Qur'an that have a direct bearing on the question of slaves, oblige masters to treat slaves well and to consider them as part of blood family members and friends. One example would serve our purpose in illustrating this attitude:

And serve Allah. Ascribe nothing as partner unto Him. Show kindness unto parents, and unto near kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and unto the neighbour who is of kin [unto you] and the neighbour who is not of kin, and the fellow traveller and the wayfarer and those whom your right hands possess [the slaves]. Lo! Allah loveth not such as are proud and boastful.<sup>35</sup>

The foregoing account surveys the Qur'anic passages that have a direct bearing on slaves. Reference to slaves occurs in twelve chapters of the Qur'an and in thirty two passages. There is not one single verse that sanctions slavery. All that occurs is dealing with legal expiation and edicts for emancipation and orders for good treatment of all slaves. It is true that there is no direct language in the Qur'an that calls for the abolition of slavery. But all considered, one can see, if one wishes to see, that the Qur'an condemns slavery as morally, economically, and socially wrong. All this is expressed implicitly in a more eloquent way than if it were expressed explicitly. If human beings are allowed to express themselves implicitly and consider that a means of eloquence, why then is it not permitted for Allah to do so? Though this might be a legitimate argument that would be enough to close the discussion concerning this question, much more can be said by way of explanation.

## Textual Evidence from the Hadith

In all matters related to Islam, the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad serves always as a way of further support that confirms the teachings of the Qur'an and explains them. The corpus of the Hadith dealing with our subject is extensive. A sampling of them, however, will be enough for the limited purpose of this paper. Like the verses of the Qur'an, the Hadith prescribe ways for encouraging Muslims to set slaves free; they also call for the good treatment of slaves.

Malik ibn Anas reported the following Hadith in which the Prophet encourages the emancipation of slaves by showing Allah's high reward for such a deed:

Whosoever frees a slave who is a Muslim, God will redeem every member of his body, limb for limb, from Hell-Fire.<sup>36</sup>

As we saw in the teachings of the Qur'an, the Prophet encouraged the Muslims to marry their slave women and set them free.

He whosoever educated his slave girl, freed her, then married her, will be doubly rewarded.<sup>37</sup>

Here we can see an explicit instruction by the Prophet urging Muslims to educate, free, and marry their slave women. To pay due account to the feelings of the slaves, the Prophet instructs the masters:

Let none of you say: 'this is my slave man and this is my slave woman', but rather say: 'this is my boy and this is my girl.'<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, the Prophet instructed the Muslims to consider their slaves as brothers and sisters, to feed and clothe them as they would themselves, and not to overburden them with work.

Your slaves are your brothers, so whosoever has his brother under his authority should feed him from what he eats, dress him from what he dresses; and do not over task them [your slaves] with what might overburden them; if you do, then you have to help them.<sup>39</sup>

The Hadith establishes that slaves are souls who are equal to their masters, so a master who maltreats or harms his slave should receive an equal punishment:

He who kills his slave will be killed by us, and he who amputates [some part of the body] of his slave will be so amputated by us, and he who castrates his slave will be castrated by us.<sup>40</sup>

The Prophet sanctions the manumission or freeing of slave at the legal expiation for beating them:

He who beats up or jolts his slave, his legal expiation is freeing him.<sup>41</sup>

In reviewing the corpus of the Hadith that deal with the question of slaves, one can clearly see that the Prophet was concerned with the freedom of slaves as well as with their moral and material welfare. Muslims were instructed not to hurt the feelings of their slaves, to provide for them from the same food and clothing that they have for themselves, and to consider slaves as equal to their masters in the eyes of the law. Nothing close to this was done in favor of the slaves in any other religion or philosophy before Islam.

## Historical Evidence

Skimming the pages of Islamic history, one can find ample evidence demonstrating that practicing Muslims upheld the teachings of their religion on slavery. The Prophet Muhammad was the first practicing Muslim to carry out the teachings of Islam. Only a sampling of his deeds are possible in this paper.

In the question of encouraging the Muslims to free their slave women and marry them, Muhammad, both a Prophet and man, proceeded to set the example for other Muslims. History reports that in the campaign of al-Khandaq, a certain Ṣafīyya bint Ḥuyayy was imprisoned and enslaved. She came to ask Muhammad to help her in obtaining freedom. He proposed a marriage between them to which she agreed and through which she gained her freedom. Seeing the example of the Prophet, many of his followers followed suit.<sup>42</sup> There is also the story of the Coptic slave woman, Mary, who was sent to Muhammad as a present by the Coptic ruler of Egypt. The Prophet freed her and married her.<sup>43</sup> History also tells that the Prophet arranged the marriage of Zayd ibn Ḥāritha, his freedman and adopted son, with Zaynab, the Prophet's cousin.<sup>44</sup> Reference to this marriage occurs in the Qur'an, Surah XXXIII: 37. All of these examples illustrate beyond any doubt that the Prophet wanted to set examples to elevate the social and moral status of slaves as well as to break down the barriers of caste and race.

During the early Islamic religious campaigns, the Prophet provided yet other examples for freeing slaves. In the Ḥudaybiyah campaign,

accounts tell us that when many slaves from the enemy camp came to the Muslim camp to embrace Islam, the Prophet announced that they automatically became free.<sup>45</sup> Muhammad also initiated a very novel way to free slaves; history tells us that the slaves of war in the Islamic campaigns were set free if they taught ten Muslims how to read and write.<sup>46</sup>

History records the stories of several slave men and women whose attachment to the Prophet became proverbial, as did his attachment to them. The limitation of this paper does not allow us to tell all of their stories, but their names must be recorded as part of our documentation. They are: Thuwayba, his wet nurse; Barakah Umm Ayman, his nursemaid; Zayd ibn Hāritha, his freed slave and adopted son; Bilāl ibn Rabāh, the famous Ethiopian muezzin of Islam; Usāmah ibn Zayd and Salmān al-Fārisī.<sup>47</sup>

By and large, the act of emancipating of slaves was taken seriously by the early, pious and practicing Muslims. The first believer in Muhammad's message among men and the first Orthodox Caliph, Abu Bakr, spent most of his fortune (and he was a rich merchant) in buying slaves from their nonbelieving masters for whatever price they would ask and setting them free. Those early freed slaves were a great supporting strength to the weak Islam in its early days. Among the slaves that Abu Bakr freed is Bilal ibn Rabah, the famous Ethiopian *muezzin* of Islam and a prominent figure of Islamic history. 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn 'Umar was another prominent Muslim figure who acquired a special fame in buying slaves from their masters and setting them free.<sup>48</sup> The story of the Muslim hero Abū Dharr, who married a black slave woman and who used to pray led by an Ethiopian freed slave is very instructive.<sup>49</sup> Again, we have the story of the marriage of Bilal, the Ethiopian freed slave, to an Arab girl.

At this point, we pause to comment on the remarks of the Orientalist Bernard Lewis on this story of Bilal's marriage. This might appear like an unrelated digression, but it is not. It would give us a sampling of that Western style of scholarship alluded to above, which this essay aims to refute within the context of slavery. Professor Lewis relates the story and then comments on it by saying, "the story is probably not authentic since it deals with a prejudice which does not seem to have existed in the Prophet's time." Following this, Lewis quotes what he considers a true Hadith related to the Prophet in which he seems to be warning against intermarriage

with blacks.<sup>50</sup> In his failure to criticize this very possibly spurious Hadith, Lewis seems to lack scholarly objectivity; it seems that he has forgotten a simple fact: if this latter Hadith which he quotes is really authentic, then the Prophet, here, places himself in opposition to God's teachings, which he is supposed to confirm both in word and deed, and this departure lies in an area considered to be the backbone of Islam: equality and universalism.

Another weak point in Lewis' study is that he does not have a clear sense of history, for he sometimes says, "in early Islamic and pre-Islamic times, the Arabs looked down on the sons of slave mother, regarding them as inferior to the sons of free born mothers."<sup>51</sup> Here, on the one hand, we find Lewis mixing and confusing two very different and distinct periods in a way that no one who has full command of the historical data would ever do. On the other hand, Lewis contradicts here what he said earlier when commenting on the story of Bilal's marriage to an Arab girl. There he said, "the story is probably not authentic since it deals with a prejudice which does not seem to have existed in the Prophet's life time." Compare this with his saying, "in early Islamic and Pre-Islamic times, the Arabs looked down on the sons of slave mothers ..."<sup>52</sup> In his discussion of the marriage issue in Islam, Lewis seems to be confusing and mixing purely social customs and beliefs with religious law. We have to bear in mind that Lewis' remarks are part of a work in which he tries to demonstrate that Islamic freedom from racial and color prejudice is a 'myth' and in which he attacks Edward Blyden as "one of the most influential proponents of the myth."<sup>53</sup>

## The Attitude of Islam Towards Race and Color

Since the question of slavery intermingles with the question of race and color according to the Western viewpoint, it becomes inevitable to touch upon the Islamic attitude towards this issue. Again we must remember that the ultimate Islamic reference and authority is the Qur'an first and the Prophet's sayings and practices second. In the Qur'an there are two verses with direct bearing upon the issue. The first reads: "Among the signs of Allah are the creation of the Heaven and of the Earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. Lo! herein indeed are portents

(signs) for men of knowledge.”<sup>54</sup> The second verse reads, “O mankind! Lo! We have created you from a male and female, and We have made you into nations and tribes so that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you in the eyes of God is the most pious, for Allah is Knower and Aware.”<sup>55</sup> From these two verses it is obvious that the Qur’anic teachings express no racial or color prejudice; and more significantly, such prejudice is not even mentioned. In the Qur’an, the question of race and color is obviously not a burning issue; it is simply the will of Allah (SWT) to have a variety of races and colors stand out as signs of His might. But if it happened that, later on, the question of race and color became a hot issue among some Muslims, such a social development would not necessarily implicate Islam, but would simply mean that those Muslims have deviated from the true teachings of their religion.<sup>56</sup>

There is, by way of further support, the Hadith that confirms the Islamic principles of equality and universalism. The Prophet is reported to have said, “I was sent to the red and the black,” an expression meant to embrace the whole mankind. On another occasion, the Prophet said, “Obey whoever is put in authority over you, even if he be an Ethiopian slave.”<sup>57</sup> On still another occasion, he is reported to have said: “Do not marry women for their beauty, which may destroy them, or for their money, which may corrupt them, but for religion. A slit-nosed black-slave woman, if pious, is preferable.”<sup>58</sup> Upon a fourth occasion an Ethiopian came to the Prophet and said, “You Arabs excell us in all, in build, color, and in the possession of the Prophet. If I believe, will I be with you in Paradise?” The Prophet answers, “Yes, and in Paradise the whiteness of the Ethiopian will be seen over a stretch of a thousand years.”<sup>59</sup> Does not this suggest that the issue of color is a question that is relative to our life in this world and that it is not going to exist in the Hereafter? These quotations, to mention only a few, illustrate beyond any doubt, that the pious Islamic viewpoint is free from any racial or color prejudice. There is no innate superiority of race in Islam, and therefore no bar to racial intermarriage. Thus racial and color prejudice was a burning issue before Islam, but Islam came to oppose these errors, and here lay the merits of Islamic teachings. It might be true that in practice some Muslims would disregard the pious principles of their



religion;<sup>60</sup> but that does not implicate Islam; it only implicates those Muslim practitioners.

On the racial intermarriage issue in the Muslim world, the British historian Arnold Toynbee makes the point clear when he says, "...until nowadays, whites and blacks are intermingled under the aegis of Islam, through the length and breadth of the Indian and African continent. Under this searching test the white Muslims have demonstrated their freedom from racial feeling by the most convincing of all proofs; they have given their daughters to black Muslims in marriage."<sup>61</sup>

The story of 'Ubadah ibn al-Samit with the Muqawqis, the Christian functionary of Egypt in the time of the Arab conquest, is again very instructive in proving the attitude of the early Muslims towards color. "Blackness is not despised among us" was the strong, firm statement that the Muqawqis heard as an answer to his perplexity when he saw the black 'Ubadah as the head of the delegation that came to talk to him. Blackness was then despised in the eyes of the Christian Muqawqis as it was among almost all nations in those times. Islam came to teach them for the first time that "blackness is not despised."<sup>62</sup> The spirit of brotherhood, equality, and universalism is well expressed in Islamic rituals, such as praying, giving the Zakat (prescribed minimum of alms) and pilgrimage. The late Malcolm X observed these qualities in Islam and wrote saying, "There were tens of thousands of pilgrims from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white."<sup>63</sup>

The foregoing account has shown the real attitude of Islam toward the question of race and color, a question closely related to slavery in Western memory. In Islam, this association of blackness and Africanism with slavery never took place. In the light of this discussion, it becomes easier now to understand the Islamic attitude toward slavery. The Shari'ah (Islamic law) forbids the enslavement of free Muslims, of whatever race, and the law was usually upheld in this matter. "There is, however, some evidence that the law was not always strictly enforced to protect Muslim captives from black Africa."<sup>64</sup> On the assumption

that such compelling evidence which Lewis mentions does exist, Islam is still not seriously implicated for reasons outlined clearly above. The basic tenets of religion are constant; they do not bend at the whim of some of its practitioners.

In relation to this final point, I strongly disagree with Bernard Lewis who says, "Islam is the counterpart, not of Christianity, but rather of Christendom. In this sense, Islam means not what Muslims believed or were expected to believe, but what they actually did."<sup>65</sup> Acceptance of this definition of Islam implies that we must deal with many Islamic religions, not with only one, because many groups of Muslims in certain societies have created their own interpretation of some of the teachings of Islam, molding the religion to adjust to their worldly needs. The problem of Islam, as has been the problem of all religions before it, is that in the course of time, its followers deviated from the pure and original teachings; this deviation leads to practices that are not in harmony with the original teachings of the religion. If one could safely judge Islam by the practices and actual deeds of some of its followers, it would be safe, on the same grounds, to judge Christianity by the practices of some of its followers. We cannot, for example, say that Christianity permits adultery or drunkenness based upon the observation that in most of the Western Christian countries a considerable number of population allow themselves to commit adultery or drink to excess. Islam, like Christianity, is not what some or many of its followers do and practice; rather, it is a set of teachings and beliefs that are confirmed by the deeds and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, the early true pious Muslims, and the good, virtuous Muslims of all ages. Indeed, many religious scholars and truly pious Muslims of today rightly argue that the weakness and backwardness of Muslims in later times came about as a result of their deviation from the true teachings of Islam. Such deviation is a result of these Muslims' attempts to make the Islamic teachings adjust to their worldly pursuits with their associated refusal or inability to adjust themselves to the true teachings of Islam.

## Islam and Slavery in the Context of the Trans-Saharan Trade

Erroneously, or at least by way of over-statement, I believe, some scholars have associated the trans-Saharan slave trade with the presence of

Islam in Africa. Thus, it becomes relevant to discuss this question in the context of a study on the attitude of Islam towards slavery.

In the first place, it seems necessary to quote some of the literature that touches upon the question of Islam and slavery in Africa. Bovill, for example, seems to agree with Lord Lugard who has stated that “it is the most serious charge against Islam in Africa that it has encouraged and given religious sanction to slavery.”<sup>66</sup> In a paper dealing with the Songhai, L. Kaba argues that “the imposition of Islamic values upon the Songhai state stimulated inequality in general and slavery in particular.”<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, Nachtigal states that “everywhere Islam brings with it a mild administration of the institution of slavery.”<sup>68</sup> Blyden observes that “the introduction of Islam into central and west Africa, has been the most important, if not the sole preservation, against the desolation of the slave trade. Mohammedism furnished a protection to the tribes that embraced it by effectually binding them together in one strong religious fraternity, and enabling them by their united effort to baffle the attempt of the powerful pagan slave-hunters.”<sup>69</sup>

The foregoing quotations illustrate that the question of Islam in relation to slavery in Africa has been an issue of concern among scholars for a long time. The following discussion is not intended to support or oppose the views that have been expressed concerning this question. It is simply an attempt to defend Islam, the religion, against the charges directed to it concerning the subject of slavery. It is in no way a defence in favor of non-Islamic practices and attitudes of some Muslims.

For a discussion of slavery within the context of Islam in Africa, there is always the difficulty of determining how much arises from the original Islamic teachings and how much from local African custom and the greed of the merchants and the rulers who wished to evade the true teachings of their religion. The Fishers rightly state that “the fact that the institution of slavery, in one form or another, had deep roots in many parts of Africa long before Islam became a significant social influence there and that even in thoroughly Islamized regions there were many pre-Islamic survivals, demonstrates how misleading it would be to suggest a hard and fast distinction between Muslim and traditional slavery. So it is difficult to draw a sharp line between characteristics of African slavery surviving from pre-Muslim practice and those imported later by Islam.”<sup>70</sup>

It might be true that massive development of the slave trade in Black African and the large-scale importance of black Africans for use in the Mediterranean basin and the Middle Eastern countries dates from the Arab period. But in no way is it safe or true to relate this to the presence of Islam and its institutions. This phenomenon is a mere coincidence with the presence of Islam, and its real causes are related to economic factors that have very little, if anything, to do with the presence of Islam as a religion in Africa. A religion that calls for equality and universalism, and encourages the emancipation of slaves, cannot at the same time encourage and give religious sanctions to slavery.

There is ample historical evidence to prove that the trans-Saharan trade in slavery ante-dates the spread of Islam in the 7th century.<sup>71</sup> The Africans themselves were active trade agents both at the individual level and at the official level.<sup>72</sup> The fact is that many people benefitted materially from the slave trade, which to them appeared perfectly legitimate and natural on purely economic grounds. They found slavery with the associated trading of slaves an old and well-established institution and thus were reluctant to abandon such a lucrative source of revenue. What I would like to suggest is that economic, political, and military motives have to be examined as determining factors in the expansion of the slave trade in Africa after the introduction of Islam. Here we pause to ask the following question: Suppose that the institution of slavery did not exist in Africa before the presence of Islam, was it then admissible for Islam to impose and enforce slavery upon the African society? The answer to this question is a categorical “no.” As has been shown earlier, everything in Islam in relation to slavery was intended to eliminate an existing, disagreeable, and deep-rooted institution. Where such an institution does not exist, Islam cannot impose it since the absence of slavery is the natural course of things according to the Islamic teachings. The following concluding paragraphs would further substantiate this fact.

## Concluding Remarks

Before concluding this essay on the attitude of Islam toward slaves and slavery, an attempt should be made to answer the legitimate philosophical

question: Why didn't Islam ban the institution of slavery and outlaw the slave trade by direct edict as it did with gambling, usurious interest, and alcohol drinking? The answer, in my opinion, is strikingly simple for someone who wishes to find an answer.

On the one hand, if we look at the problem in the limited context of the preIslamic Arabic society we find that the practice of slavery was based on custom and economic and social habits and values, rather than on sanctioned dogmatic written laws. Taking that into consideration, Islam rightly calculated the impracticality of trying rapidly to eliminate a customary law that has deep social and economic bases and replace it by a written law that is based basically on moral considerations. The practical way out was to educate the people over a period of time to understand that such customary practices are wrong and that the human rights to dignity and freedom require the abolition of every form of slavery. Among the Arabs as well as among all the nations of the Earth, masters considered slaves as their property, their money, and their livelihood. One need not have great imaginary power to envisage what would happen if you would ask somebody suddenly to surrender his property.

Islam dealt with the issue of slavery in a very simple, logical, wise, and humane manner. It left the door open for slaves to be introduced to Islam through their purchase by Muslim master: then Islam initiated teachings that facilitate compensatory and voluntary acts of emancipation as we have seen earlier. Were it not for the fact that Muslims began to deviate from the true teachings of their religion, intentionally or by way of misinterpretation, the institution of slavery would have been eliminated automatically within the first decades of Islamic history.<sup>73</sup>

On the other hand, Islam looked at the problem of slavery in its wider global context and considered it repugnant to the most basic principles of human rights. War was one of the main channels through which slaves were acquired. What did Islam do about this? In the first place, the Muslims considered war to be an inevitable evil, so Muslims were taught not to go to war except in legitimate defence against aggression. But what is to be done with prisoners legitimately taken?

The Prophet (SAAS) and Muslim jurists permitted the enslavement of prisoners of war in the context of reciprocity of equality of humane treatment.<sup>74</sup> But a Qur'anic verse reads:

NOW WHEN you meet [in war] those who are bent on denying the truth, smite their necks until you overcome them fully, and then tighten their bonds; but thereafter [set them free,] either by an act of grace or against ransom, so that the burden of war may be lifted. Thus [shall it be].

And [know that] had God so willed, He could indeed punish them [Himself]; but He wills you (to struggle) so as to test you [all] by means of one another.

And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste.<sup>75</sup>

Here we can see that the Qur'an favors granting the prisoners the grace of setting them free, with the option of exchanging their freedom for ransom.

To conclude, the issue of slavery is one, among many others, in which one can appreciate in Islam a delicate and miraculous wisdom in applying the loftiest idealism effectively in practice.<sup>76</sup> From the very beginning, Islam was a religion and a community, and in all its teachings there is evident the realistic need for strategy and tactics in dealing with recalcitrant mankind. Without understanding and appreciating this practical aspect of Islam, one is destined to misunderstand its teachings and to lose the benefits of its guidance in the eternal pursuit of both truth and justice.

## Endnotes

- 1 For a sustained and persuasively critical study against Oriental studies and Oriental scholarship, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, New York, 1979).
- 2 Bovill, E. W., *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, 2nd ed. (London, Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 21.
- 3 Bovill, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22, quoting Barrow, R.H., *Slavery in the Roman Empire* (London, 1928).
- 4 Plato in his *Republic* as quoted in 'Abd al-Salam al-Tarmamini, *al-Riqq madih wa hadiruh* (al-Majlis al-watani lil-thaqafah wa-al-funun wa-al-adab, Kuwait, 1979), pp. 23-23; *The Politics of Aristotle*, translated by B. Jowett. (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1885), Vol. I, pt. I:3-6, pp. 6-10. Shawqi Abu Khalil, *al-Islam fi qafas al-ittiham* (Dar al-fikr, Damascus, 2nd ed., 1974), p. 165. See also Muhammad Shawkat al-Tuni, *Muhammad muharrir al-'abid* (Mu'assasat dar al-sh'b, Cairo, 1975), pp. 21-22. See also 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, *Haqa'iq al-Islam wa-abatil khusumih*, 3rd ed. (Dar al-kitab al-'Arabi, Beirut, 1966), p. 286.
- 5 See al-Tarmamini, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24; also al-Tuni, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- 6 See Muhammad al-Bahi, *al-Islam wa-al-riqq* (Dar al-turath al-'Arabi, Cairo, 1979), p. 7.
- 7 See Bovill, *op. cit.*, p.41.
- 8 See Muhammad Qutb, *Shubuhah hawla al-Islam*, 4th ed. (Maktabah Wahbah, Cairo, 1960), pp. 32-33; also Ibrahim Hashim al-Fallali, *La riqq fi al-Qur'an* (Dar al-qalam, Cairo, undated), pp. 19-21. See also Shawqi Abu Khalil, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-166; also al-Tuni, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- 9 Ahmad Shalabi, *Muqaranat al-adyan*, Vol. III, p. 205 as quoted in Shawqi Abu Khalil, *op. cit.*, p. 164; see also al-Fallali, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
- 10 See Ahmad Muhammad Jamal, *Muftarayat 'ala al-Islam* (Dar al-fikr, Beirut, 1972), p. 130; also Shawqi Abu Khalil, *op. cit.*, p. 164; also al-Fallali, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-29.
- 11 Shawqi Abu Khalil, *op. cit.*, p. 165; also al-Fallali, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.
- 12 See *The Jerusalem Bible*, Reader's Edition (Doubleday & Co., Inc., New York, 1968), Exodus: 21, p. 82.
- 13 *Ibid.*, Deuteronomy: 20, p. 209
- 14 This attitude was maintained by the Apostles Sts. Paul and Peter. See *ibid.*, New Testament, Romans: 6, p. 203; also Peter: 2, p. 302.
- 15 See al-Tuni, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-27; also al-Tarmamini, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33, 158; also al-Fallali, *op. cit.*, pp. 33; also Shawqi Abu Khalil, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-168.
- 16 al-Fallali, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
- 17 al-'Aqqad, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-287. For al-'Aqqad's views on the subject, see pp. 285-298 of the above cited book.

- 18 For a survey of those who raised their voice against slavery or called for a humane treatment of the slaves see Mustafa al-Jiddawi, *Dirasah jadidah 'an al-riqq fi al-tarikh wa fi al-Islam* (1963), pp. 207-228.
- 19 See Allan G. B. Fisher & Humphrey J. Fisher, *Slavery and Muslim Society in Africa* (New York, 1972 edition), p. 9. (Hereafter, reference to this book is to be made as “The Fishers”).
- 20 Qur'an, IV: 92. The verses quoted in this paper, are from Pickthal's translation (Muslim World League - Rabita Mecca al-Mukarramah, 1977).
- 21 *Ibid.*, V:89.
- 22 This practice was very common among the Arabs, where a man upon getting angry with his wife would swear not to touch her as a way of punishment; he would say to her, “you are forbidden from me as the back of my mother is” (Arabic: *anti muharramatun 'alayya ka-zahri ummi*). This custom is called in Arabic *al-zihar*.
- 23 Qur'an, LVIII:2-4.
- 24 *Ibid.*, XC:8-13.
- 25 *Ibid.*, XC:14-18.
- 26 *Ibid.*, II:177.
- 27 *Ibid.*, XVI:71.
- 28 *Ibid.*, IX:60.
- 29 *Ibid.*, XXIV:33.
- 30 For an explanation of the concept of *mukatabah*, see al-Bahl, *op. cit.*, p. 8; also Shawqi Abu Khalil, *op. cit.*, p. 174; also al-Tuni, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
- 31 Qur'an, XXIV: 32.
- 32 *Ibid.*, IV:3.
- 33 See al-Fallali, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
- 34 Qur'an, IV:25.
- 35 *Ibid.*, IV:36; see also XXIV:31; also XXXIII:55.
- 36 Reported by al-Bukhari in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Arabic-English text, “Manumission of Slaves and its Superiority,” (Kazi Publications, Chicago, 1977), Vol. III, Book XLVI, Chapter I, No. 693, p. 419.
- 37 Reported by al-Bukhari in *ibid.*, Chapter 14, No. 720, p. 433.
- 38 Reported by al-Bukhari through Abu Hurayrah in *ibid.*, Chapter 17, No. 728, p. 437.
- 39 Reported by al-Bukhari in *ibid.*, Chapter 15, No. 721, p. 434.
- 40 Reported by Muslim, in *al-Jami' al-Sahih* (al-Maktab al-Tijari li-l-tiba'ah wa-l-nashr, Beirut, undated), Vol. 5, p. 90.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 al-Tarmamini, *op. cit.*, p. 124.



- 43 See the story in al-Tuni, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-179.
- 44 See the story in *ibid.*, pp. 150-155.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 46 al-Fallali, *op. cit.*, p. 178; also Qutb, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
- 47 For a brief account of these personalities and their relationships with the Prophet, see al-Tuni, *op. cit.*, 50-59, 105-184.
- 48 See *ibid.*, p. 77.
- 49 See ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-tabaqat al-kubra* (Dar Sadir, Beirut, 1957), Vol. 2. p. 304.
- 50 For Lewis' quotations and discussion see *Race and Colour in Islam* (N. Y.: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), pp. 91-92.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.
- 54 Qur'an, XXX:22.
- 55 *Ibid.*, XLIX:13
- 56 Ignac Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien* (Paris, 1952), Vol. I, p. 269, English trans., p. 344, quoted in Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- 57 Muttaqi, *Kanz al-'Ummal*, Hyderabad, 1313, Vol. III, p. 197.
- 58 Ibn Majah, *Sunan* (Cairo, 1372/1952), Vol. I, p. 597 (Nikah 6).
- 59 Goldziher, *op. cit.*, p. 74, English trans. p. 75, quoted in Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.
- 60 Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
- 61 Toynbee, Arnold J. *A Study of History* (Oxford University Press, London, 1939), Vol. 1, p. 226.
- 62 Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam, *Futuh Misr*, ed. C. C. Torrey (New Haven, 1922), p. 66.
- 63 *The Autobiography of Malcolm X with the Assistance of Alex Haley* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), pp. 338-339, 340.
- 64 Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.
- 66 Lugard, F. D., *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh & London, 1922), p. 365.
- 67 Kaba, L., "Some Aspects of Social Inequality and Slavery in Songhay under the Askia (1443-1591)," p. 5. (Unpublished paper).
- 68 Nachtigal, Gustav, *Sahara und Sudan, Ergebnisse Sechsjahriger Reisen in Africa* (Berlin, 1879), Vol. I, p. 100.
- 69 Blyden, E. W., *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race* (London, 1887), reprinted 1967, pp. 175-176.

- 70 The Fishers, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- 71 Hopkins, A. G., *Economic History of West Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 82; also The Fishers, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- 72 Bovill, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
- 73 Qutb, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-45.
- 74 See *ibid.*, pp. 45-50; also al-Bahi, *op. cit.*, pp. 4, 18-21; also al-Fallali, *op. cit.*, p. 169; also Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1961), Vol. II, pp. 61-65.
- 75 Qur'an, XLVII:4, translation of Muhammad Asad (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andulus, 1980).
- 76 See Amin al-Khuli in his article, "al-Islam bayna al-mithaliyyah wsa-al-waqi'iyah" in *Al-'Arabi*, issue no. 13, (1959).