Religions and the abolition of slavery - a comparative approach

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Economic historians tend to see religion as justifying servitude, or perhaps as ameliorating the conditions of slaves and serving to make abolition acceptable, but rarely as a causative factor in the evolution of the 'peculiar institution.' In the hallowed traditions, slavery emerges from scarcity of labour and abundance of land. This may be a mistake. If culture is to humans what water is to fish, the relationship between slavery and religion might be stood on its head. It takes a culture that sees certain human beings as chattels, or livestock, for labour to be structured in particular ways. If religions profoundly affected labour opportunities in societies, it becomes all the more important to understand how perceptions of slavery differed and changed.

It is customary to draw a distinction between Christian sensitivity to slavery, and the ingrained conservatism of other faiths, but all world religions have wrestled with the problem of slavery. Moreover, all have hesitated between sanctioning and condemning the 'embarrassing institution.' Acceptance of slavery lasted for centuries, and yet went hand in hand with doubts, criticisms, and occasional outright condemnations.

Hinduism

The roots of slavery stretch back to the earliest Hindu texts, and belief in reincarnation led to the interpretation of slavery as retribution for evil deeds in an earlier life. Servile status originated chiefly from capture in war, birth to a bondwoman, sale of self and children, debt, or judicial procedures. Caste and slavery overlapped considerably, but were far from being identical. Brahmins tried to have themselves exempted from servitude, and more generally to ensure that no slave should belong to

someone from a lower caste. In practice, however, slaves could come from any caste.[1]

Although Hindu opposition to slavery is seemingly not documented, Bhakti movements, spreading from the early centuries CE, stressed personal devotion to one divine being. They welcomed followers from all caste backgrounds, and thus at least criticised slavery by implication.[2]

Faced with the British colonial challenge, a new generation reinvented Hinduism as a reformed world religion, but still emphasised caste over slavery.[3] Ambiguous views of bondage were nicely illustrated by Mahatma Jotirao Phule of Maharashtra (1827-90). In *Slavery*, a popular and much reprinted book of 1873, he praised the Western abolition of 'Negro slavery,' but wrote only of caste struggles against Brahmins in South Asia.[4]

Buddhism

Buddhism grew out Hinduism, marginalising or rejecting caste, but with an ambiguous attitude to slavery. The canonical texts mentioned servitude without criticising it, and excluded slaves from becoming monks, although practice diverged from this norm.[5] The Buddha forbade his followers from making a living out of dealing in slaves, and showed compassion for their lot. Ashoka (r.269-32 BCE), the archetypal Buddhist ruler, inscribed in stone his injunctions to cease slave trading and treat slaves decently, but without eliminating servitude.[6]

Merciful Buddhist precepts may nevertheless have hastened a transition from slavery to serfdom, similar to that of mediaeval western Europe. Restricted to Sri Lanka and Mainland Southeast Asia by the

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1 Chanana 1960; Bongert 1963; Ramachandran Nair 1986.
2 Kumar 1993: 114.
3 Kusuman 1973: 133-4, 163-5.
4 Phule 2002: 2-99.
5 Mabbett 1998: 27, 29.

thirteenth century, Theravada Buddhist kingdoms contained many more serfs than slaves. The main goal of frequent military campaigns was to seize people and settle them as whole communities attached to the soil, sometimes on monastic estates. Unredeemed debtors, who were numerous, blended into this wider serf population.[7]

Serfdom, slavery, debt bondage and corvée labour were abolished in stages in the Theravada Buddhist world from the nineteenth century. Western imperialist pressure was significant, together with rising population, commercialisation of the economy, belief in the superiority of free labour, and royal desire to restrict noble powers.[8] However, a Buddhist revival, premised on a return to original texts and the exemplary life of the Buddha, also played a part. The initial Thai abolition decree of 1873 was couched in terms of Buddhist ethics, and the private correspondence of King Chulalongkorn (r.1868-1910) indicates that he was sincere in these beliefs.[9]

Confucianism and the East Asian synthesis

In East Asia, Confucianism generally dominated Mahayana Buddhism and Daoism in social matters. Confucianism initially only sanctioned forced labour for the state, inflicted on captives and criminals. However, private, commercial and hereditary forms of slavery and serfdom soon became rampant.[10] As Neo-Confucian reform movements spread from the twelfth century, some Korean scholars criticised private slavery as un-canonical and inhumane, for slaves are 'still Heaven's people.' Servitude engendered endless lawsuits, brutalised both owner and chattel, and undermined the family, the cornerstone of Confucian

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6 Moosvi 2003; Chanana 1960; Chakravarti 1985: 67-8.
7 Turton 1980; Feeny 1993: 88-90.
8 Feeny 1993.
9 Wyatt 1982: 175-8, 188, 192.
10 Palais 1996: 232, 235; Jenner 1998: 70-1.

ethics. However, other sages argued that patrimonial property should be protected at all costs.[11]

Ming and Qing Chinese rulers cited Neo-Confucian norms to improve the lot of 'mean people,' including slaves. A wave of servile uprisings prompted noted reforms in the 1720s. The authorities prohibited raiding, kidnapping, and trading in people, while tolerating servitude by birth, self-enslavement, and the sale of children in cases of dire necessity. Forced labour for life persisted as a punishment, and officials allocated such people to private individuals, but these 'state slaves' could be neither transferred nor manumitted without official permission. Moreover, the worst offenders were more rarely castrated than in earlier centuries.[12]

Confucianism was weaker in Japan, and Mahayana Buddhism may have played a greater role in the transition from slavery to serfdom, more or less complete by the tenth century. Serfs in turn slowly evolved into a free peasantry in early modern times.[13] Prisoners of war ceased to be legally enslaved from the early seventeenth century, although descendants of former captives might still be traded, and destitute parents continued to sell their children into some kind of bondage.[14] The modernising Meiji regime after 1868, faced with an upsurge in exports of girls to Southeast Asian brothels, passed a law forbidding all buying and selling of females in 1872.[15] A 'Japanese-sponsored cabinet' then imposed complete emancipation on Korea in 1894.[16]

In response to growing Western pressure, Chinese abolition became more secular in tone. The sale of girls, in part for export to Southeast Asia, provoked an international scandal from the mid-

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11 Palais 1996: 217-19, 232-7.
12 Meijer 1980; Rowe 2002: 497-8, 500-1; Huang 1974: 228-31; Tsai 1996: 17-19, 27-8; Jenner 1998: 71-2; Hellie 1993: 299.
13 Sansom 1978: 220-2.
14 Livingston 1976: I, 11-12.
15 Hane 2003: 208.
16 Palais 1996: 266.

nineteenth century.[17] The Qing thus took the ultimate step of abolishing slavery in 1906, to take effect in 1910.[18] The prohibition was repeated by the Republicans after they took power in 1911, and again by the Communists after 1949.[19] Even the latter found it hard to stamp out sales of abducted women and children, however. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was necessary to 'make propaganda to persuade rural people that buying women and children is wrong.'[20]

Judaism

Slavery was as old as the Torah, and posed few problems as long as outsiders were the victims.[21] Deuteronomy, 20:13-14, taught that 'when the Lord your God delivers [the city] into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves.' Leviticus 25:44 further allowed purchases of gentiles: 'Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves.'

Although holding Hebrew slaves grated with the founding story of liberation from bondage in Egypt, exceptions were made and safeguards were ignored.[22] Exodus 21:2-16 allowed the purchase of Hebrew children, but commanded the release of males in the seventh year of their bondage, and forbade kidnapping on pain of death. Deuteronomy 15:1-18 allowed self-enslavement, but called for the release of female as well as male slaves in the seventh year, together with the cancellation of debts. Leviticus, 25:10, further commanded that slaves be freed after seven times seven years, in the year of the jubilee.

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17 Lasker 1950: 52-3.
18 Hellie 1993: 293.
19 Watson 1980: 240.
20 Jenner 1998: 72.
21 Maxwell 1975: 23-5.

The prophetic books criticised slavery. Isaiah, 61:1-2, trumpeted that God 'has sent me ... to proclaim freedom for the captives,' and to 'proclaim the year of the lord's favour [the jubilee].' Ezekiel, 46:17, also referred to freedom in the year of the jubilee. Jeremiah, 4:8-22, identified disobedience in releasing Hebrew slaves in the seventh year as causing the wrath of God to fall upon his people. Joel, 3: 6, fulminated against the sale of Jewish slaves to Greeks, while Amos, 1:6 and 1:9-10, condemned the sale of 'whole communities of captives.'

Sects, flourishing around the beginning of the Common Era, took this a step further. The austere and pacifist Essenes, centred in Palestine, declared enslavement to be against God's will. Through John the Baptist, they may have influenced early Christianity. The Therapeutae, in Egypt, pronounced slavery to be contrary to nature. They probably reflected the ideas of Stoics and other Ancient authors, who opposed Aristotle's views on 'natural slavery.'[23]

Despite this sectarian ferment, rabbinical Judaism clung to slavery after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. At best, rabbis were uncertain whether uncircumcised gentiles broke purity rules by residing in the household, whether efforts should be made to convert slaves, and what impact this might have on their servile status. At the same time, they tightened rules on manumitting Jewish slaves, to keep the community united. The twelfth century Maimonides code recognised both Jewish and non-Jewish slaves, and the Genizah records of tenth to thirteenth century Egypt depict slavery as part of everyday life.[24] Early Modern rabbis debated whether it was right to hold 'Canaanite' gentiles as slaves, but Jews participated in Atlantic slave trading and slave production.[25]

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22 Davis 1984: 85.
23 Meltzer 1993: I, 44-5, 93-6; Quenum 1993: 16-18, 39-40.
24 Davis 1984: 88-92.
25 Davis 1984: 94-101; Faber 1998; Schorsch 2000; Jonathan Schorsch, personal communication.

The onset of Judaic repudiation of slavery came in the nineteenth century, when some Jews were affected by Western abolitionist fervour. Moses Mielziner's closely argued German dissertation, written in 1859, circulated widely in abolitionist circles, even if his views were hotly contested. The United States Jewish community split over the issue on broadly North-South lines, like their Christian compatriots. Even after legal emancipation in the United States, a minority of Jewish scholars 'continued to insist on the abstract lawfulness of human bondage as an ordinance of God.'[26] Jews in Islamic lands may have been particularly slow to take up the cause of abolition.[27]

Catholicism

The teachings of the Christian gospels generally valued the poor and humble, albeit with no specific references to abolishing servitude. It was hard to draw social lessons from the allegorical parables of Jesus, and Matthew 18:25 could even be read as accepting enslavement for debt. However, in Luke 4:18-19, Jesus, reading in the synagogue at Nazareth, cited Isaiah 61:1-2, proclaiming the year of the jubilee and freedom for 'captives.' Although the Greek word had the specific connotation of 'prisoners of war,' 'captives' in this passage was for centuries translated merely as 'prisoners.'

Saint Paul exhorted masters to treat slaves kindly, for all were equal before God, but commanded slaves to obey their masters. Paul's letter to Philemon, returning a fugitive slave to his master as a convert, has often been taken as the most detailed example of this attitude. Although Paul placed slave traders among the wicked in 1Timothy 1:10, there was a lack of any formal encouragement of manumission.

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26 Davis 1984: 82-4, 112; *Encylopaedia Judaica*: XIV, 1663.
27 Schroeter 1992: 203.

The early church fathers took opposing positions. Origen (c.185-254) approved of the Jewish freeing of slaves in their seventh year. Saint Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-394) went further, condemning the ownership human beings as contrary to divine and natural law. However, Christians listened more to the views of Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who held that servitude was 'the just sentence of God upon the sinner,' the fruit of both original and personal sin. Slaves taken in war were fortunate, for they were saved from death. Moreover, servitude accorded with civil law, was a guarantee of social order, and profited both slave and owner.[28] However Augustine recommended manumission, in the context of a strong tradition of people marking their conversion to Christianity by freeing their slaves.[29]

Controversy surrounds the role of Catholicism in the transition from slavery to serfdom, almost universal in north-western Europe by the twelfth century. The Church promoted the transformation, giving the example on its own extensive properties. Enslaving fellow Catholics was prohibited in 992, manumission was declared to be a pious act, and there was much contractual freeing after a fixed period, especially at the death of an owner. However, it remained licit to enslave heretics, Muslims, Jews, heathens, rebels against papal authority, clerics breaking their vows of celibacy, and those aiding the infidel. Popes themselves owned slaves, as did priests and clerical corporations. Canon law anathemised those who encouraged slaves to leave their owners, and incorporated aspects of the Roman law of servitude.[30] Saint Nilus of southern Italy (d.1005), taught that Genesis 9:5-6 allowed for the enslavement of fellow

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28 Quenum 1993: 41-5, 49; Meltzer 1993: I, 206.
29 Lengellé 1976: 14, 47.
30 Meltzer 1993: I, 207, 211-12, 218; Lengellé 1976: 59, 74-6; Quenum 1993: 44-51; Maxwell 1975: 18-19; Heers 1981: 247-61; Heers 2003: 43; Stark 2003: 290-1, 329; Davis 1984: 51-60; Hernando 2000: 226-43.

Christians who committed murder, but his may have been an isolated voice.[31]

In any event, there was a hardening of Catholic attitudes towards slavery from the thirteenth century, with the revitalised study of Aristotle and Roman law. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-72), the great Dominican theologian, opined that slavery was contrary to the 'first intention' of nature, but not to its 'second intention.' He relegated slavery to the family, outside the sphere of public law, and reiterated Augustine's points about the social utility of slavery and its origins in sin.[32] Saint Bonaventure (c.1217-74), a weighty Franciscan contemporary, admitted slavery's validity in civil law and as a punishment for sin, and yet denounced it as 'infamous' and 'perverting virtue.'[33] But it was Aquinas who became the greatest influence on canon law.

Catholic slavery went in curiously contradictory directions after the Black Death of the fourteenth century. North-western Catholics replaced serfdom with wage work, tenancy and sharecropping. Indeed, the soil of France gained the reputation of conferring freedom.[34] North-eastern Catholics eliminated the last vestiges of slavery, but participated in the rise of Eastern Europe's repressive 'second serfdom.'[35] South-western Catholics obtained fresh levies of Muslim, heretic, and Animist slaves, coming from the Black Sea, the Canary Islands and Sub-Saharan Africa.[36] Only gradually was this Mediterranean slavery restricted in the eighteenth century.[37]

It was south-western Europeans who took over the New World, developing a flourishing variety of Catholic slavery, with helots taken from the Americas and Africa. To be sure, papal bulls sought to end

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31 Kazhdan 1985: 215.
32 Quenum 1993: 47-9; Meltzer 1993: I, 211; Lengellé 1976: 14-15.
33 Quenum 1993: 48.
34 Quenum 1993: 127; Stark 2003: 305-7.
35 Hellie 1982: 696.
36 Furió 2000; Renault and Daget 1985: 35.
37 Davis 2003: 8-9.

Amerindian bondage from 1435, culminating in Paul III's three pronouncements in 1537 on protecting the subjects of Iberian kings. In passing, these texts also mentioned the rights of 'all other peoples.'[38] However, the same pope authorised the purchase and possession of Muslim slaves in the Papal States in 1548, 'for the public good'.[39] Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, Bishop of Meaux, fell back on Paul and Augustine in the 1680s to justify the new slavery of the Americas.[40]

The Holy Office of Inquisition pinpointed a central loophole in canon law in 1686, ruling that the right to freedom applied only to those who 'have harmed no one.'[41] Rodney Stark strangely fails to realise that this not only allowed the purchase of Africans and Asians taken in 'just wars,' but even permitted the continuing enslavement of un-subdued Amerindians. Serious crimes, slave descent and the benefits of conversion were further adduced to authorise buying unbelievers. Baptism might entail freedom in Europe, albeit not as a right, and rarely had the same effect overseas. A number of clerics spoke out against maintaining converts in bondage, but they were ruthlessly silenced.[42]

Eighteenth century Philosophes are usually portrayed as secularists, but they were mainly Catholics, who cited Christian texts in opposing servitude.[43] Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755), saw no contradiction between his Catholic faith and his attack on slavery.[44] He launched his celebrated offensive chiefly on grounds of incompatibility with natural law.[45] In 1721, he also put in the mouths of imaginary Muslim Persian visitors a satirical attack on Christian contradictions between growing freedom in Europe and spreading

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38 Stark 2003: 305-7, 329-32; Quenum 1993: 72, 79, 82, 98.
39 Prud'homme 2002: 76.
40 Lengellé 1976: 15-16.
41 Stark 2003: 333.
42 Quenum 1993: 86-90, 99-126, 139-42, 147-50, 162-4, 168-9; Prud'homme 2002: 76; Vila Vilar 1990; Pimentel 1995: 239-50; Marques 1999: 71-3.
43 Quenum 1993: 159-60, 164-8, 185-6.
44 Jean Ehrard, personal communication.
45 Wirz 1984: 187.

servitude in the Americas, associated with appalling mortality in the slave trade.[46] Among later major critics of servitude were two priests, Guillaume-Thomas Raynal (1713-96) and Henri Grégoire (1750-1831), although both fell foul of the Church for their radical political views.[47]

The trauma of the French Revolution made the Church intensely suspicious of liberty, but Pope Pius VII needed British backing for the return of the Papal States. He thus condemned the slave trade in letters to the kings of France and Portugal, in 1814 and 1823 respectively. His delegates also signed the Congress of Vienna declaration of 1815. However, the papacy quickly snuffed out incipient critiques of slavery in Swiss and German Catholic circles.[48] The employment of Muslim slaves in the Papal States lingered on, even if converts were usually freed.[49]

Pope Gregory VI's landmark ruling in 1839, that methods of enslavement in Africa were unjust, was the first public Catholic rejection of the slave trade. It owed something to continuing British pressure, but Gregory VI had been head of Propaganda Fide from 1826, and had gained an insight into how the trade hampered evangelisation. The pope's failure to condemn slavery itself pleased pro-slavery Catholics, notably in the United States, which no longer relied on imports of fresh slaves.[50]

Papal condemnation of the trade did not cause Monseigneur Jean-Baptiste Bouvier, Bishop of Le Mans, to alter his treatise on moral theology, first published in 1834. Employed in Catholic seminaries around the world up to the 1880s, this textbook followed Aquinas in teaching that owning people was underpinned by scripture, canon law, civil law, and natural law. Self-enslavement was acceptable, and servitude was preferable to execution after defeat or for a crime. Slaves should be

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46 Montesquieu 1960: 159-60, 249.
47 Quenum 1993: 190-6.
48 Quenum 1993: 222-7, 232-6; Stark 2003: 343.
49 Prud'homme 2002: 75-6.
50 Quenum 1993: 48, 236-40; Marques 1999: 263; Vila Vilar 1990: 26.

treated humanely, and emancipation was the ideal, but only through moral persuasion. Both slavery and the slave trade remained legitimate in theory, even if the latter might be rejected in practice for not conforming to the Church's rules.[51]

Even progressive Catholics remained cautious gradualists, warning of social cataclysm if slaves were to be suddenly emancipated.[52] Radical French priests of the 1840s denounced inhumane conditions, rather than the institution itself.[53] Catholic objections to Muslim servile eunuchs were undermined by the Vatican's own employment of castrated singers till 1878, even if they were free.[54] Some abolitionist writings were relegated to the index of prohibited books. As late as 1873, Pope Pius IX referred to the alleged 'curse of Ham' afflicting Africans, thereby underpinning a racist religious argument for servitude.[55] Alexis de Tocqueville noted acutely in 1831-32 that racism resolved the contradiction between freedom at home and slavery overseas, but only by 'inflicting a wound on humanity which was less extensive, but infinitely harder to heal.'[56]

The Catholic turning point of 1888 was not exempt from ambiguity. In that year, Brazil became the last Catholic country to end slavery in law, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie launched his crusade against slavery in Islam, and Pope Leo XIII addressed an encyclical letter, *In plurimis*, to Brazilian bishops. The latter opened with a reference to Luke 4:18-19, with 'captives' now interpreted to mean 'slaves' rather than 'prisoners.' However, the pope presented no reasoned refutation of traditional Catholic justifications for slavery.[57] Moreover, he called on missionaries to

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51 Prud'homme 2002: 77-86.
52 Davis 1984: 114.
53 Prud'homme 2002: 85.
54 Croutier 1989: 129.
55 Maxwell 1975: 14-17, 20.
56 Lengellé 1976: 54.
57 Prud'homme 2002: 86-7; Quenum 1993: 240.

intensify the ransoming of slaves, a practice which risked intensifying the trade and corrupting clerical morals.[58]

Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox churches

The views of Eastern Orthodox Christians have been little studied. Byzantine law codes from the sixth to the ninth century modified the Roman inheritance by stressing the humanity of slaves, and by providing increased protection for them.[59] However, obdurate Muslims, as descendants of Hagar the slave concubine of Abraham, were natural slaves, and servile tribute may have been taken from Balkan Animists.[60] Individual clergymen could own slaves, but not clerical organisations.[61] At best, the Byzantine Church recommended freeing converts.[62] From the eleventh century, 'semi-feudal relations' also tended to replace slavery, seen as 'an evil contrary to nature, created by man's selfishness,' even if permissible in law.[63]

A few Russian priests and monks voiced opposition to slavery prior to the transformation of slaves into serfs in 1723, but the Church as such took longer to embrace freedom.[64] The clergy began to murmur against servitude as clerical serfs were being 'secularised' between 1701 and 1764, and as serfs came to be increasingly, if illicitly, sold independently from the land.[65] Old Believers, schismatics with millenarian and mystical inclinations, were perhaps even more hostile to serfdom and slavery,

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58 Lazzarotto 1982: 46; Clarence-Smith forthcoming.
59 Hellie 1993: 293-5.
60 Kazhdan 1985: 218-19; Cahen 1970: 215-16.
61 Hellie 1982: 75.
62 Hellie 1982: 73-4; Kazhdan 1985: 219-19.
63 Kazhdan 1985: 215, 219, 222-4.
64 Hellie 1982: 585-6.
65 Kolchin 1987: 38-9, 41-6, 225, 374-5.

although this needs to be demonstrated.[66] Some Russians, including serfs themselves, drew on the biblical story of release from Egyptian bondage.[67] From timidly opposing the abuses of owners, 'leading churchmen evinced growing disenchantment with serfdom,' because it disrupted family and spiritual life.[68] Symbolically, the Archbishop of Moscow drafted the decree of liberation in 1861.[69]

The Eastern Orthodox church of Egypt appears to have hesitated for a long time before rejecting slavery.[70] A British official declared in 1881 that not a single indigenous Egyptian Coptic Christian opposed slavery. However, *al-Fayum*, a Christian newspaper edited by Ibrahim Ramzi, condemned buyers of slaves as 'barbarians' during a famous trial in 1894. Indeed, the newspaper stood alone in doing so.[71]

The allied Ethiopian Orthodox church adopted Judaic and Byzantine prescriptions of bondage, reflected in the thirteenth century Fetha Nagast code. Clerics even gave credence to the Curse of Ham, applied to 'real' Blacks.[72] Nevertheless, the Ethiopian church expressed occasional doubts about servitude.[73] Emperor Tewodros (r.1855-68), a deeply religious monarch, banned the slave trade and tried to root out the enslavement of Christians. Repeated by his successors, the prohibition on slave trading remained a dead letter.[74] Measures against slavery proper, culminating in a 1942 decree under British military occupation, were patchily enforced.[75]

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66 Nolte 2004.
67 Moon 2001: 31-2.
68 Freeze 1989.
69 Seton-Watson 1952: 43.
70 Elbashir 1983: 70, 140; Baer 1969: 167.
71 Powell 2003: 143, 154.
72 Hellie 1993: 294; Derrick 1975: 152; Greenidge 1958: 46.
73 Moore-Harell 1999: 409.
74 Trimingham 1965: 118-19; Renault and Daget 1985: 221.
75 Greenidge 1958: 46-7; Derrick 1975: 152-4; Renault and Daget 1985: 221-6.

Protestants

Emerging from the early sixteenth century, Protestants were initially preoccupied with assuring their own uncertain future. Trusting in faith rather than works, and often believing that only a finite number of humans would be saved, they focused on the unacceptability of slavery on European soil. They tended to duck the question overseas, although a few early Spanish converts condemned the trade.[76] Protestant owners avoided the moral dilemma of possessing fellow Christians by delaying baptism till slaves were at death's door.[77] At best, Pierre Jurieu (1637-1713), an exiled French Calvinist, wrote in the 1680s that an implicit pact between masters and slaves should govern the treatment of the latter.[78]

The millenarian and mystical Quakers initiated a radical attack in Pennsylvania in 1688. Valuing works and intuition as much as faith, they believed that the 'internal light' of Jesus could override the letter of scripture, and that all wars were illegitimate. John Woolman (1720-72), an early environmentalist and evangelist of Native Americans, launched an uncompromising onslaught from the 1750s.[79] The Quakers proclaimed that owning slaves was sinful, citing Matthew 25:40, 'whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' From this they deduced that 'to enslave a "Negro" was to enslave Christ.'[80]

Shamed by Quaker activism, most Protestants shifted their perception from sin as slavery to slavery as sin, and preached this new gospel with fervour.[81] To back their campaign, they scoured the Bible, and interpreted both Isaiah 61:1-2 and the citation of this passage in Luke 4:18 as rejecting slavery. Their world was largely cleansed of servitude by

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76 Hellie 1993: 293; Schorsch 2000: 125.
77 Quenum 1993: 104.
78 Lengellé 1976: 15.
79 Punshon 1984: 69, 115-19, 162-4, 167-8, 179-81.
80 Stark 2003: 340-52.
81 Hellie 1993: 292.

the Union's victory in the American civil war of 1861-65, although a few theologians continued to maintain the legitimacy of servitude.[82]

Islam

The founding texts of Islam were ambiguous about slavery, and it could be argued that a certain libertarian ethos reigned briefly. In the early Meccan phase of Muhammad's preaching, he was heavily reliant on marginal elements in society, including slaves. In the later part of his mission, however, Muhammad was effectively the ruler of Medina, and became less dependent on such groups.

Sectarians were most likely to be critics of slavery in the first centuries of Islam, especially millenarians in the Isma'ili tradition. The only unambiguous process of abolition was that enacted by the Druzes in the eleventh century. This had no obvious consequences for emancipation among the wider Muslim community, but sectarian views of slavery remain a somewhat obscure subject, and further research may hold surprises.

A new phase of Islamic unhappiness with slavery emerged in 'gunpowder empires' from the sixteenth century, this time emanating from enlightened despots and their religious advisers. Many reformers simply concentrated on clipping the wings of elite slaves. The usual explanation is that such slaves constituted an obstacle to political and military efficiency. However, royal collaboration with sharia-minded ulama has been underestimated. More work needs to be done on attitudes to elite slavery in the context of the wider desire for conformity with holy law.

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82 Davis 1984: 107-8, 112-13, 136-53; Pétré-Grenouilleau 2004, ch. 4; Quenum 1993: 206-16.

Some rulers went further, questioning the legitimacy of modes of enslavement. It is perfectly plausible to argue that this was intended to head off damaging rebellions, as reforms emerged mainly in areas where numerous subjects stubbornly refused to convert to Islam, as in the Balkans, India, West Africa, and Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the possible religious wellsprings of these measures need to be scrutinised, especially as a deeper unease about servitude surfaced here and there, hard to explain purely in terms of social and political tensions.

Western diplomatic and military intervention, from the late eighteenth century, was partly justified by a desire to suppress the slave trade and slavery. Writers desiring to portray anti-imperialist leaders as spotless heroes have thus tended to downplay violent Muslim reactions, or even deny them altogether. As the lustre of nationalism fades, examples of strong-armed defence of slavery need to be recognised more openly, and dissected more dispassionately.

Much less research has been undertaken on Muslims who took the opposite tack, believing slavery to be a deviation from the path of God, and therefore contributing to the community's weakness. From the 1870s, radical and gradual rationalists, together with moderate literalists and progressive ulama, could all be placed in the broad category of opponents of slavery, despite their manifold disagreements. In the present state of research, it is difficult to tell what audience they had among the bulk of the faithful. The greatest uncertainly concerns the beliefs of slaves themselves, especially when they imbibed millenarian ideas of justice filling the earth.[83]

The majority of the faithful eventually accepted abolition as religiously legitimate, but pinpointing this crucial moment is difficult. Khaled Abou el Fadl, writing at the dawn of the third millennium, is vague: 'Muslims of previous generations reached the awareness that slavery is

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83 All this first section on Islam is based on Clarence-Smith 2006.

immoral and unlawful, as a matter of conscience.'[84] Reuben Levy is probably overly optimistic in thinking that victory had been achieved by the 1950s, for examples of slave holding, and belief in the legitimacy of slavery, abounded in that decade.[85] The 1960s seem to have constituted the true watershed, when an Islamic accord against slavery triumphed, hastened by secularist agitation, and mainly informed by the cautious gradualism of Amir 'Ali.

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference [OIC], emerging from1969 as an association of Muslim governments, financed a conference on human rights in Belgrade in 1980, co-sponsored by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO]. The published proceedings asserted the right to freedom, and rejected the enslavement of prisoners and conquered peoples.[86] Representing 54 countries by 1990, the OIC published the 'Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam.' Article 11a stated that, 'human beings are born free, and no one has the right to enslave, humiliate, oppress or exploit them.' The authors hedged their bets, however, stressing that all human rights were subject to the authority of the shari'a.[87]

There remains the tricky problem of estimating the size and influence of Muslim groups who refuse to accept the new consensus. Persistent manifestations of bondage in remote deserts could be dismissed as antediluvian relics of scant significance, but urban literalists are also calling for the restoration of slavery, considering the legitimacy of the institution to be engraved in God's law. Internet web sites defending such views show that this position is no mere archaic remnant in Islam.

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84 Abou el Fadl 2001: 269.
85 Levy 1957: 88-9.
86 Boisard 1985: 4, 107, 124.
87 http://www.humanrights.harvard.edu/documents/regionaldocs/
Cairo_dec.htm

A dogged refusal by some Muslims to accept the modern consensus about the sinfulness of slavery is not unique, although surprisingly little is known about such strands in other faiths. Islamic minorities refusing to let go of slavery have perhaps been larger, or at least more vocal, than in other religions. At one level, this merely reflects the entrenched position of Islam across the great arid zone of the Old World, where environmental conditions have impeded the penetration of new ideas. However, a certain reluctance to let go of slavery also stems from a broader salience of traditionalism and literalism, in a faith which often perceives itself as singled out for persecution by a triumphant West.[88]

Conclusion

Deeper studies of religious attitudes towards servitude and abolition are urgently needed, because the subject has generated so much vulgar polemic. Serious scholarship is often the first casualty of the heated exchanges that sizzle along the internet, filtering into a varied range of publications. Participants in such controversies rarely heed Jacques Jomier's wise words that no religion is in a position to cast the first stone in the matter of slavery.[89]

To achieve the eradication of slavery throughout the world, and to avoid the danger of its resurgence, people of all beliefs should begin by uniting in humble apology for the pain and sorrow inflicted on generations of coerced and humiliated human beings. Every world faith has condoned some version of servitude in its time, including the atheistic creed of Communism. However, there were always courageous people, prepared to row against the current by denouncing evils that those of their own persuasion accepted.

88 Clarence-Smith 2006.
89 Jomier 1988: 102.

Above all, there is a need for a better understanding of why adherents of different belief systems accepted slavery for so long, and why and how they ceased to do so. Replacing partisan diatribes by sober and self-critical assessments is a priority, which could do much to heal current rifts between religious communities. Re-emerging in the late twentieth century, to the surprise of many scholars, these tensions threaten to tear our world apart.

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