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We're all bound by slavery

Throughout history, slavery was often supported by religious authorities

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Bernadette Brooten's work might be considered arcane, given that it focuses on slavery in early Christianity.

But the Brandeis University theologian, a professor of Christian studies and women's and gender studies, believes there is a long-term legacy to the practice of slavery. And we're still paying the price for it.

"Slavery is the greatest hindrance to sexual ethics based on meaningful consent and mutuality," both historically and in the present, said Brooten, a respected scholar who was given a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 1998.

Because slavery has frequently included the sexual abuse of girls and women and sometimes of boys, Brooten and her colleagues at the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project, which she directs, believe the history of slavery taints all sexual ethics.

"If a society believes that slavery is moral, or adheres to the idea that you can own another human being, that infects its moral sensibilities."

Lest we think slavery is relegated to the distant past, ending when the American Civil War was fought from 1861 to 1865 to abolish the practice, Brooten has news for us.

"One international labour organization estimates that there are more than 12 million people in this world who are virtually enslaved today - think of debt bondage, agricultural labour, sex slavery," she said. And these are only the cases that have been documented.

The question she is investigating centres on why people felt they had the right to enslave others.

"What most people don't know is that virtually all of the pro-slavery advocates appealed to the Bible in support of slavery," Brooten said.

"I'm interested in helping people today think about what it means that so many Christians supported slavery, which was tolerated in the Bible, the Talmud, the Koran and early Islamic law," she said, acknowledging that at the same time many religious people opposed slavery on religious grounds.

Brooten, who will speak next week at McGill University's faculty of religious studies, said this widespread religious support of slavery has put us "in a bad place."

She said she believes the attitude toward slavery in ancient Israelite law and the books of the Bible were the result of a belief that a hierarchical order in society was in accordance with God's will.

"In the 15th century, first the Portuguese and then the Spaniards asked the pope for moral approval to engage in the slave trade. Two popes did that, allowing them to capture West Africans if they were Saracen - Muslims, pagans and other enemies of Christ - and hold them in slavery forever."

At that point there was also slavery in the Muslim world, allowed by the Koran, taking place in sub-Saharan Africa.

Brooten raises the question: If papal approval had not been forthcoming, would the the Portuguese and Spaniards have engaged in the slave trade? This trade, of course, directly affected slavery in the United States.

Some even took the position that slavery was enlightened if it allowed slaves to marry or to learn to read. "They even argued it was good for Africans because it introduced them to Christianity," Brooten says. "What does it say about biblical morality?"

While American church leaders could have placed a penalty on slave owners, they chose not to, she said.

She said she believes it's because of this history that American blacks were unable to gain formal equality "until perhaps 1965 with the Voting Rights Act of 1967, the year in which it was no longer illegal for white and black to marry."

Through the work of the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project, Brooten hopes to make known the sexual harm that took place under slavery throughout history.

One issue is the attitude of the Roman Catholic church toward women today, refusing to ordain them because of what is considered inferior status, because historically "women are supposed to be subordinate."

Another, closer to home for American activists, concerns the parallels between incarcerated women in the U.S. and slavery.

"The U.S. goes against international norms on two points in particular," she said. "One, to have male guards for female prisoners, and the other to take infants away from their mothers."

She said she considers this latter treatment a form of torture, and there's ample evidence that "if you torture another human being, it's going to have an effect on the whole society."

Bernadette Brooten presents Women, Slavery and Early Christianity, a two-part Birks lecture series of McGill University's faculty of religious studies, Tuesday at 5 p.m. and Wednesday at 3 p.m. at the Henry and William Birks Building, 3520 University St. Visit www.mcgill.ca/religiousstudies/

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