

ISLAM AND FREE WILL

A) HISTORICAL CONTEXT



Brutal forms of slavery were rife across the globe in the 5th century – with trade markets and businesses across both the Eastern and Western hemispheres benefitting from the sale of enslaved men and women. Entire kingdoms depended upon slavery to safeguard their economies, while the lifelong enslavement of Prisoners of War (including women and children) was a marker for any tribe or country's status and power. It was in this world context, that the revelations of the Quran were communicated to Prophet Muhammad

(PBUH) in the 7th century. Arab society – just as in other societies of the time – was steeped in the daily trading of human beings for profit and gain, with physical abuse, rape, starvation and ill-treatment of those enslaved being common practice.

The Quran does not shy away from the fact that slavery exists, just as it does not shy away from all other forms of abuse mankind is capable of. By recognising the depth of slavery's roots, over the course of the 23 years of its revelation, the Quran established an entirely new ethical viewpoint on the issue of slavery. Its objective was to gradually revolutionise mindsets. The Quran provided strong guidance and templates to those benefiting from the use of slaves on how to free themselves from treating other human beings as chattel.

B) FREE WILL

Islam in its essence came to abolish all forms of slavery created by mankind, whatever form it took, whether it was financial debt, forced marriage, domestic enslavement, prostitution or enforced slave labour. All were ordinary facets to everyday society at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the many prophets who came before him (peace be upon them all).

The negation of one human being's free will by enslavement is, at its core, incompatible with the teachings of Islam. Islam after all, expounds the importance of free will. And humans by definition, are beings in possession of "free will" and are permitted to choose between the paths of good and evil independently.

After all, if we cannot be forced – nor force another – to believe in God/the faith as expounded in Surah Al-Baqarah (below), then surely forcing another human being into positions of unwanted servitude is as unacceptable in Islam?

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ

"There shall be no compulsion in the religion."

Islam in its very meaning therefore encompasses freedom, and free will. Whilst the word 'Islam' is often translated as simply 'submission' or 'surrender', this submission to Divine Will is made in pursuit of peace for oneself. Ahmed Rehab, an American Muslim activist eloquently surmised this premise by saying Islam is 'to freely submit one's will to God's, in pursuit of divine peace'.