

ISLAM AND
SLAVERY

The enslavement of human beings was practised by all the ancient civilisations of America, Asia, Europe and Africa. People became slaves – the property of others – through debt, by being sold into slavery by family members, by being captured in war, or through kidnapping by slave raiders and pirates.

Nowadays, when slavery is banned in almost every country, there are still places where people are effectively trapped in employment under harsh conditions. For example, they may be “bonded labourers” in Pakistan, unable to change jobs because of debts to their employer. Another scenario is that of expatriate domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, whose employers have seized their passports, and who are locked in the house to prevent them escaping. Such individuals are slaves in all but name. There are also still true slaves in some countries.

The European slave trade is well known, but that of Islam is not. Furthermore, Islam even played a part in the European slave trade, as Arab traders were involved with African chiefs in the business of providing Africans for the Europeans to enslave.

In the past, religions sought to justify the practice of slavery. Whilst, thankfully, most have rejected it now, Islam stands out as the exception.

Muhammad and slavery

Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, kept slaves. One of his biographers, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, states that he had four slave girls and adds a list of 27 male slaves (some of whom he freed).¹ Al-Jawziyya also adds that:

The Prophet bought and sold: he bought more than he sold ... He also sold Ya‘qub, the slave of Abu Madhkur, and exchanged a Negro slave for two slaves.²

Al-Jawziyya also recounts a story told by a black slave named Mihran, nicknamed “the Ship”:

Among them was Safinah ibn Farukh, whose name was Mihran. The Prophet called him “Safinah” because he used to carry people’s luggage while travelling. The Prophet said to him, “You are Safinah (a ship)”

“The apostle of God and his companions went on a trip. When their belongings became too heavy for them to carry, Muhammad told me, ‘Spread your garment.’ They filled it with their belongings, then they put it on me. The apostle of God

¹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Provisions for the Hereafter (Zad al-Ma‘ad fi Hayati Khairi-l ‘Ibad)*, translated by Jalal Abulrub, vol. 1. Orlando, Florida: Madinah Publishers and Distributors, 2003, pp197-200.

² Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Provisions for the Hereafter*, vol. 1, p279.

told me, 'Carry (it), for you are a ship.' Even if I was carrying the load of six or seven donkeys while we were on a journey, anyone who felt weak would throw his clothes or his sword on me so ... I would carry that. The prophet told me, 'You are a ship.'³

Many slaves were gained as booty after victorious military campaigns. After defeating a Jewish tribe called the Banu Qurayza in 627, Muhammad executed all the men (numbering 600 to 900), and divided the women and children among his people as slaves. On this occasion, he took Rihana, the wife of the leader of the tribe, as a concubine. This story indicates the close linkage in classical Islam between prisoners of war, slaves and concubines. A prisoner of war was automatically a slave, and if female she was potentially a concubine as well.

Muhammad not only kept slaves and enslaved captives but also traded in slaves, as did his companions and many other people in the Arabian Peninsula at that time. He also received slaves as gifts. One of his concubines, Mary the Copt (apparently a Christian), was given to him by the ruler of Egypt.

The example of Muhammad, who is traditionally considered by Muslims the perfect model for their own behaviour, has made any Islamic opposition to slavery difficult. The argument that what he did was

normal and acceptable in the society of that time but not in the modern world carries little or no weight with conservative Muslims, who are interested only in copying Muhammad's example.

The Qur'an and slavery

The existence of slavery is accepted uncritically in the Qur'an, and slaves are often mentioned. Captive women could be taken as concubines, special permission being granted to Muhammad in a Qur'anic verse to allow him to do this:

O prophet! We have made lawful to thee thy wives to whom thou hast paid their dowers; and those whom thy right hand possesses out of the prisoners of war whom Allah has assigned to thee; and daughters of thy paternal uncles and aunts and daughters of thy maternal uncles and aunts who migrated (from Mecca) with thee; and any believing woman who dedicates her soul to the Prophet if the Prophet wishes to wed her this only for thee and not for the Believers (at large); We know what We have appointed for them as to their wives and the captives whom their right hands possess in order that there should be no difficulty for Thee. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving Most Merciful. Q 33:50⁴

⁴ Quotations in this booklet are taken from A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*. Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1975. Please note that the verse numbering varies slightly between different translations of the Qur'an, so it may be necessary to look in the verses just before or just after the reference given to find the same text in another translation.

This verse clearly shows that, according to the Qur'an, taking slaves in war was a God-given right. These slaves were considered spoils of war, and the women were usually destined to be concubines of the victorious warriors. Muhammad received his share of enslaved women.

The right of Muslims to have sexual intercourse with female slaves is indicated in Qur'an 23:1-6, which gives Muslims sexual rights over their wives and over those "whom their right hands possess".

Many texts indicate that slaves can be used as a sort of currency to pay penalties imposed for the misdemeanours of their owners. Qur'an 4:92, for example, explains that the manslaughter of a Muslim could be paid for by freeing a believing (i.e. Muslim) slave and paying compensation to the relatives. Interestingly, a non-Muslim slave cannot be freed for this reason. If a slave cannot be afforded then the penalty is a two months' fast.

Never should a believer kill a believer; but (if it so happens) by mistake (compensation is due): if one (so) kills a believer it is ordained that he should free a believing slave and pay compensation to the deceased's family unless they remit it freely. If the deceased belonged to a people at war with you and he was a believer the freeing of a believing slave (is enough). If he belonged to a people with whom ye have a treaty of mutual alliance compensation

should be paid to his family and a believing slave be freed. For those who find this beyond their means (is prescribed) a fast for two months running: by way of repentance to Allah: for Allah hath all knowledge and all wisdom.

Although the Qur'an does not condemn slavery, it does encourage kindness to slaves. Qur'an 24:33 instructs Muslims to allow slaves of good character to buy their freedom if they so request, and it even tells the slave-owner to contribute towards the sum to be raised. This verse also prohibits compelling unwilling slave girls into prostitution.

... And if any of your slaves ask for a deed in writing (to enable them to earn their freedom for a certain sum), give them such a deed, if you know any good in them; yea, give them something yourselves out of the means which God has given to you. But force not your maids to prostitution when they desire chastity...

The freeing of slaves is included in a list of virtuous acts (Q 90:12-13), and elsewhere the Qur'an commends spending money to ransom slaves:

It is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day and the Angels and the Book and the Messengers; to spend of your substance out of love for Him for your kin for orphans for the needy for the wayfarer for those who ask and for the ransom of slaves. Q 2.177

³ Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyyah, *Provisions for the Hereafter*, vol. 1, pp199-200.

Sharia and slavery

Sharia (Islamic law) has much to say about slaves, including the acquisition of slaves, slave-trading, freeing slaves, the status of female slaves and how to deal with runaway slaves and lost slaves. In wars against non-Muslims, prisoners of war were to be killed, exchanged for Muslim prisoners of war, freed for ransom or enslaved. The women and children too were to be exchanged or enslaved. Many rules concerning the practice of owners marrying slaves and taking slaves as concubines were outlined in order to determine paternity and ownership of children born to a female slave. A slave concubine who bore children to her master would be elevated to the status of *um walad* (mother of his child) and her children would be equal to the legal offspring. She could not be sold and was freed on her master's death. If a concubine was freed she could not have legal status as a wife but would live with her master as a mistress, and her children would be illegitimate. There were also rules about slaves marrying each other.

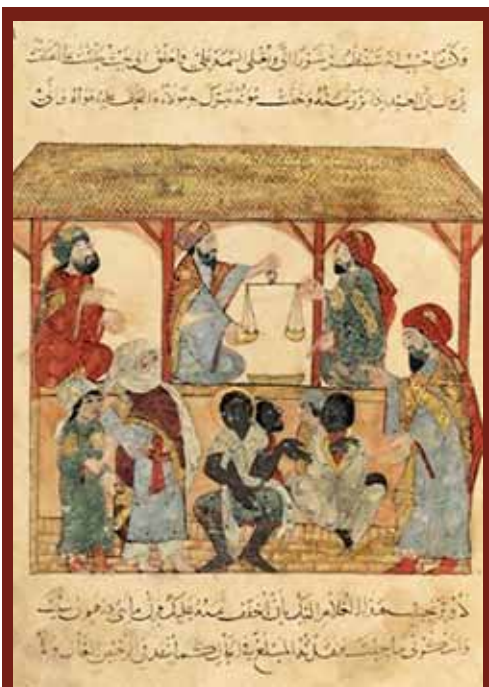
The four caliphs who came after Muhammad discouraged the enslavement of Muslims, and it was eventually prohibited, but the enslavement of non-Muslims continued apace. If a non-Muslim slave converted to Islam he or she remained a slave. As an act of charity by the owner, however, a slave could be emancipated, but only a believing slave deserved freedom. In Muslim lands, slaves had few civil or legal

rights: they had no right to be heard in court or to property; any goods they did manage to accumulate would be inherited by their masters not their children. They could marry only with the permission of the owner; they could not give alms or make a pilgrimage; they were considered mere pieces of property.

As in all contexts where slavery was practised, the actual treatment of slaves varied: some masters were kind, and some were cruel.

Islamic expansion and slavery

As Islam expanded by conquest



A Muslim slave market in Yemen in the thirteenth century

(jihad), extending within a few centuries from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian subcontinent, and spreading to south-east Asia, central Asia and Africa, large numbers of people were enslaved. The supply of slaves had to be constantly replenished because there was a high death rate amongst them. Furthermore, marriage amongst slaves was not encouraged, and in any case many male slaves were castrated (an operation that was often fatal). But Muslims and non-Muslim minorities living under the protection of the Islamic state could not be enslaved. So the need to procure more slaves became a strong motive for continuing to expand and conquer non-Muslim territories.

A vast network of slave trading developed. Within Islamic territories there were slaves from central Asia, from the Byzantine Empire, from sub-Saharan Africa and from Europe. As far afield as Indonesia the business of seizing and selling slaves flourished, with the Muslim Acehnese active in piracy and “people-hunting” on non-Muslim islands and countries, even in the early 20th century.

Slavery and jihad were thus interlinked in a symbiotic relationship. Jihad provided profitable booty in the form of slaves; indeed slave raids were often camouflaged as jihad.⁵ Slave raiding became a way of life for many Muslim warlords on the

frontiers of the Islamic world. Muslim corsairs based in North Africa raided as far as the English coasts for slaves up to the 17th century. Sub-Saharan Africans were taken as slaves by Arab and Berber tribes from the north.

Some slaves were used for domestic duties or for agricultural and other types of labour, or as soldiers. Slaves could rise to positions of great eminence, even to the position of vizier (like a Prime Minister) under the Ottoman Empire. Slave-soldiers included the Turkic Mamelukes, who eventually became a powerful force within Islam and set up their own state in Egypt governing a wide area. Female slaves were often used as concubines. Those with blonde hair and blue eyes were considered particularly desirable. Some male slaves were made eunuchs.

High prices were paid for eunuchs, and the practice of castration persisted from the 9th century until the early 20th century. Islam prohibits physical mutilation, so many eunuchs were castrated before entering Islamic territory.

The slave trade became a great source of wealth and power to Muslim states and remained an important part of the economy of parts of the Muslim world well into the 20th century.

Slavery in Africa

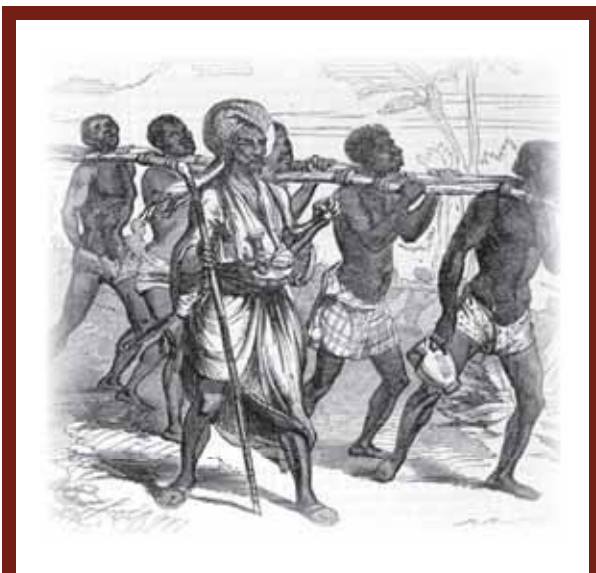
Black slaves were imported into the Muslim world from Africa by a number of routes northward across

⁵ Humphrey J. Fisher, *Slavery in the History of Muslim Black Africa*. London: Hurst and Company, 2001, pp46-54.

the Sahara desert, and by sea into Arabia and the Persian Gulf. Estimates of the number involved vary greatly, but it seems that there may easily have been 10 million, perhaps even twice that number.

Two-thirds of black African slaves were female, destined to be domestic servants, or to be placed in harems. These harems were to be found not merely in the palaces, but wherever a citizen could afford to sustain one. The males were considered to be troublesome. An uprising of slaves from West Africa, the Zanj, who had been imported into the Tigris-Euphrates delta to reclaim salt marshland through their back-breaking labour, lasted from 869 until 883.

For black slaves coming from West and West Central Africa, particularly when Africa became the most important source of slaves for Mediterranean Islam, the mortality rate was very high because of the harsh conditions they faced on their journey. The trade was so lucrative that merchants were not deterred by the numbers who died. Many harrowing eyewitness accounts of the vast scale and the miserable conditions of the slave trade in Africa survive. In the 1570s many thousands of black Africans were seen for sale in Cairo on market days.



A Muslim slave caravan on a journey with black African captives

In 1796 a caravan was seen by a British traveller leaving Darfur with 5,000 slaves. Black eunuchs became favoured for the royal harems. Even after Britain outlawed the slave trade in 1807, a further 2 million Africans were enslaved by Muslim traders.

The Arabic word *abd*, which means “slave” or “servant”, is used as an insult to black people in Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

Slavery in the Ottoman Empire

The enslavement of captives taken when the Ottoman armies raided Christian countries was part of the state system of the Ottoman Empire. After he conquered Constantinople

in 1453 Sultan Mehmed wrote to various Muslim rulers boasting of the enslavement of its Christian population. The Ottomans engaged in slave trading from Gibraltar to Central Asia.

The Balkan Christians of the Ottoman Empire suffered cruelly, particularly under the brutal and bitterly resented child-levy, the *devshirme*. From the 15th century to the early 17th century the Ottomans would seize a certain proportion of Christian boys from their villages every few years, forcibly convert them to Islam and train them for the elite fighting force known as the Janissaries or for the state bureaucracy. The *devshirme* was sternly enforced. If any Christian parents tried to prevent the taking of their child they were immediately hanged from their own door frame. It is estimated that between 500,000 and one million boys, from the ages of 8 to 20, were taken in this way. Occasionally armed uprisings against the system took place, but they were quickly crushed. Some children ran away, only to return and give themselves up when their parents were tortured. Many resorted to bribery to escape recruitment. In the early 17th century the *devshirme* was abandoned, and the Ottomans obtained their slaves from a new source: the Georgians and Circassians of the Caucasus, and Slav and Central Asian slaves captured and traded by the Crimean Tatars. By the early 19th century this supply was reduced and the Ottomans turned to Africa.

Eunuch slaves were in high demand in the Ottoman Empire, principally as guardians of the harems. Prague became an important centre for the castration of European slaves being imported to the Ottoman Empire.

Slavery in India

In the 7th and 8th centuries, and later under the Ghaznavids (962-1187), huge numbers of Hindus became slaves. The Arabs were the first invaders of India to remove a large number of its inhabitants as enslaved captives.⁶ A raid by the Sultan Subuktigin of Ghazni (942-997) is recorded:

*The Sultan returned, marching in the rear of this immense booty, and slaves were so plentiful that they became very cheap; and men of respectability in their native land, were degraded by becoming slaves of common shopkeepers. But this is the goodness of God, who bestows honours on his own religion and degrades infidelity.*⁷

Many more Hindus were enslaved under the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526), the Timurid jihad (1398), and the Mughals (1526-1857).

Of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) it is related that at the taking of the great Hindu fortress of Chitor after a long siege:

⁶ Andre Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 1, pp13-16, 25, 61.

⁷ Al-'Utbi, *Tarikh Yamini*, in H.M. Elliot and John Dowson, eds., *The History of India: As Told by Its Own Historians*, vol. 2. Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2001, p39.

*At early dawn the Emperor [Akbar] went in mounted on an elephant attended by his nobles and chiefs on foot. The order was given for a general massacre of the infidels as a punishment ... By mid-day, nearly 2000 had been slain ... those of the fortress who escaped the sword, men and women, were made prisoners, and their property came into the hands of the Muslims. The place being cleared of the infidels, His Majesty remained there three days.*⁸

The later Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707) treated non-Muslims with great severity while setting out to conquer the remaining Hindu parts of India, especially those in the south. During a campaign against the Rajputs, his generals:

*employed themselves in laying waste the country, destroying temples and buildings, cutting down fruit trees, and making prisoners of the women and children of the infidels who had take refuge in holes and ruined places.*⁹

The nobility owned huge numbers of slaves and maintained large slave armies. Of the Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq (1351-1388) it is said that:

The Sultan was very diligent in providing slaves, and he carried his care so far as to command his great

*fief-holders and officers to capture slaves whenever they were at war, and to pick out and send the best for the services of the court.*¹⁰

This sultan had 180,000 slaves, of whom 40,000 were guards in his palace, and he had a special minister and bureaucracy dedicated to dealing with his slaves. Other slaves captured in campaigns were either sold in local markets or sent to markets in central Asia. Amid such abundance the price of female slaves was very low.

It has been claimed that the slave-taking added significantly to the growth of the Muslim population in India.

Enslaving western Europeans
Muslim pirates from the Barbary (North African) coast, authorised by their governments, were active in seizing and enslaving white Christians from Western Europe from the 16th to the 18th century. They attacked not only ships but also coastal villages. Although Spain and Italy bore the brunt of these attacks, the Barbary pirates – often called corsairs – would also go to Portugal, France, England, Ireland and even Iceland. The slaves were kept in wretched conditions and many were worked to death, especially those unfortunate enough to be chosen to row the corsair galleys.

Between 1530 and 1780 at least a million white Christian Europeans

were enslaved on the Barbary coast. Around the year 1600 there were estimated to be some 35,000 in captivity there at any one time. Many records of the letters sent home, telling of the terrible sufferings the slaves were enduring, still exist. Some converted to Islam in order to get easier duties or, in the case of women in the harems, to stay with their children, who were being brought up as Muslims.

The slaves' only hope lay in being redeemed by payment of a ransom. Churches collected offerings for this purpose. Many of those who went to North Africa with funds to negotiate the release of the slaves were church leaders. In Spain and Italy ransoming slaves was considered an act of great merit. "Their [only] fault, their crime, is recognising Jesus Christ as the most divine Saviour ... and of professing Him as the True Faith."¹¹

English slaves were largely neglected by their home country, especially in comparison with those from southern European countries. They knew this and were demoralised.

An "Algerian Duty" was set aside from the customs income in England to redeem slaves, but much of it was diverted to other uses. Many English slaves died in captivity.

Slavery in modern times

Although Tunisia, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire abolished slavery in the 19th century under pressure from the West, in east Africa and other places it persisted into the 20th century, prompting the League of Nations and later the United Nations to condemn the practice. The nations of the Arabian Peninsula were among the last to outlaw slavery: Qatar in 1952, Saudi Arabia and the Yemen Arab Republic in 1962, the United Arab Emirates in 1963, South Yemen in 1967 and Oman in 1970.

Saudi Arabia

After abolition in 1962, about 10,000 slaves were freed out of an estimated 15,000–30,000. A UN report in 1965 revealed that the Saudi royal family still kept hundreds of slaves. Many in Saudi Arabia still advocate slavery. Sheik Saleh Al-Fawzan, a leading scholar and author of a religious textbook for schools, said in a tape recorded by the Saudi Information Agency in 2003 that slavery is a part of Islam and that those Muslims who oppose it are ignorant.¹²

In Saudi Arabia, the plight of migrant workers often amounts to slavery. Over 40 years after slavery was officially banned, domestic workers are often exploited, forcibly confined, beaten, underfed and sometimes raped. The lives of these

⁸ Maulana Ahmad, "Tarikh-i Alfi", in Elliot and Dowson, *The History of India*, vol. 5, p174.

⁹ Khafi Khan, "Muntakhabu-l Lubab", in Elliot and Dowson, *The History of India*, vol. 7, p300.

¹⁰ Shams-i Siraj 'Afif, *Tarikh-i Fioz Shahi*, in Elliot and Dowson, *The History of India*, vol. 2, p341.

¹¹ Quoted in R. Davies, "British Slaves on the Barbary Coast", 7 January 2003, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire_seapower/white_slaves_04.shtml (accessed 20 October 2008).

¹² "Taming a Neo-Qutubite Fanatic: A Dialogue with Idris Palmer", Part 1, <http://abdurrahman.org/innovation/thequtubisuroori.pdf> (accessed 18 January 2010).

workers are complicated further by deeply-ingrained gender, religious and racial discrimination in Saudi society. Government policies, the practice of private employers and unfair legal proceedings all combine to oppress large numbers of poor and desperate foreigners trying to earn a living in Saudi Arabia.

Mauritania

In ancient times slavery was common in Mauritania. In the 8th century Mauritania came under Islamic authority. From this point onward, only black Africans have been enslaved in Mauritania.

The old practice of forming slave armies was revived after the end of colonialism (1960). Black Mauritians (Harratin) were forced into military units and sent into African villages to subdue and kill the inhabitants. The soldiers were then settled on the lands of the villagers and authorised to defend themselves and undertake punitive campaigns against the population.

In Mauritania there have been several legal/constitutional rulings to outlaw slavery (in 1905, two in 1961, and in 1981), but they have not been effective. In 1994 there were still an estimated 90,000 black Mauritians in the possession of their Arab/Berber masters. It was also reported that some 300,000 freed slaves were still serving their former masters because of psychological or economic dependence. Article 2 of

the 1981 ordinance abolishing slavery granted compensation to slave holders for the loss of their slaves, but the money was not forthcoming, which may be one of the reasons why most slave owners continued to hold their slaves.

Although some try to defend the institution by noting that many families of slaves have worked for the same family for generations and claiming that they are merely servants working for their keep, the testimonies of the small number who have managed to escape tell of brutalities and hardship that seem more like slavery.

There do not seem to be any firm figures on the number of slaves in Mauritania currently, but it is clear that slavery continues there.

Sudan

With the imposition of Islamic law in 1983 by the Northern-based Arab Islamic government, the age-old practice of slavery in Sudan gathered momentum. During the civil war that raged from 1983 until 2005, captured Southerners were frequently enslaved. Many men were shot; the children were made slaves (herding cattle or performing other unpaid tasks), while the women became the sexual slaves of their owners. (This is reminiscent of what Muhammad did to the Banu Qurayza in 627. See page 2.)

Since 1986 more than 200,000 people of the Dinka tribe are estimated to have been enslaved in a complex network of buyers, sellers



Pakistani Christian slaves in 2006

and middlemen, with many of the slaves being brutally treated and some forcibly converted to Islam.

Such slavery was abolished in the 2005 peace treaty that ended the civil war.

Pakistan

In Pakistan, many lives are blighted as enormous numbers of people eke out an existence as “bonded labourers” unable to leave their desperately hard and low-paid jobs. A high proportion of these are Christian workers with Muslim employers.

Evidence came to light in 2006 of the kidnapping and enslavement of young boys from Christian villages in the Punjab, an operation coordinated by a leading member of a militant Islamic group, the Jamaat-ud-Daawa. The children, aged between 6 and 12, were held in appalling conditions, beaten, barely fed, and forbidden to talk, play or pray, before being sold for approximately \$1,700 each into the sex trade or into domestic servitude.



An enslaved Pakistani Christian boy

Conclusion

Many Muslims agree that there is no place for slavery in the modern world, but there has as yet been no sustained critique of the practice. The difficulties and dangers of confronting the example of Muhammad and the teaching of the Qur'an and sharia (which most Muslims believe cannot be changed) have dampened any internal debate within Islam. Although slavery still exists in many Islamic countries, few Muslim leaders show remorse for the past, discuss reparations or show that repugnance for the scourge of slavery that eventually led to its abolition in the West. It is time for Muslims emphatically and publicly to condemn the practice of slavery in any form and to ensure that their legal codes supporting it are changed.

Further reading

Humphrey J. Fisher, *Slavery in the History of Muslim Black Africa* (London: Hurst & Company, 2001).

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Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Robert Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast and Italy, 1500-1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

Jok Madut, *War and Slavery in Sudan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

John Eibner, "My Career Redeeming Slaves", *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (December 1999).

This series of booklets is intended to provide background information for Christians seeking to understand the nature of Islam and its contemporary expression. One aspect of this relates to understanding the reason for the oppression and persecution of Christians in various Islamic parts of the world, and another to the growing challenge which Islam poses to Western society, culture and Church.

Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo, International Director

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**UK – International Headquarters
Barnabas Fund**

The Old Rectory, River Street,
Pewsey, Wiltshire, SN9 5DB, UK
T: 01672 564 938
F: 01672 565 030
E: info@barnabasfund.org
W: www.barnabasfund.org

Company registered in England
Number 4029536
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**Australia
Barnabas Fund**

Postal Suite 107,
236 Hyperdome,
Loganholme, QLD 4129
T: (07) 3806 1076 or 1300 365 799
F: (07) 3806 4076
E: bfaustralia@barnabasfund.org

**New Zealand
Barnabas Fund**

PO Box 27 6018, Manukau City,
Manukau, 2241
T: (09) 280 4385
or 0800 008 805
E: office@barnabasfund.org.nz

**USA
Barnabas Aid**

6731 Curran Street,
McLean, VA 22101
T: (703) 2881681
Toll free: 1 866 936 2525
F: (703) 2881682
E: usa@barnabasaid.org
W: www.barnabasaid.org