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## Slavery in the Americas: Economic, Cultural, and Religious Consequences

Slavery extended widely over the Americas for over four centuries. Its main purpose was to make money. Slavery was not an accident of history. It is at the very foundation of civilization in the West and is to be viewed as its running costs. It is ironic that slavery developed in the West at the very time that reason and the Enlightenment were at their peak. The fact that human exploitation and suffering could lay the foundation for the nations of the Americas should be reason for profound thought and repentance.

### I. The Economic History of Slavery

Our account of this aspect of slavery must be brief. A survey is needed, however, to put slavery in its context. Slavery existed in early times, both in Greek and Roman societies. The Book of Exodus is an account of Egyptian slavery to which the Hebrews were subject. Slavery declined between the fifth and eighth centuries A.D. It was usually found at the household or domestic levels. In the non-Christian world of the Mediterranean, slavery experienced a renaissance between the eighth and thirteenth centuries. Muslim invasions explain somewhat this increasing use of slaves.

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The identification of slavery with sugar was well established before the conquest of America. The slave plantation based on agriculture developed on the islands on the east side of the great Atlantic Ocean. Later this same pattern of slavery in association with agriculture was transplanted in the New World.

The arrival of the Portuguese on the West Coast of Africa in the 1400s marked a major new development in slavery. Here we refer to the intensity and sources of slaves as well as to the diverse uses to which slavery would be put. At first the Portuguese were mainly concerned with the control of the North African Saharan routes to the sea. Slaves, pepper, ivory, etc. were of secondary interest.

With the introduction of sugar and the opening up of the Western hemisphere to European conquest at the end of the 15th century the volume of slaves increased significantly. About this time Portugal settled in the Gulf of Guinea and established trade relations with the Kingdom of the Kongo. Priests and advisors were sent to the court of the Konglese king and his representatives. These were placed on Sao Tome, a Portuguese stronghold.

These changes occurred as the Spanish conquered the territories in the Caribbean islands. Portugal was also settling Brazil. These events opened up the New World market to slaves. The Arawak and Carib peoples were being decimated. Here developed the first major zone of European occupation.

The acculturated and Christianized Blacks from the Iberian peninsula had been the first Africans forced to cross the Atlantic with their masters. Now it was non-Christian, non-Latinized and non-Europeanized Africans who were transported directly from Africa. These latter Africans were to define the new plantation model of slaves.

At first both Spain and Portugal experimented with Indian slaves. European diseases depopulated the Indians. Indians could

easily escape. Africans on the other hand, were kinless and totally mobile. Africans came from many tribes and language groups, the European language was the only language they had in common. Africans were more conformable than the Indians to European norms. The total control which slavery required could not be forced upon the Indians. Since Portugal had considerable experience with African slaves earlier, it was a matter of course that they turned to the African slaves. The British and the French followed the lead of Portugal in the slave trade.

## II. Economics of Slavery and Dehumanization of the Africans

Slavery became an established institution in the New World. Consequently an abundant supply of slaves was demanded. Forts and bases were established along the Ivory Coast and other outlets to the sea. Slaves were captured through raids in the interior, or through wars between the tribes instigated by the slavers. In exchange for slaves the Europeans brought fabrics, copper, glass, and firearms for the African kings. Slaves came from Dahomey, Congo, Angola, Guinea, and even from southern Africa.

During four centuries, around 11,700,000 slaves were brought to the Americas. Some estimates reach more than 15 million. The average rate of mortality was 13 percent. During the 18th century Britain alone provided between two and three million slaves to the colonies. France transported about one million in 3321 ships. In 1774 Black slaves in the United States numbered 500,000. At the same time around two million slaves were in Brazil (1778). There was no English, French, or Dutch colony that was not provided with slaves. In 1788 Lamacia, a most prosperous British colony, had 256,000 slaves. St. Dominique, France's greatest source of wealth, had 405,828 slaves.

As slavery reached its zenith in the Americas, Africa was being decimated. Young Africans were captured in large numbers.

Slaves over forty years of age were usually rejected by the slavers. The demand for Africans for enslavement was never completely satisfied. Africa was undergoing a decline as its people were being enslaved. Slavery demanded its strongest, brightest, and best people. Crafts, weaving, metalwork, and agriculture were in steady decline. The irony of history is that many of these same European powers would colonize Africa, again for profit. By the time they decided to discontinue slavery in the 19th century, the continent was crippled beyond repair—one in every four Africans was a slave.

Crossing the Atlantic was a tragic ordeal. It took around forty days to make this journey. Ships loaded some four to five hundred slaves who were chained two by two at the feet and stacked in the hold as one might stack books. Hunger, and diseases like dysentery, made slave ships floating tombs. Ill-treatment added insult to injury. Beatings were savage. The slave was nothing more than livestock, subject to the sadistic whims of their proprietors, whether on land or sea.

A slave was a slave for life and any children were destined to be slaves. Slavery is correctly referred to as an empire of death, a slow agonizing death. The average life-span of a slave was seven years. To be a slave was to have a beaten and broken body. Slaves wore rags for clothes and the children were naked. The only relief from this tragic condition was death. Few had a decent burial in a shroud. Most were buried in filthy rags.

Europeans had to make clear their absolute domination over their slaves. For this purpose no treatment was too severe. For example, the slave master would have red-hot irons applied to the tender parts of the body. Other punishments were such as these: tying to a stake, having insects gnaw to death, burning alive, chaining and then setting dogs or snakes to the heels, raping women, and any other painful, degrading, and dehumanizing torture. Slaves who were considered rebellious or lazy rarely survived

their punishment.

In addition to physical abuse there was psychological torture. Slaves were branded, their names were changed, white men took Black women as concubines at will. Everything was done to blot out kinships and to produce cultural amnesia. Slaves were to be zombies, the living dead, totally subjected to their master's will.

### III. Anglo-Saxon Slavery: Distinction Without A Difference

It is important to point out some special characteristics of Anglo-Saxon slavery in the United States. This we will do briefly before drawing some comparative conclusions regarding culture and religion as influenced by slavery. There is a distinction between slavery in South America and in the United States. This is due to the British outlook on both religion and politics. On the other hand slavery is slavery in any or all locations. It is a cruel and inhuman institution wherever and whenever it occurs.

Blacks first came to the United States in 1619. They came before the Mayflower. We as Blacks have had a long and tortured history in this country.

The people who established the first colonies, in what is now the United States of America, were mainly British. They came for "an errand in the wilderness" and with "a Manifest Destiny." Like the Spanish, who led the conquest in the heart of South America, they had mixed motives, both religious and political. When cotton became king, the population centered more on the southern region. These settlers were mostly dissenters—both religious and political. Their religion was Puritanism and they were in quest of political freedom.

When we look at slavery in the Americas we have to consider the confluence of cultures and political points of view. Spain and Portugal divided up South America. Portugal settled in

Brazil. Spain expanded through the rest of that region. Several European powers carved up the Caribbean Islands. An island like Trinidad was influenced by more than one European power, e.g., the Spanish and the British. In a general sense we can say that South America was latinized or Iberianized. The leading influence upon the United States was British. Again, Latin America was mainly Roman Catholic. Those who carried the cross and wielded the sword were from the same metropolitan centers of Europe.

In South America statecraft was monarchical, with authority extending from the crown to the colonies. The rich natural resources of the colonies were seized by Spain and Portugal. Wealth flowed in one direction—away from the colonies. Church and state were tied together. The church socialized the program of the state. The close ties between Spain and Portugal secured this Iberian type of religion and social organization. The pattern of slavery was similar in this vast territory.

In the United States slavery was considered an economic necessity. The mix of ideologies among the colonists in the United States was to lead to an uneasy conscience. On the one hand, there were Puritans who saw God's hand in the brutal institution. Their mission was to "civilize" and "Christianize" slaves, once they were assured that they had souls. But with a platonic dualism in mind they were able to separate the destiny of the body from that of the soul. With a strong Calvinist theology to support them, they could see God's judgment and power manifest in this evil system. They saw every African as a heathen, and their task was to stamp out all African cultural survivals, religious or otherwise. Their mission was to prepare the Africans for heavenly rewards, with no regard for fulfillment in this life. At same time, there were those who loved freedom among the British. The Revolutionary War testified to this strong hunger for liberty. Among the dissenters were Anabaptists,

Quakers, and others who would soon see that slavery was an unmitigated social evil. It was in conflict with their reading of the Bible and their social awareness. It also conflicted with their political desires for liberty. In a sense, the dissenters who came to the United States brought with them the very ideas that would fuel the abolitionists who advocated the freedom of the slaves in that land.

The discussion on a comparison of slavery in the Americas, North and South, leads us to a final concern, the mixture of religion and culture as a result of the enslavement of Africans in the New World.

#### IV. Slavery: Religious and Cultural Developments

In South America slavery was generally approved by the European nations. The church, the state, the nobility, and public opinion were solidly behind it. Few questions were raised concerning the right to enslave Africans. There were those who were prepared to endorse slavery, thoughtfully and theologically, whenever the issue was raised.

The myth concerning the son of Ham and the curse, was in circulation during the Middle Ages. This source gave biblical endorsement to Spain and Portugal as they raided Africa for slaves. It is important to understand the evil of slavery to better comprehend the diabolical depths to which human beings can sink in the exploitation of other humans.

In both Americas, and the islands in between, slavery eventually required some ideological justification. Thus the myth of Ham was gradually grafted on to an anthropology of the "negro savage." The African slave was described as barbarous, cannibalistic, lazy, polygamous, prone to human sacrifices, and with no taste whatsoever for freedom.

A vast literature developed and was circulated in the 18th and 19th centuries to support slavery. It was disseminated throughout Europe. Its purpose was to present such a dismal picture of Blacks that Western opinion would be totally insensitive to the hell of slavery.

In the United States conversion was presented as a total deculturation experience. Through conversion to the Christian faith, Africans were taken from an heathen environment. Slavery was an instrument of God for that purpose. They now, thanks to God's holy purpose, could be brought within his kingdom. In order to experience salvation in the full sense, all African traits and beliefs had to be erased. The views of the Catholic Church in South America were quite different. These require some discussion.

The Iberian Catholic Church was locked in its scholastic, medieval form. The understanding of its theology and doctrine of the church was different from views in Western Europe that had been influenced by the Reformation, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and other movements. There was a special understanding of Christ that enjoyed wide influence. Christ was still nailed to the cross. There was no emphasis upon the resurrection. The mother of Jesus was exalted to the level of "a cult of Mary." Thus this Spanish Christ presented a "powerless" Christ to a powerless people. Christ suffered with them, but could not deliver. Over against this Christ was a Christ who supported the powerful, the rich, and the leaders of church and state. This latter Christ was insensitive and unapproachable. Mary, the mother of Jesus, therefore, was the Indian's and Black slave's replacement for Christ.

Thus the conversion of Indians and Blacks took on a particular outlook and manifestation for the suffering masses. African gods became Roman Catholic saints. Aspects of traditional African religions were brought under the new way of life.

### A Critical Conclusion

The comparative study of slavery in the Americas is extremely significant. It speaks volumes about human history. It also reveals much about human nature. It presents an instance in which the love of money becomes the root of a gross evil. As a Black American, a descendent of slaves, I feel the pain and suffering of my ancestors. It is a human tragedy in history which continues to yield much pain for Black people in the Americas.

Slavery says much about personal sin and guilt. But it also demonstrates collective evil. The evil of slavery was transnational. It casts light on the hypocrisy of the so-called Christian nations as they participated in the sale of human beings as if they were brute animals. Until this day Westerners have not come to grips with this institutionalized evil. The shadow of slavery still hangs over us, especially in the United States. Slavery and its tragic consequences still linger in the personal psyche and collective memory of nations like Brazil and the United States. Argentineans either killed off or sold their Black slaves. Their position is one of lost consciousness and lost memory. But such gross evil as slavery is best removed by repentance and efforts to right the injustices associated with this gross inhumanity. Unless such crimes of history as slavery and the holocaust are remembered there is the frightful possibility they may be repeated. God forbid that this should happen.