

FREE INDEED

THE MODERN CHURCH'S OPPORTUNITY TO END SLAVERY, AGAIN

BY AUSTIN CHOI-FITZPATRICK

“To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons are free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce.”

PAULO FRIERE

In the dead heat of India I sat with the heads of 40 families. Each member of each family—a total of 200 men, women, and children—had been enslaved to break rocks in a quarry until their family's US\$1,000 debt was paid off. The amount they owed was extraordinarily high, as most bonded laborers in India are enslaved for debts of US\$40 to \$50.

These facts are not new. In India between 15 and 17 million people are enslaved by landowners who extract labor for years, sometimes generations, as repayment for these small debts. What was new, at least to me, was the vigor with which these men insisted that they actually owed the money and that they were legally and morally bound to pay off the debt to the quarry owner. It took several hours of discussion to convince them that, despite the threats of the owner, and despite his use of violence, both international and Indian law agreed on one point: The use of debt or violence by one person to enslave another is illegal. Their heartfelt conviction that they carried a legitimate monetary debt, and their desire

to do what was morally right by repaying that debt, bear testimony to the psychological and economic forces that sociologist Kevin Bales has called “a chain around the brain.”

SLAVERY STILL EXISTS?

Over the past few decades an increasingly vocal contingent of the modern evangelical church has been emphasizing the cause of the poor. While this interest has taken different forms, sometimes patronizing and sometimes empowering, the overall discourse has generated more useful understandings of the poor as both oppressed and capable. And yet, despite this attention, one group seems to have gone relatively unnoticed for quite some time: the poorest of the poor, the most oppressed of the oppressed, the truly voiceless: slaves.

Over the last 15 years slavery has reemerged around the globe. By slavery I do not mean powerlessness in the face of consumer culture. Nor do I mean wage slavery. What I mean is slavery pure and simple: the total control of one person by

another, through the use or threat of violence, for economic gain. By this definition an estimated 27 million people live in slavery today, at least 10,000 of them in the United States at any point in time. Slavery is what it has always been, an opportunity for those with relatively more power to exploit those with relatively less power. This is exactly what was happening to the families of those 40 men I interviewed on that sweltering day in India.

Around the world the legislative and moral struggles to end slavery have resulted in repudiation of the practice. Over the past 150 years slavery as a social institution has gone from being universally accepted to being universally condemned. Today nearly everyone agrees that owning a slave oneself or participating in an economy that relies on slave labor is wrong.

The way slavery is practiced has morphed in the face of this moral consensus. While the core nature of slavery, a highly dysfunctional, violence-laced relationship between two or more people, hasn't changed much, modalities and methods have. Gone are the days of slave ships, stockades, and hereditary ownership. While the power exerted by contemporary slaveholders is as insidious and invasive as ever, it is far more hidden. Instead, complicated systems of obligation and violence persist. The old cues and indicators have been erased, but not the vicious exploitation that strips humans of their dignity and freedom. In its modern manifestations, slavery affects the same people it always has: the poor and vulnerable, the marginalized, women and children. Their vulnerability to slavery is amplified by other factors: migration or displacement, armed conflict, domestic violence, sexual assault, corrupt or indifferent governmental officials—the list goes on.

Kevin Bales, the world's leading expert on modern slavery, points to several reasons that slavery is on the rise. The population explosion over the last century has resulted in an unprecedented number of people looking for work. This competition has driven down real wages as human life becomes cheaper and cheaper. Globalization has resulted in earth-wide systems of supply and demand, unprecedented mobility, and increasingly sophisticated technology. The slave trade (often referred to as "human trafficking") has never been more efficient. Finally, those whose lives have been disrupted by these social and economic changes are vulnerable to the greed, corruption, and violence of the powerful. This unsettling combination renders the poor exposed to corrupt governmental officials who look the other way when individuals, criminals, and companies, concerned only with economic gain, violate the rights of the poor.

Opposite: Trafficked children in northern India are forced to weave carpets that may find their way into homes in Europe and America. (Photo: Free the Slaves)

This new slavery manifests itself in different forms around the world, where its victims suffer in a variety of ways. In the United States, at least 10,000 people are enslaved at any point in time, forced to work as prostitutes, domestic servants, and in the agricultural sector. Around the world millions more women, children, and some men are forced into prostitution. China and Burma use slave labor in prisons or on state-sponsored construction projects. In South Asia, bonded laborers like those I spoke with in India are enslaved by hereditary obligation, often for petty debts. In 30 countries some 300,000 child soldiers are used and abused in violent conflict. Chattel slavery, the actual ownership of one person by another, is still practiced in Mauritania and in some parts of the Sudan. Far from extinct, slavery is currently claiming more victims than at any other point in human history.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

What is the church's role in mitigating this suffering? In what ways might the church, whether in the North or South, the East or West, become more intimately involved in the struggle for the freedom of those suffering in slavery? It shouldn't be surprising to learn that some answers lay a mere 150 years back in church history, in England and the United States.

Many leaders of the abolitionist movements in both countries were what we today would recognize as evangelical Christians. In England, Christian activists and politicians joined together both to lobby Parliament and to prick society's conscience. Across the Atlantic, American abolitionists drew dual inspiration from the Enlightenment and the revival of protestant evangelicalism that was sweeping the nation.

With their emphasis on the individual, both movements triggered unprecedented debates on slavery. Motivated by their beliefs and empowered by their economic resources, Quakers in both countries promoted an inclusive and emancipating message. (Then, as now, Christians held differing opinions about their civic duties. Should abolitionists focus on emancipation exclusively or on larger social issues such as women's suffrage and the plight of the urban poor? In retrospect, the answer should seem painfully obvious).

Christian entrepreneurs like the Tappan brothers invested tremendous amounts of personal wealth into the cause, founding Oberlin College (the country's first college open to all: black, white, male, female), funding newspapers, and paying the salaries of prominent abolitionists. The popular evangelist Charles Finney spoke out from the pulpit against slavery. Traveling abroad, British and American missionaries also contributed to the abolitionist movement. Serving in the Congo, African-American missionary William Shepherd provided critical testimony to the exploitation suffered by slaves at the hands of King Leopold of Belgium.

In voicing their opposition to slavery, abolitionists were exercising leadership and moral entrepreneurialism within their faith communities and their secular communities. This was no small undertaking, given that they were speaking out against the powers of the day: industry, commerce, government, as well as much of the religious community. Working relentlessly, they created the world's first human rights organization (the Anti-Slavery Society, now called Anti-Slavery International), adopted new technologies, utilized the popular media, provided clear actions their supporters could take, and based their actions on solid research.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE MODERN CHURCH?

This admittedly edited glance back in history provides a strong basis for those seeking to push the modern church towards a more proactive and public faith. Current anti-slavery work is being conducted by heroes like Father Ricardo Rezende, a priest who advocates for landless peasants enslaved by landowners in Brazil. Both historical context and contemporary pioneers provide valuable lessons in how communities of faith can step forward to bring modern slavery to an end. The transnational nature of the church is perfectly suited for the global engagement of this issue from the grass roots to world stage. It also has access to vast economic and human resources and is able to mobilize extensive networks to affect government policies and social programs.

Biblical teachings are consistent in their exhortation for social activism on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed. Solomon emphasizes the importance of advocating for those

who are destitute and cannot speak for themselves (Prov. 31:8). Micah clearly states that practicing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly are practices required by the Creator (Mic. 6:8). Jesus himself identified the weightier matters of the law as being justice, mercy, and faith (Matt. 23:23).

Furthermore, the modern church is presumably in possession of those holistic tools necessary to address the physical, mental, and spiritual needs of survivors. At its best, the church is able to serve as a guide in the struggle for hope, love, joy, and forgiveness—critical components of whole freedom. These characteristics represent vital steps in the restoration of human relationships that have been badly distorted by greed, corruption, and violence. Activist educator Paulo Friere echoes Jesus' teaching that the "first shall be last," stating that the unique task of the oppressed is to become the "restorers of the humanity of both [the oppressed and the oppressor]."

WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN?

One challenge to the modern church is to give voice to and partner with those it seeks to serve. Failure to do this in earlier movements has left us with a painful legacy of heroic white men freeing powerless "creatures" rather than seeking the empowerment of the oppressed in their struggle. The lauded abolitionist William Wilberforce once said about slaves that upon emancipation, "Taught by Christianity, they will sustain with patience the sufferings of their actual lot... [and] will soon be regarded as a grateful peasantry." The Christian enterprise should always be to bring into better focus the humanity of those suffering from social exclusion and oppression and to place individuals at the center of their own emancipation.

The second challenge involves changing the way in which many people view the issue of slavery. Modern slavery and the modern slave trade are often considered issues primarily involving the sexual exploitation of women. We must be unequivocal in our denunciation of all crimes against women, but this step, however necessary, is only the first. American consumers must also be willing to investigate the oft-murky connections between the products we purchase daily (coffee, sugar, cotton, chocolate) and slavery. Similarly, almost half of

Left: Ten boys freed in a raid by Free the Slaves' partner Bal Vikas Ashram wait to give evidence against those who enslaved them. (Photo Free the Slaves/Supriya Awasthi)

Opposite: Recently freed children now receive care and education from Free the Slaves' partner Bal Vikas Ashram. The sign behind them reads, "Every child has the right to bread, play, study, and love." (Photo: Free the Slaves/Supriya Awasthi)



the slavery occurring in the United States occurs in homes, farms, and sweatshops. The challenge to seek out the cause of the oppressed is a radical one, as it necessarily challenges both class interests and moral sensibilities. It is critical that those accepting this challenge not infantilize victims (or survivors) of slavery by treating them simply as the weak in need of rescue by the strong.

The third challenge is to combat a general lack of awareness in the Christian (and American) community of the global stage on which they, their church, their community, their denomination, and their investments play a role.

Faced with such a moral imperative and with access to such vast resources, how can the church not see its way through these challenges to the task of ending slavery? This goal can be advanced if the modern church:

- Raises awareness of the conditions in which too many of God's children live.
- Uses its voice to focus attention and resources on poverty, exploitation, and oppression as moral, rather than civic, issues.
- Mobilizes to support research on modern slavery, advocacy for victims, services for survivors, and initiatives to bring systemic change at the local and global levels.
- Bases all actions on practices proven to bring sustainable change in the lives of those in need.
- Invests responsibly. Recognizing the global reach of our economic decisions and the many ways in which we are all connected to slavery, we can commit to reforming the systems that encourage this exploitation. (For example, at the time of writing there was no convenient and reliable way to verify that a host of commodities—from coffee, cotton, and oil to timber, fruit, and sugar—have been produced without slave labor.)
- Supports organizations committed to ending slavery.
- Prays to increasingly represent a faith that is a blessing to the earth and its inhabitants.

Few groups in the world are better poised than the modern church to aid the movement to bring a message of hope to the millions of people forced to work against their will and deprived of their income. Because of the progressive, pro-poor, first-shall-be-last nature of Christ's teachings, Christians should have the vision to articulate an anti-slavery message from the vantage point of freedom. Now is the time for the church to once again support and pioneer the struggle to end slavery in our lifetimes.

We must see beyond elitism to a world in which all members of society are protected and paid fairly. We must see past paternalism to a place where the oppressed articulate and



realize their own freedom. Obstacles exist, most of which represent the ways in which systems of exploitation benefit many of us in industrialized societies. Yet Christian ideals of sacrifice, humility, forgiveness, and hope will stand in good stead a people committed to a world in which slavery is a distant and painful memory. The modern church has the moral imperative, the historical precedent, and the economic capacity. What is needed now is action. ■

Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick is outreach associate for the Washington, D.C.-based Free the Slaves, the sister organization of Anti-Slavery International, the world's oldest human rights organization. Free the Slaves works towards a world without slavery by conducting research, educating policy makers, supporting grassroots efforts to end slavery, and supporting slave-free trade. For more information on modern slavery and the efforts being taken to end it, visit www.freetheslaves.net.

Resources

Dreams Die Hard, a short film on slavery in the United States that shows people of faith engaged in combating and surviving slavery in America.

Community Members Guide to Ending Slavery, a pamphlet explaining more about how communities can take action to stop slavery.

Hidden Slaves: Forced Labour in the United States. (Free The Slaves and Human Rights Center/UC Berkeley, 2004).

Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy by Kevin Bales (University of California Press, 1999).

All resources available from **Free the Slaves** at www.freetheslaves.net or by calling (202) 638-1865.