

## Islam's Position on Slavery

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Nowhere in the Qur'an will you find any verse which says "Slavery is prohibited". Yet, Islam abolished slavery centuries ago. The economy of the known world at the start of Islam was based on slavery. The measure of the wealth of an individual was based on the number of slaves he owned. Had Islam legislated in one stroke "Slavery is Prohibited!" then the economy of the world would have disintegrated right away. The very rich man would have turned into a very poor man and the whole economy would be in shambles.

How did Islam abolish slavery? These days an issue is AIDS and its main cause is being identified as homosexuality. They are searching desperately for a cure while leaving the homosexuals to have their own organizations, their own churches, and their own demonstrations to put pressure on Congress demanding rights and all that. Under these circumstances, any cure will never catch up with the

spread of AIDS. Islam, on the other hand, when it intended to eliminate slavery, struck first of all at the source.

What was the source of slavery? The international law at that time was that war captives were the slaves of the victors. When Islam engaged in battles – known as *ghazawāt* – any captives taken by Muslims were set free for a ransom. What was the ransom? To teach ten Muslim children how to read and write. So Islam first dried up the source of slavery, and then gradually worked on freeing the existing slaves until there were no more slaves. The slavery that existed, and was later abolished here in the United States had no similarity with the slavery of the past, because the slavery in the United States was based upon kidnapping and trafficking in human beings. People from Europe went to Africa, kidnapped whoever they could lay their hands on and brought them here and enslaved them. In the past *only*

*prisoners of war* became slaves.

After drying up the source of slavery, how did Islam deal with the existing slaves? The term *fidyah* means “a penalty” and Islam used this concept to deal with the abolition of slavery step by step. If a man made a false oath, Islam legislated that he could expiate his sin by setting a slave free; that is the ransom for a false oath. If a Muslim killed another person by mistake, he would, as ransom, have to set a slave free. If a man said to his wife “You are prohibited to me as the back of my mother”<sup>1</sup> he could not approach her again before setting a slave free. And above and beyond all that, the Prophet, peace be upon him, to encourage the people to buy slaves and set them free, said: “If a believer sets a slave free, then God will set him free of hellfire on the Day of Judgment.”

We have the story of AbuBakr and Bilal. Bilal was enslaved by Umayya bin Khalaf. After Bilal converted to Islam, his master, Umayya bin Khalaf, would punish him because he wanted him to go back to worshipping idols. He would make Bilal lie down on the burning hot sand in the heat of the sun and put a big rock on his chest. AbuBakr passed by Bilal one day and said to Umayya: “Fear God in your treatment of that man.” So Umayya said to AbuBakr: “If you can do something for him, then do it.” AbuBakr purchased him and set him free. Qur’anic verses were revealed in reference to this event in Chapter Al-Layl: “He that spends his possessions on others so that he might grow in purity – not as payment for favors received, but only out of a longing for the Countenance of his Sustainer, the All-Highest: and such, indeed, shall in time be well-pleased” [92:18-21].

Islam treated the abolition of slavery in a gradual manner and that is how slavery was eliminated in lands where Islam held sway. It is the same with Islam in general: if we are to carry Islam to success, and call upon Muslims to practice Islam and have it as

their law, we cannot do it in one day and one night. This is a mistake which many Muslim organizations, nowadays, commit, when they want to make Islam the law of the country. The Qur’an was revealed to Muhammad over 23 years. But, nowadays, if a Muslim country would like to apply Islam as its constitution, they issue one decree: “The Law of the Country is Islam!” Period. Close the bars! Close the nightclubs! Close this, this, and this. Now the country has become Muslim! We are kidding ourselves. In Iran, the Islamic revolution failed. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood failed. Now, it is the turn of Jordan, and they are on their way to failure. As you are hearing these days, in Algeria, Islam is gaining momentum like wildfire – in the election<sup>2</sup> – and I hope they will not fail, although I smell failure already. I smell the failure because the head<sup>3</sup> is in the *gallabiya*.<sup>4</sup>

In this country, we have all heard of alcoholic people. How can you cure an alcoholic man in 24 hours with a decree? He will die. It is medically impossible. He will manufacture liquor in his home if there is no bar. In Muslim countries where bars are prohibited, you will still find that liquor is manufactured inside the houses. Therefore, what we need to do, if we are to bring Islam, is that we have to proceed gradually. Gradually means to start from zero – educate the new generation. The generation of today, *Allah yarhamu*,<sup>5</sup> it’s finished; it cannot be reformed. Start with the new generation and prepare it to accept Islam as it should be. Change the curriculums in the schools. Change the whole system of education. Then, after 10, 15, 20, 30 or more years you may have people with a totally new outlook; they will be used to Islam, and will be ready to apply it in their lives. When you want to have a train, you have to build a track first, and the construction of railroad tracks takes a long time.

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<sup>1</sup> Known as *Ad-Dahaar*, a form of divorce practiced by the Arabs before the advent of Islam

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<sup>2</sup> December 1992

<sup>3</sup> Imam means, their preoccupation, the thinking (in their head)

<sup>4</sup> The traditional male Arab dress. By “The head is in the gallabiya” Imam means that they are giving priority to *appearance*.

<sup>5</sup> “God have mercy on them” an evocation used on the occasion of somebody’s death