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Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations

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The Ismaili contribution to the Islamic rejection of slavery

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Introduction by Assistant Professor Stefan Weber

He is writing is not on everything, but on very many places, from South East Asia to the Middle East also on many different topics, so we are very happy to have you today and his work in normally on very different topics, crops, food production stock, slavery, Christian-Muslim relations, so quite range of topics, but he offer something to talk about which has to do with the Ismaili community and we are very happy to listen to you, thank you for coming.

Talk by Dr William Gervase Clarence-Smith

Thank you very much, normally you come to hear somebody because they can give you information, but I have come here today really to ask you for information. I am very interested in this topic, because I wrote this book on Islam and the abolition of slavery, which goes back to the origins of Islam and covers the whole Islamic world including Muslims in the new world. I became increasingly interested in the question of the broadly speaking sectarian contribution, Muslims who are not Sunni Muslims are about 15% of the total Islamic population today, but they played a role, which seems to me to be much greater than that small number would suggest in the slavery issue.

Now Ismaili groups from their origins have tended to be seen as 'libertarian' and, 'libertarian' is one of these words which can mean lots of different things, but obviously one of these it could mean is to oppose slavery. They have also been a tendency to social levelling, Marshal Hodgson wrote that they were a champion to ordinary people in the name of justice. So we have this kind of picture of Ismailism as a radical levelling form of Islam. Now Maxime Rodinson, who was a Marxist, who was a bit suspicious about all that kind of stuff, argued that and I am quoting him here in translation, "with rare exceptions, there was no question of contesting the hereditary status of slaves". So he says that, that was a kind of limit beyond which the Ismailis would not go, that they might be radical, that might be socially levelling, but they didn't contest slavery. Unfortunately he didn't specified what his rare exceptions were, which would have interested me enormously, it is



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not entirely clear that the rare exceptions were to do with slavery anyway, because I have slightly truncated the citation and there are other things to which Rodinson was referring. But it seems to me that, with respect to slavery, this is too strong a statement, I think Ismailis did actually contest slavery. What complicates the picture and the question is the millenarian input. A lot of early Ismailism was highly millenarian in nature, it was about the coming end of the world and it was about the Imam Mahdi who was going to come to fill the world with justice, as the phrase always has it, as it has hitherto been filled with injustice. Now Mahdiism is in a way and millenarian Islam is in a way a separate topic, because it was not specifically or exclusively an Ismaili phenomenon, in fact from the early modern era, millenarianism becomes essentially a Sunni phenomenon across the Islamic world. So the kind of strong connection between Ismailism and millenarianism is an early aspect and one would certainly be mistaken in reducing Ismailism to Mahdiism or vice-versa, but it does interfere in the sense that, if you think that the earth is about to be filled with justice, what do you do about slaves. In fact historically, Islamic millenarians have not necessarily opposed slavery, some have, some haven't, so we are again in that kind of situation of not being terribly clear as to what effect of that would be.

So to move specifically into the growth of Ismailism and its relationship with slavery, in the case of Qarmati or Qarmatians as they are called in English sources, we have the semi-legendary figure, Hamdam Qarmat in the 9th century in Iraq, and the allegation is that he held slavery to be unlawful, and this comes from Sayyid Amir Ali, the great 19th century Shi' theoretician from India in the late 19th century and early 20th century, from a book he published in 1917. Unfortunately as is often in the case with Sayyid Amir Ali he didn't cite any sources, so he didn't tell us why he thinks that Qarmat tells slavery to be unlawful, and on the face of it, it seems to be pretty unlikely. I think the origins of this myth may come from the fact that, it's alleged that the Qarmati were in alliance with the Zanj rebels, the 3rd great Zanj rebellion of slaves in Iraq, but that is in itself problematic and there is certainly no actual cooperation ever shown between, they may have negotiated, but they never seem to have cooperated, the Qarmati and the Zanji and in any event, the Zanj rebellion was a profoundly ambiguous event, although it was a revolution by slaves, it was not necessarily an abolitionist revolution. In fact there was a lot of evidence to show that Ali Bin Mohammed, who was the leader of the Zanji, simply aimed to invert the social pyramid, so that when you took Basra for instance, he made many *Sharifas* into slaves, a classical inversion of the social pyramid, rather than being against slavery *per se*. So I think this is really a bit of red herring, and if you look at the Bahrain Qarmati state from the 890s, this has been described as a precocious welfare state and I think you probably wouldn't expect find slaves in a welfare state, but in fact what we find is that all this welfare is actually based upon 30,000 purchased black African slaves and this is in fact the way that you bankrolled, if you like, the doling out of largesse to your followers, so here we have something which is definitely not abolitionist in its impact, moreover the Bahrain Qarmati actually raided other Arabs for slaves, which is interesting in a sense both because it was not meant to slave a fellow Muslim and through custom was not meant as slaves an Arabs in a sense by enslaving other Arab Muslims, the Qarmati were doubly going against the grain, but both are in their attack of the Syrian Haji caravan and in the attack of Mecca



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itself, they took many slaves, in fact on the Syrian pilgrimage they are alleged to have taken 2700 slaves. So not an abolitionist aspect of Ismailism.

If you look at the Fatimids, the next major movement, this of course emerges in North Africa in a burst of millenarianism, here we have Mahdi, who is really very much coming for the end times, but what does he do in Tunis, he takes over the slaves of his defeated enemies, at best the Mahdi is only refusing to have military slavery and administrative slavery. And notice that this is a long debate in Islam, there is debate about slavery itself, but is also a debate about what kind of slaves you should be allowed to have. But it doesn't last, because his successor in busily recruits as military and administrative slaves all over again, in fact the Fatimids begin to scour the Mediterranean in their search for slaves, they are unusual in the sense of being a major slaving power by sea as well as by land, unusual in Islamic history, and a fully fledged slave state develops. Moreover the Fatimid law code, the pillars of Islam, composed by Nu'man Bin Muhammad Al-Tamimi, is fairly close to Twelver Shi' law and it permitted slavery and it legislated for slavery in some considerable detail. In fact one of the things that struck me more generally in this work is, if you look at Islamic law codes, is how much of them are taken up with slaves. I mean typically about a third of the Islamic law code deals with slavery, it is an incredibly important part of the Holy Law, is how you deal slaves, and this is just as true of Fatimid law as of other law codes and it is also true of the condensed version of the code which is usually used for teaching in Cairo once the Fatimid state moved to Cairo.

Yet the odd thing is, that from this rather unpromising Fatimid Caliphate, does emerge the one unquestionable abolitionist movement within Ismaili Islam, that just shows you the paradoxes of history, because the Fatimid Caliph Al-Hakim, who ruled in the end of the 10th century of the common era thought to be a perfect Ismaili ruler. He was thought to be completely mad, but there was some method in his madness and in 1013 CE, he freed all his own slaves, male and female, he did not insist that his followers or his subjects to do the same, but he nevertheless gave the example and in 1021 CE, he rode out from Cairo, on his donkey and disappeared into the desert, never to be seen again, his body was never found and from this emerged the Druze sect, now whether you count the Druze to be Ismaili of course, is a difficult one, many people don't consider the Druze to be Muslims at all, nevertheless their historical roots in Ismailism are absolutely undoubted and they then settle down to wait for Al-Hakim to return from his occultation and they were defeated in their rebellion and settled in the mountains of Greater Syria. Now the fascinating thing about the Druze is that they copied their law mainly from the Fatimid law code, but they left out polygamy, concubinage and slavery. And why, it is very unclear, and in a sense very surprising. Now Baha Al-Din explained in a very important text by the Druze, that the governance by which the believers bound themselves to the community was incompatible with slavery. That the community had to be a free community and I think this is linked to the fact, I think that it is Firro who says, is the notion that it is linked to the transmigration of souls and it is one of the reasons why they are not considered to be Muslims by many Muslims, but the idea is that, you can't have the soul of a slave migrating into a free person, this would disturb the unity of the community, it doesn't seem an entirely a good



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reason to me and I am still actually quite perplexed, and I have tried to look around and if any of you are Druzologists, or whatever the word is, and could help me to understand that I would be really, really interested, because you understand that this is an 11th Century abolition. You know this is centuries before William Wilberforce who is greatly portrayed in this 200th anniversary of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade this year, and yet nobody talks about this, nobody talks about Druze abolition. Indeed it is slightly worrying to my mind, no Muslims talk about it either as far as I can make out, it seems to be entirely something within the community, which is of course a very secretive community, and which seems to have had very little impact on the wider Muslim world, but I would love to have some Sunni 'Alim from Damascus saying, you know, this is very interesting, these Druze types have abolished slavery, I wonder why. I would love to have that kind of document, which would show what the wider Muslim world thought about this peculiar Druze notion.

Okay so if we move from the Druze to the other survivors of the Fatimid empire, and we start with the Musta'ili Ismaili or more correctly the Tayyibi, who were loyal to the child of Caliph Al-Tayyib. Now these groups move first to the Yemen and then later to Gujarat in India, whence they have generally been known as Bohra and it split into 2 groups in 1591, the Sulymani who mainly remained in Yemen, and the Daudi Bohra, who are mainly in India. There were various other splits that occurred, this is an extremely sectarian group, but those are the two main groups and essentially they maintained the Fatimid law code. So they maintained the legality of slavery in Holy Law and then, as the Daudi Bohras from Gujarat, they became major traders in East Africa and Sir Bartle Frere in his famous report of 1873, noted that they like all other South Asians in East Africa, did not consider slavery to be a moral crime, so all the Indian communities, all the South Asian communities accepted slavery, dealt in slaves, traded in slaves, it was not a moral problem. And then as late as the 1960's, Asaf Fyzee, who was a great scholar of Daudi law, still says that in terms of Fatimid law slavery is legitimate, note that in the 1960's, we are talking about 120 years after the British abolished slavery, in law, in India and this is the divide between secular law and religious law, which is very important for Islam.

So we have a community which is reputed to be very conservative and which seems to stick to slavery in theory, not saying in fact, I am not saying that all the Daudi Bohras had slaves, what I am saying is that they stick to the legitimacy of slavery in theory right into the modern era and this may be connected with something else that I am interested in which is that, the Daudi Bohras are the only people in India, the only Muslims in India or in South Asia, who practiced female genital cutting or female genital mutilation and this is very interesting because, well this is another topic that I am working on now, but this is why it is very interesting to me, but I would expect that the Shaf'i Muslims in South India would also practice female gentle cutting, because it is in Shaf'i law, it is obligatory and they don't seem to, so the Bohras seem to be alone in doing this, and so we have a picture of a very socially conservative group. On the other hand, the Daudi Bohras are divided and have been divided for a long time, so there has been a liberal reformist group since at least the middle of 19th century, there have been enormous tensions in the community and



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certainly by the 1990s, if you scour the internet, where one finds all sorts of things which may or may not be true, we find a number of these Daudi Bohras who reject slavery and say that it is wrong that their community should have stuck with slavery. What I can't work out is how representative these people are and to what extent the community as a whole still holds to the legitimacy of slavery.

If we turn to the other main survivor from the Fatimids, the Nizari Ismaili or the Aga Khanis as they are sometimes called, we find a much more complicated situation. And one which is in some senses much harder to fathom, as you all know, these people became the famous assassins in their famous castles in Syria and Iran, and Marshal Hodgson, who had something of a weakness for these people, talks about them as champions of ordinary people, determined to be free, all this kind of stuff litters Marshal Hodgson's work and he was a great historian of the assassins and I should say a great historian full stop, I have enormous admiration for Marshal Hodgson. But it seems that slavery nevertheless persisted, at least until we get to the reign of Hassan II, 1162 to 1166, who declared himself to be the judge at the end of the world and annulled the *Sharia*, now Hassan II definitely liberated captives, which would be the first step towards abolishing slavery, giving that a lot of enslavement happened through captivity, that was a very common thing, it is argued that this is the only legitimate way of making a slave in terms of the *Qur'an*, so he liberated captives and he proclaimed paradise on earth, with nobody may to work anymore, well again that sounds pretty much as though slavery wouldn't fit into that sort of idea. Nevertheless I can't find anything actually saying all existing slaves or all slaves born into slavery are freed, that is the bit that I can't find, so if any of you have that wonderful document which gives me this, I would be very happy to have it. Now it didn't last very long, his successor Muhammad II made yet another twist in the history of this group by claiming to be the Imam, and claiming that his father was the Imam and therefore we get the restoration of the Imamate within this Ismaili group, the importance of this of course is, that once you have a living Imam, then the *Sharia* is in a sense not terribly important, because the Imam could at any moment can abrogate the *Sharia* if he so chooses and so the whole question of whether or not, the Nizari Ismailis stick to the Fatimid law code is in a sense moot because the Imam decides. Now despite the distraction of the assassins by the Mongols and by the Mamluk, they survived and they became particularly important in Iran, in Persia, where they come into cross contact with the Nimat Allahi Sufi movement, Sufi order, and this is interesting because of all the Sufi orders that I have been able to get any information on from the entire Islamic world, the Nimat Allahi are the most abolitionist I have ever found. Now why this should be, I cannot comprehend, but we have a situation in which the Sufi confidant of Shah Muhammad advised his imperial master to abolish the slave trade, which Muhammad does in 1848 on his deathbed, possibly get himself to have a passage into heaven, but we have even more surprisingly, we have the head of the Nimat Allahi in 1912 issues a *Fatwa*, and this is one of the most uncompromisingly abolitionist *Fatwa* that I have ever seen in Islam, this lays down in absolutely clear and unambiguous terms that slavery is wrong, it is morally unacceptable. I should say that the Nimat Allahi order has not stuck to this, so interestingly there has been a return to a partial justification of slavery in later terms, but in the late 19th, early 20th



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century, this is one of the most abolitionist movements in Islam and it is very, very close to the Aga Khans as they emerge with the title given to them by the Persian Shah, in fact all the early Aga Khans are Nimat Allahi by Sufi inclination and are very close to the Nimat Allahi movement. Okay now nevertheless Bartle Frere's report of 1873 in East Africa also puts the Khojas, as they are called there, the Nizari Khojas, also puts in the same bag as people who do not contest slavery and who deal in slaves. So 1873 in East Africa, at any rate, there doesn't seem to be yet any impact upon the ideas about slavery. The change seems to come with Aga Khan III, who has an extraordinarily long reign from 1885 to 1957, but my problem here is that, there are still problems in understanding exactly how they shift against slavery, which does occur within this branch of Ismailism, how it is interpreted, how it is justified in Islamic terms, that's the thing which I really would like some help with, because what we have in Aga Khan III, is we have somebody who is a modernizer, a liberal, western educated, he travels a lot to Europe and who has European wives, another Sufi interestingly the Sufi tradition is maintained and perhaps through the Sufi connection, he patronizes and his friends with some of the leading South Asian Islamic modernizers of his day. Now this is tremendously important, because the real development, of abolitionist Islam as a kind of concerted organized movement comes in South Asia in the late 19th century and therefore the fact that by this stage the center of gravity of the Nizari Ismaili has moved to India and the Aga Khan is in close contact with all these leading Islamic modernists, its really very important. There are two schools of abolition, there is Sayyid Amir Ali, who I mentioned earlier in that remark about the Qarmati, who is a quintessential gradualist, so for Sayyid Amir Ali, it is a question of the time being ripe, yes the Prophet wanted to abolish slavery, yes God wants slavery to be abolished, but the time was not right at the time of the Prophet. However, now in modern times, everything is hunky-dory and we don't need slavery more and we can move towards abolishing slavery. This is by the dominant position throughout Islam to this long stay; this Sayyid Amir Ali gradualist position is the one that most Muslims will adopt in their attitude towards slavery.

However there is also a very radical school linked to Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan, the Founder of the Aligarh University, Aligarh as the Muslim Cambridge in South Asia, who said, no, no, no, this is all wrong, slavery has always been wrong in Islam. From the very beginning the Prophet wanted you to abolish slavery and generation after generation of Muslims have sinned against their God, have sinned against their Prophet, have betrayed the faith by not abolishing slavery. You can understand that this position might be slightly unpopular, because it undermines the idea of a golden age of Islam, it undermines the idea that the first four caliphs were rightly guided, and this was the apotheosis of Islamic government. If in fact these people were betraying their Prophet and betraying their God by maintaining slavery, and this is a pretty dismal time. So you can see that in a way the radicalism of Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan is in a different Islamic tradition to that of the golden age. In the Islamic tradition, which considers that Islam is submission to God, is a progressive phenomenon. It is something which stiff-necked human beings find very difficult to do and do very badly and it's something that you learn to do better and better from generation to generation. So the golden age was not in the past, the golden age is still to come, the



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golden age is something that we are moving towards by submitting evermore to God. But that's slightly a hard pill to swallow to some Muslims and you can understand why there has been this division and debate ever since.

Now where did Aga Khan III fit in this debate, this is my problem, I don't know. All I know is that in 1909, in a speech, in a public forum, the Aga Khan publicly praises Britain for abolishing slavery in South Asia, interestingly in India, in British India. He didn't say anything about Africa, which is a slightly odd, but he is referring back to 1843-44 abolition in directly ruled British India, which is followed of course by a much slower process of abolition in the princely states.

And then from the First World War, the Aga Khan throws himself into anti-slavery activities, so he is extremely important in the promulgation of the 1926 League of Nations covenant against slavery, which is still in force today, it has been modified in 1956 by the United Nations but it much the same so it is still in force today, and he seen as an ambassador of anti-slavery. Regularly he is one of the 'Muslim Princes', as colonialists said at the time, who can be counted upon to persuade Muslims that they must give up slavery. So every there is some kind of bust-up or scandal about slavery, the Aga Khan is someone who you can turn to as a reliable anti-slavery figure. So he really gets this reputation of being an anti-slavery campaigner, but what I can't find and what I really hope that you can help me to find, is any doctrinally based religious rejection of slavery, I can't find this anywhere. What we seem to get is almost a kind of political or social reformist kind of view, from which religion has been evacuated. Now it may be that I am not looking in the right places, it may be that this exists in languages that I don't read, there are all sorts of possibilities, but I really, really would like to find a religiously argued rejection of slavery. Now note that this is not something which is just peculiar to this particular case, I just take another very important case, the Catholic Church in theory rejected slavery in 1888. But the Catholic Church has also never produced an argued or reasoned theological rejection of slavery. All that we get in the famous encyclical of Leo XIII In Plurimis, a kind of emotional declaration, a citation from Luke of Jesus citing the Prophet Isaiah, I have come to free the captives, and captives in the Greek is the word for 'prisoners of war', not for 'prisoners', as it was long translated in versions of the bible, and that's all we get, we don't get anything in that encyclical, which says that Thomas Aquinas said slavery was okay and Thomas Aquinas was wrong, now we can see all those reasons why the Catholics don't do it, because Thomas Aquinas is still a pillar of the Catholic faith and if you start saying that Thomas Aquinas is completely wrong about slavery, then you're in something of trouble, people say that if he is wrong about slavery to the Pope, then isn't he wrong about lots of other things, so it undermines the Catholic Church.

What I am wondering by analogy is, whether we get a similar kind of problem within the Nizari Ismaili congregation, that if slavery is wrong, then why on earth have we maintained it up until this point and perhaps you know a way of avoiding that awkward question is simply not to say anything, but perhaps I'm completely wrong about it.



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So it seems to me that, there is a lot that still remains to be done and I am probably the last person to do it because I don't have the linguistic skills. I don't read Gujarati, I was born in Gujarat, my father was Gujarati speaking, but I don't read Gujarati myself, I am only struggling with Arabic in the very first stages, you know it probably needs someone who can grapple with these Ismaili texts, to be able to find the answer to all this, but I certainly think that two things seem to me to be fairly clear, first of all there is no automatic Ismaili rejection of slavery that some people who claimed, its not that there is a kind of libertarianism in Ismaili doctrines, which means that they are automatically opposed to slavery. Secondly however, I think there is also no automatic acceptance of servitude and this in a way, one could generalize to the whole of Islam and he gets true of Islam finding moments, that he is never exactly rejected slavery and never exactly accepted it either, that this ambivalence is been something which is gone right through Islamic history in all Islamic groups. Thank you.