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ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF HUMAN FREEDOM

The general or psychological definition of freedom is rather difficult to obtain. Freedom belongs to an abstract category just as, love, taste, and life etc. do. Generally, we presume that we understand the meaning of all these words but, when we come to explain them, everybody seems to have his own definition of them. Everybody defines these concepts according to his own choice based on psychological, moral and social background. For instance, some take love to be a form of sickness, while others hold it to be a remedy of all maladies. Same is the case with taste. It is difficult, if not impossible, to have a single, simple, definition of taste. The same goes for life. Everybody has his own way of looking at life and defines it according to his own background and inclinations.

The definition of freedom also varies from person to person. For example, a child might equate it with freedom from the orders of the elders. For a slave it means freedom from his master; for an oppressed it means freedom of thought, freedom of action, freedom of religion and freedom of association.

The dictionary meaning of freedom is:

"The state of being free from the control of fate or necessity; the power of self-determination attributed to the will,"¹ or "The state of being able to act without hinderance or restraint, liberty of action,"² etc.

The problem of freedom is not something new. In fact, it is as old as man himself. To be more precise, this problem seems to be integrally related to the nature of man himself. A proper appreciation of this problem, therefore, calls for the proper study

of human nature itself. Let us first look into the problem of human nature.

The nature of man can be defined from two standpoints. Sometimes he considers himself as a god-unto-himself, without any sense of responsibility or accountability to someone else, while at other times he considers himself as the lowest of the low and degrades himself before trees, stones, sun, moon, fire, animals etc. History of philosophy is replete with different interpretations of human nature. Some of the philosophers elevate man to the level of God and attribute absolute freedom to human beings. While others, consider him as a part of general nature and as such subject to the same causal order as everything else in the universe. They rule out any possibility of freedom and hold man as absolutely determined by the causal nexus. Leaving aside these conflicting approaches we will prefer to return to the Quran and see what it has to say concerning the nature of man and his freedom.

It may be underlined that Quran is not a Book on God, or on universe, or on science and history. Instead, it is essentially a Book on man, and is meant for guidance of man. Hence it is not difficult to reconstruct a theory of man based on Quranic teachings. Verse after verse is related to man and introduces us to his different qualities, good and bad alike. For instance the Quran says:

"We created you out of dust, then out of sperm, then out of leech-like clot, then out of morsel of flesh, partly formed and partly unformed, in order that we may manifest (our power) to you; and we cause whom we will to rest in the wombs for an appointed term, then do we bring you out as babes, then (foster you) that we may reach your age of full strength; and some of you are called to die, and some are sent back to the

feeblest old age, so that they know nothing after having known (much)."³.

"Now let man but think from what he is created! He is created from a drop emitted proceeding from between the backbone and the ribs."⁴.

"Doth not man see that it is we who created him from sperm? Yet behold he (stands forth) as an open adversary! and he makes comparisons for Us, and forgets his own (origin and) creation:"⁵.

These verses seem to ask man to look deeply into his low status. His body is a piece of earth, which is not self-created but created by God.

Then in the next stage is life and reproduction which are by physical nature, but are higher than dead matter; life is reproduced through semen, which is the real essence of every part of the body of man, i.e., living cells. Then it is mixed in due proportion, that is, fertilization of ovum by the sperm, and an individual life comes into existence which is fashioned into shape; its limbs are framed; animal life begins to function, and all the beautiful adaptation comes into play. Lastly, is the distinctive man, into whom God's spirit is breathed. Then he rises higher than animals. So by virtue of this spirit he becomes the vicegerent of God on this earth.

Some of the commentators of the Quran maintain that all higher qualities in human nature such as freedom, intelligence, knowledge, compassion etc. stem from and are reflective of that spirit of God which He by virtue of His out-pouring mercy has breathed in man. These are by no means the qualities of mater. Instead, they are divinely qualities bestowed upon man. It is these qualities that add new dimensions to human life. Shorn off these qualities man is at the level of other biological organisms. By virtue of these qualities moral and spiritual dimensions are opened up and man truly becomes a viceroy of God in this world.

Similarly in so many other verses the nature of man is shown. The overriding purpose of these verses seems to strike a sense of balance in human mind. By reminding him of his humble origin, it is expected that his pride will come to an end. Man will realize that without the mercy of God he will never have come to this world. In all fairness, therefore, he cannot afford to ignore the existence of God and His unlimited mercy on him. On the other hand, by telling man that he has been blessed with divinely qualities, he is encouraged to prepare himself well for the fulfilment of his duties as a viceroy in this world. Both these aspects are brought to his notice with a constant reminder that if he falters in his duties, he should remember that eventually he will return to Him and account for his conduct in this life. Ultimate purpose of the Quranic teachings is to create in man a specific psychological and moral attitude, an attitude of *taqwa*, i.e., God fearingness.

Islam, in the 1st instance, does not regard man as a mere species among species. It assigns him an exalted position of the vicegerent of the Almighty God upon this earth.

The dignified position of man is shown in various verses of the Quran such as:

Behold, thy Lord said to the angles: "I will create a vicegerent on earth". They said: "Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood whilst we do celebrate Thy praise and glorify Thy holy (name)?" He said: "I know what ye know not"⁶.

By this verse the Quran means to suggest the following, according to Abdullah Yousaf Ali:

It would seem that angels though holy and pure, endowed with power from God yet represented only one side of creation.

We may imagine them without passion or emotion, of which highest flower is love. If man was to be endowed with emotions, those emotions could lead him to the highest and drag him to the lowest. The power of will or ability to choose would have to go with them in order that man might steer his own bark. The power of will (when used rightly) can give him to some extent mastery over his fortunes and over nature, thus bringing him to the God-like nature, which has supreme mastery and will. We may suppose the angels had no independent will of their own; their perfection but could not raise them to the dignity of vicegerency. The perfect vicegerent is he who has the power of initiative and whose independent action always reflects perfectly the will of his principle. The distinction is expressed by Shakespeare (sonnet 94) as: "They are Lords and owners of their faces, others but stewards of their excellence". The angel in their one-sidedness saw only the mischief consequent on the misuse of the emotional nature by man, perhaps they also being without emotion did not understand the whole of God's nature, which gives and asks for love. In humility and true devotion to God they demonstrate we must not imagine the least tinge of the jealousy, as they are without emotion"⁷.

There are other verses on the same subject for example,

Behold! Thy lord said to the angels: "I am about to create man from sounding clay from mud moulded into shape; when I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of my spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him"⁸.

This is where Islam makes a radical departure from Christianity. According to the Christian concept of Original Sin man is a sinful being. It means that evil has come to stay. All moral struggle of man is meaningless for it cannot qualify man for the hereafter without the crucifixion of Christ. The concept of original sin, therefore, offers a very pessimistic view of human life in this world, whereas the Quran elevates him to the exalted

position of a vicegerent of the Lord upon the earth. It is by virtue of this status of man in God's scheme of creation that he is to take full advantage of everything that exists in the universe.

Man is the master of everything in the world and everything acts for his benefit as:

Seest thou not that God has made subject to you
(men) all that is on earth⁹.

This verse shows that whatever exists in the universe is for man while man himself is for God.

The position of man being the vicegerent of Lord upon the earth and his mastery over everything of the earth entails many serious and grave responsibilities. As a deputy of Lord, he is required to behave in a manner in which He, his master, asks him to do. He has to exploit all the resources of the earth as Almighty God desires so that he may acquit himself creditably of the responsibilities which has fallen upon his shoulders as "khalifat-ul-ard".

God, the Almighty, has given man the needed guidance: the right and wrong ways of life are made clear to him. Beside, he is blessed with the ability to choose whichever way of life he likes. In fact, the whole Quran is addressed to man who is supposed to have both freedom and intelligence, otherwise the purpose of revelation will be nullified.

Man according to the Holy Quran, is the trustee of free personality, which he has accepted at his own peril, and which can be fully realized if he throws himself whole-heartedly into the troubles and turmoils, the joys and sorrows of the world which surround him. God knows it very well that life cannot unfold all its possibilities nor can the individual fully develop all his latent powers except in an atmosphere of freedom which allows for unchecked experimentation with the environment. Without this, the idea of virtue and vice is nothing more than an illusion, and

the words like goodness and evil are absolutely meaningless. The morality, which is essential in Islam, presupposes freedom, that is, ability to choose, select, accept or repudiate. And where there is no freedom, there can be no morality, for a moral conduct implies just those types of action in respect of which man enjoys freedom of choice. And action which proceeds from external pressure or internal ignorance cannot be called a moral or free action.

O David! We did indeed make thee a vicegerent on earth; So judge thou between men in truth and justice: Nor follow thou lusts (of thy heart), for they will mislead thee from the path of God¹⁰.

Here man as a prophet is shown that his kingly power and gifts of wisdom, justice, and apostleship were bestowed on him as a trust. These great gifts were not a matter of self-glory.

As in freedom, Islam supports the responsibility of individual persons upon themselves. Every person is responsible for his own actions. The notion of responsibility of the actions of individual upon himself is defined in various verses such as:

Guard your own souls: If ye follow (right) guidance, no hurt can come to you from those who stray¹¹.

Every soul draws the need of its acts on none but itself: no bearer of the burden can bear the burden of another¹².

This is the doctrine of personal responsibility, that is, we are ourselves responsible for our own acts. We cannot transfer the consequences to someone else. Nor any one can substitute for us and repay for our sins.

If ye did well, ye did well for yourselves; If ye did evil, (ye did it) against yourselves¹³.

Here, it is shown that whatever way you act, you are free in choosing your action. If anyone follows God's law, the benefit goes to himself; he does not bestow a favour on anyone else. Similarly evil brings its own reward to the doer of evil.

Nor can the bearer of the burdens bear another's burden. If one heavily laden should call another to (bear) his load, not the least portion of it can be carried (by the other) even though he be nearly related¹⁴.

It becomes clear that a person is free to choose for himself, and will be responsible for the consequences of his actions. No other person would be responsible for his deeds. No one else can get the reward or punishment on behalf of others. He cannot transfer his responsibility to someone else. So it is clear that when a person puts his arm in fire he can feel the burning, or a person who eats honey can know the taste of it. Hence any person who performs any action will get the reward or punishment of his deeds.

The short span of life is thus a kind of sacred trust of God given to individual or a group of people to prove that they are honest in the use of this trust. If this trust, on the one hand, confers on him the highest status amongst all created beings, he is also saddled with the gravest and the most challenging risks, which are associated with it. It is obvious, therefore, that this life is a test and trial for man to show his worth. He is free to choose and act, according to his will, whatever way he likes. Further, if God has desired, He would make all people virtuous and pious, but then the purpose of creation could not be fulfilled. The evil doers could never be distinguished from virtuous persons. The test is meant to separate the chaff from grain. It is indeed a touchstone to differentiate between the pure gold and the base metal.

To among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you¹⁵.

Before coming to the rise and fall of nations and its causes, it is essential to make some observations regarding the attitude of the Quran towards man.

Islam, unlike Christianity and other schools of religious and philosophical thought, does not believe in the idea of original sin.

It is We Who have placed you with authority on earth, and provided you therein with means for the fulfilment of your life, small are the thanks that ye give¹⁶.

The Quran believes in the possibility of free human behaviour and his control over natural forces. It thus shakes the idea of the sinful birth of man from its very foundations. It is meliorism which recognizes a growing universe and is animated by the hope of man's eventual victory over evil. If man is degraded low, it is not on account of sin of Adam, but due to his own misdeeds. Man, according to the Quran, is a unique and irreplaceable being. He alone is responsible for his deeds. Islam does not subscribe to the views of original sin as we have already discussed.

In Islamic view every child is born pure and innocent. According to the Holy Prophet, "Every man is born innocent (or a muslim); it is his parents who make him afterward a Jew, a Christian," etc. One can safely infer that according to Islam man is born free.

Islam grants the freedom of choice to human kind, either to march forward on the road of morality or to retrograde. The final choice depends upon man's own initiative. God and angels are not going to pull the humanity onward. The morality involves self discipline, control of desire, and regulation of will in the pursuit of some high ideal. This demands ever fresh efforts on the part of individual or group within the province of morality. There is no everlasting success, no permanent progress.

Thus morality, whether of individual or of the group, may at any time relapse or retrogress entailing the loss of whatever has already been achieved.

We have indeed created man in best of moulds, then do we abase him (to be) the lowest of low, except such as believe and do righteous deeds: For they shall have a reward unfailing¹⁷.

There is no fault in God's creation. That is, He created man as the purest and the best one. Man's duty is to preserve the pattern on which God has made him. As a vicegerent of God, He exalted him to an authority even higher than angels, as angels bowed in front of him. As a vicegerent, he has a will, and when he uses it wrongly then he falls even lower than the animals.

So men or nations may rise or fall according to their inclinations. Allah has no personal clash against any class of persons. It is their own misbehaviour which brings destruction to them.

The Quran tells us that the change is not brought about from outside, but it takes place from within. It becomes clear from this verse.

Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls)¹⁸.

This verse clearly underscores the importance of freedom and personal initiative. Change in the society is predicated upon human struggle. People will change if they themselves make necessary struggle, otherwise no external force can change fate.

God has blessed man with basic intelligence and requisite knowledge; He equipped him with all sorts of instruments of his grace and mercy. Despite this, if man distorts his own will and goes against God's will, yet is God's forgiveness open to him if he will take it. It is only when he has made his own sight blind and changed his own nature away from the beautiful character in which God formed it that God's rage will come to him and favourable position in which God placed him will be changed. It means that God is not anxious to punish man. Instead it is man's own behaviour that invites his wrath and that too is not without sufficient warnings. But if man fails to mend his ways and pays no heed to his frequent warnings he is ready for dismissal. And when God's anger visits anybody there is no escape.

The change must be brought from within and not from outside. It is the inward push of life, the spirit within him that works out change in the life of individual and through them into nations. True changes whether of individual or community, can be secured only when the self changes. An individual is a world in himself.

It seems clear that Islamic philosophy of freedom can be rightly called as a moral interpretation of freedom and it treats man as a moral being. The external circumstances affect his life but the deciding factor is his own inner being which can either lead him to the path of glory by developing God-consciousness or to ruin by abortive effort to overcome his insecurity by his own power, to hide the finiteness of his intelligence by pretensions of omniscience; in short, his inclination to install himself as his own Lord. He has power to choose and act according to his free will.

There is no compulsion from God upon the creatures to obey his orders. He sends the prophets, the Holy Books, in order to show the right path to the people. The right and wrong was clearly shown by these prophets and they informed their peoples that if they chose the right path they would get reward, and if, on the contrary, they opted for the wrong path, they would get punishment. For instance, the Quran maintains:

Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject (it)¹⁹.

Why obstruct ye those who believe from the path of God²⁰.

So our choice in our limited free will involves personal responsibility. We are offered the truth. Again and again it is pressed on our attention. If we reject it, we must take the terrible results which are prefigured in the fire of Hell. It will burn us. Ordinarily there is water to quench the heat of thirst, while here the only drink will be like molten brass, thick, heavy, burning.

Therefore, whose will, let him take a (straight) path to his Lord²¹.

It is clear that man is completely free in his action, and in his decision to perform any act. He can do any act with his own choice. There are other verses in which it is shown that man performs such actions as were not ordered by God. They perform these actions by their own free will. When they act wrongly they suffer hardship, which is clear from the verses as:

Verily God will not deal unjustly with man in aught: It is man that wrongs his own soul²².

Whoever works righteousness benefits his own soul; Whoever works evil it is against his own soul: Nor is thy Lord ever unjust (in the least) to his servants²³.

It is clear from these verses that God cannot be blamed for man's evil, nor will he deal unjustly with man. He has given him qualities and means of guidance. If he goes wrong it is because he wrongs himself. The verses can be further explained as: All evil, all sorrows, all pain and affliction, are things not normal, things twisted from the pure and holy nature as created by God's hands. As far as a man is concerned, his misfortunes are but the consequences of the things he has done. He must bear personal responsibility for them and not throw the blame on others.

In other verses the freedom of man is stressed and asserted that whosoever accepts the right path does so for his own good and whosoever departs (from the right) does so for his own bad. Besides, the Quran insists that God has made manifest both the good and evil and it is left to human discretion to choose whichever way he likes. The responsibility devolves upon his choice. God does not compell us for any action whatsoever.

As to Thamud, We gave them guidance, but they preferred blindness (of heart) to Guidance²⁴.

Those who receive guidance do so for the good of their own souls²⁵.

The criterion between right and wrong has been sent to us by God. If we accept the guidance it is not as if we confer favour on those who bring us guidance. They suffer for us in order that we may be guided to the right way. We have a certain amount of free will, and the responsibility is ours; it cannot be shifted to the prophets sent by God.

Further, the Prophets also accepted their mistakes which are committed by them as having free will, and replied to God in such a manner:

Adam replied to God:

We have wronged our own soul²⁶.

Younas said:

Glory to thee: I was indeed wrong²⁷.

Moses confessed his free will when he said:

He prayed: O my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul²⁸.

Lastly we refer to the prayer of Noah:

Noah said: O my Lord! I do seek refuge with
Thee, lest I ask Thee for that of which I have no
knowledge²⁹.

We can easily conclude that according to Islam man is born free. He is blessed with basic intelligence and the ability to choose his way of life. The over-powering mercy of God, however, has not thrown him unto himself. Instead he has given him the requisite guidance. But he is placed under no compulsion. Rather, he is left alone to exercise his own choice and thus become responsible for his choice. Man, therefore, himself is rewarded or punished by his own deeds. Of course, he can suspend the use of his own intelligence and freedom and gravitate towards the earth the source of his origin be lowest of the low and be worse than animals. But if he exercises his freedom and intelligence, makes right kind of choice and translates this choice into actions and transcends towards the highest, cultivates in himself Godly attributes, he can be better than the angels. Both the lower and the upper limits of human life are defined; what station he occupies is left entirely to human discretion. It means that while Islam insists upon human freedom it equally insists upon human responsibility. It means that our freedom is regulated by a sense of accountability/responsibility.

FOOT NOTES AND REFERENCES

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10. Ibid, 38:26.
11. Ibid, 5:105
12. Ibid, 7:165
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14. Ibid, 35:18
15. Ibid, 5:48
16. Ibid, 7:10
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22. Ibid, 10:44
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