FREEDOM FROM EXPLOITATION



Christian Responses to Modern-Day Slavery

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Freedom from Exploitation: Christian Responses to Modern-Day Slavery

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The Story of a Victim

He had arrived in Glasgow via London on the overnight bus. Over a hot cup of coffee in our city center drop-in—Glasgow City Mission in Scotland—with the aid of a volunteer who could speak his language, he told us some of his story.[1] He had left Africa for Europe in order to escape terrorism and warfare and had somehow managed to find his way to Belgium. He had hoped that he would be able to claim asylum, acculturate, and make a life for himself in Europe. But like so many others, he found himself vulnerable to exploitation.

He was delighted when a Belgian farmer offered him employment and worked hard for him for many weeks. Along with some others, he was given very basic accommodation and was provided with food. For a while it seemed to be a good arrangement, but it soon became obvious that the farmer had no

1 The author serves as Chaplain at Glasgow City Mission in Glasgow, Scotland. The oldest City Mission in the world, it was founded in 1826 by David Nasmith who went on to set up similar missions throughout the United Kingdom and in America. Today, in Glasgow, staff and volunteers reach out to people affected by poverty, homelessness, and addictions, as well as asylum seekers and refugees.

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intention of paying him. When he asked for his wages, he was told that accommodation and food was all the payment he would be getting. He decided he should leave—but where could he go? He opted for the United Kingdom. After a long harrowing journey by lorry, he eventually arrived in Glasgow, knowing no one and speaking no English. After several nights sleeping rough, he was exhausted, hungry, and bewildered.

According to the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, which is known as the Palermo Protocol,

> "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control of another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or removal of organs.[2]

Victims of trafficking are found all over the world. Recruited by means of coercion, deception, or force, they work in the hospitality sector, in agriculture and fisheries, on construction sites, in private homes as domestic servants, in beauty salons, and in brothels.[3] Traffickers exploit the most vulnerable in society—

2 United Nations Human Rights, "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking."

3 Kara, *Modern Slavery*.

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those in poverty, the displaced, and the young.[4] They do so because they know that they can make huge amounts of money. Slaves provide free labor for their owners who pay little or no wages and no tax, and those who have been trafficked are made to pay back any money that has been spent on them such as for travel costs, food, or equipment.

Many victims have been exploited while escaping religious or ethnic persecution or, like the man in the story above (I'll call him Thierry), fleeing war and terrorism. And their numbers are increasing. As I write, millions of people, mostly women and children, have had to leave Ukraine as a result of the invasion of their country by Russian forces. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "over 13,000 unaccompanied and separated children from Ukraine were registered in the European Union (EU) as of 6 May 2022, a subgroup of whom were orphaned due to the war, or were already orphans in institutional care."[5] In their displacement and desperation, they are highly vulnerable to exploitation by human traffickers who know whom to target. Early in the war it was reported that many children had gone missing on the Ukrainian-Polish border.[6]

Unaccompanied children are highly vulnerable to exploitation by human traffickers who know whom to target.

4 It is important to distinguish trafficking from smuggling. Human traffickers coerce and deceive people into working against their will. Smuggling, on the other hand, involves the payment of money by adults, often very large amounts, to be taken across borders in order to find safety and work. Children who pay money to smugglers are considered to be victims of trafficking.

5 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Conflict in Ukraine*.

6 Mitchell, "Thousands of Vulnerable Children."

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At our drop-in center in central Glasgow, it is our privilege to be able to work with victims of exploitation, to learn something of their stories, and to help them as best we can. We are able to offer a safe space, hot meals, English language classes, and assistance in the lengthy and complex UK asylum process. During the winter months, we help them find emergency accommodation in order to prevent them from having to sleep rough on the freezing and dangerous city streets. Throughout the year we provide a temporary community in which to make friends and learn new skills, such as English language and computing. A weekly art class is particularly popular among refugees.

Working alongside social workers, housing officers, and other charitable organizations we can ensure that displaced persons are given safe accommodation as well as financial, medical, and psychological help. Some have gone through unspeakable trauma, whether at the hands of their exploiters or on the precarious and often extremely dangerous journey they have undertaken to try to find safety and a new life. They may have lost contact with family members and friends, have few possessions, and now find themselves isolated, vulnerable, and deeply lonely. Providing a safe space in which people feel valued can help them to begin to articulate their feelings and so begin to heal. For those who are believers, we provide a safe place in which they can be strengthened in their faith, through regular Bible studies, worship, and prayer.

> Some victims have gone through unspeakable trauma.

In Thierry's case, we were able to help him find the right support, and I am happy to report that life has turned around for him. Having first fled from a situation of terrorism and war,

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he then had to escape exploitation. Now he has started the long journey of learning how to live with the trauma of his past and in hope for a more stable life.[7]

I say it is our privilege to work with people like Thierry, and indeed it is. But we are very much aware that we are only scratching the surface of what is a tragic situation for millions of people throughout the world. Many, many more will remain enslaved for years, hidden from view, robbed of the hope of freedom, and in physical danger from those who exploit them. We are also very aware that we are dealing with the damage done by those who exploit others—serving people whose lives have been wrecked by criminals who saw them only as commodities to be bought and sold, and to be used in order to make a profit. Those who do manage to escape are likely to suffer from physical and psychological wounds which will affect them for years to come. They will need a great deal of help to learn to live in freedom without becoming isolated or exploited all over again.

We are only scratching the surface of what is a tragic situation for millions of people.

In our ministry, like so many others, we seek to serve the victims of exploitation and human trafficking. We are able to do so through the generous financial support of churches and individuals and the practical help of many dedicated volunteers (over 200!) who give up their time to listen to, pray with, and walk alongside people like Thierry. It is a great privilege for us to be able to do this. But we would much rather that our service was not needed. We would much rather that such exploitation and injustice did not happen at all. We believe that it is the responsibility of Christians

7 Hemmings, Jakobowitz, Abas, et al., "Responding to the Health Needs."

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