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Slavery in the 21st Century

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Slavery in the 21st Century

Slavery has existed for millennia, and has been the norm throughout most of human history. The modern aversion to it is not new; nor will the dedication to eradicate slavery spurred by this aversion eliminate the problem. The dilemma is that each generation must fight slavery. Eradication this century does not mean it will remain gone in the 22nd century. The real issue is a moral one. Do people, nations, and international organizations (both for profit and non-profit) desire to fight modern slavery? Many organizations are fighting it, but the allure of immense profits from free labor, forced sex trade, sale or trading of persons, and the advantage of child soldiers on a battlefield apparently keeps plenty of unscrupulous slave traders in business. This paper attempts to demonstrate that slavery is a larger problem than most understand, does exist in the United States, and will outline some effective means to combat it. For purposes of this paper, “slavery” can include persons of any sex or age, but is limited to the following: those forced into traditional slavery (forced non-compensatory labor), those forced into the sex trades (sex trafficking), children forced to take up arms, serfdom (born into a legal or customary arrangement where a person is not free to go work for another), and those forced into debt bondage. “Forced” shall be understood to mean physically or psychologically coerced (such as a threat against family members). This paper does not consider child labor slavery, unless that child is not allowed to decline the employment (by either employer or parent). Freedom of contract is an essential human right and those who freely accept a position regardless of the wage should not have that right infringed upon.

Slavery as Idea

The notion of modern slavery is bifurcated; first, that one person (or group) is stronger or more powerful than another person (or group) and since the stronger can control the weaker, then

it is acceptable to do so. It is primarily motivated by power and greed. It is the typical understanding of slavery, such as existed in the U.S. prior to the Civil War, and throughout much of history. The second type is more of a religious or socio-cultural slavery. This is prominent in Africa (as well as areas of Asia and Southeast Asia) where often “members of the same ethnicities and communities [were] enslaving one another” (Nunn, 2004, p. 3). In some communities, penance for a sin or crime is performed by delivering a young child (typically a daughter) to the local priest, as is the case with the Trokosi in Ghana (Hawksley, 2001). This is a perennial penance, so when the slave dies, another must be given in her place. Although this is religious and cultural in nature, there is an economic factor. Although laws in Ghana make this practice illegal, no one is freed without a payment and no one has been arrested (Ibid). The laws in this case are ineffective for lack of implementation.

Both aspects are similar in that “dominant value orientations” of the in-group (the owners) are not necessarily applicable to those in the out-group (the slaves) (Staub, 1999, p. 57). Both aspects also must devalue the person and objectify them. Cornel West draws an applicable conclusion saying that although “radical feminists and cultural radicals of the sixties” have contributed to the “cultural undermining in America... corporate market institutions have greatly contributed... in order to stay in business and make a profit. The reduction of individuals to objects of pleasure is especially evident in the culture industries – television, radio, video, music...” (1993, p. 181). West rightly points to the fact that economies drive this sort of objectification of human beings. When a person can be objectified they are much easier to exploit within a criminal enterprise. There is a demand, and hence the entrepreneurs provide the avenue. But this is not the situation in the religious and cultural vein of slavery. This paper does not intend to further discuss the second type of slavery, as a different method of dealing with the

situation is needed to address the cultural and religious notions of slavery. Neither is this the major problem. Hawksley (2001) points out that in Ghana there are 3,000 known women slaves. Compare this number to the estimates by the U.S. State Department showing 600,000 to 800,000 persons are trafficked across borders annually, usually for forced labor or sexual servitude (U.S. Department of State, 2005, Trafficking in Persons Report [DOS-TIP]). This number does not include incidence of intrastate trafficking, which would yield far greater numbers. Also, this paper does not consider so-called “state of mind” slavery (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [UNHCHR], Fact Sheet No. 14, Contemporary Forms of Slavery).

Brief Historical Overview of Abolition

Slavery is a historical practice that has only in the last 150 years or so become a national and international debate. Largely coinciding with the rise of industrialization in the West, many religious leaders pushed to abolish slavery in its legal format, such as Quaker Benjamin Lay (ca 1737), Jonathan Edwards, and William Lloyd Garrison (Library of Congress, African American Odyssey). The War Between the States ended legal slavery in America, and about 50 years later, the League of Nations ratified the Slavery Convention (in 1926) which sought to suppress and abolish all forms of slavery. The UN General Assembly in 1953 and 1956 amended the Slavery Convention to bring it in line with UN Protocols and augment the definitions and expectations. Other important documents include the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (1949), the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (1957), and Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000, not in force) (UNHCHR, A Compilation of International Instruments). The attention that the issue has been getting, even as recently as 2000, from the

international community indicates that slavery and human trafficking is still a major issue in a global context.

The Human Problem

Slavery is anti-human. It is, according to author Mark Thornton, the “antithesis of humanity, depriving man materially, socially, and spiritually and contributes especially to the fragility of family bonds. Even in its most platonic form, it leaves scars of resentment, detachment, and fear that can last for generations” (2005). Slavery has been legally done away with, but the practice still occurs the world over. An article just out today discusses the problem and that the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate just passed a bill strengthening the U.S. human trafficking laws and added \$361 million over two years to combat it (Worldnetdaily, 2005, U.S. “takes lead” to Combat Human Trafficking). The article continues stating that there are at least 90 U.S. cities where forced labor has been uncovered and over 3,000 people worldwide were prosecuted last year for trafficking in persons (ibid). Another Worldnetdaily article from 2004 states that 10,000 persons were enslaved in the U.S. at that time. (Right now in U.S., 10,000 in slavery). The article also breaks down the type of forced labor; one half are in sex trades or prostitution, about a third are domestic workers, and one-tenth work in agriculture (ibid). The slave population largely comes from China, Mexico, and Vietnam, but persons from at least 35 other nations have been reported to be victims in the U.S. as well. The largest problems are where large immigrant populations exist, New York, California, Texas, and Florida (ibid). A BBC new article reports that worldwide, 27 million persons have been forced into slavery (BBC News, 2002, Millions ‘forced into slavery’). This is no minor issue.

The Security Problem

Perhaps not as important as the human problem, but certainly a matter of great concern is the security problems associated with slavery and trafficking in persons. As has previously been discussed, the motivation typically is power and greed. This is problematic in that often these motivators are extremely strong and those involved are often organized, secretive, and willing to do anything to continue their illicit trade to turn their profit. Often those participating in trafficking are from former Eastern Bloc countries, where they gain valuable experience operating black markets and avoiding detection, working the system, and bribing/blackmailing those in authority. John Gannon, Chairman of the National Intelligence Council is clear, that human “trafficking is the second most profitable criminal activity – following only drug trafficking” and with profits as high as they are and being of relatively low risk of prosecution, it is likely only to increase (2001).

The major issue is the windfall profits which allow these illicit organizations to strengthen their positions politically (through bribes, for example) and internationally (through organizing and formalizing procedures). Typically, those caught are the peons or soldiers, and the industry can replace those people easily. There is a second issue at hand; the methods smugglers employ can just as easily be used by terrorists to bring homicide bombers or weapons of mass destruction. This is unsettling in the least.

Finally, the power that these organizations have would typically not be felt in larger, developed countries such as the United States or Britain, but if they gain enough power to gain some legitimacy (such as happens with insurgencies like the LTTE and FARC) they will serve to destabilize democratic efforts throughout the world.

Stopping Slavery

Slavery will not be stopped in its entirety around the globe absent a massive global reduction in general freedom. The goal, though, must be to eradicate it for moral reasons. The realist must recognize that diminishing slavery is likely the best that can be hoped for. The methods that ought to be used involve a two-fold approach. First, slavery only occurs when there is someone willing to exploit and control another human. In a very real sense, slave traders only participate because they see a market that can be tapped. Although the immense profits are fueled by the illegal nature of the product they are peddling, this is not a situation where decriminalization can be considered. There must be a frontal attack on the *demand* side of the slave trade. This would involve investigation, training of beat officers regarding methods and markers, and a close working relationship with prosecutors, who must be willing to pursue aggressive prosecution of those looking to purchase or facilitating the purchase of humans (to include sex tourism websites, child pornography distributors, “travelers”, and prostitution of minors rings).

Secondly, there should be an attack coordinated on the *supply* side of the slave trade. Securing borders, ports, and coastlines is necessary to eliminate interstate trafficking into the U.S., but intrastate trafficking would entail aggressive investigation and prosecution of kidnappings, child sex rings, missing persons, and organized crime. This only deals with part of the problem. Most of the supply side emanates from other countries, where the U.S. does not typically assert jurisdiction. Coordination, liaison, provision of training, and financial assistance have been the typical routes. But there also needs to be an educational component for children, and a basic level of morality taught. Even a mere “human rights” morality with no notion of God could be helpful, although children are not brainless and may well see the inconsistencies many adults do not.

In conclusion, one caution that must be offered is that although “slavery is fuelled by ‘poverty, vulnerability and lack of political will,’” (BBC News, 2002, Millions) it is also fueled by cultures of violence, philosophical solipsism and nihilism (perhaps related to the decline of Christian thought and increasing acceptability of humanism and postmodern philosophies), and rampant immorality. The belief that slavery can be eliminated as a major global issue absent any real global spiritual-moral change is naïve. The only method possible would have a result that could only be a power base which sets up standards of right as defined by conventions, with no real moral bearing except whatever the reigning powers determine right to be. From here it is not a far step from utopian ideologies where freedom cannot exist. Although slavery is a human rights tragedy, it would be just as tragic to take away the freedoms of others in the process of combatting human trafficking.

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