

Religion and Liberty

The relationship between religion and liberty has been discussed extensively by scholars. Yet, these views usually aim at either defending or rejecting the former. In such arguments, there is usually an ambiguity in the notion of political liberty which is used as the criterion for judgment about religion. It is true that in great religions, principally and initially no mention has been made of liberty. However, every great religion has emerged and developed on the horizon of liberty.

With the advent of modern world, religion is viewed differently. In the pre-modern world, religion was the main criterion for the judgment of every affair. But the modern era has its own criteria to judge everything with it including faith. The Europe's reform brought about the basis for changing the existing criteria. That is the reason why the Protestant countries are pioneers in adopting democracy. Obviously the differences between the Catholics and Protestants have not been related to liberty. In recent decades, the Catholic Church has had a share in the emergence and establishment of democracy, particularly in Eastern Europe. Yet, one cannot deduce from these points that Christianity has accepted or denied political freedom. Of course Max Weber has rightly argued that reform is a prelude to the advent of modern political and economic systems. The Church may also claim that it has indirectly served democracy by confronting the Communism and Stalinism. One may accept such an argument but cannot conclude that the ultimate goal of Christianity has been the establishment of a democratic society.

The formal political liberties that we talk about, and which we are interested in, did not formally exist anywhere up to the 18th century. Hence one should not expect to find a statement about accepting or rejecting such liberties in the old faiths. Nevertheless, the true followers and those who have intimacy with religious truths consider themselves free, no matter when and where they are. To elaborate this religious trial, a great number of Muslim scholars have called Islam the religion of liberty.

Obviously, a multitude of non-Muslims and even some Muslims may deny such experience and state that liberty has nothing to do with religion, and no faith, including Islam, would accept the liberty in religion. In this regard, the advocates of the notion that Islam accepts the principle of liberty argue that such statements are against liberty and belong to the category of ruling verdicts, and that they have nothing to do with the essence of Islam. Whatever the difference, it denotes that

the followers of Islam have a variety of interpretations of their faith, and depending on the perceptions and interpretations that would turn into the dominant discourse; a form of religion is realized. It is noteworthy that in discussions about the relationship between religion and liberty, those who believe that liberty should be placed under religious rules and sanctions, intentionally or otherwise argue that liberty is something that stands outside the domain of religion. This is a right interpretation, although, each religion has been created with liberty, in religious principles and instructions, no mention has been made of liberty itself.

Actually, political and legal liberties have emerged in the modern history while religion is as old as man. There is little dispute among scholars in the notion that political liberties belong to the history of modernity. Generally, in the pre-modern eras, there is no discussion about liberty in its modern sense in the works of philosophers and writers. The Greeks had democracy but had no affinity with liberalism. In our language and culture, liberty confronts slavery, and in religious and philosophical studies, liberty denotes being free from dependence to anyone but God.

When Napoleon Bonaparte talked about liberty in Egypt, the audience thought that he considered them slaves but as already stated, the classical poets and thinkers of the World of Islam have had a thorough understanding of liberty, and occasionally have written about it. Molavi, the Iranian poet, considers prophecy as a means leading to liberty. In his poem, he states;

As prophecy leads to liberty

It liberates the believers

Oh, followers live happily

And feel free as cedar or lily

It is noteworthy that in Persian poems, cedar and lily symbolize liberty and free-mindedness. Cedar symbolizes liberty in the sense that it is free to grow as tall as it wishes and it never bows, nor does it fruit. But lily symbolizes eloquence and tactfulness in speech:

I wonder what the early bird said

That the eloquent free lily kept quiet

The lily is free and its freedom is in its speech. That is not to say that Molavi and Hafiz had free-mindedness in mind while writing their poems, and political and legal freedoms are not proven in their works either. If we divide the freedom into “freedom of”, “freedom in” and “freedom for”, their poems denote “freedom of”, yet we also know that freedom is undividable, but has different forms, and at any time, one of its forms is dominant and manifests itself or is perceived in that way.

Evidently the ultimate political and social liberty will be realized only when there is a balance among its three dimensions. Apparently the contemporary legal and political liberties mostly embrace freedom in accepting, expressing our views, choosing jobs and accommodation, etc.

In Kant’s view, man may achieve such liberties when he is intellectually mature. If one interprets Kant’s and other philosophers’ views in a way to show that liberty has affinity with formal intellect, then, one may consider liberty as a precondition for intellectual life and establishment of a peaceful and healthy world. Obviously, the aim of liberty in the 18th century was to bring peace, health and welfare and to produce science. Yet, now do we know what liberty is for? Maybe in our age, liberty connotes liberty for power. Such power is superstitious power, which is not known how it should be realized and for the same reason, it may not be free in its true sense.

To perceive the different forms of freedom, one should note that in any perception of freedom and in any form of it, which we have in mind, liberty’s way begins with “freedom of”. Prophets promised and taught people to be free from prejudice, sects

and rigidity. But a faith that has laws must obey them where behaviors and actions are needed. This implies that the limits of freedom are determined through following the principles and laws. That is, people interact within the framework of laws and rules. One thing should not be forgotten and if forgotten, the religious liberty is endangered. Namely, obeying the laws has its own limitations; the mere obedience is not the ultimate point. Prophets were assigned to liberate and lead people to perfection. The holy prophet of Islam has stated that "I was assigned to perfect supreme ethics. When we forget these statements, and when the sects become dominant, no trace of liberty will remain.

This is true of every case. In the modern world when liberty was first framed, and when it was thought of as a need for the nature of human beings, what was in mind was liberating people from the Middle Ages, and liberty in thinking, promising, acting, opinion, practice as well as freedom for achieving a peaceful, just and healthy society. However, now we see that mostly a superficial form of freedom has formally remained.

In the present world, in which freedom in its common sense is something outside the domain of religion, how is it possible to talk about the natural relationship between religion and liberty? Usually when this relationship is discussed, the aim is that whether religion agrees with the principles of liberalism and its recent stage, which is mostly related to the right to reject and deny it.

There are Muslims who strive to prove this conformity and agreement. They claim that Islam has no opposition to any form of goodness, and that naturally, it is not opposed to liberty, which is truly something good. There are occasions where some Muslims refer to the scholars of the world of Islam and their views about liberty and freedom of human beings in that connection. Mutazelites held that God has obliged us to support freedom. In other words, because we have obligations we should be free. There is another group whose thinking paradigm is mostly in line with the modern philosophy of the West. Of course, they have principal differences with one another. They believe that the obligation, order and action are those of God. In the modern era, Kant, the free philosopher, has stated that our inner voice obliges us to choose the right way and the right deed. In his view, we are free since we have obligation, not otherwise.

Probably the European philosophy may not have influenced the Muslims directly but since the last two hundred years, during which their globalization has been

flourishing, new problems have been set forth not only for Muslims but also for other people of the world. Little attempt has been made to resolve such problems logically. As a result, gradually, the problems have been accumulated. Now regarding the globalization, what will happen to the faiths and cultures of different parts of the world, and what should be done with religion, wisdom and knowledge? And what should followers of faiths do in such circumstances?

Two common responses to these questions are easy, and one is difficult and has fewer advocates. The easy answers are to accept globalization as it is, and the other answer is to reject it completely. With these two responses, nothing will change and no problem will be resolved. The difficult answer is to confront what has happened and to recognize it, and to resolve it with respect to the existing facilities and possibilities in the present world. If one asks the believers who hold this attitude about their views of liberty, they may respect it as a pre-condition for freeing man from tyranny and achieving perfection. They may think of it as something necessary for the society and even for influencing religion.