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Session 6: Freedom in Islam (Part 2)

Expressing skepticism on the foundation of historical development of man

This skepticism is formed based on the historical development and diversity of human culture and civilization and the transformation of social orders. It must be acknowledged that the social life of mankind throughout history has passed through many critical stages and moments. In a certain period in human history, slavery was the issue of the day, and the preservation of human civilization and advancement required that weaker and inferior human beings would be slaves of others and subjected to forced labor by the latter.

It is natural that consistent with that period, the relationship between man and God used to be described within the framework of master-servant relationship because some were masters and sovereigns while some were their servants and slaves, and human relations used to be assessed within the framework of the master-servant relationship. As such, just as the weak were considered slaves and servants of the strong and mighty, all human beings were recognized as servants of God, He being the Master. However, as the system of slavery is now abolished, comparisons to that period are no longer relevant.

Nowadays, man does not feel obedient and subservient. He feels he is his own master. So, he says that we are servants and God is the Master, but regards himself as the vicegerent of Allah. He who is the vicegerent of God has no feeling of servitude and is not inclined to receiving orders and obeying God. Rather, he has a feeling of Lordship. God is dismissed and he replaces Him. He does whatever he likes. This is the age of modernism and the dominance of a new civilization over mankind.

We have attained a level of awareness, growth and advancement in which we cannot afford to accept mandatory order, subservience, obedience, and submission to a great entity. We are in pursuit of lordship and mastership. We have gone through the period of obligation and sense of responsibility. Even if orders, commands and duties are mentioned in the Qur'an as they are, these are related to the age of slavery because when the Prophet (*s*) began his apostleship [*risalah*], a great system was

prevalent, and the initial structure of Islam and the relationship of God and the Prophet (*s*) with the people consistent with that system.

Sometimes they say that today man is not looking for duties. He is rather seeking his rights. It is no longer inculcated in his mind that he has any duty, responsibility and obligation to perform. He has to demand his rights and claim them from others as well as God. In short, those who talk from the religious perspective about the exigency of obeying and following the Prophet (*s*), the infallible Imams (*'a*) and their deputies are doing so in consonance with the social system fourteen hundred years ago.

The social system, however, has been transformed, and it is no longer relevant to talk about obedience, submission and duty. Instead one needs to talk about human rights. The people have to be informed that they have the right to live in whatever way they like. They have the right to wear whatever style of dress they like, and to appear in public in whatever manner they like.

Reply to the above skepticism

We shall approach the reply to the above skepticism from the ontological [*takwini*] and legislative [*tashri'i*] angle as we are facing these two stances. In other words, it is the stance of "beings" and realities and the stance of "dos and don'ts" and duties. From another perspective, it is the world of realities while the other one is the world of values. (Of course, the above expressions are equal in substance but because of different levels of understanding various expressions have been presented.)

Now, ontologically, it must be examined what our relationship to God is, because if a person does not believe in God in principle, to assume any relationship with God will be senseless in his view. But if a person has faith in God, he, at least, accepts that it is He who created him. He acknowledges the Creatorship [*khaliqiyyah*] of God, which is the lowest level of faith in God, and regards himself as among His creatures and phenomena. (Of course, in Islam mere belief in the Creatorship of God is not enough for a monotheist [*muwahhid*]. In fact, belief in the ontological and legislative Lordship [*rububiyyat-e takwini wa tashri'i*] of God is also necessary for belief in monotheism [*tawhid*]).

Based on monotheistic belief in creatorship [*tawhid fi'l-khaliqiyyah*], the statement of one who claims that he is not a servant and slave of God is inconsistent with the belief in the Creatorship of God. The first step in monotheism is to accept that we are God's creatures and that we owe our existence to Him. This is the same as servitude [*'ubudiyyah*] to God. *'Abd* [servant] means to be a slave and in possession of another. So, if a person regards himself a Muslim who believes in God but refuses to accept servitude to Him is in explicit contradiction, because the requisite of belief in God is to regard oneself as His slave and servant. It is for this reason that in their most essential and eminent forms of worship, viz. the *salah* [ritual prayer], all Muslims say: "I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and apostle" [*Ashhadu anna Muhammadan 'abduhu wa rasuluh*].The most outstanding and honorable station of the best human personality is to be a servant of God. As such, God says:

﴿...سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلاً مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الأَقْصَا﴾

"Immaculate is He who carried His servant on a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque..."[1]

Yes, because of the lofty position of servitude to God, in the Qur'an God has repeatedly used the elegant term "*'abd*" and its derivatives, regarding utmost servitude as the loftiest station of human perfection when He says:

﴿يَا أَيَّتُهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ * ارْجِعِي إِلَى رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً * فَادْخُلِي فِي عِبَادِي﴾

"O soul at peace! Return to your Lord, pleased, pleasing! Then enter among My servants!"[2]

From the legislative angle, to say that freedom of man is inconsistent with subservience to law and assumption of responsibility will lead to savagery, barbarity and chaos. This notion that being free man can do whatever he likes and even defy the law he himself approved of is inapplicable even in the jungle because there also are certain laws observed by the animals! We, beating the drum of civilization and civility, have to accept that the first pillar of civility is the acceptance of responsibility and observance of law. Through unconditional non-acceptance of restrictions and responsibility, one can not claim modern civilization. Rather, he should find himself drowned in the lowest firm if barbarity.

In other words, the most eminent human faculty is reason, which insists that man should accept responsibility and regard himself bound 'to do' and 'not to do' certain things. Based on this, if a person wore a dress as he pleased, or appeared naked in public, uttered gibberish nonsense, who would treat him as being in the right frame of mind? Will he not be considered insane, stupid or even savage? If asked, "Why are you behaving thus?" he replies, "I am free and freedom is the hallmark of humanity. I just feel like that," is there anyone who will accept him?

It follows that the hallmark of humanity is the intellect and the corollary of rationality is the acceptance of responsibility and observance of law, for there is no civility without legality. If there is no sense of responsibility, humanity will also not be realized. That man is free, i.e. to have the power to choose, does not mean that legislatively he should not submit to laws, decrees and mandatory orders and not accept any limits and boundaries in his social life. As such, it should not be imagined that religion's assumption of *wilayah* is opposed to human freedom, because freedom is the most eminent feature of man and a requisite for being the viceroy of Allah!

Expressing the above skepticism through a different approach

Some say that considering the development and evolution in the various stages of human life as well as new beliefs, outlook, ways of thinking, and requisites of the present civilization, today's religion should be

concerned with human rights, and not duties and mandatory orders.
In reality, modernism and the modern civilization have created a tall wall between us and the past people who were servants and slaves serving others.

As such, modern man has wound up the case of acceptance of duty and responsibility which belonged to the age of barbarity and intransigence, and is striving to reclaim his rights. Nowadays, to talk about duty and discharging of responsibility is retrogression and a return to the pre-modern age. In this age of human rights, when by the blessings of democracy, man was released from the bondage of slavery and colonialism, the time has come for us to abandon the ancient religions which were consistent with the age of slavery and turn our attention to new religions that talk about human rights.

In a bid to realize their statement and objective and draw the attention of society, especially the youth, to such statements, the skeptics utilize various means. But we shall reply to them on the basis of correct and firm logic.

Reply to the above skepticism

The claim that today's man is only looking for rights without duties is an idle and false claim. As legal philosophers say, "No right can be established for a person without there being a duty established for others. For example, if the right of using clean and fresh air is established for a citizen, other citizens are duty-bound not to pollute the air. So, if everybody has the right to pollute the air, the right to use clean air loses meaning.

Similarly, if a person has the right of possession to his properties, others must be obliged not to embezzle them; otherwise, the right to benefit from one's possession will not be actually realized. In the same vein, every right established for a person has a corollary duty he has to discharge toward others. If a person has the right to benefit from public utilities as he really has, he is obliged in return to serve the society, accept duties and responsibilities, and not to burden others. Therefore, rights and duties—in both senses—are correlative and to say that people demand rights without responsibilities is inadmissible.

Considering that all religious and non-religious scholars as well as legal philosophers, in general, acknowledge the existence of duty and commitment, we conclude that what is meant by duty in the statements of the skeptics is divine duty. The essence of their statements is that God should not set any duties for us. On the contrary, according to them, social duties are not within the framework of rights that individuals possess because these duties are acceptable to all rational people. This confirms that the master-servant relationship, the master's issuance of an order, and, the exigency of obeying him, are consistent with the culture of slavery and, therefore, irrelevant today.

Disobedience to God in the past

It is not only modern man who refuses to submit to God, religion and divine duty. Many people throughout history did not submit to divine duties but engaged in rebellion and violation of law. To say that man is looking for his rights and not duties is not new. In the very beginning Qabil (Cain), the rebellious son of Adam (*'a*) openly disobeyed divine ordinances. His violation of law and selfishness led him to murder his own brother Habil (Abel):

﴿وَاتْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأَ ابْنَيْ آدَمَ بِالْحَقِّ إِذْ قَرَّبَا قُرْبَانًا فَتُقُبِّلَ مِن أَحَدِهِمَا وَلَمْ يُتَقَبَّلْ مِنَ الآخَرِ قَالَ لَأَقْتُلَنَّكَ قَالَ إِنَّمَا يَتَقَبَّلُ اللّهُ مِنَ الْمُتَّقِينَ﴾

"Relate to them truly the account of Adam's two sons. When the two of them offered an offering, it was accepted from one of them and not accepted from the other.* [*One of them*] *said, 'Surely I will kill you.'* [*The other one*] *said, 'Allah accepts only from the God-wary'."[3]

The historical accounts of the prophets of Allah (*'a*) mentioned in the Qur'an indicate that most people used to belie their own prophet. Not only did they reject his prophetic call but also wrongly accused him. They used to ridicule and mock their own prophet and even kill or expel him from their city. If a prophet would say something beneficial for them by prohibiting them from doing wrong, for e.g., weighing wrongly—*"And do not cheat the people of their goods"*[4]—they would say to him in return:

﴿...قَالُواْ يَا شُعَيْبُ أَصَلاَتُكَ تَأْمُرُكَ أَن نَتْرُكَ مَا يَعْبُدُ آبَاؤُنَا أَوْ أَن نَفْعَلَ فِي أَمْوَالِنَا مَا نَشَاء﴾

"They said, 'O Shu'ayb* (*Jethro*)*, does your worship require that we abandon what our fathers have been worshipping, or that we should not do with our means whatever we wish?... '"[5]

It may possibly be said here that the opposition and hostility to the prophets and saints [*awliya'*] of Allah throughout history has been the result of idol-worship, polytheism and satanic rebellion. Our point is that man should neither wear the yoke of servitude to every object of worship [*ma'bud*] nor follow the idols and Satan.

But this statement is unwise from the authentic viewpoint of revelation [*wahy*], because according to it, man is situated between two ways—servitude to God or servitude to the *taghut*[6]—and it is impossible not to choose one of them. If a person chants the slogan that "I am nobody's servant," in reality he is a servant of the *taghut* and his own carnal desires. As such, the Qur'an says:

﴿اللّهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُواْ يُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّوُرِ وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَوْلِيَآؤُهُمُ الطَّاغُوتُ يُخْرِجُونَهُم مِّنَ النُّورِ إِلَى الظُّلُمَاتِ...﴾

"Allah is the Master of the faithful: He brings them out of darkness into light. As for the faithless, their patrons are the Rebels* [*taghut*]*, who drive them out of light into darkness..."[7]

In another place, God says:

﴿أَلَمْ أَعْهَدْ إِلَيْكُمْ يَا بَنِي آدَمَ أَنْ لا تَعْبُدُوا الشَّيْطَانَ إِنَّهُ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُبِينٌ * وَأَنْ اعْبُدُونِي هَذَا صِرَاطٌ مُسْتَقِيمٌ﴾

"Did I not exhort you, O children of Adam, saying, 'Do not worship Satan. He is indeed your manifest enemy. Worship Me. This is a straight path'?"[8]

The verse does not mean that after abandoning the worship of Satan, man is no longer in need of obeying and worshipping another being. In fact, he has to worship God. Just as in the formula of monotheism, "There is no god" [*la ilaha*] is followed by the phrase, "but Allah" [*illallah*]. Therefore, those who have woken up from the slumber of negligence by the light of revelation and have realized that they have to worship God for He is their real Creator and Master, in His hand is life and death, youth and old age, wellbeing and ailment. For them, to worship Him is the highest honor. His ordained duties stem from the spring of infinite wisdom and mercy, and acting upon them bring human felicity and perfection.

Realizing that refusal to accept the truth, duty and responsibility are caused by man's lack of nurture [*tarbiyyah*], bestiality and following of Satan, and have always existed in history and not only found in modern man. In fact, it is modern man who has desisted from the essentials of civility and turned toward the age of ignorance and savagery, and become the intransigent. On the contrary, those who have been trained in the school [*maktab*] of the prophets (*'a*) have desisted from bestiality and savagery and have chosen civility through the rule of law and acceptance of duty and responsibility in the true sense of the word.

Civilization and civility are the opposite of savagery and their main requisite and condition is the recognition of law. There fore, how can some people say that modern civilization demands that man should not accept any duty?! Is this civility, or savagery? Basically civilization is based on the acceptance at limitation, law and assuming responsibility; otherwise it has no difference with savagery.

Thus, he who refuses to accept the law, duty and responsibility actually advocates a return to savagery and barbarism. Certainly, he who has such an idea and disposition can never be the saintly vicegerent of Allah, who is our model. (It is necessary to note that the slogan of civility and the rule of law prevalent nowadays in our society, means the attainment of the peak of civility and the rule of law in which there is no violation whatsoever. It is a fact that something new has happened, and our society since the past 19 years,[9] after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, is now moving toward civility. In fact, our Revolution occurred on the basis of the perennial civility and civilization of Islam, and one of its principal mottos and objectives was the observance of divine law in all affairs.)

Following God and freedom

Again, the axis of the prophets' call is to obey and worship God and not follow the *taghut*. God says:

﴿...وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَّسُولاً أَنِ اعْبُدُوا اللّهَ وَاجْتَنِبُوا الطَّاغُوتَ﴾

"Certainly We raised an apostle in every nation* [*to preach:*] *'Worship Allah, and keep away from the Rebel'..."[10]

Given this, it cannot be accepted that Islam is based on non-obedience to others including God. Essentially, any religion that calls upon us to disobey God is false. As indicated earlier, the essence of the prophets' call is absolute obedience to God from whom entire creation emanates and who is the Beginning, the End and Real Master—

"Indeed we belong to Allah, and to Him do we indeed return."[11]

Now, once we recognize God as the Real Master of the universe and ourselves, how can it be accepted that He has no right to give orders and issue decrees to us? Is ownership other than that the owner can use his property in whatever way he likes? Therefore, it is inadmissible to claim that we have accepted Islam yet we have not subjected ourselves to the bond of servitude to God; for, absolute freedom is condemned by both religion and the intellect. Islam and religion are proclaimers of freedom. This is freedom from worship, and obedience of the *taghut*s and other than God, and not a deliverance from obedience to God. Man is created free and autonomous but he is legislatively and legally bound to follow God. He has the right to freely choose to obey or disobey God. Essentially, in the world of creation the seal of servitude is put on every phenomenon. Intrinsically, no creature exists without the mark of servitude to God:

﴿...تُسَبِّحُ لَهُ السَّمَاوَاتُ السَّبْعُ وَالأَرْضُ وَمَن فِيهِنَّ وَإِن مِن شَيْءٍ إِلاَّ يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَلَـكِن لا تَفْقَهُونَ تَسْبِيحَهُمْ﴾

"The seven heavens glorify Him, and the earth* [*too*]*, and whatever is in them. There is not a thing but celebrates His praise, but you do not understand their glorification."[12]

In connection with the servitude and worship of creatures, God also says:

﴿...أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ مَن فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالطَّيْرُ صَافَّاتٍ كُلٌّ قَدْ عَلِمَ صَلَاتَهُ وَتَسْبِيحَهُ﴾

"Have you not regarded that Allah is glorified by everyone in the heavens and the earth, and the birds spreading their wings. Each knows his prayer and glorification."[13]

Yet, due to the possession of reason and intellect, man has been created free and autonomous. God, the Exalted, has shown him the way to guidance or misguidance, but he is free in choosing his way. Almighty Allah says:

﴿إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا﴾

"Indeed We have guided him to the way, be he grateful or ungrateful."[14]

He has to take into account the purpose and philosophy of his creation and know that he has to engage in servitude and submission to God. The legislative law of God does not permit him to move along the path of obedience to Satan and other than God. Man has to worship God and perform his duties to Him because God has created him for such a purpose:

﴿ وَ ما خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَ الْإِنْسَ إِلاَّ لِيَعْبُدُونِ ﴾

"I did not create the jinn and humans except that they may worship Me."[15]

Now, since worship of God is harmonious with the system of creation, discharging of divine duties, acting upon one's obligation and responsibility toward Him and being thankful to the All-merciful Creator who gives us life and endows us out of His grace and favor with wellbeing and innumerable blessings is necessary—just as God says in the tongue of Hadrat Ibrahim (Abraham) (*'a*):

﴿ الَّذِي خَلَقَنِي فَهُوَ يَهْدِينِ. وَ الَّذِي هُوَ يُطْعِمُنِي وَ يَسْقِينِ. وَ إِذا مَرِضْتُ فَهُوَ يَشْفِينِ. وَ الَّذِي يُمِيتُنِي ثُمَّ يُحْيِينِ ﴾

"(It is God) who created me, and it is He who guides me, and provides me with food and drink, and when I get sick, it is He who cures me; who will make me die, then He will bring me to life"[16]

how can we afford to refuse to follow Him. Is it fair and righteous for us to say that modern man does not believe in duty and obedience and is only interested in his rights? Does Islam accept this logic? Undoubtedly, such thinking is devoid of rationality and far from humanity, let alone having an Islamic basis.

1. Surah al-Isra' (or Bani Isra'il) 17:1.
2. Surah al-Fajr 89:27-29.
3. Surah al-Ma'idah 5:27.
4. Surah ash-Shu'ara' 26:138.
5. Surah Hud 11:87.
6. The term taghut applies to any idol, object, or individual that prevents men from doing what is good, and leads them astray. The term has been used eight times in the Qur'an. Prior to Islam, taghut had been the name of one of the idols of the Quraysh tribe. This name is used also to mean Satan. Moreover, the term is used to indicate one who rebels against

lofty values, or who surpasses all bounds in his despotism and tyranny and claims the prerogatives of divinity for himself whether explicitly or implicitly. [Trans.]

7. Surah al-Baqarah 2:257.

8. Surah Ya-Sin 36:60-61.

9. It is now almost three decades. [Trans.]

10. Surah an-Nahl 16:36.

11. Surah al-Baqarah 2:156.

12. Surah al-Isra' (or Bani Isra'il) 17:44.

13. Surah an-Nur 24:41.

14. Surah al-Insan (or, ad-Dahr) 76:3.

15. Surah adh-Dhariyat 51:56.

16. Surah ash-Shu'ara' 26:78-81.

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