

**The Islamic Conception of
FREEDOM, TRUST
and
RESPONSIBILITY**

by
S. MUHAMMAD TUFAIL, M.A.

The Imam, The Shah Jehan Mosque,
and Joint Editor, *The Islamic Review*,
Woking, Surrey, England

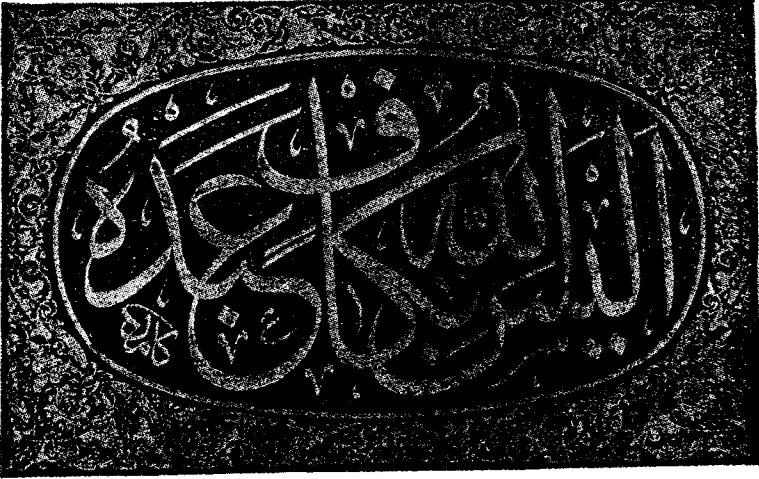
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A verse of the Qur'án (39 : 36) enclosed in a border of decorative pattern. The English rendering of this verse reads : "Is God not sufficient for His servant (Muhammad)?"

The Islamic Conception of Freedom, Trust and Responsibility¹

What freedom is not

Freedom could mean freedom from righteousness and responsibility or freedom to do what ever one likes. But surely this is not the freedom which we are thinking of while discussing this subject. We have to make distinction between freedom and license. Freedom which makes us free from trustworthiness and responsibility leads us to chaos. What then is freedom, that so much cherished object in man's life?

What freedom is

Broadly speaking, freedom is making oneself free from bondage, or from troublesome things in life. Freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of occupation and enterprise,

¹ Text of a lecture delivered at Krasnapolsky Hotel, Amsterdam, Holland, at a meeting of the Congress of Ideals held in 1957.

freedom from want, disease and fear, freedom to feel equal with others, freedom to worship God, etc., are various concepts of freedom, for which men have lived and died. In whatever terms we define freedom one point is, however, clear, that the path of freedom is the path of onerous responsibilities. "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom," says Thomas Paine, "must undergo the fatigue of supporting it."¹

This is true in all walks of life. Whenever we talk of freedom we always think of discipline, obedience, responsibility, restraint from evil, adherence to truth, and so on and so forth. How true was Jesus Christ (may peace and blessings of God be upon him!) when he said that only "truth shall make you free".² The old saying, "The good man only is free; all bad men are slaves," also points towards this direction. The freedom which a good man enjoys can only be attained by his obedience to moral law, otherwise man becomes a slave to his own lower self. "Hast thou seen him," says the Qur'an, "who takes his lower desires for his god?"³ This man, in fact, is not free; he is a slave to his passions.

To a Muslim real freedom lies in submission to God

The desire to be free, no doubt, has a strong hold on man's mind, but unless he is willing to accept the guidance of God he would not be able to free himself from bondage. The Qur'an teaches that real freedom from bondage lies in submission to God and the purification of the self. This is the pivot of Islamic faith, on which turns all that is dear to man, life, liberty, success, peace, happiness and wisdom.

بَلَىٰ مَنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ
مُحْسِنٌ فَلَهُ أَجْرُهُ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

☞ "Whoever submits himself entirely to God and is the doer of good (to others) he has his reward from his Lord, and there is no fear for such nor shall they grieve."⁴

"He indeed is successful who purifies himself."⁵

"Now surely in God's remembrance do hearts find peace."⁶

"We have sent among you a Messenger (i.e., Muhammad) from among you who recites to you Our messages and purifies you and teaches you the Book and the Wisdom."⁷

But man is free to reject the messages of God, if he likes. This is where he differs from the rest of the creation.

Everything in the universe submits to God

According to the Qur'án, everything in the universe submits to the laws of God :

“To Him submits whoever is in the heavens and the earth willingly or unwillingly, and to Him they will be returned.”⁸

This submission to God in other words is submission to the creative and guiding power of God, which is working in and for everything. The Qur'án says :

“Our Lord is He Who gives to everything its creation then guides (it).”⁹

God is He Who “creates, then makes complete, and Who measures and then guides it”.¹⁰ And God “revealed in every heaven its affair”.¹¹ And God has revealed to the bee, “make hives in the mountains and in the trees”.¹²

But man can reject the guidance of God if he likes

The directive power of God is working for man also, but in a different form, because man himself is in some ways different from other beings. When he is born, he is a helpless creature, but in this helplessness lies his greatest power. He is not like other animals who live only by instinct. Man is an animal who makes selections. A wolf would eat nothing but meat and a sheep nothing but grass, but with man food is an acquired taste. He may eat meat or may not touch it throughout his life ; that depends in which class of people he has been brought up. In the preservation of his life and species man stands in line with other animals. All living creatures struggle hard to escape death but man can kill himself if he likes. The act of committing suicide is peculiar only to this animal called man. No other animal does it, because it has no other choice except to complete its term of life, unless, of course, it meets with an accident.

Because man is different, or has been made different, therefore God's guidance to him is also given in a different way, that is through the agency of prophets who have been raised in all lands and nations. The bee follows its prescribed (instinctive) course, but man has been given the choice, however limited that choice may be, to accept or reject the direction which comes to him through the prophets. The promise which God made with Adam was :

“Surely there will come to you a guidance from Me, then whoever follows My guidance, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve. And (as to) those who disbelieve in and reject Our messages, they are the companions of the Fire ; in it they will abide.”¹³

The mere possibility of rejecting the messages of the prophets that man was not forced to follow such guidance. This point has been further clarified at other places. Qur'an :

وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفِرْ

14 "The truth is from your Lord; so let him who please believe and let him who please disbelieve."

15 "We have truly shown him the way; he may accept it or reject it."

16 "Have We not . . . pointed out to him the two conspicuous ways."

قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ بَصَائِرُ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ فَمَنْ أَبْصَرَ فَلِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ عَمِيَ فَعَلَيْهَا

17 "Clear proofs have indeed come to you from your Lord; so whoever sees, it is for his own good; and whoever is blind it is for his own harm."

18 "If you do good, you do good for your own souls. And if you do evil it is for them" (i.e., for your own souls).

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ

19 "There is no compulsion in religion — the right way is clearly distinct from error."

Man is born a free agent

This freedom of will and action is thus the basis of all virtuous life in Islam. It is here that man differs from the rest of the creation. An act only becomes a virtue when it is chosen by free will. The free will is, however, restricted, but that does not mean that man's actions are pre-determined. Man's deeds are recorded at the moment when they are done.²⁰ Islam does not accept the view that our present life is the result of our previous deeds (*karma*) nor does it believe in the doctrine of original or inherited sin. According to the Qur'an, man is born a free agent and is responsible for what he does here in this world. God expects him to follow the Divine guidance but the decision is left to man himself, whether or not he likes to surrender his will freely to the Will of God and thus work in harmony and participation with his Creator.

Leaving aside the questions of freedom of conscience, will and action, I may mention here briefly a few aspects of

our lives where Islam has helped us to break the man-made shackles.

Islam has broken the man-made shackles: monasticism asceticism, priesthood, racialism, etc.

There is but One God " (*Lá ilahá il-Allah*), the basic formula of Islamic faith, makes us free from all sorts of superstitions and bondages. Paganism in its various forms and the worship of all other gods and goddesses have to be entirely discarded. Because there is no god except God, the Supreme, the Wise, the Mighty, the Compassionate, the Merciful, the Loving, the Creator of the matter and the soul, the Light of the heaven and the earth, therefore, He and He alone should be worshipped. God alone should be our goal and ideal. That only would bring peace and harmony in our lives. If we serve other gods and ideas besides God that would create conflicts and disharmonies in our existence. The way of freedom lies in serving One Ideal alone.

Islam teaches us that man is not made a slave to the natural forces but a ruler over them. His rank in the scale of creation is so high that everything in the universe has been made subservient to him.²¹

Islam makes us free from monasticism,²² a life of complete renunciation, on the one hand, and from the stark materialism, the life of this world alone, on the other.

Islam also makes us free from asceticism. The use of the good things of this life is not to be prohibited. "O you who believe, eat of the good things that We have provided you with, and give thanks to God, if He it is Whom you serve."²³ But the note of warning is always there.

"Let not your wealth nor your children divert you from the remembrance of God; and whosoever does that these are the losers."²⁴

Further, Islam makes us free from the bondage of priesthood, priesthood as a class and as a profession. No mediators, no priests are needed between man and his Creator. Let every man become his own priest. Religion is a matter of *faith* in God and virtuous life. There is nothing unintelligible, superstitious or talismanic about it, for which a special class of priests, pharisees or occult teachers is needed. God is nearer to man than his life vein.²⁵ He listens to our call when we pray to Him.²⁶

"Surely God loves those who turn much (to Him), and He loves those who purify themselves."²⁷

Again Islam makes us free from prejudices of race, colour, rank or caste. "O mankind," says the Qur'an — the address is here to the whole of mankind and not to a particular people — "surely We have created you from a male and a female and made you tribes and families that you may know each other. Surely the noblest of you with God is the most dutiful of you."²⁸

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَى
وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ

"O mankind, surely We have created you from a single male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other. Surely the noblest of you with God is the most dutiful of you" (The Qur'an, 49 : 13).

At another place the Qur'an declares :

"Mankind is a single nation."²⁹

Again :

"O mankind, keep your duty to your Lord, Who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same (kind) and spread from these two many men and women."³⁰

Man must be respected

Man cannot be dutiful and virtuous if he escapes from life or on the contrary wastes all his efforts in this world's life. He should live his life to the best of his capabilities in harmony with the welfare of mankind. But, before he can do so, he must know that humanity has to be respected. Every human being who walks on this earth has to be honoured ; he may belong to any land, race or religion. The Qur'an says :

"We have honoured the children of Adam."³¹

Again the words here should be marked. Not Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews or Christians should be honoured but the children of Adam. Man must develop an attitude of respect towards mankind because God is the Lord of all the worlds and nations.³² Only doing so, that is by correcting his attitude towards life, man can have trust in himself and the future of mankind.

Modern man's attitude towards life is fundamentally wrong

But what do we find around us? Suspicions, hatreds and conflicts. Within our own souls and without. Man has thrown himself into a muddle. The greatest tragedy for him today is that there is nothing left to believe or trust. He has denied himself any purpose and destiny. He cries in the wilderness as Voltaire did when he said :

“Man is a stranger to his own researches ;
He knows not whence he comes, nor whither he goes.”³³

This ignorance and mistrust of one's own destiny has made him a pessimist and cynic. The whole universe seems to him a meaningless phenomenon. It is at this stage that the Qur'án comes to his rescue. God “created not the heavens and the earth,” declares the Qur'án, “and all between them *except with truth* and for an appointed term.”³⁴ Again, God

“did not create the heavens and the earth and that which is between them *in sport* . . . but most of them know not.”³⁵

Man must trust in the wisdom of God and be patient and steadfast

One of the attributive names of God mentioned in the Qur'án is *Al-Hakim*, the Wise.³⁶ It is the Wise God Who has created this universe and whatever is in it and has appointed a goal for everything. It is trust in such a Wise Being that is expected from a believer. Only the Wise God should command our absolute trust.

“He it is Who is God in the heaven and God in the earth.
And He is the Wise, the Knowing.”³⁷

“Say: He is my Lord, there is no God but He ; in Him do I trust and to Him is my return.”³⁸

Trust in God should, however, be accompanied by work, patience and steadfastness. “Excellent is the reward of the workers,” says the Qur'án, “who are patient (or steadfast) and upon their Lord have set their trust.”³⁹ At another place we find :

“Those who strive hard for God, certainly God shall guide them in His ways and He is surely with the doers of good.”⁴⁰

At times trust (Arabic *tawakkul*) in God and responsibility have been mentioned together :

“Whoever keeps his duty to God, He ordains a way out for him, and giveth him sustenance from whence he imagines not. And whoever trusts in God, He is sufficient for him.”⁴¹

Trust (tawakkul) in God is not fatalism

Some people think that trust in God is just a form of fatalism.⁴² In Islam nothing is farther from the truth. The verses quoted above show that reliance on God is meaningless unless accompanied by appropriate action. This reminds me of a little incident from the life of the Prophet, Muhammad. A bedouin came to visit the Prophet and, on inquiry as to what he had done with his camel, he said that he had left it outside. "But have you tied it?" asked the Prophet.

"No," said the Arab, "I trust in God."

"Go, first tie your camel, and then trust in God," said the Prophet.^{43a}

This was the attitude of the Prophet towards life and its problems. One should do one's best and then leave the rest to God. The whole life of the Prophet bears testimony to this fact. He had trusted God every moment of his life, but his struggle to make the cause of truth triumph over falsehood never ceased till he breathed his last. The same he taught to his followers. He could not do otherwise because the Qur'an itself has laid great emphasis on the point that "man can have nothing but what he strives for".⁴³ At another place we read :

"O you who believe, be patient and vie with one another in endurance and remain steadfast, and fulfil your duty to God, that you may be successful."⁴⁴

Fulfilling one's obligation is a prerequisite of success. But, as I have said before, man cannot tread the path of duty unless he believes in the heart of his heart that life has a meaning, a purpose, a sanctity behind it.

Believers in God are the keepers of their trust

There is another word for trust in Arabic which has been used in the Qur'an and that is *amánah*. It was due to his *amánah* that the Prophet Muhammad, in his life before prophethood, was called by his countrymen as *al-Amin*, the Trustworthy.

Keeping of trust is one of the qualities of a believer that has been mentioned in the Qur'an together with faith, holding of prayer, restraint from ill, etc.⁴⁵ In our ordinary dealings with men, "if one of you trusts another," says the Qur'an, "then he who is trusted should deliver his trust, and let him keep his duty to God, his Lord."⁴⁶

In matters of State and Government the appointment of a right person to a right job has also been called the deliverance of trust to its rightful owners.

“God commands you to make over trusts to those worthy of them.”⁴⁷

Our lives are also a trust of God with us

Our lives and properties are also a sacred trust of God with us. When a child or anyone dear and near to us dies a Muslim does not say “Dust thou art and to dust thou shall return”, instead he utters the following words :

“Of God we are and to Him shall we return.”⁴⁸

Another story reaches us in this connection from the time of the Prophet. The wife of a Companion of the Prophet suffered the loss of her only child while her husband was away. The wife of Abu Talha Ansári got her son buried the same day. When the husband returned and asked about his son she replied that he was better than before. The husband had his meal, talked with everyone happily and slept comfortably. In the early hours of the night the wife said, “I want to ask you a question”.

“What is that?” the husband said, rather surprised.

“Suppose a person has left a thing with us as a trust,” started the wife, “and then he wants to take it back. Should we feel sorry for that?”

“No, no, why should we feel sorry for that? It did not really belong to us,” replied the husband.

The wife then quietly broke the news of the death of the child. He was a trust (*amánah*) of God with them and the Lord had taken him back. The trust has been delivered to its rightful owner. Why should they feel sorry for that^{48a}

Responsibility

Now I turn to the question of responsibility, the last, though not the least important aspect of the problem under discussion. The question of freedom and trust is intimately connected with responsibility. I have already made a few remarks on this subject during the course of my talk. Nevertheless, to mention a few points more here will not be out of place.

Without a deep sense of duty and responsibility no progress in the moral, spiritual or physical world is possible. One of the earliest verses of the Qur'án is :

“This Book, there is no duty about it, is a guide to those who keep their duty.”⁴⁹

Having regard for one's duty is the starting point of spiritual advancement in man's life. That is why the Qur'án often reminds its followers to observe their duties, if they want protection from evil.

“O you who believe, if you keep your duty to God, He will grant you a distinction and do away with your evils and protect you. And God is the Lord of Mighty grace.”⁵⁰

At another place we read that the noblest of men with God is not he who belongs to this tribe or that but the most dutiful of them.⁵¹

Rights and obligations

We often hear people claiming about their rights ! But how many of them talk of their obligations and responsibilities? We have rights, but other people have similar rights. We can safeguard our rights only when we do not trample on the rights of others, not even the rights of our enemies. The Qur'án says :

“O you who believe, let not hatred of a people incite you to transgress. And help one another in righteousness and piety and help not one another in sin and transgression, and keep your duty to God.”⁵²

Believers are expected to be maintainers of justice, bearers of witness for God's sake, though it goes against themselves, their parents or other relatives.⁵³

Responsibility is thus the keynote of progress in life on this earth. Every person is like a ruler in this world. Let him be responsible for his subjects. The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said.

“Every one of you is a ruler and every one of you shall be questioned about those under his rule; the man is a ruler in his family and he shall be questioned about those under his care; and the woman is a ruler in the house of her husband, and shall be questioned about those under her care; and the servant is the ruler so far as the property of his master is concerned, and shall be questioned about that which is entrusted to him.”⁵⁴

Responsibility, in other words, is trustworthiness. Man is entrusted with the vicegerency of God on this earth.⁵⁵ To discharge this responsibility faithfully his "prayer", his "sacrifice", his "life" and his "death" should not be for his own self, or for his nation or for his country, but for God alone.

May God help us to follow the path of duty, responsibility and righteousness, and the path of submission to His will, however winding and difficult it may be; Amen!

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- 2 John 8 : 32.
- 3 The Qur'an, 25 : 43 ; 45 : 23. English translation with text and commentary by Muhammad 'Ali, Lahore, Pakistan, 1951.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 2 : 12.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 87 : 14.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 13 : 28.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 2 : 151 ; 3 : 163.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 3 : 82 ; 13 : 15 ; 30 : 26.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 20 : 50.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 87 : 2-3.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 41 : 12.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 16 : 68.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 2 : 38-39 ; 7 : 35-36.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 18 : 29.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 76 : 3.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 90 : 8-10.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 6 : 105.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 17 : 7.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 2 : 256.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 50 : 17 ; 82 : 10-12.
- 21 "God is He Who made subservient to you the sea that the ships may glide therein by His command, and that you may seek of His grace, and that you may give thanks. And He has made subservient to you whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth, all from Himself. Surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect" (The Qur'an, 45 : 12-13).
- 22 "And (as for) monkery, they innovated it — We did not prescribe it to them" (The Qur'an, 57 : 27). The Prophet said : "A Muslim who mixes with others and shares their burdens is better than one who lives a life of seclusion and contemplation."
- 23 The Qur'an, 2 : 172.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 63 : 9.

- 25 *Ibid.*, 50 : 16.
- 26 "I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he calls on Me, so they should hear My call and believe in Me that they may walk in the right way" (The Qur'an, 2 : 186).
- 27 The Qur'an, 2 : 222.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 49 : 13.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 2 : 213.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 4 : 1.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 17 : 70.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 1 : 1.
- 33 *Selected Works of Voltaire*, London 1911, p. 4.
- 34 The Qur'an, 46 : 3.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 44 : 38.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 6 : 74.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 43 : 84.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 13 : 30.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 29 : 58-59.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 29 : 69.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 65 : 2-3.
- 41a *Tirmidhi*.
- 42 By fatalism is meant *the absolute decree of good and evil by God*. Sometimes it has been defined as the "doctrine that nothing which the individual can do can in any way affect the fate with which he is destined."—Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, p. 399, New York, 1943.
- 43 The Qur'an, 53 : 39.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 3 : 199.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 23 : 1-5, 8-10 ; 70 : 32-35.
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- 51 *Ibid.*, 49 : 13.
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- 54 *Al-Bukhari*, 11 : 11 (Collection of the traditions of the Prophet).
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