

Human Trafficking

Many non-Muslims who are otherwise favorably disposed to Muslims voice concerns about our selective approach to human rights. As evidence they point to the demands that Muslims make for their own human rights, but not for those outside the faith. Why they ask, do Muslims demand justice in Palestine, Chechnya, or Bosnia but not in Myanmar, to cite but the latest example. And they ask, more pointedly, why Muslims turn a blind eye to their own human rights trespasses, as against non Muslim in their midst, for instance, or against other Muslims of opposing sects or ethnicities? Darfur is perhaps the most poignant example of their lament, for it is where our failings as exemplars of human rights come together quite starkly, and where no clear condemnation seems forthcoming, even from those in the religious hierarchy. Then again, I could be wrong: perhaps our leaders are not indifferent to the plight of all humans but simply distracted by the minutiae of the human condition, by the politics that so often foments human tragedy, or the partisanship that makes difficult the ethical apportionment of blame. Or perhaps they are just awaiting a human rights issue that is truly universal, truly humanitarian: if so, then human trafficking might just be what they were looking for.

My own introduction to this, the latest in humanity's self inflicted wounds came by way of an invitation to participate in the UN's International Conference to Combat Human Trafficking. In attendance were leaders of all the world's major religions. . .except Islam. No Muslim leader from the Islamic heartlands bothered to attend; this, despite an earnest effort on the part of UN officials to include as many delegates from the Muslim world as possible—or so they claimed. And yet, this conference was meant to highlight what is perhaps the greatest challenge human beings face since the abolition of institutionalized slavery. And it affects Muslims as much as it does all others, in places such as Iraq, Bosnia, and Afghanistan.

The aim of the conference was to use the influence religions wield to nip human trafficking in the bud, or if not that, then to least rehabilitate those who fall through the cracks. Former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, reminded participants that institutionalized slavery, officially abolished in some parts of Europe some two centuries ago, was now reemerging in the form of an informal trade in human trafficking. The latter is fast becoming the crime against humanity, to the extent that it may well surpass even the atrocities of slavery in its darkest moments! This, because slavery even in its most barbaric forms was less dehumanizing, less undignified, experts say, than human trafficking often is. They cite sexual exploitation as one example: the emphasis on sexual value in human trafficking was, even in the most egregious cases of historical slavery, singularly absent. In the past sexual exploitation was largely a by product of economic slavery, whereas today it serves as the primary motivation for abducting and holding people against their will.

But some similarities persist. Modern human trafficking, like its counterpart in antiquity, is selective in its choice of victims: as in the past, so today, the ideal victim belongs not to one's own race, religion, or ethnicity, but to one that happens to be either in conflict with one's own community or far removed from it. But whereas in the past the choice was based on ethnic or racial otherness, today that same choice is based largely on gender and

age, which in itself, may further be refined by location and vocation. Thus, forcibly marrying off pubescent girls to geriatric males is common more to South Asia and the Gulf than to other parts of the Muslim world. By contrast, sexual servitude is more likely to be the pattern of human trafficking in places such as Iraq. Recent reports show a growing tendency among victims of the war to sell their daughters into sexual servitude in neighboring countries.

In the West where sexual immorality is almost always trumped by individual liberty determining where sexual exploitation begins and where free market commerce ends is far from easy. The former, within the framework of today's moral order is strictly speaking a private matter governed by the individual's conscience whereas the latter is an individual liberty the state is sworn to protect. As a result, victims of human trafficking who are forced to sell themselves, are hard to separate from entrepreneurs willingly using their natural assets to improve their financial conditions. The overall responsibility of the state to protect individual rights to sexual freedom on the one hand and to economic freedom on the other makes difficult the task of determining whether the principle of willing buyer willing seller is operative in each sex for sale transaction.

Which is what makes human trafficking so ideal a point of entry for those in authority within Muslim circles wishing to contribute to the culture of human rights. We ought to urge our Imams, Shaikhs, and others to see this tragedy as an opportunity to give new meaning to the verse: “. . .If anyone kills one person it would be as if he has killed all of mankind; and if he saves one person, it would be as if he has saved all of mankind.”