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Islam and the Abolition of Slavery by William Gervase Clarence-Smith

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REVIEW ARTICLE

ENSLAVEMENT AND ABOLITION IN MUSLIM
SOCIETIES

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Islam and the Abolition of Slavery. By WILLIAM GERVASE CLARENCE-SMITH.
London: Hurst & Company, 2006. Pp. xxvi + 293. £26.40 (ISBN 1-85065-708-4).
KEY WORDS: Ideology, Islam, slavery, slavery abolition, sources.

REVIEWING this book, I must confess, has not been an easy job; at times, it was perplexing, confusing and frustrating. On the one hand, Professor Clarence-Smith is a well-established economic historian of Asian and African societies, with special interest in 'Islam'. I have known his work for many years, and found much of it sound and interesting. On the other, after more than two decades of research into enslavement in Ottoman and other Islamic societies, and three books, the volume at hand made me doubt my own understanding of what the relevant sources and the main concepts in the field are, and what the research agenda should be. Conversely, we might entertain the view that a great deal is wrong with the book under consideration here.

The problem begins with the title, or rather with the concept implied by it. As controversial as Edward Said's *Orientalism* might be, few scholars would doubt that it has contributed some major ideas to the discourse on Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, and even beyond. One of the valid points Said made was about essentializing Islam. Most of us in the field have come to use 'Islamic societies' rather than 'Islam', in recognition of the great social, political and cultural diversity within the vast expanse of peoples and countries where the religion of Islam is adhered to. To generalize in this context has become simplistic and superficial; it is to ignore the significant and often determining impact of local practices and cultures and to privilege an often unsubstantiated, ahistorical universal view of 'Islam'. Thus, an attempt to discuss the history of enslavement in societies as distant and different as Morocco and Indonesia is bound to be either shallow or simply wrong. By insisting on the large framework rather than looking at enslavement during a specific period in, for example, the Arab Middle East, the Ottoman Empire, Iran, West Africa or the Indian Ocean world, Clarence-Smith produces an analysis of what are often 'apples and oranges'.

It is obvious that the author not only is fully aware of that variety of practices, but even tries to offer in each and every chapter observations about different regions in different periods. However, he somehow fails to draw the inevitable conclusion from his own account, i.e., that these cannot be put on the same plate, perhaps not even on the same table. Moreover, throughout the book, he fails to convince us why it should be important or even analytically useful to lump all Muslim societies together. It is surely true that one common denominator should be the fact that Islamic law governed all these societies through time, which might have been a reason for examining them under the same umbrella.

However, Clarence-Smith himself provides a clear account of the diverse legal practices in Islamic societies, and, no less, of the fact that in all of them Islamic law vied with customary law and social practices, often losing to them. So, with at least four different schools within Sunni law, we must also contend with Shi'a law, various heretic legal systems, Sufi interpretations and what-not, before we even begin to account for the dynamic changes over time within each of these categories. Nonetheless, Clarence-Smith, who himself lists these varieties, keeps framing his whole discussion of enslavement in an Islamic context. To boot, early on in the book, he himself declares that there were many similarities in types of slaves and modes of acquiring them between 'Islam' and other civilizations, although he insists that 'the central suggestion made here is that Islam played a neglected role in the process [of abolition]' (p. 2).

This is hardly the place to go into the problematic view of Islamic history which seems to inform the present book. Suffice it to mention that the available sources increasingly show that it is unhelpful to stress dichotomies and ruptures instead of gradations and continuities, when dealing with the diverse aspects of Muslim societies and polities. Thus, it is less acceptable nowadays to separate law from practice, orthodoxy from Sufism, 'religious' from 'secular' in societies where a 'secular' option did not really exist until modernity; so, too, with regard to enslavement and the phenomena linked to it. Enslaved persons were exploited in a variety of tasks in a broad array of life situations, but these were not strictly and clearly differentiated from each other, and were rather placed on a continuum of options that need to be historicized and locally interpreted. That is, to generalize in this context is to overreach and miss much, if not all, of the story – its nuances, its intricacies, its magnificent complexity – and replace them with banal observations and an illusion of comprehending some elusive 'big picture'.

Despite these and other conceptual flaws, the book is neatly structured, well organized and elegantly written. The Introduction discusses enslavement in Islamic societies from the time of the Prophet to virtually the present day. This is a fairly concise and useful account of the distinct types of enslavement in different Muslim societies and over more than a millennium. Part I is devoted to 'The Contradictions of Slavery', where the various and often conflicting approaches of Sunni orthodoxy, the Shi'a and divergent sects, other dissenting voices, custom and the later states are discussed. This is mainly a legal survey, though the author attempts not to neglect social practice, in as much as this is at all possible in such a large-scale framework. Part II, 'The Roads to Abolition', looks at the ways in which the question of abolition was broached in various Muslim countries by the state, the elites or legal-theological thinkers and movements.

Professor Clarence-Smith strictly adheres to a systematic structure whereby each chapter begins with a brief presentation of the issue at hand, then proceeds to survey a few cases deemed relevant to the points he wishes to make, and then concludes with a concise lead and summation. In the case surveys, each sentence is studiously followed by a reference footnote, presumably to authenticate these essentially state-of-the-art summaries. The lead summations invariably are not conclusions or definite pointers, but rather suggestions as to where future research should go. We are systematically urged to 'unearth' and 'examine more carefully' (p. 48), told that some direction of research is 'an important task to undertake', while another 'remains to be securely established' (p. 64), prodded to undertake 'more research on ...', advised that further study 'might reveal ...', that '[m]ore work is thus required ...' (p. 83), counseled that 'what is required is a systematic piercing together of ...' (p. 96) or that 'research should not be confined to ...' (p. 97) and so on, in each of the book's eleven chapters.

Such a patronizing attitude towards generations of scholars – on whose work Clarence-Smith's book totally relies¹ – might have been more acceptable if it came with the scholarly authority acquired after a lifetime of research into the primary sources available for the study of enslavement in Islamic societies. Unfortunately, this is far from being the case here. It is truly amazing to find that the author has not used a single source emanating from the relevant cultures and societies themselves and written in any of the four major languages used by Muslims over the centuries. Instead of using and citing sources in Arabic, Persian, Turkish or Urdu, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* is based entirely on published studies in European languages and published translated sources. It thus ignores not only sources in the languages of Muslims, but also all the research published in their countries. How, we must ask, can anyone gain the slightest insight into the intricacies of such a complex phenomenon as enslavement without delving into the intimate accounts of the enslavers and the enslaved?

What is so frustrating about this endeavor is that the author surely invested a great deal of time and energy in covering a huge amount of material for this book. Professor Clarence-Smith manages to cite every secondary source on Islamic slavery I ever came across, and probably much more, but lamentably, he did not go beyond that. His book is, therefore, a synthesis of the existing literature on the subject in European languages and an informed attempt to describe the main issues in the discourse. Since I suspect that he himself would hardly deny that, this may explain the relative hesitancy and equivocating tenor of his narrative when summing up each chapter and suggesting agendas for future research. However, precisely because of this weak base, the agendas ring hollow, exuding the air of talking points put together for someone else to deliver a speech; Clarence-Smith himself will never follow these agendas, because to undertake them one would need to use extensively sources in languages that are accessible only to those who can read them. Based on their familiarity with the original sources, such scholars will, in all likelihood, prefer to problematize the issues in radically different ways from those he advocates. Herein, I would argue, lies all the difference.

The available sources for studying the history of enslavement in Muslim societies are diverse but ultimately quite limited in volume and, perhaps, also scope. These sources are, for the most part, narrative, archival, archeological and artistic. Archaeology is only recently emerging as a promising ground for research, so far mainly in African and Middle Eastern societies. Narratives by enslaved persons are few and scattered, but we are still hopeful that more will come to light in the future. Art in its various forms is an important source, and new methods to exploit this type of evidence for reconstructing the history of enslaved people are being developed. The most promising archival sources thus far have been court records – those both of Shari'a courts and of the new reformed courts of modernizing Islamic states – and a variety of central and local government records, as well as foreign consular archives. Family papers are preserved in more cases than hitherto believed, and those of enslaver families may contain more references to the enslaved.

In general, however, it is important to understand that, for various reasons, both social and cultural, enslaved persons are not ubiquitous in the sources. The fact is that evidence about enslavement in these societies is hard to obtain, hard to retrieve and decipher and even harder to contextualize and interpret. Hence, many of the items on the agenda for research proposed by Clarence-Smith are unlikely ever to find the evidentiary base for proper interrogation. This is the bad news; the good

¹ Amazingly and strangely, the author mentions no fewer than 188 names in the Preface and Acknowledgments section of the book (ix–xiii).

news is that many of the items on that agenda are not really of much interest, concern or relevance to the study of enslavement in Islamic societies.

This is so not only because, as already pointed out, enslavement is – as indeed are many, if not all, aspects of social, cultural and even political life – most fruitfully and effectively studied within local and regional contexts rather than within a universal, Islamic one. Also, the very question of abolition is a dubious topic to pursue as part of the history of enslavement and has always been a problematic topic to investigate. Many of the well-known polemics pitted a self-righteous, enlightened-liberal Occident against a denial-ridden, defensive and apologetic Orient. One discourse was moralizing, patronizing, fault-finding, while the other was seeking to redefine the very notion of bondage and to recast the problem in terms of value-free sociocultural difference. Unfortunately, no real dialogue between the two has evolved, since much was believed to be at stake – the very reputation of civilizations as humane and virtuous versus inhumane and barbaric. It is not the ‘facts’ themselves that need to be unearthed, but rather their implications that need to be faced and owned up to. Lamentably, as long as these are inextricably bound to religious and national sentiments, not much will be gained by researching anti-enslavement across cultural–religious barriers.

Without actually spelling it out, Professor Clarence-Smith does bring out the paradox in Islamic attitudes towards enslavement throughout history: Islam, as a system of belief, meaning and law sought from its inception to mitigate enslavement and limit its scope, but practice and custom prevailed in most societies where Islam dominated the social order. In modern times, however, the reverse occurred: governments in Islamic societies – bowing to European pressure or acting to serve their own interests – worked to gradually phase out enslavement and stop the slave trade, while literal interpreters of Islamic dogma and law continued to support the practice as divinely sanctioned. So what was abolitionism in such contexts? Can we at all use here this loaded, essentially foreign, term in a meaningful, historical sense? Should we bother to?

True, some historians might find it worthwhile to study lone abolitionist voices in an otherwise solid anti-abolition discourse. But then, some historians would always insist that the unrepresentative is important in and of itself, regardless of its social and political significance. Even if we examine with good intentions the scant evidence that Clarence-Smith himself provides in his book, we cannot but conclude how very few and very far between such voices indeed were. Considered within the huge dimensions of the Islamic World and the extended period of time allowed by the author for these voices to have emerged, the phenomenon appears so marginal and ephemeral that it cannot possibly deserve to be called a ‘sentiment’, let alone constitute a ‘subversive current’ or be described as a ‘movement’. Why, then, we may ask, does Clarence-Smith insist on this unpromising line of investigation and rather forced research agenda?

Well, one answer is obviously that our author does not share this reviewer’s assessment of the value, potential and promise of studying abolition – or what I prefer to call anti-enslavement – in Islamic societies. Indeed, he firmly opines that ‘[d]eeper studies of religious attitudes towards servitude and abolition are’, no less, ‘urgently needed’, and this is ‘because the subject has generated so much vulgar polemic’ (p. 233). Now, serious scholarship, we are asked to believe, is the weapon with which we can fight the venom spewed into the Internet by Islamophobes – and presumably also by West-haters and anti-Semites. Well, so much for extreme naivety and pipe dreams. My own strong impression, however, is that a huge and frustrating disconnection exists between serious scholarship and the stuff we see on the Internet, watch on the electronic media or read in the print press. Hate bloggers, sad to admit, do not read the scholarly works that could

change their views. More modest goals might perhaps be more realistic, and, personally, I would gladly settle for serious and revisionist scholarship about Islamic societies having some impact on textbooks taught in elementary schools and high schools.

Furthermore, Clarence-Smith also believes that by leveling the playing field and spreading the blame for enslavement evenly among all religions, we will somehow be able to 'heal current rifts between religious communities' (p. 233). Do not be too judgmental, be compassionate and brotherly love will reign supreme. In other words, the research program he advocates in this book has a clear purpose in mind – it should yield an account that would invent, *ex nihilo*, strong anti-enslavement traditions and vibrant abolitionist movements in past Islamic societies the world over. So much for keeping an open mind when reading the sources, developing research questions and pondering hypotheses. This is the agenda, we are told, go ahead and find the evidence to back it up.

Sadly, we might add, if Clarence-Smith's vision of one, unified 'Islam', or Islamic civilization, were to prevail, this would only enhance prejudice and the dangerous notion of a war of civilizations, i.e. precisely the kind of idea our author desperately wishes to ward off. Also, if scholars were to undertake, in earnest and honesty, extensive studies of anti-enslavement manifestations in Islamic societies, their work would most probably reinforce the kind of negative view of 'Islam' that Clarence-Smith is so eager to revise and reconstruct. But there is no real threat of that, as it is highly unlikely that serious historians of enslavement in Islamic and non-Islamic societies will heed Professor Clarence-Smith's call to reshape their research agenda in the direction he is suggesting in *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery*. They will probably continue to follow the available original sources in order to construct the kind of narratives that the evidence can support. But scholars in adjacent fields should be alerted to the problems discussed above, and students – impressionable, trusting, idealistic and naively enthusiastic as they often are – ought to be cautioned to avoid the pitfalls that abound in the story told to them by a respectable and eloquent professor.