

Islam versus the Christian Concept of Freedom Who is truly free?

Most people will agree that freedom is a precious possession. Freedom is said to be worth more than all the treasures on earth. It is of such high value that one must be ready to give his life for it. When we hear freedom so highly praised, you would think that all is well in this world. But reality tells a different story. We live in a dangerous world. Under the slogan, "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity", nations have been robbed of their freedom, and became enslaved by tyrannical powers. There have been many successful revolutions, and we know that in most cases what has happened is simply that the oppressor and the oppressed have changed roles. The question is, "What is real freedom?" Martin Luther once said: "A human being can be compared to a horse which is never without a rider; this rider is either the devil or God." Luther's meaning is clear. A human being is subject to a power, whether he wants to be or not. He tries to rule himself, to be in total control of himself, but history shows that he will never succeed.

When we limit our discussion to the Islamic versus the Christian concept of freedom, we notice that there are vast differences. For example, political pluralism has not taken root in Arab nations. The ideas of parliamentary-democratic multi-party liberalism were expounded by a few Arab thinkers in the 1920s and the 1930s, mainly in Egypt, but they didn't impact the political scene. The long quest for freedom in the Muslim world has left a string of shabby tyrannies, ranging from traditional autocracies to a new-style dictatorship, modern only in their apparatus of oppression and indoctrination. For Christians, tolerance means a willingness to practice pluralism and peaceful coexistence. But the basic problem with Muslims is their refusal to accept pluralism. They claim sole ownership of the truth, but they also refuse to accept differences of religious opinion and practice.

Islam, a religion of peace?

Is Islam a religion of peace? When we let the Koran and the Hadith (traditions) speak for themselves, one can hardly substantiate the claim that Islam is a tolerant religion. Laws and regulations enacted during Muhammad's residency in Medina gave Islam a new legal feel and, in effect, paved the way for the formation of an Arab state. And this state is a theocracy. Allah is the true sovereign of the community, the ultimate source of authority, the sole source of legislation. The state was the church and the church was the state, and God was head of both. For more than a thousand years, Islam provided the only universally accepted set of rules and principles for the regulation of public and social life.

What then is peace? In Islam it means "submission" and resignation to the will of Allah. Submission constitutes the essence of what Islam is all about. A Muslim is one resigned and obedient to the will of God, and bears witness that there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is his apostle. An unbeliever is someone who rejects God's call to submission, who remains indifferent to God or ignores him. Since it is the will of Allah

that Islam will rule the entire world, entering non-Muslim lands to subjugate the population and wipe out their corrupt, infidel culture is not seen by Muslims as "waging war," but as spreading peace.

Modern radical Islam, also called Islamism, has been influenced by pagan Nazi ideology. From 1933, Nazi Germany and its various agencies made a concerted and, on the whole, remarkably successful effort to promote and disseminate European style anti-Semitism in the Arab world. In *What Went Wrong: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, Bernard Lewis observes that during the 1930s, Fascism and Naziism won widespread support, and even after their military defeat in World War II, they continued to serve as unavowed models in both ideology and statecraft in Arab countries.

Since Islam's understanding of peace is vastly different from ours, no politician should parrot the line "Islam is a religion of peace." To claim that it is a religion of peace is too serious of a matter; it has to do with our future, and the future of our children and grandchildren.

Islam and Freedom

The absence of freedom in the Islamic world is related to their religion. A hadith attributed to Muhammad is: "There can be no two religions in Arabia." The second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, forced all Jews and Christians to leave Arabia during his term, 634-644 A.D. The reign of Caliph Abd al-Malik (685-705) marked the beginning of the Islamicization and Arabicization of conquered territories. Violence was familiar from the very beginning of Islamic political history. Of the four Righteous Caliphs who followed Muhammad in the headship of the Islamic community, three were murdered.

Bernard Lewis notes that westerners have become accustomed to think of good and bad government in terms of tyranny versus liberty. In Middle-Eastern usage for traditional Muslims, the opposite of tyranny was not liberty but justice. Justice in this context meant essentially two things, that the ruler was there by right and not by usurpation, and that he governed according to God's law, or at least according to recognizable moral and legal principles.

Shari'a

Shari'a is the name for the Islamic legal system. It originally and ideally is meant to regulate all spheres of life without differentiating between civil, criminal and personal status laws. The authority of the shari'a is absolute, and all legitimacy must be derived from it. It originated in the Koran and the traditions attributed to Muhammad and is regarded as immutable, since it consists in what Muhammad knew by revelation of the divine will. The Shari'a was not only a "divine" law but also a lawyer's law; for it was built up directly or indirectly, on their deduction from the sacred texts. It has been partially implemented in a number of Muslim countries. This legal system strongly opposes conversion from Islam to Christianity. In certain nations, converts have been sentenced

to death. This strict interpretation of shari'a generates fear and inhibits all but the most courageous from any serious investigation of Christian claims to truth. In Muslim perception, therefore, there is no human legislative power, and there is only one law for believers – the Holy Law of God, promulgated by revelation. For example, Sheikh Tabtaba'i, the iman of the Kadhimain mosque in Baghdad said recently, "The West calls for freedom and liberation. Islam rejects this freedom. True freedom is obeying Allah." In an Islamic state, there is in principle of no other law than the shari'a, the holy law of Islam. But the reforms of the nineteenth century and the needs of commercial and other contacts with Europe led to the enactment of new laws modelled on those of Europe – commercial, civil, criminal and finally constitutional. But today, radical Islamists want to return to the original purpose of the shari'a. Therefore, Islamist circles, in and out of governments, have been pressing for a stronger enhancement of Shari'a's influence on legislation.

Women in Islam

From a Western perspective, Islam discriminates against women. In Islamic countries women are still denied many rights that are available to men. The emancipation of women, more than any other single issue, is the touchstone difference between modernization and westernization. Islamists consider women as "deficient in mind and religion." The testimony of a woman in the courts is worth only half a man's testimony. When women appear in public, they must be veiled. In Saudi Arabia women are even barred from driving an automobile. Islam permits both polygamy and concubinage. According to the late Ayatollah Khomeini, allowing women to reveal their faces, their arms, and their legs, and to mingle socially in the school or workplace with men is an incitement to immorality and promiscuity, and a deadly blow to the very heart of Islamic society, the Muslim family and home.

Second-class Citizens

Since Islam applies to every area of life, including the political, non-Muslims are normally considered second-class citizens where Muslims are a majority. There is no Muslim state where democracy, freedom of the press and pluralism reign. Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians have faced clear discrimination in Islamic countries, even though these religious groups happen to be the original inhabitants of the lands conquered by Islam. Muslims regard them as "Dhimmi" who must pay the Jizya (Surah 9:29). But this dhimmi option is only available to Christians and Jews, not to Hindus, Buddhists or others, who have only the choice between embracing Islam or death. It is also a capital offence for converts to Islam to return to Christianity. In other words, non-Muslims are subject to religious apartheid and second class citizenship in their own country under Islamic rule. Since the shari'a requires the subjugation of non-Muslims, "freedom of religion" for Muslims essentially means the freedom to take away religious freedom from others. Eastern Christians, living under Islam, are deprived of state patronage, a public voice, equality under the law, and of their right to proclaim their message. Christians, as dhimmi communities, are obliged to maintain a low social profile. Furthermore, since the refusal to submit to shari'a is considered a rebellion

against Allah, the very existence of non-Muslim communities can be viewed as an act of aggression. Opposition to the Gospel has taken extreme forms at times. In the 1990s in Sudan, the Islamic government burned down a church with Christians praying inside, and only one person survived. Religious tensions in Egypt between Christians and Muslims have often been marked by the burning of churches, execution of Christians, confiscation of private property and forced conversions to Islam. But what Christians are not allowed to do in Muslim nations, Islamists want to do in Western nations. Contemporary Muslim missions have been organized both to win converts and to counteract Christian missionary efforts. The conferees at the Muslim World League Conference in Mecca in 1974 called for the government takeover of mission hospitals, schools, and orphanages, the banning of Christian literature in Muslim countries, and cutting off financial support from countries allowing missionaries to Muslims. But at the same time the Islamic conference has expended billions for Islamic institutions and propaganda around the world.

The Christian Concept of Freedom

What is the Biblical perspective of freedom? Freedom does not mean anarchy. It does not mean uniformity. Uniformity can only be achieved by power and force. Therefore, uniformity can be achieved by Islam. But for Christians, uniformity clashes with freedom. The tension between freedom and bondage is one of the crucial dual themes of Scripture. Beginning with the Genesis account of the Fall, humanity lost its freedom. It lost the freedom to converse and walk with God and to live in Paradise. Human beings became slaves of sin. We live in a fallen world where Satan is hard at work opposing the advance of God's Kingdom. More than ever we must recognize how much of the sickness of this world is due to spiritual causes. We are not wrestling against flesh and blood but against the principalities and powers in the invisible world. We are involved in a spiritual battle (John 8:31-59; Eph. 6:10-20). Therefore, all human traditions, institutions, and structures are prone to evil.

Real freedom in the real sense of the word does not exist outside of Christ. Freedom is a gift from God, which we received through faith in Jesus Christ (John 8). Jesus Christ is the Great Liberator, and whoever believes in Him becomes the son of God, God's free children who have found an eternal home. The Truth, Jesus Christ, shall set you free (John 8:31-36). The Cross is central. Only through Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension can we understand the true meaning of freedom. We serve the living Lord. The early martyrs disobeyed the law of the Empire and accepted death rather than be disloyal to Christ. Their method was not rebellion but martyrdom. Walter Wink reminds us that the victory of the Church over the demonic power, which was embodied in the Roman imperial system, was not won by seizing the levers of power. It was won when the victims knelt down in the Colosseum and prayed in the name of Jesus for the Emperor.

The apostle Paul is clearly the chief expositor of this Christian concept of freedom (Gal. 5:1). He emphasizes the nature of true freedom as intrinsically associated with the new relationship of believers with Christ. Through Christ we are no longer slaves of sin

(Rom. 6:14). Freedom then comes only by the power of the Gospel itself, announced in word and deed. The freedom we have through faith in Christ is not self-determination nor freedom to do whatever we want. The apostle Paul enjoined responsible behaviour (Rom.13:1). Real freedom means that we let ourselves be led by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). Christians are free to love and to serve. St. Augustine wrote about the city of God where power is replaced by service in charity. To be mastered by Christ, who was the pre-eminent servant, is to partake of the benefits of his redemptive death. To base one's behaviour on the principle that the Christian leads by serving, is to be a truly free man. He must take a lively interest in the welfare of the whole community, Christian or non-Christian, of which he is a part.

When we put the Triune God first, we can live in true freedom. His supreme lordship is then accepted over every area of life. As St. Augustine said, "Those who wish to follow God allow him to go before and they follow; they do not make him follow while they go before." From the beginning, Christians were taught both by precept and practice to distinguish between God and Caesar and between the different duties owed to each of the two. Muslims received no such instruction.

All freedom-loving people would do well to recall the words of Malcolm Muggeridge, once a non-Christian but later a staunch defender of the Christian faith. He observed, "We must not forget that our human rights are derived from the Christian faith. In Christian terms, every single human being whoever he or she may be, sick or well, clever or foolish, beautiful or ugly, every human being is loved by his Creator, who as the Gospel tells us, counted the hairs of his head." Christianity's accent on the importance of the individual and his freedom demonstrates that God values each and every person. Political freedom and tolerance have their roots in the love of God and Christ's liberating rule. Political, economic, and religious freedom can only exist where there is liberty and freedom of the individual. No wonder individual freedom and rights are most prevalent where Christianity had the greatest impact.

The record of the church reveals the role of those who championed true freedom. Tertullian (d. ca.220) said that "it is a fundamental right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions... to which free-will and not force should lead us." Martin Luther noted, "A Christian man is perfectly a free lord, subject to none." But he did not want to manufacture anarchists. To counteract this claim to liberty, he also said: "A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." He also told the German princes in a letter that it was not the function of government to "forbid anyone to teach or say what he wants – the Gospel or lies." The first European country that actually accorded civil rights to non-Christians was Calvinist Holland, followed within a short time by England. Protestant churches in England were all legal, but unequal in right and opportunities, and Catholics were more or less persecuted. Still, the English church and state allowed the publishing of the view that religion should be optional and atheism considered a possible form of belief. The rationale was that argument brings out the truth, no matter what errors are put forward.

As I have shown, the Islamic concept of freedom, both in theory and practice, compares unfavourably with the Western democracies as they have developed under the influence of Christianity during the last two or three centuries. The freedom of the mind from constraint and indoctrination, the freedom to question and inquire and speak, and freedom for women from male oppression are still lacking in the Muslim world. In the light of the Islamist threat to our freedoms, our call is to think with integrity, to speak with courage and work with a vision for true Biblical freedom. We must become aware of suffering Christians and show our solidarity with them. We must publicize in magazines, newspapers and other media the violations of religious freedom in Muslim countries.

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September 2006