

ISLAM, LIBERTY AND PLURALISM

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**“When enslaved, life is reduced to a small rivulet,
In freedom, it is like a boundless ocean.”**

Allama Muhammad Iqbal

Introduction

Religiosity, liberty and plurality are important values in human life. The relationship between them is the subject of many discussions and debates. Freedom is the most important value in human life. In this paper, we will approach their relationship from the perspective of freedom and attempt to present a theological-philosophical account, which considers liberty as the chief value.

The relationship between religiosity, liberty and plurality is particularly important for Muslims, because this issue is theoretically and practically important to them. The present and future of Muslim world largely depends on how Muslims see the nature of this relationship. Are Muslims going to develop a new perspective, which values liberty and pluralism as the highest values or are they going to limit themselves with the fixed theological formulations? Are they going to condemn liberty and plurality in the name of religion? How can they approach individual-society-state relations in the light of liberty and plurality? We need to deal with these questions deeply and seriously. We must avoid to create clashing camps in the name of religion or in the name of liberty. Instead wasting our energies with futile discussions and conflicts, we must search new ways, which could open new possibilities for us to live together in peace, diversity and liberty.

Islam: A Religion of Fear or the Religion of Freedom?

Islam has been depicted by some as the nightmare of humankind, which promotes war, fanaticism, oppression and violence. According to this negative picture, there is nothing human in Islam. Humanity and Islam are aliens to each other. Furthermore, it is claimed that Islam is the chief enemy of human freedom. Islam and freedom cannot be together. Is Islam really a religion of fear? Then we could raise the second question: Is Islam the religion of freedom?

Instead of discussing the compatibility between Islam and freedom, we need to talk about Islam as the religion of freedom. Separating Islam and freedom from each other makes Islam as the enemy of humanity. In this separation Islam becomes fanaticism against humankind, not spiritual and moral way for humankind. Locating Islam in the ocean of humanity is the central challenge, which we are facing today. In this regard, we need to develop a clear and principled account about the relationship between Islam and freedom.

Muslims could have different ideas about the relationship between freedom and Islam, but one thing is certain that Islam is not the religion of fear, but religion of freedom. Although Islam is not the religion of fear, oppression, violence and tyranny are dominant phenomena of the Muslim world. Unfortunately, freedom is absent in the lives of Muslims. Most of the Muslim countries have been categorized as unfree.¹ Not availability of freedom, its absence is the chief problem. There is a need for a fresh approach, which values freedom as the highest value and chief ideal in human life. We should not be only alert about our religiosity, we must be alert also about our liberty. "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."² If we start to ignore the value of liberty, tyranny and oppression would easily rule our lives. We should not forget that "the idea of freedom must grow weak in the hearts of men before it can be killed at the hands of tyrants."³

It is not easy to talk about freedom and develop ideas about the relationship between religion and freedom. There is a strong resistance

¹ See: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2010*, www.freedomhouse.org.

² J. Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, Colorado: Navpress, 1991, p.131.

³ L.E. Read, *Meditations on Freedom*, New York : The Foundation for Economic Education, 1972, p. 29.

against freedom in Muslim world. Especially, traditional and literalist circles have resisted against free ideas in the name of defending religiosity and piety. Literalist and traditionalist people have easily declared individuals, who think differently from them about Islamic issues, as apostates (kafir) and tried to oppress them. Rejecting freedom is not an Islamic attitude. Encouraging free debate and discussion is more Islamic attitude than oppressing various ideas. It is not Islam, which promotes unfreedom and oppression. But it is Muslim attitudes, which put Islam in the side of fear and unfreedom. Fear and freedom are contradictory. The availability of one of them requires the absence of the other.

In the name of religion, it is possible to produce a religious authoritarianism or totalitarianism. Religion easily could be turned into a totalitarian religion. Islam itself is not totalitarian way of life, it is in side of freedom in its essence. But turning Islam to Islamism, from religion to religionism makes Islam hostile to freedom. Islamism, freedom and pluralism are incompatible, but Islam as natural religion promotes and encourages freedom. Iqbal regards Islam as the universal religion of liberty and humanity as follows:

Liberty took roots from this message,
The sweet wine dripped from its grapes.
It never tolerated invidious distinctions,
Equality was implicit in its nature.
The modern age which has kindled a hundred lights,
Has opened its eyes in its lap.⁴

Making Islam the religion of freedom means also making Islam the religion of civilisation. Civilisation is the victory of freedom over fear. The challenge before Muslims is not to choose Islam and reject freedom. Realizing 'being free' and 'being Muslim' is the greatest challenge, which Muslims are facing.

Muslims do not need foreigners to bring freedom for them. When the love and passion for liberty is located as a central spiritual and intellectual state in the hearts and minds of Muslims, freedom would

⁴ Cited in A.I.Khan, *Some Aspets of Iqbal's Thought*, Lahore : Islamic Book Service, 1977, p. 18.

become the dominant value in their political, social and cultural lives. Liberty is neither oriental nor occidental, it belongs to humanity. Freedom cannot be limited with a particular culture, religion, continent or race. Freedom is not an accidental phenomenon of a particular culture, it is the most natural state of human being. Culturalist approaches to freedom destroy the meaning and essence of freedom. Every human being needs and desires freedom. Muslims also need and desire freedom like other peoples on the globe.

Isolating Islam from freedom means isolating Islam from humanity. Islam is not a religion, which has no relation with the rest of humankind. Muslims also are not isolated people, which have no relations with the rest of humanity. Islam is the universal religion of humanity and Muslims also are a natural part of humankind. Everything about humankind is related to Muslims. All human life with its diversity is very important for Muslims as well as for Islam.

Liberty and plurality are natural human phenomena. No human life can be considered without freedom and pluralism. Islam's approach to these phenomena is purely human. The absence of liberty and plurality dehumanizes human personality. But their presence makes possible for us being fully human. As the Quran says, "Among His other signs are the creation of heaven and earth and the diversity of your tongues and colors. Surely there are signs in this for those who reflect."⁵ Liberty and plurality do not diminish the richness of human life, but they increase and enrich human personality and experience. Liberty and pluralism are Islamic values, because Islam talks to humanity. Plurality and liberty are natural human states. The Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development had been entitled as *Our Creative Diversity*. The second chapter is titled as "A Commitment to Pluralism."⁶ What does commitment to pluralism mean? Islam means the commitment to God. What does commitment to God mean? Commitment to God means commitment to humanity, to liberty and plurality.

The Centrality of Human Being in Islam

Human individual is the basic value around which everything revolves. No authority, like state, church, tradition, society and so on, is

⁵ *The Quran*, 30:22.

⁶ *Our Creative Diversity, Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, UNESCO, 1995.

above individual. It is individual, who must shape state, society and religiosity, not the other way round. Individual is the microcosm of the world. The dignity and value of human person transvalues all values. Human individual cannot be reduced to the level of a simple tool in the hands of any authority, because he/she is not a tool, he/she is the highest end, who is the measure of all creation.

Every individual is unique. His/her inner and outer life is entirely unique to him/her. Human individual lives, acts, thinks and feels as unique being. Human action in outside world is the external manifestation of individual uniqueness. Human individual shapes his/her life according to his/her unique aims, desires and ideals. The Quran expresses the uniqueness of human individual as follows: "Everyone acts according to his own disposition."⁷ The uniqueness of human individual is the source of individual freedom as well as human pluralism. We cannot deny the legitimate diversity of humankind in the name of religion, civilization, or culture. No particular civilization includes all human experience. Every civilization is just one province of human experience.

Human being is born as a free dignitary being. Dignity and liberty are natural aspects of human beings. God does not create humans as dependent on any worldly authority. Freedom is not granted by tolerance of other people, state or religion. It is a natural right of all people given to humankind by God. God created human being as His representative in the world. As the Representative of God, human being must be free and with dignity. The Quran considers men and woman as free human individuals and encourages them to develop full partnership among themselves.

As unique and free individuals, every human individual has the capacity of self-control and responsibility. If an individual transfers his/her individual responsibility to a higher authority, he/she is opening ways of serfdom for himself/herself. Freedom can be responsibly expressed only in the absence of coercion and within some limitations. Individuals are their own masters. Latin phrase *sui juris*, which means self-law, expressed self-mastery of individuals. People can determine their lives according to their needs, aims and values, because they have been endowed with the right to choose and act. Liberty or the right to choose and act according to his/her personal needs and conscience,

⁷ *The Quran*, 17:84.

cannot be reduced to the state of irresponsibility. Liberty requires self-discipline and self-control. We must discipline ourselves in order not to violate the rights of others. Freedom does not consist of doing whatever we want, but it means the right to discover what we ought to do and what we are able to do it. Liberty requires the highest order of conduct in its practice.

Collectivism denies the value of human individual and devalues individuality for the sake of pseudo-societism. It identifies individual with egoism and self-fetichism. For example Montagu writes that “The Individual is a myth. There are no individuals. There are many persons, however, who try to be individuals, who endeavor their lives separate and apart from their fellow human beings. Frequently they live their individual lives without thought or consideration of the effects of their individualism upon their fellow men.”⁸ In contrast to this collectivist claim, in the human world, the only reality is individual person. Iqbal locates individual at the heart of Islam: “Any mode of conduct which hampers the free development of human individual is opposed to the spirit of Islamic law and ethics.”⁹ Anything against individual freedom is considered as something against Islam in Iqbalian thought. Individual desire and energy is the power, which shapes and creates human life. As Toynbee says, “Human individuals, not human societies, make history.”¹⁰ Class, nation, race and other collectivist entities are not real, but they are fictional constructions. All these collectivist entities limit and restrict human choices and human relations. They use force in human relations if it is necessary. But individual approach does not use force, it promotes plurality and liberty. In a real human society, which is composed of unique individuals, real and free relations are possible. The real individuals could make relations, cooperations, combinations and interactions in the form of society.

All Humankind (mankind/womankind) are Relatives.

Every individual is unique and special. The individual uniqueness of human being does not separate him/her from the rest of humanity. We

⁸ A. Montagu, *The Humanization of Man*, New York : Grove Press, 1964, p. 61.

⁹ S.A.Vahid, (Ed.), *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, Lahore : Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1992, p. 61.

¹⁰ Cited in R.Chase, ‘Toynbee: The Historian as Artist,’ *The American Scholar*, Summer, 1947, p. 275.

share with the rest of humankind our humanness. Islam not only says that men and women are free but also it says men and woman are brothers and sisters. The Prophet of humankind declares humanness as our common identity as follows: “An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor has a non-Arab superiority over an Arab; also he who is white has no superiority over him who is black nor the one who is black over the one who is white except by piety and good action. You are children of Adam, and Adam is from dust. Truly, every privilege, be it based on blood or possessions, is abolished. Be good to your neighbour; you will then be a believer. Wish for men what you wish for yourself; you will then become a Muslim.” In these statements, The Prophet of Humankind intimately links the sense of responsibility, neighbourhood, liberty and humanity with each other. They engender each other mutually and one cannot long to live without others. Human freedom and human brotherhood/sisterhood are two fundamental facts, which Islam recognizes and promotes.

Human brotherhood/sisterhood is not an empty wish or ideal. It is the fact of our lives. Unfortunately, people easily forget this reality most of the time. All human beings are relatives to each other. The Quran presents human beings as relatives and expresses their human responsibility as follows: “Men, We have created you from a male and female and divided you into nations and tribes that you might know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in God’s sight is the most righteous of you. God is wise and all-knowing.”¹¹ It is the global responsibility of humankind to live together in peace, diversity and liberty. Our differences do not abolish this fact. As a matter of fact, our diversity affirms this fact. We need to mobilize our efforts to find new ways how to live together in diversity and how to experience our diversities in liberty.

The brotherhood/sisterhood of men and woman asks us not to hurt or give harm to other people. Individual welfare cannot be separated from human welfare. Injuring one individual means the injuring of all humanity. The Quran identifies individual life and the life of common humanity with each other in the following verse: “If anyone killed a person, it would be as if he killed all mankind, and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of all mankind.”¹² Through

¹¹ *The Quran*, 49:13.

¹² *The Quran*, 5:32.

respecting and recognizing the liberties and diversities of humankind, we could experience the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity. We must experience the brotherhood/sisterhood of man and woman as a fact, not as a wish.

The idea of human brotherhood/sisterhood and liberty creates individual relationship with other individuals. As Emerson says, "All are needed by each one, Nothing is fair or good alone." Every human being thinks, chooses and acts. Human society through individual relations, actions and efforts, develops and changes and renews itself. Individual relations and interactions as the manifestations of human brotherhood/sisterhood make human life possible in the world. As long as people do not give harm to each other, no authority should control and limit human relations. Free movement of human ideas, products and actions is a must for a free world. Liberty, diversity and creativity feed, not consume, each other.

We must live our unique individuality and let other individuals live their particularness and uniqueness. What makes human beings as brothers and sisters is not their homogeneity, but it is their individuality, responsibility, liberty and plurality because these values create our humanness. As a member of common humanity, we have to make our choice. We are dividing the world as Muslim World, Western World, Christian World and so on; as a matter of fact, there is one World for all of us. If we do not make this choice real, there would be no world for any one of us.

Is Human Freedom a challenge to God?

In Muslim mind, there is a widespread misunderstanding about human freedom. Many Muslims think that freedom is a challenge to God. Therefore they assume that being free and being faithful at the same time is a state, which is something unthinkable. In order to become faithful, they believe that it is necessary to sacrifice their freedom.

As a matter of fact, freedom is a challenge. But it does not challenge God. It challenges human individual. To realizing 'being free' and 'being Muslim' is a challenge for every human being. True faith and freedom cannot be sacrificed at the expense of each other.

The basic reality is the unity and oneness of God, which is called *tawhid* in Islam. Islam does not separate truth from freedom. The separation of truth and freedom leads humanity to deny its own uniqueness and dignity. God is free and men and women are also free.

Free God demands free people. We need The Free God and Free God wants free people, who are the rulers of their lives. God does not control our lives, but He judges our actions and behavior. He gives us the will to control and be responsible to ourselves. Instead of controlling us, God set us free. As Iqbal says, “No doubt, the emergence of egos endowed with the power of spontaneous and hence unforeseeable action is, in a sense, a limitation on the freedom of the all-inclusive Ego. But this limitation is not externally imposed. It is born out of His creative freedom whereby He has chosen finite egos to be participators of His life, power, and freedom.”¹³ *Islam mandates free individual. Freedom does not protect us against God. Freedom protects us against tyrannical power of state and other human institutions.*

A Pagan Obsession: Controlling Men

Being individual means to control and experience one's life and take responsibility for one's own actions and for the world he/she is making. Unfortunately, there are always some external authorities, who claim the right to control human life. These external authorities always claim that they know better than human individuals what is good or bad for a human individual and society. The idea of controlling human life from outside is the greatest threat against human freedom. As a matter of fact, there is no authority, who has the right to control our lives and determine the framework of good life on our behalf. Any attempt to control our life is an attempt against our liberty as well as security. There is neither liberty nor security for human beings as long as they depend on the will of another man, instead of depending on our will.

Islam is not an attempt, which aims to control human life. Islam is the natural religion of humankind, which rejects every pagan attempt to control human life and make them slaves. There are three freedom movements in human history, which reject the pagan obsession of controlling human life and declare human being as free. The first one is Jesus, the second one is Muhammad, Who is The Prophet of Humanity, (Peace upon be Him), the third one is America experience. All these three movements declare the same fact: Men are born naturally free. They also reject this basic fallacy of controlling human life, which is the eternal enemy of human freedom: Human life cannot be controlled. “Be free” and “Do not control life” are the essential message of these three

¹³ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 80.

great freedom movements.¹⁴ Freedom brings creativity, peace and prosperity to human life while poverty, violence and idleness are the fruits of controlling of human life.

Controlling the lives of human beings is not compatible which the following aspects:

-Human being has a great capacity and skill to compete with some people while he/she could cooperate with other human beings.

-Human beings have material, moral, religious and spiritual purposes together.

-Human being naturally desires freedom and has the will to be free. He/she wants to be the builder of his/her own life.

People, who want to control human life, change the perception of God, in order to justify their authoritarianism. According to these people, God is the highest authority, who controls and shapes every dimension of human life. These people present themselves as the representative of God's authority and claim that they have the right to control human mind, soul and action. In other words, God has been considered as the highest authority, who wants to destroy human freedom and put free human beings under false authorities. Believing in an absolute authority in the name of God or man is a fallacy, which opens doors for the destruction of freedom. Controlling individuals prevents people to act freely but also prevents them to use their potentials in creative and constructive ways.

Considering human being as a static, completed and passive creature leads to the idea that a higher authority must control him/her. As a matter of fact, the creation of universe and human being is not finished. Creation continues. God and men/woman every times create something new. Iqbal points out free and dynamic life of God and men/women as follows: "Life is one and continuous. Man marches always onward to receive ever fresh illuminations from an Infinite Reality which "every moment appears in a new glory." And the recipient of Divine illumination is not merely a passive recipient. Every act of a free ego creates a new situation, and thus offers further opportunities of

¹⁴ See: Rose Wilder Lane, *Islam and The Discovery of Freedom*, with an introduction and commentary by Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, Amana Publications, 2001.

a creative unfolding.”¹⁵ God does not put human being under specific control, He sets him/her free. God make human individual an authority for himself/herself. Iqbal rejects all false authorities and make individual the only authority about his/her life in the following statement: “Tawhid demands loyalty to God, not to thrones. And since God is the ultimate basis of all life, loyalty to God virtually amounts to man’s loyalty to his own ideal nature.”¹⁶ Social or political forces have no right to interfere or control the lives of individuals.

God as the Ultimate Reality is the creative power, which creates continuously. Constant creation requires constant change and renewal. God’s creation is not finished, static and completed. It continues. The constant creative activity shows that there is no authority to control human life. Constant creation is the manifestation of freedom, because “all creative activity is free activity.”¹⁷ Paganism creates false deities, which control various areas of universe and human life.

Demanding freedom is not a rebellion against the authority of God. But it is a rebellion against the authority of false deities. The false deities of paganism claim to be authorities to control everything. But the true God creates constantly and asks men to renew His creation in the world. Creative power of God and creative energy of man creates new things all the time. Both God and man/woman are in action and cooperation together. Iqbal regards God and men/women as co-workers, who build and rebuild universe continuously: “It is the lot of man to share in the deeper aspirations of the universe around him and to shape his own destiny as well as that of the universe, now by adjusting himself to its forces, now by putting the whole energy to mould its forces to his own ends and purposes. And in this process of progressive change, God becomes a co-worker with him, provided man takes the initiative.”¹⁸

The constant act of creation is against the idea of authority, which controls everything. If creation continues, it means that there

¹⁵ M.Iqbal, *The Reconstruction Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore : Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1988, , p. 123.

¹⁶ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 147.

¹⁷ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 50.

¹⁸ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, p. 12.

is no authority, there is freedom. Individual is the only authority, who could decide what to do or not to do. Individual desires, aims, aspirations and ideals only motivate the individual to act freely. No authority, including God, forces human individual to act in a particular way. Human individual controls, shapes and determines his/her life. Human individual is at the control and therefore, he/she is responsible for all actions, because every human is naturally free. Freedom is the natural state of human being while authority is an artificial construction, like the proletarian state, the will of masses, church, state, public good, and so on. We cannot sacrifice our freedom for the sake of any authority. Every authority asks us to obey them, but what we need is questioning and criticizing it, not obedience. No man can control another man. Only a man can use force against other in order to limit or hinder his/her acts. Freedom rejects the use of force by any authority against individual freedom and liberties.

The Freedom of Choice

Liberty is the right of a person to do whatever he/she desires according to his/her wisdom and conscience. It specifies the right to do what he/she desires, rather than the obligation to bow to the force of others in doing what they desire him to do. The second one is slavery, not liberty. Free choice means liberty. We need the right to free choice in order to live our lives as we are. Our life is not a collectivist life, it is personal and private. Our choices make our life personal and as really belonging to us. For a religious or irreligious life, freedom of choice is needed in order to live our life the way we want. The freedom of choice is essential to make life lived.

The more options we have, the greater freedom we have. Free choice is a necessary dimension of freedom, which makes it possible for us to choose the most suitable choice among many. Only an individual could determine, which choice is suitable for him/her. The choice could be right or wrong, sin or virtue. Individual is the one who could make the moral, spiritual and religious evaluation of his/her choices. Freedom of choice includes the right to do right and at the same time it contains the right to make wrong. Individual has the freedom to sin or unsin.

When we make proper choices for us, we should not harm or hurt others. As Mill says “The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our way so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.” We have no

right to force others to accept our choices and no one also has the right to coerce us. The absence of coercion is necessary for implementing the freedom of choice.

Force should not be used in order to limit the freedom of choice. It is up to individuals to decide what is good or bad for him/her. Islam does not impose a particular choice on society and individuals. The Prophet himself did not force people to accept his message. As the Quran says, "It is the truth from your Lord. So let whoever wishes have belief and whoever wishes be an unbeliever."¹⁹

We must be free to choose what is good or bad for us. There is no absolute good way of life, which could be determined by an outside force as the most appropriate good life for all human beings. Every individual makes different choices about religion, ideology, values, ethics and philosophy. There should not be any governmental intervention, which imposes on us a particular understanding of good, religion, value and ideology. No person, institution or state has the inherent right to control our lives. Every individual is a policeman over his/her own acts. Our freedom of conscience and freedom of choice do not cancel or diminish our self-responsibility. Everyone is responsible for his/her actions. Man is the only creature, who could make right and wrong choices about his/her life and take responsibility of his/her actions.

Muslim idea of human life and human nature requires freedom. God, Who is All-Powerful and All Merciful, granted men/women, a real ability to control their lives. This world is a place for testing. In order to pass the test we must have freedom to choose between right and wrong.

Religious Freedom

Religiosity is a natural inclination of human being. In the state of liberty, human being could be religious, irreligious or antireligious. Without liberty, there is no religiosity or irreligiosity. Religious freedom is the fundamental category of liberty, which protects our religiosity against external interventions. The purpose of religion is to influence human conscience and contribute to the realization of the moral and spiritual transformation of individuals. Religious freedom allows and encourages religion to pursue its own ends, namely the pursuit of moral truth and the salvation of souls.

¹⁹ *The Quran*, 18:29.

Religious freedom starts with freedom of conscience. Freedom recognizes the moral equality of individuals. Conscience is the starting point for liberty. Every individual has the right to choose or disavow any value, religion, philosophy, ideology, what is good or bad for him/her. Freedom of conscience and religion includes the right to believe religious as well as no-religious views too. State or social groups have no right to impose their religious or irreligious views on society. Individual is the only authority, who could decide what to believe or not to believe. Every human individual could make choices in the field of religion, they have the right to express their religious or irreligious views, they have also the right to criticize or challenge the role of religious institutions and dominant religious ideas, because human individual has the sufficient rational capacity and ability. Rationality makes human individual as the only authority, who could make choices and decisions in the field of religion.

Individuals could make religious, irreligious even antireligious choices according to their needs, ideals, desires and values. Recognizing of the right of individual to make various religious choices demonstrates the radicalism of liberty in the field of religion. The natural fact of religious life is its diversity. Religion is one of the main sources of human pluralism. Religious, irreligious and antireligious people are a natural part of human diversity. The diversity of religious life cannot be homogenized or monopolized by one religion. The plurality of our religious life is a natural law of creation. Plurality, not homogeneity, is the Divine plan of God for humanity. As the Quran says, ““If your Lord had willed, surely all those who are in the earth would have believed, all of them; will you then force men till they become believers?””²⁰ Every religion has the right to be one among many, no religion has the right to be the only one. If we eliminate all religions and make one religion dominant in religious life, we cannot talk about religious freedom and plurality, we only could talk about the domination of one religion.

In order to protect, promote and institutionalize religious freedom and religious pluralism, two main conditions are necessary. The first one is that every individual has the right to accept, change or deny any religion or value anytime he/she wants. Changing religion is a matter of personal choice. It is not a crime. If someone changes his/her religion, he/she should not be punished, his/her liberties should not be restricted

²⁰ The Quran, 10:99.

and he should not face any fear and threat. Changing religion should be considered as something normal and natural, not something criminal. If a person wants to convert from any religion to another, he/she should be free to do so, because “there is no compulsion in religion.”²¹ There must be free entry as well as free exit in religious life. Allowing free entry but prohibiting free exit in religion is not compatible with religious freedom and pluralism. Applying compulsory belonging as an identity goes against the spirit of religiosity, liberty and plurality. Accepting or leaving religion are matters of free choice, because “The truth is from your Lord. So let him who please believe, and let him who please disbelieve.”²² Making free choices in the areas of religion makes religious life plural as well as free.

The second principle is that state must be neutral in religious life. State must not be against or for any religion or ideology. State must be purified from religious as well as from secular ideologies. Religious freedom includes the right to be free from religion. Every individual has the right to make himself/herself free from religion. *Freedom to religion or freedom from religion* must be the products of individual choice. State has no right to make individual, social and cultural life free from religion. State is not an actor in individual and social religious life. If state actively imposes a social and cultural life, which is freed from religion, it is totalitarianism, which destroys religious freedom and pluralism. State has also no duty to shape social and individual lives according to one particular understanding of a particular religion. Neither religionism nor laicism are suitable ways for protecting religious freedom. The first one aims to impose a particular religious interpretation on society while the second one imposes a particular secular ideology on people. Both religionism and militant laicism do not allow individual religious freedom and social pluralism.

The duty of state is not to have religion. The duty of state is to protect the freedom of religion and conscience, which gives individual men/women intellectual, moral and spiritual freedoms to choose a suitable option for themselves among various religious, spiritual and moral ideals. Religious freedom is the essential condition and guardian of religious individuals, not religions.

²¹ *The Quran*, 2:256.

²² *The Quran*, 18:29.

Religion according to state or *state according to religion* are against religious freedom. Religious freedom requires *religion according to individuals*. Religious freedom protects *individuals*, not *religions*. Putting state in the service of religion or religion in the service of state are not solutions for the protection of religious freedom. Religion must be in the service of individuals and society. The solution is to recognize competing and pluralistic claims of religion and leaving them to individuals to decide which one is wrong or right. Briefly, religious freedom is what happens when you leave individuals alone.

State vs. Freedom

The existence of state has been considered as a necessary evil. The absence of state causes anarchy, which could rob people's liberty while the existence of state sometimes makes state itself the robber of our liberty. Instead of avoiding these extreme situations, the power of state must be limited in favour of our individual liberties. State is the only organisation, which has the privilege of having and using power. State can use its power against our freedom. Throughout human history, state is the greatest enemy of human freedom. Lord Acton says that "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely"²³ Iqbal also points out the corruptive and exploitative nature of power as follows:

Man-weak, oppressed and suppressed- idolised man.

The might of the great Emperors got hold of him and put him into fetters,

The pope and priest, the Sultan and the elite, combined to exploit him.

Slavery so degraded him that the music of his flute was crushed within it.²⁴

Power replaces liberty and then it becomes the irrevocable authority over others. People, who have the power of state, could suppress our decisions, actions and opinions in various ways. The power of state must be limited in order to protect our freedom.

State is not an end itself. It is not superior to individual. Considering state as the highest authority, which controls individual life is a fanatical

²³ J. Acton, *Selected Writings of Lord Acton, Essays in Religion, Politics and Morality*, J.R. Fears, (Ed.), Liberty Classics, Indianapolis, 1988, p. 519

²⁴ Cited in A.I. Khan, *Some Aspects of Iqbal's Thought*, Lahore : Islamic Book Service, 1977, p. 17.

belief. State is not absolute authority, but state is a dangerous organization, whose power must be limited. Individuals have the right to limit the power of state, but state has no right to limit or abolish individual freedoms and liberties. Free individuals and limited state must be the formulation, not limited individuals and free state. State exists in order to protect our individual rights and liberties. Life, liberty and property are three fundamental human liberties. Human liberty is a value which must be under the rule of law. Everyone subjected to law; no one, including all rulers, even the Prophet, are above law. As the Prophet says that if my daughter Fatima stole, she would be punished. When state power has been used against our individual liberties, the legitimacy of the existence of state no longer exists. Like state, Islam also is not an end in itself. It is a means, which aim to show a true moral and spiritual guidance for humanity. Neither Islam nor state can be used against our individual liberties. State and religion are tools, which must serve for the betterment of human beings.

It is not the task of Islam to establish state. Islamic state is not a requirement of Islam. The existence of state is a human requirement and human construction. The statization of Islam and Islamisation of state are not compatible with human liberty and pluralism. We should not forget that the aim of Islam is to guide, not to rule. An Islamic theocracy does not protect or limit the power of state in favor of individuals. Rather an Islamist theocracy itself could abolish our freedom. Although Islamists promote the myth of Islamic state, the utopia of Islamist state does not bring Islam in power, it brings totalitarianism in the name of Islam.

Religion and state must be separated. But the separation between state and religion does not mean the full separation between religion and politics. Political dimension of religion and uniting religion with state are totally different things. Religion can contribute and influence politics. Politics must have a moral dimension. The moralisation of politics is very important. But religion should not be reduced to a tool for controlling state in the hands of politicians.

The concept of theocracy is alien to Islam. Because we are commanded to submit ourselves to God, not to theocratic rulers. The Prophet himself did not establish a theocratic state. But he tried to create a peaceful pluralistic society, which included Muslims, Jews, Christians and so on. The Prophet did not use the power of administration for creating a homogeneous society. He recognized the existence of various religious groups and turned this recognition into politics. Madina

Charter is the document of the recognition and application of the Prophet's politics. After his death, he also did not leave us a theocracy. Our state should not be ruled allegedly in the name of God; it should be founded and ruled by humans.

Commanding good and preventing evil is the religious duty of all believers. Muslims as individuals have the right to promote and propagate their religion, enjoin good and prevent evil according to their faith. But enjoining good and preventing evil is not the job of state. Force cannot be used in order to practice this religious duty. State cannot do this, but individuals can do it.

Neither Islamist state nor militant laicist state is desirable. Islamists put state under the service of one particular religion and oppress social diversity. The capture of state power by one religious group becomes an end in itself, a means of further oppression.

It aims to impose *sharia* on the whole society. The Shariatization of society is the ideological programme of Islamic state. Secularist state makes secularist perspectives higher than religious ones and does not let public expression of religion in public life. State must not adopt a religion or secular ideology. The power of state must be limited and state must be neutral in the areas of religions and values. State should not control religion and religion should not control state. What we need is not to make ourselves dependent on state, but to free ourselves from the oppression and intervention of state.

We can lose our liberty under the delusion of Islamic state. The idea of Islamic state means a totalitarian project, which aims to shape our life from a particular religious understanding through the use of force. Many people find the idea of Islamic state very attractive. But they forget that they could lose their liberty for the sake of this delusion.

Human freedom and dignity can flourish only in a state, whose power is limited and in a society, which is free and plural. Human freedom and dignity do not flourish under totalitarian regimes, like Nazist, Socialist, nationalist and religionist regimes, which are based on lies and utopias. Authoritarian and totalitarian understanding of religion must be criticized in order to protect our liberty. God is the Only One, Who is sacred; there is no sacred authoritarianism or totalitarianism.

Every individual has the right to be different. The Quran expresses the right of individual to be different as follows: “Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion.”²⁵ No state has the right to interfere in the right of being different. As state cannot define individuals what they should be just as any religion or ideology also cannot define and shape what state should be. State must recognize all human differences in society and must take neutral attitude towards them. In the limited neutral state, Muslims can have freedom to live their faiths and be equal citizens. But the basis of citizenship should not be religion. Every individual, regardless of his/her faith, gender, class and so on, must be accepted as equal citizen, who has individual liberties and rights. A limited neutral state recognizes plurality and liberty and tries to create a safe environment for all peoples, who live in society. But religious state creates endless conflicts, violations of human liberty and oppressive tyranny. Religious state, like the myth of Islamic state, does not value human individual. Human individual is valuable as long as he/she serves the politics of Islamists. The real capital of Islam is human heart, not a theocratic state.

Free Religious Life

Islam wants to locate itself in the minds and hearts of men and women. But Islam does not create a specific organization, which rules the soul of human being. There is no church organization, papacy or clergy, which controls human spirit. Akyol writes that “By rejecting any intermediaries between man and God — such as an established church — Islam did not become an “organized religion” in the Western sense, and thus continued to empower the individual. The result was not the modern individual with civil liberties that we have today, but it was still a clean and progressive break from the tribalism of the age of paganism.”²⁶ Islam demands human individuals to search freely and voluntarily and let truth flow to their hearts and minds. There is no particular religious institution or class, which governs our relations with God. We are responsible to determine our direct relationship with God. The absence of institutional religious authority in Islam makes our life very individual, very free and pluralistic. Islam is not only the religion of individual, but also it is the religion, which promotes

²⁵ *The Quran*, 109:6.

²⁶ M.Akyol, *A Muslim Case for Liberty*, New York : Norton,(forthcoming book), p. 24.

human freedom. Islam addresses to human individual and recognizes and respects his/her liberties.

No religious class or authority is responsible for human life. We cannot submit our will to any authority in our spiritual and religious life. Spiritual authoritarianism is a form of corruption. Individual is the only one, who is responsible for his/her spirituality, morality and religiosity. No religious authority, such as clergy, ulama, church and so on, could claim responsibility and control of our lives. The existence of religious organizations, like church, means that religion gives the control of our lives to these institutions. Individual responsibility gives the right to control to ourselves. The absence of religious institutions demonstrates that Islam purifies our religions from the control and manipulations of false authorities and recognizes us as free and mature beings, who could be responsible for themselves.

No religious authority should determine truth for us and tell us how to live our lives. We should not waste our lives for realizing the demands of external authorities. We must live and direct our energy for our self-realisation.

Totalitarianism wants to hold political power and to control all institutions. Through the power of institutions, they force society and individual to change according to their ideological utopias. This is the main reason why totalitarian ideologies, such as socialism, nationalism and religionism, are so in line with the power of state. But Islam does not want to change human individual and society through the coercive power of state. It wants to change the hearts and minds of individuals. Then social transformation starts. Totalitarianism is against man while Islam makes change with man. Islam is so in love with human beings, not with the power of political institutions, like state.

Islam in a Free Society

Free society is not as a melting pot, which assimilates our differences. Free society is like mosaic, in which we experience our diversity in liberty. Islam is not a totalitarian ideology, like Fascism and Communism, which seeks to dominate the whole society. The Quran recognizes the diversity of human society and commands Muslims to be a part of this society: "And We have sent down the Book [the Qur'an] to you with truth, confirming and conserving the previous Books... We

have appointed a law and a practice for every one of you. Had God willed, He would have made you a single community, but He wanted to test you regarding what has come to you. So compete with each other in doing good. Every one of you will return to God and He will inform you regarding the things about which you differed.”²⁷ Oppressing or denial of our unique diversity is against the nature of free society. Every religious group is a legitimate partner of any other, not enemy, for living together in a free society. No group is superior to another in a free society in terms of human dignity and liberty. Considering one group superior to others is not compatible with human dignity and liberty. Human individual must be valued, so his/her way of life also must be valued and respected.

The existence of different religious communities is one of great signs from God. Pluralism is the greatest law of God. God have created diversity as the law in operation in natural world as well as in human world. Diversity is the fruit of God’s constant creation. God did not create a single homogenous community, but He allows pluralism in every sphere of human life. Muslims have generally understood pluralism in the context of Islam’s relation to the People of the Book. In Muslim historical experience, Muslims tried to create room for non-Muslims in society and state. Non-Muslim minorities had a sort of internal autonomy; in such a system they could run their civic affairs. Today we must extend pluralism not only to non-Muslims, but also to other types of human diversity. We need to recognize pluralism in every realm of life and reject the homogenization of society in the name of Islam. Muslims must give give up the idea of society in which everyone is a Muslim and society is controlled and ruled by Muslims. Instead homogenizing or ruling society, Muslims must be a part of a plural society, in which they could live, practice, promote and protect their rights and liberties.

Pluralism is a response to the facts of human life and human society. Plurality and liberty cannot be separable. Pluralism and liberty is about how we must live and make decisions about our lives and the lives of our children. Dealing with pluralism is dealing with human rights and freedom of choice. Can Muslims open themselves to other human experiences within Islam and outside Islam?

²⁷ *The Quran*, 5:48.

Absolutism is not compatible with freedom. Pluralism and openness is the requirements of freedom. Openness and pluralism is the only option, which leads us to face various claims to truths and various ways of life and different kinds of human beings. Openness and pluralism are the great values of our day. The absolutist believer is the real danger. Openness and pluralism teaches us to respect, listen and talk to all answers. Instead of totalizing and absolutizing answers, pluralism and liberty always make room for new answers.

Free society is not free, in the sense of having no sense of responsibility. Free society is not the place where individual does whatever he/she pleases. This is libertinism. Islam is incompatible with libertinism. Anarchy and chaos will be dominant in society. As a matter of fact, freedom does not mean the state of chaos. As Proudhon says, "freedom is order." Islam asks people to restrain themselves, not to harm themselves as well as others. Islam requires liberty and responsibility together. Instead of fear and force, people should behave in a mutually responsible way toward each other. Responsible mutuality is necessary for us. Instead of responsibility, fear and oppression makes people unfree.

As long as people do not use force, every religious and secular groups have full liberty to practice their lives. Pluralism is not to live according to the will of the dominant group and power. Pluralism does not mean to make everyone the same and deny differences. Pluralism recognizes the common humanness of all individuals; at the same time it recognize particularities of individuals, like religion, culture, philosophy, race and so on. Every religious group must be respected. The relationship between various groups are not passive. People must live together in diversity and experience their diversity together. Freedom makes possible living together in peaceful, active, and constructive ways. Pluralism not only recognizes the fact of diversity but at the same it encourages people actively engage with diversity and establish mutual giving-receiving form of human relationship. Iqbal expresses the creative fruit of constructive human relations as follows: "Company (of living personalities) is better than the knowledge obtained from books. The company of free men is creative of

fresh personalities.”²⁸ Pluralism gives us opportunity to pursue our particular way as well as to learn from others.

The institutions of state are not the institutions of religion. The institutions of religion are the institutions of free, plural and civil society. Religion as a part of free and plural society, can contribute to social life in various fields such as education, health, and charity. Religious life could dynamically flourish in civil society, but religion itself weakens if it becomes a business of state in the hands of state bureaucrats.

It is important to make distinction between state and society. Secular neutral state does not mean a secularized society. The neutrality of state does not mean the neutrality of society in terms of religion, values and ideologies. Liberal state does not favour or disfavour any religious or secular doctrine, it has no enforcing role in the fields of religion and values. State should not even have a positive role to play in promoting a particular religious learning, worship and practice. But a free society accommodates secular and religious views together. Religious freedom not only includes the right to live as religious person but also accommodates secular person too. Secularism simply means the separation between state and religion, not secularization of society.

In the context of Muslim world, the following question need to be asked: Can Islam be a part of free plural society or is Islam a religion that dictates its own political order on society? There is a religious or secular tendency, which claims to dictate a particular religion or a specific secular ideology over the whole society. The religious one is called *religionism* while the secular one is called *laicism*. Absolutist militant religionism and aggressive secularism, namely laicism, are incompatible with human freedom and pluralism, because militant religionism, like Islamism, and militant secularism, like laicism, mutually refuse to accommodate each other, they do not allow the broadening of secular or religious identity. As a version of religionism, Islamism understands Islam as a fixed and unchangeable political ideology, while militant secularism understands positivism as absolute true ideology.

When Muslims understand Islam as religion, not totalitarian ideology, which controls state, and Muslims as a social religious group,

²⁸ Cited in. M.Siddiqi, *Concept of Muslim Culture in Iqbal*, Lahore : Islamic Research Institute, 1994, p. 65.

this understanding could bring great benefits to them. As a social group, Muslims really can contribute to society in the areas of charity, health, education, science, medicine, culture, media and so on. In a free society, Islam has a chance to be a real social phenomenon. But as a state ideology, there is no such chance. Free society makes Islam so individual, so social.

In a free society, all people have freedom to compete or cooperate with other religious groups. It is up to them to have relations the way they want.

Conclusion

Islam says that men are free and does not give any authority to control the minds and lives of human beings. Islam is in favor of the values and institutions of free individuals, free society and limited state, whose power is limited in favor of individual liberties.

Can Islam make a difference in the field of liberty, peace and plurality? My answer is “yes” if Muslims renew their understanding about what it means to be a Muslim. Iqbal gave a profound answer to this question very long time ago:

Momin and Love are mutually interdependent

What is impossible to us is possible for Love!

The capital of the Intellect is apprehension and doubt,

Of Love, faith and resolution!

Intellect builds that it may destroy

Love destroys that it may rehabilitate!

Intellect says ‘Live happy and content’,

Love says “Learn submission and achieve freedom.”²⁹

My answer also to this question is this: What it means to be a Muslim means to be a free dignitary being.

*This paper was delivered as Iqbal Memorial Lecture at the Department of Philosophy, University of the Punjab, Lahore (Pakistan).

²⁹ Cited in K.G.Saiyidain, *Iqbal's Educational Philosophy*, Lahore : Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1992, p. 95.