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Religion and Freedom

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Despite the evolution of renaissance that led to the processes referred to as 'liberalisation', 'consumer lifestyle' and 'gross materialism', mankind still faces a kind of dichotomy. Humanity is yet to embark upon the search for inner peace, truth, freedom, and way of life. In this paper, we will try to study one of the important topics of the modern age i.e. the relation between religion and freedom.

We will endeavour to seek a way and a method to acquire knowledge of the true spirit of religion. We will also tackle tangible methodologies to recognise the 'true spirit of religion', the definition of freedom and the approach that will lead one to know the splendid reality of 'true freedom'.

Consider the following questions: how does the world view freedom? Are there any misconceptions regarding the essence of 'true freedom'? We will attempt to analyse such polemical issues that relate to the topic under discussion, and to seek an understanding that would nurture the innate nature of human beings.

Conceptualising freedom

Let us start by briefly enlightening ourselves regarding the concept of freedom. How do people view religion and freedom? This is one of the most pertinent issues in philosophy and the social sciences. In the current age it is paramount for one to be able to empower one's self with a true understanding of the concept of freedom from the Islamic perspective. There are certain 'modes of understanding' that define freedom.

Furthermore, there are different types of freedom. One type of freedom, known as 'philosophical and metaphysical freedom,' is the subject of study by philosophers and theologians who aim to establish whether or not human beings can choose their path and the nature of the actions they perform as well as those actions which they do not perform (this is generally referred to as 'free will').

Does a human being possess a free will, or are his actions pre-ordained? In order to tackle these

complex matters with a degree of clarity, one must first grasp a thorough understanding of 'free will'. For example, if a person was to perform an action or travel to a specific place would the said individual decide his own actions or would this act be caused by factors that are not under his control? Did the Sublime God create the action in the individual, or does he possess the free will to perform an act of his choosing? In the Holy Qur'an, God says:

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا

Indeed, we have guided him to the way, be he grateful or ungrateful. (***76:3***)

What does this verse tell us about mankind with regard to free will? How can this verse be interpreted? People from different walks of life may interpret the above verse in different ways. After investing much thought in this matter, one comes to the conclusion that Allah (s.w.t.) is stating that mankind has been provided with the guidance that he requires to continue on the virtuous path. However, it is for the individual to accept this guidance and be thankful because of it or to reject it and be ungrateful. Whatever decision the individual makes is his choice and he is responsible for that.

There are different ways to discuss this issue, but perhaps the clearest way is to refer to ourselves and reflect on the process of decision making. In the following couplet, Jalaludin Rumi[1] reminds one of the perception of freedom that is innate to human nature:

این که گویي این کنم یا آن کنم

اختیاراست اختیار است اي صنم

Here, Rumi so magnificently proves that when making a decision a man asks himself whether I should do this or that, this in itself is a proof that human beings are 'free'.

When we make decisions our condition is completely different from that of someone who is falling off a building, because in this case the individual has the will to prevent himself from falling, but has no choice and is forced to fall. Those who are interested to know more about this type of freedom should refer to philosophical discussions.

Other types of freedom include freedom of thought, freedom of belief, freedom of expression, freedom in political matters and so on. All of these types of freedom are based on acceptance of metaphysical and philosophical freedom. In fact, if philosophical and metaphysical freedom did not exist then one would not be able to engage in the philosophical and metaphysical disciplines.

Therefore, one must accept that the foundation of all freedom is philosophical and metaphysical

freedom, so that one may proceed onto the next step in order to appreciate the diverse expressions of freedom.

Islam and freedom of thought

Does Islam encourage or even allow individuals to think and reflect? Let us explain what we mean by this statement. The freedom to think and reflect allows a person to engage in a search for the truth regarding the affairs of humanity. Some people think that this contradicts any religious conviction. To them, you have to be either a freethinker or a religious person. Of course, this problem does not stop with religions. It extends to any philosophical, spiritual and ideological convictions that one may have.

To have a more objective understanding of the question we need to distinguish between two types of convictions. Sometimes people have convictions without them being the result of a rational process of reasoning and arguing; they just accept certain things emotionally or because of the influence of the peers, elders, society, media, etc. Surely these types of convictions represent great obstacles to freethinking. In contrast, there are people who have convictions and firm beliefs which result from an earlier process of freethinking and rational decision-making.

They have made sure that the only reason for accepting and upholding these positions is that they are backed up by safe and sound arguments. In such cases, there is no conflict between freedom of thought and upholding those positions. Indeed, this is the only way forward. In science, philosophy and any other discipline we need to build upon our findings; we cannot always start from scratch. Therefore, instead of dismissing all types of convictions and affiliations, we need to investigate them and check on which basis they rely.

In any case, as far as Islam is concerned, its adherents are bound to accept only those things that are rational and decisive, including Islam itself. The religion of Islam encourages human beings to reflect and ponder. In fact, Islam makes cognizance and vigilance incumbent on all people. There are many verses in the Holy Qur'an where Allah (SWT.) commands human beings to think and to ponder. One must realise that when a person thinks and reflects, this increases his or her knowledge and understanding. Through this process, humans can find new ways in which to conduct their lives. Furthermore, one has ample facility to benefit from the vast experiences of those people who are among the wise and knowledgeable people within society. In this way, individuals are able to reach their own conclusions and apply them in their daily lives.

Islam holds in great esteem those people who learn by engaging in thought and reflection, and who correct themselves accordingly. The late prominent scholar, Martyr Murtada Mutahhari, held a beautiful discussion on this subject, where he reflected upon the golden era in Islamic history. Islam has always made progress when the common people, clergymen, scholars and scientists have exercised freedom of thought. The sixth infallible Imam Sadiq (A) used to spend a considerable length of time in complex philosophical and theological debates and discussions with people of different faiths, and also with those

individuals who did not adhere to any religious beliefs.

Atheists would deliberate with the Holy Imam on issues that were of immense scholastic value, and they would ask difficult and challenging questions. Yet, one finds that during such debates our Holy Imam would maintain his composure and he would graciously quench the thirst for knowledge in each and every questioner by answering their questions comprehensively. As an example, one may refer to the well-known book size answer that Imam gave to Mufaddal about the existence of God when he was challenged by the atheists.

Islam places a great deal of emphasis on creating avenues whereby people may ask questions and receive answers to these questions. There are two underlying issues to consider:

a) According to Islam, people should be able to create scientific and academic ideas and their intellectual needs should be fulfilled.

b) Even if people are very critical or ask very rational or deeply philosophical questions, this poses no threat to Islam. Islam can withstand any type of critique. Indeed, Islamic thought has always been strengthened and refreshed after critiques.

Islam triumphed when the masses evolved by acquiring the freedom to think, and that period was known as the 'golden age in the history of Islam' whereby civilisation reached its pinnacle. According to the school of Ahlul Bayt (A), people should adopt religion only after adequately uncovering the truth, with the support of intellect, the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah. Blind faith, or religion through 'inheritance', does not cause a Muslim to be a 'true Muslim'.

When one studies books dealing with Islamic jurisprudence, one will find that the first part in the Risalah of any renowned Maraji of Taqlid will make it clear that following a Marji' is only for practical rulings of Islam; one cannot follow a Marji' in the fundamental beliefs (Usul-e Din). Each and every individual must exercise reason and reflection and develop his or her own arguments with regards to the truth of religion or existence of God and the like.

There is a famous story from the time of the Holy Prophet (S), about an elderly woman who was working with her simple machine that produced thread from wool. The Holy Prophet (S) asked her why she believed in the Creator. She answered "I know that my machine only works when I put my hand on it and stops when I stop, so how can this awesome world with its amazing creations move without a mover. It is impossible".

This was an argument put forward by an old lady to answer the Holy Prophet (S), for which the Prophet (S) exclaimed to the people: "Alaykum bidin al-Aja'iz" (You must have a faith like such elderly women).

Ijtihad or independent study of a qualified scholar

The other dynamic and prominent issue in Islam, especially in the school of Ahlul Bayt, is that it allows and indeed insists on independent study and thought of a qualified jurist, known as ijtihad.

The door of ijtihad has always been open in the School of the Ahlul Bayt. To make this concept clearer, we deem it necessary to explain it further. Every qualified jurist (faqih; mujtahid; ayatollah) in order to draw and infer Islamic rulings has to refer directly to the Qur'anic injunctions and the Sunnah. Although such a jurist is always in need of consulting works and reasoning of the peers and predecessors, he cannot follow any of them, regardless of how learned they may be, and must make his own

judgements. Such approach to jurisprudence has provided certain vitality and dynamism in the Ja'fari school of thought.

Another aspect of this vitality is that according to this school of thought, when a Marji' passes away all his followers have to refer to the most knowledgeable among the living ones and it is only when he permits that they can keep following the late Marji'. Of course, even in this case, with respect to new issues which arise by the passage of time, they need to refer to the living one.

Islam does not impede anyone in any way, as long as one abides by its divine principles. In fact, Islam encourages us to be creative, to initiate new ideas, innovate and direct new efforts and fresh thinking so that we are able to meet the challenges and requirements of the present time.

On visiting an Islamic seminary or an Islamic theological centre, one begins to appreciate that hundreds and thousands of students, teachers and scholars engaged in profound and thought– provoking discussions. Teachers at these institutions become very sad when students do not indulge in rigorous questioning and intellectually challenging scientific dialogue. Teachers at the Islamic centres believe in asking their students questions and allowing them ask any question they like, thus creating room for dialogue and rational thinking, as well as encouraging the development of logical reasoning that will satisfy the human mind.

Freedom of belief

The third type of freedom is somewhat controversial. It is the freedom of belief, which constitutes a great part of what is known as 'religious freedom'. This point is very important to discuss, particularly when some individuals ask questions such as "Can we encourage people to believe in whatever they want?" and "Should we allow people to worship idols, cows and other such things?"

How does Islam view this concept? From an Islamic perspective, people are free to choose their own religion and no one should force them to adhere to any particular religion. Faith can only come when people voluntarily choose to be faithful. Force is not accepted. Nor does it work. Of course, this does not

mean that whatever people choose will make no difference and all will bear the same fruits. Ultimately, some may have good results and while others may suffer horrible consequences for himself and possibly others.

Thus, everyone must make their choices with the utmost care that he may ever exercise in any of his decisions that he makes in his life. It may prove to be of far more importance than choosing a spouse or a career. Thus, it becomes necessary to use rational arguments and exercise logical reasoning to reach the ultimate truth. One cannot simply say “I am an idol worshipper just because my parents were idol worshipers” or “I am a Muslim just because my parents were Muslims” or “I am an atheist because it is more convenient and easier”. Blind faith in its entirety is unacceptable in Islam, and one cannot be termed as a real Muslim if one has merely ‘inherited’ Islam.

Of course, to be born into a religious family can be very helpful in having an objective and first-hand experience of religious life in general and the religion at issue in particular, but this is not enough.

Islam encourages and indeed urges everyone to make his own enquiry about which religion to choose, while simultaneously it does not hold all choices equally sound. This is a matter of truth regardless of whether one discovers it, denies it, or ignores it altogether. For such a choice is not something subjective like the colour of one’s dress or the cuisine that one enjoys; rather, the belief in baseless myths and superstitions is undoubtedly perilous to human honour and dignity.

What about an Islamic government? Should an Islamic government impose Islamic belief system on its citizens? Imposition of Islamic beliefs on others is not something that one would expect from an Islamic government. An Islamic government treats its citizens with respect and dignity and tries to create a peaceful and moral environment in which people exercise their intellectual power and make responsible and serious decisions independent from the pressure of immoral factors and powers.

Islam’s certainty regarding its truth, clarity and compatibility with human nature is such that it finds itself to be pleasing to any freethinking person or society. Of course, an Islamic government should feel responsible to help its Muslim majority in upholding human divine values, practising their faith and upbringing their children spiritually.

In any case, the maximum a Muslim individual, party or government can do is to encourage their nation into believing something that is genuine and would ensure eternal happiness in this world and the Hereafter. Of course, religious people must be honest in preaching their faith and should represent such honesty in action, and not only in words, if they are to convince others of the beauty of such a faith.

Therefore, despite the fact that we are not relativists and we do believe in certain standards, we should let people decide which creed they are to follow. Let us say, for example, that in an Islamic state there are atheists who do not believe in the monotheistic ideology (which is to believe in the Absolute One God). Here, it would not be the Islamic government’s responsibility to force them to believe. The unprecedented truth is that Islam is not intolerant to other people’s faiths. Rather, Islam aims to

propagate individuals to take responsibility of their faith. Islam encourages them to follow logical arguments, to ponder and avoid blindly following one's lowly desires and whims.

Social freedom

Another type of freedom is referred to as 'social freedom'. Among other things, this implies that we as individuals have the choice of the type of rule, government and policies we are governed by. No one can force another person to obey a given rule. It is important to note that the Islamic point of view in this matter is that freedom of the people must be safeguarded.

Advising his son, Imam Hasan (A), Imam Ali (A) states:

> أكْرِمْ نفْسك عنْ كُلّ دنيّةٍ وإنْ ساقتْك إلى الرّغائب، فإنّك لنْ تعْتاض بما تبْذُلُ منْ نفْسك عوضاً. ولا تكُنْ عبْد ... غيْرك وقدْ جعلك اللهُ حُرّاً

Safeguard yourself from everything that is mean, because you do not gain any replacement for what you lose from yourself [when you perform something mean]. And do not be a slave of any one, because God has created you free.2

When God has created us free, why should one human being serve another? Is it because the person being served is the head of a tribe, a head of state, a highly influential individual or that he is supported by the affluent people, such that this in turn causes one to sacrifice one's freedom? The right of obedience belongs solely to God, and those whom have been granted rights from God, such as the Prophets, parents, and the like. Even if someone is more pious he does not have the right to claim our obedience for his own sake.

Thus, if one studies the mission of the divine Prophets, one will come to realise that even the Prophets did not ask us to obey them for their own sake or independent of God. They acted as spokesmen of religion to tell us what God wants from both us and them in order to secure our interests.

This is comparable to a scenario where a physician or a doctor prescribes a particular medicine to his patient. The very fact that the patient trusts the doctor means that the patient will accept the doctor's medical treatment (for his own sake). Similarly, when a teacher sets an assignment for a student, the student will complete the assignment for his own sake and not for the teacher.

When one obeys the Prophets, the infallible Imams and the like, one is inclined to become a better human being.

Hence, obedience to other individuals is not acceptable. Being a free person, one should only conform to other people's wishes so long as it is in one's interest to do so! For example, a citizen of a particular country cannot be forced to become a subject of a country by anyone. Rather, he can choose to remain

in a country and commit himself to it. At this juncture we will not dwell on the concept of authority in Islam (i.e. politics and democracy) as this is not the subject under discussion. The core issue is this: every human being is free and equal, and he or she can decide to agree upon and commit to the constitution of a particular country.

To conclude this part, let us remind ourselves of a story that originates from the early days of Islam, when the army of Islam (headed by Zahrat b. Abdullah) encountered one of the chief commanders of the Iranian army, Rustam. The chief of the Iranian army asked his Muslim counterpart "what is your religion all about?" The Muslim commander answered with confidence, saying "we believe in Allah as our Creator and Muhammad as his last Messenger". The Iranian commander in chief replied "this is not a problem. What else do you believe in?" Zahrat b. Abdullah replied "human beings are free and God has created human being free". At this stage, Rustam encountered great difficulty, because in Persian society at that time, monarchy and class system were so strong that there was no way to talk abot people being equally free.

Freedom of behaviour

What do we mean by freedom of behaviour, or 'individual freedom'? The question is: whether one, per se, is free to do whatever one wishes. This is a notion of the so-called 'secular liberal culture'. This concept can be explained as follows: let people do what they want as long as they do not violate other people's rights and freedoms. To illustrate this point in more simple terms, we will provide some examples. A person can increase the volume of his television to the highest setting, as long as he does not annoy or irritate his neighbours.

Similarly, one may choose to drink alcohol and become intoxicated, but may not drive a vehicle in this state, because he may hit other cars or innocent people. This attitude is merely concerned with preventing harm to other individuals in society. This culture does not permit one to question an individual as to why he or she consumes alcohol. If a person wishes to drink alcohol, he cannot drive; otherwise he can drink as much as he wishes even if this leads to a fatal illness. The only time such a "liberal society" may again be concerned about this person is when his illness places a burden on the public fund.

The Islamic doctrine is diametrically opposed to the above concept. Ayatollah Mutahhari makes a very interesting point here. To understand it better we should bear in mind that there are three types or dimensions of the human soul: vegetative soul, animalistic soul (i.e. a soul with the desire for food, shelter and sexual fulfilment) and the rational soul. There are no limits with regards to the extent of animalistic desires in a human being.

However, the 'rational soul' directs one's desires towards perfection. Nobility of man depends on his purity and self- control, the urge for him to seek knowledge and to help others, and these desires direct man towards divinity. These desires and their like are 'human' and 'moral' in nature. The desire for food, power, fame and knowledge can be moral or immoral. This depends on the individual's attitude and

state of mind. An individual who exercises self-restraint can think aright and make the correct decision. He does not succumb to agitated emotions and transitory passions, thus enabling him to save himself from all types of troubles and worldly whims.

When we say that 'human beings are free' this means that real freedom comes from within. This concept is vital. What does it mean 'to be free'? Does this involve following one's lower desires and being free to amass wealth, acquire power, indulge in sexual gratification and so on? Or does this mean that a human being must be free to follow the real human desires, i.e., to attain moral excellence, benevolence and, ultimately, perfection?

It is from this idea that the Islamic understanding of 'real freedom' stems. One must be capable of succumbing to whatever is 'moral' and 'human'. Neither the internal forces (i.e. our nature) nor the external forces (i.e. the environment and people around us) should prevent one from becoming moral human beings.

If one contemplates more deeply, one will come to realise the fact that the internal forces (i.e. our nature) is more severe and dangerous compared to the external forces, so much so that this can weaken the values and principles of an individual who succumbs to an external force and gives in to his or her animalistic desires. To illustrate this point, consider the example of a person who wishes to perform a good act (e.g. a person who is a great philanthropist), but he is chained from within and cannot liberate himself in order to be able to give charity.

There is an internal force that prevents this individual from performing such a noble act. Another example is one where an individual takes pleasure from a deep sleep during the night, but there is no determination from within this person to wake up for prayers at the time of fajr. Reflection upon these points will make one realise the extent to which an individual can be chained within himself, thus preventing him from being liberated from the prison within.

As Muslims, we must liberate ourselves from both the external and internal forces. The internal enemy is more dangerous than the external enemy. The Prophet Mohammad is quoted as saying:

> أعدى عدوك نفسك التي بين جنبيك

Your most hostile enemy is your own soul.[3]

Spiritual freedom

'Spiritual freedom' is the core ingredient of Islam. It refers to a state where a person is socially and spiritually free, allowing him to prosper both materially and spiritually. For such a person, there remains salvation in this world and in the Hereafter. On the other hand, if people do not have real freedom then

their inner potential will be wasted. As long as such people keep their spiritual facet chained, they will regress and be hindered from progress. We need to be free in every sense of the word (i.e. freedom from within, freedom from satanic powers and freedom from man- made forces).

One of the tasks entrusted to the Prophets from the very beginning was to liberate people from their internal locks. We need to free our eyes, tongues, ears and minds from satanic thoughts and actions. In the contemporary age, human beings live in total confusion and bewilderment. Do you think that we are truly free to think, decide, choose and vote? Given the extent and overwhelming nature of the external propaganda and pressure of our own lusts and lower desires which are heavily expanded in the culture of materialism, we have more or less lost the essence of true liberation within and without. It is the power of a true religion that can liberate us.

The concept of piety (taqwa)

What is meant by the term 'taqwa'? Is it a form of restriction? Does taqwa restrict human freedom? Are religious values a type of restriction? Of course, not. On the contrary, by becoming a committed follower and a true servant of God, an individual also becomes a liberated force. This is the true essence of taqwa. As followers of truth, we ought to be confident and not be afraid of those who combat the truth. We are called upon to do what is right and leave the rest to God. However, if we are timid, fearful and afraid to perform an act that is righteous, because we are in danger of tarnishing our reputation in this world, or afraid of losing friends, relatives and money, we would forever be trying to please others and never satisfying them.

The reason for this is that people in this world are never satisfied with the things they possess, and they are continuously seeking more. More is always less to such people. On a positive note, God is the One, the Absolute. He only demands good and what is possible and rational. He never wants anything from us for His benefit. Pleasing Him is far easier than pleasing thousands of people with different sorts of demands that they have. Moreover, pleasing God by itself pleases one's self, and provides one with a sense of fulfilment. Taqwa is a protection and a strong shield of human freedom.

Conclusion

The concept of freedom possesses several facets. These include freedom of thought, freedom of belief, freedom of expression, spiritual freedom and philosophical freedom. The latter type of freedom forms the basis of each of the other freedoms and God has given us the free will. Without contemplating and deliberating on a matter freely, one cannot be free to form a particular train of thought or express an opinion. Whilst contemporary society lays much emphasis on the physical aspects of freedom (i.e. the tangible and worldly freedoms), the spiritual aspect is almost totally ignored.

One observes that some individuals are significantly lacking in exercising self-control. A stark example of this is that some people will 'give in' to their desires, whether it is a sexual desire or the desire to drink

alcohol and so on. Furthermore, there is a tendency for people to be influenced by ideas that are prevalent in society without scrutiny or any consideration as to whether such ideas are correct.

These tendencies occur because such individuals lack spiritual freedom. They are bound by 'internal shackles' that do not allow them to exercise their spirituality without hindrance. This imprisonment may occur when one is subject to one's animalistic instincts, when the provisions of reason and intellect are forgotten. Such people cannot be 'free' in the true sense of the word, as the opinions they express and the contemplation they pursue will not be governed by them, but by those forces which bind them.

Once the internal forces are defeated, one has to contend with restrictions over the physical aspects of freedom. Man will not enjoy eternal bliss and peace until and unless he frees himself from the inner chains that bind him as well as the external forces that hinder his freedom, allowing him to become nearer to God and resemble Him in his qualities and actions.

1. Jalal-ad-Din Mohammad Balkhi-Rumi was a 13th century Persian poet, Islamic jurist and theologian.
2. Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter 31.
3. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 67, p. 64.

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