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Epilogue

Introduction

In many ways, an examination of the concept of freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam constitutes a highly interesting and sophisticated endeavor. With their conception of God as Creator and Almighty Ruler of the universe, these religions, basically, leave little room for the freedom and autonomy of the human being in terms of how these two concepts are currently understood in our age. As these religions teach that God made man from earth, i. e. from the lowest of the four natural elements, they place man in a radical relationship of dependence with a Creator whose nature is fundamentally different from that of his creatures and who exists on the other side of an unbridgeable ontological gap. Man exists in an essentially submissive position vis-à-vis God and powerless against His will – an idea implied in the account of creation in Judaism and Christianity and which finds an even more precise expression in the human attitude expressed in the Arabic word *islām*. Accordingly, every human decision contrary to the will of God is perceived in these three religions in terms of transgression and sin. Therefore, man cannot have freedom in the true sense in the face of God. At most, man can temporarily free himself from divine predestination, such as in the story of Jonah. This time-dependent state of freedom, however, ultimately ends via an act of divine intervention. The three religions believe that God's temporal rule penetrates down to the smallest details. The freedom that man can enjoy only emerges from the substrate implanted within him by divine will.

On this shared basis, the three religions have developed diverse ideas about the freedom that God grants to man. The subsequent part of this epilogue will present a concise summary of the three preceding chapters. Thereafter, common features and differences between the Jewish, Christian and Islamic concepts of freedom shall be highlighted. The final part of the epilogue is dedicated to the tension between different religious and secular concepts of freedom.

1 The Concept of Freedom from a Jewish Perspective

In Judaism, the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt is a formative event which finds expression, among other contexts, in both the first commandment and the central position of the event in the Passover holiday.

Another characteristic feature of Judaism seems, at first sight to be opposed to the concept of freedom, namely the notion that Judaism is a religion of law. An adequate understanding of God's Law in Judaism, however, leads to an understanding of freedom as consent to laws – via an analogous concept of covenant. The covenant serves to structure social and individual life in a beneficial manner, as God does not issue orders and expect obedience, but rather invites human beings to cooperate with him. This is evident in some of the most prominent narratives of the Torah. Even figures famous for their piety like Abraham and Moses protest against God's commandments and thereby demonstrate their independence. From a Jewish perspective, it is not a rhetorical statement that God demands consent; human beings are required to deliberate and follow God's Law with inner assent.

As an example of how Jewish law is connected to the concept of freedom, it is helpful to have a look at the issue of Sabbath observance. In contrast to slaves, free men are not defined by labor and can choose to rest. The hierarchical structures and unquestioned aims of daily life are temporarily suspended. The Sabbath repose offers a glimpse of the Hereafter where human beings are delivered from the burden of daily work. Therefore, Sabbath observance can function as an instrument for the attainment of genuine freedom completely independent of God.

Given that Judaism is a monotheistic religion, God as the Creator possesses the attributes of omnipotence and omniscience that exist in tension with the idea of human freedom of action. In a purely theoretical manner, even great thinkers like Maimonides did not succeed in harmonizing divine foreknowledge and free will. Indeed, it appears to be an irreconcilable task to put stock in both concepts simultaneously without restricting one's allegiances to one part or the other. The idea of repentance, however, comes here into play, thus assuming an important role within Judaism. Human beings may not have an arbitrary and unpredictable will, but they are to impose laws on themselves and feel responsible for their deeds. Moreover, human beings are fallible and able to feel guilty when they transgress self-imposed laws. The act of repentance demonstrates the will to change one's way of life, and this cannot be dictated – even by an almighty God. Forgiveness opens up a future that is relieved from the burden of the

past. This idea is also entailed in the concept of messianism, understood as the belief that there is always a better time to come, a notion deeply rooted in Jewish thought in terms of God's promises to Abraham and the People of Israel.

2 The Concept of Freedom from a Christian Perspective

One central dimension of the concept of freedom in Christianity is reflected through the acknowledgement of human liberation from sin via the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this respect, Christianity can be characterized mainly as a salvific religion. From a Christian perspective, human beings – even they are created as free – are caught in the bondage of sin and death and not able to redeem themselves. Given that God desired to deliver humanity from this bondage, he revealed himself in Jesus Christ. The idea of redemption through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross is both paradoxical and provocative. At the same time, the fact that God does not intervene even if he has to sacrifice his own Son demonstrates an ultimate freedom bestowed onto human beings even in their performance of the worst deeds. To solve the paradox, crucifixion has to be seen in union with Christ's resurrection as the triumph over death and sin as well as a demonstration of his life-affirming power and mercy for humanity. Thus, freedom is considered as a gift of God's mercy, which then demands a response of gratitude.

This entails that, in Christianity, human beings were considered from the very outset of the faith as persons with the capability of free agency and responsibility. Therefore, Christian theologians were required to deal with the question of how to reconcile human free will with God's sovereignty. Quite different concepts have been developed in order to handle this problem, from the idea of double predestination in the Reformed Theology of John Calvin to Process Philosophy, where God is to some extent limited by the decisions of each creature.

The emphasis on the relief and salvation offered by Jesus Christ has often been opposed to the yoke of the (Jewish) Law. The obedience to God's Law has been transformed into the idea of an inner tribunal of conscience. In contemporary times, this idea is rather understood in terms of responsibility and it is still subject to intensive debates concerning to what extent Christians are obligated to intervene in the public and the political sphere. In the 20th century, the political dimensions of the Christian idea of freedom had a great impact on political and social movements in Africa and Latin America in the context of Liberation Theology. Yet whereas the peak of Liberation Theology's influence seems

to have been reached, Pentecostal movements focusing on the liberating work of the Holy Spirit are still growing and have been acquiring even more political influence, especially in Latin America and Africa.

3 The Concept of Freedom from an Islamic Perspective

The Arabic term for freedom, *ḥurriyya*, does not occur in the Qu'rān. Instead, there are two affiliated, yet dichotomous terms, which play an important role in the Qu'rān and Islamic theology: the free and the slave. The Qu'rānic notion of freedom mimics the pre-Islamic custom of dividing human beings into the free and the slaves. Yet it also establishes new valuations for organizing this social relationship. The Qu'rānic notion is innovative due to its consideration of the believers as righteous and equal before God regardless of their status as noble men or slaves. God is the omnipotent ruler of both this world and the afterworld, thereby diminishing the social significance of the aforementioned demarcation of status.

The notion of God as an almighty ruler, which is very much emphasized in Islam in contrast to pre-Islamic views, leads to the conflict of predestination and free will (and respectively free choice) that was subsequently debated quite controversially within the different schools of Islamic theology. Whereas the Mu'tazilites, who constituted the dominant stream of theology in the formative period of Islam, highlighted the free will of human beings, the Ash'arite school adhered to the idea that God is the ruler of every single event in the world, thereby rendering free will into an illusory notion.

The emphasis on the freedom and deliberative nature of human action is always connected to the obligation to adhere to God's Law. Given that the Mu'tazilites and the Muslim philosophers conceive of God as pure goodness, the obedience to God's Law has been construed as a path of inner liberation. Particularly in the Sufi tradition, this process was mentioned as a process of liberation from the slavery of bodily desires that disturb the inner freedom of the individual.

These motifs recur in modern debates and were mingled, to a greater or lesser extent, by Muslim thinkers of the colonial and postcolonial period with "Western" concepts of freedom. The emancipatory aspects of the concept of freedom as it was developed over the course of the French Revolution gained influence and led to an emphasis on the civil rights and liberties of the individual. At the time, the notion of secularism which is – in the Western context – closely connected to

the development of individual civil rights and liberties has been recognized as a threat. The controversy over this topic is still going on.

4 Common Features and Differences

The following part will highlight the commonalities and differences between the Jewish, Christian and Islamic concepts of freedom.

In Judaism, the God-given freedom of the Jewish people from slavery is, above all, a collective historical event that is commemorated on every Sabbath. It is this memory that forms a core component of Jewish identity. On the other hand, Christianity places individual freedom from the yoke of sin at the center of the new *conditio humana* made possible through the resurrection of Christ, the Christian Pascha, celebrated every Sunday. Again, Islam differs from the two older religions in that it considers freedom to be more of a social and political issue, which must be granted to certain groups of society due to the fundamental equality of all people as expressed through the concept of *fiṭra*.

According to the three religions, however, man has the freedom to believe or, conversely, to reject faith. From a Christian point of view, belief achieved via freedom exceeds the observance of religious commandments and prohibitions. For the latter constitute external acts that can be practiced without having to stem from faith. On the contrary, the observance of religious laws in Judaism and Islam possesses a higher importance as it is considered a concrete expression of faith with important social consequences that have considerable impact on the religious community as a whole. Yet, in Christianity, the observance of the laws is based on the freedom of the children of God, which is a theological foundation established by the incarnation and salvific acts of Christ, as St Paul emphasized in several of his epistles.¹

The freedom to believe is considered the highest form of human freedom in all three religions. If you believe, you voluntarily renounce self-centered freedom and submit yourself to God's will. The renunciation of self-centered freedom in the act of faith is, ideally speaking, not based on the interest to derive benefits of any kind from it, but rather on the human love of God, which is represented especially in Christianity as the human response to the divine love preceding it. Islam, for its part, teaches that the renunciation of freedom in devotion to God is a response to his mercy.

¹ Cf. for instance Romans 8:21.

In all three religions, freedom is intrinsically connected to rationality. Reason shall lead the human faculty to voluntary actions. Out of the symbiosis of freedom and rationality, responsibility emerges. It lets man voluntarily avoid harmful actions towards him, herself or others. Likewise, from the point of view of the three religions, man is responsible to enjoin the good and avoid evil. Responsibility leads to repentance should such actions have a negative impact. Repentance, conceived via the notion of freedom, is a necessary condition for forgiveness and liberation from guilt, a means of restoring inner peace and functioning relationships between people.

It is also common of the three religions to emphasize the inner freedom of the human being, which is eminently articulated in having distance from worldly things. In Judaism, this includes the Sabbath rest, and for Christians the rest on Sunday, “the day of the Lord”. These two perpetuating ritualistic practices differ qualitatively and quantitatively from the dissociation of mystics, Sufis and hermits. Here, inner freedom reaches a climax that allows people to voluntarily renounce worldly life in the longer term and instead seek spiritual goods that allow for the highest bliss, according to the three traditions. They also agree on the view that the renunciation of bodily desires cannot happen without divine assistance. At this point, a specific difference between the three religions, as well as between the different denominations within the one religion, emerges regarding the interpretation of renunciation. Based on a traditional dichotomy of the body and the soul, it is viewed as an agony and chastisement of the body in favor of the soul; or, based on a harmonious perception of body and soul, it is considered in terms of a spiritual elevation of the holistically conceived human being.

Expressed as a form of a religiously pleasing way of life, inner freedom is oriented towards the Hereafter in these three religions. Its fruits go beyond this limited life. The ultimate goal of inner freedom is to seek rewards in the afterlife, which significantly exceed any temporal state in duration and intensity. Therefore, inner freedom can be seen as a bridge between this world and the Hereafter. In Judaism, the appearance of the Messiah is the moment when full freedom is given to man. Only then, people (the Jews) will be reconciled with God and they will receive the salvation longed for. In Christianity, salvation has been granted by Christ whose redeeming deeds have freed man from the yoke of sin and related death. In Islam, the merciful God rewards people for obedience and fear of God.

The three religions consider inner freedom from sin as a central dynamic. Given by God to man, it is essentially linked to the responsibility for contributing to the liberation of others. The believers – Jews, Christians and Muslims – shall derive from their faith the power to act in the world as agents of emancipation in

every context necessary. In this sense, the Hebrews were required to “proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants” in the year jubilee, thus celebrating their liberation from Egyptian slavery and oppression.² Freedom shall be given to others in response to received freedom. Supported by the Holy Spirit, Christians should unfold the spirit of freedom in their environment. In a famous saying attributed to the second rightly-guided caliph Umar, people are born free and no political authority is permitted to restrict their freedom on the condition that they do not commit to anything which would require such a restriction.³

The three religions agree that people cannot enjoy freedom if they renounce justice. These religions also teach unanimously that humanity possesses an equal dignity and that moral law is universal. In this sense, freedom consists not only in the self-referential negation of foreign domination, control and limitation, but equally encompasses the extension of freedom to others – even if this attitude, in socio-theological terms, did not lead religious communities in earlier times to a commitment to abolish slavery as a social institution.⁴ Judaism, Christianity and Islam, however, are salvific religions which believe that real salvation is eschatological; it is freedom concomitant and coterminous with an eternal God.

The Christian concept of God-given freedom from the normativity of sin is specifically based on a radical contradiction which Judaism and Islam do not share. For the cross, through which the liberation of sin was accomplished, was itself a means of punishment, deprivation of freedom and an instrument of death. Paradoxically, with Jesus’ voluntarily accepted crucifixion, the cross became a tool of liberation. The community of the believers in Jesus Christ achieved freedom as a result of a voluntary act of liberation, whose instrument was used to produce the opposite of freedom.

All three religions teach that God created man in an original state of freedom, which means the human ability to choose between obedience and disobedience towards God’s first prohibition. As the first human couple disobeyed God, the human ability to make free choices in accordance with God’s will became distorted by sin. The negative consequences of the original sin of Adam and Eve for the entirety of humanity are emphasized more strongly in Judaism and Christianity than in Islam. The need of humanity to be repeatedly admonished

² Leviticus 25:10.

³ There are several variants of this saying. Cf. e.g.: ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād, ‘*Abqariyyat ‘Umar*, Cairo: Naḥḍat Miṣr, ¹⁰2006, 40: “*Bima ista ‘badtum an-nās wa-ḡad waladathum ummahātuhum aḥrāran?*”.

⁴ As example of this attitude is St Paul’s attitude towards Philemon.

by prophets, however, particularly as it is emphasized in the Qur'ān, is part and parcel of the human condition resulting from the first sin.

According to Christian faith, justification is bestowed upon man as a result of the belief in the salvific acts of Christ. Justification is a divine gift that cannot be obtained in result of observing religious laws but has become possible through the voluntary death of Christ and subsequent human faith. The forgiveness which was made possible to man, in this way, may appear from a Jewish point of view as divine appropriation of human autonomy. For in Judaism, the theological assumption prevails that God and man are two free agents facing each other. Nothing can be granted to man; he or she must hope for the justification of their own freedom of agency via fulfillment of religious law. In Islam as well, observance of religious law enables the attainment of salvation. It is the responsibility of man to fulfill God's obligation with a sense of complete responsibility.

While in Christianity the ability of man to differentiate between good and evil is viewed as corrupted by the original sin of Adam and Eve, the Qur'ān considers the major problem of man, in this regard, in terms of forgetting God's commandments and prohibitions. Thus, it is not an intentional act of violating God's will, but the human weakness of forgetfulness which leads man not to freely choose the Good.

In Christianity, man's obedience to God is not a duty required by law, but rather an act of gratitude to God's manifold grace, particularly the grace which was revealed in Christ. In Islam, the observance of religious commandments is a duty, the fulfillment of which is necessary because of an original covenant between God and man.⁵ In Judaism, this duty takes wider dimensions, as the commandments, and especially those contained in the Decalogue, were given to the Jews directly by God.

In the Qur'ān, the human ability to reflect on nature constitutes a means of making free decisions. The first decision relates to the belief in God the Creator. On the other hand, the Qur'ān contains verses that indicate a strong preference for divine predestination, a factor which led Islamic theology in many instances to drastically restrict human freedom against divine power. These verses, however, can be understood as sharp rhetorical formulations against the prevailing view in pre-Islamic Arabia of the omnipotence and destructive power of time. The Qur'ān emphasizes God's omnipotence in order to free the pagan Arabs

⁵ Cf. for instance Q 2:115; 36:60.

from the influence of a notion of “fateful time” (*ad-dahr*).⁶ Regarding the views of early Muslim *mutakallimūn* on the topic of human free will, scholars have pointed out a possible influence of Christian theologians, especially John of Damascus, on their contemporaneous Muslim counterparts.⁷

5 The Confrontation with Secular Ideas of Freedom in Modernity

In the age of Enlightenment in Western societies, the concept of freedom has been closely linked to secular ideas such as liberalism, autonomy, independency and emancipation. These concepts are not in and of themselves opposed to religion, but they have been often used as battle cries against the oppressive power of religious authority. In political and ethical theories, the concept of freedom has developed in an increasingly independent fashion from the notion of God and other religious concepts like sin, salvation or divine providence.

Given that change of paradigm, theologians and other religious thinkers have had the option to react in at least two different ways: to dismiss and ignore this development, or to track down common conceptual genealogies while integrating new ideas into their own religious framework. These two ways of handling the emergence of secular concepts of freedom can be found in Christianity given its status as the dominant religion in Western societies in the age of Enlightenment, along with the works of Jewish thinkers like Moses Mendelssohn. These controversies were transferred into the realm of Islamic thought when modern Western ideas of freedom and liberalism became influential in the mid-19th century (at the latest) beginning in Egypt where Muslim thinkers adopted them via reference to related concepts within the Islamic tradition.

⁶ Cf. Q 45:24–26. An extensive Interpretation of this passage can be found in Georges Tamer, *Zeit und Gott. Hellenistische Zeitvorstellungen in der altarabischen Dichtung und im Koran*, Berlin, New York: Walter De Gruyter 2008, 193–197.

⁷ This question lies beyond the scope of the present context and cannot, therefore, be tackled here. Cf. for instance: Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Kalam*, Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 196, 58–64, 608, 613–614, 617–620, 663; William Montgomery Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam*, London: Luzac & Company LTD., 1948, 58, 63, 145.

5.1 Religious Freedom and Political Liberalism

In classical works of political liberalism, the freedom of the individual lies at the heart of the political constitution. For John Stuart Mill, the “only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant [...] Over himself, over his body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”⁸ Sovereignty over the own mind implies the rejection of any limitation to free-thinking by doctrines. In conjunction with the principle of equality, political liberalism also implies the rebuttal of one privileged religion in favor of religious tolerance – an idea which was also fostered by the results of the European wars of religion. The claim of separation of church and state in Western European societies – whether in its more hostile or friendly forms⁹ – was one fiercely disputed result of this development. Although the distinction between the realm of the spirit and the realm of the world was given conceptual cogence by theologians such as Augustine and Luther, Christian thinkers in liberal democracies have had to redefine the relationship between religion and the public sphere. As Jews have constituted a political minority for a large part of their history, Judaism was never closely connected to political power until the foundation of the state of Israel. Islam, on the contrary, was linked with political power and leadership in its formative period. This does not mean, however, that the differentiation between a worldly sphere and the sphere of God is not within the realm of possibility or reflects a notion completely alien to Islam. The limitation of power and influence, not only in the sense of political power but also in the sense of authority regarding moral behavior and basic beliefs, seems, on the one hand, to threaten the unity and continuation of religious communities in liberal societies. On the other hand, it can be seen as liberation from worldly affairs. Such a temporal freedom allows one to concentrate on the core of monotheistic belief, i.e. the relation between God and human beings. That does not imply a total separation of private belief and public affairs, but rather constitutes, in the ideal case, a balanced reciprocity consisting of adjustment and self-limitation. In fact, there are many tensions between secular ideas of freedom, on one side, and the notions of freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, on the other. Indeed, this is highly evident in the case of women’s rights

⁸ Mill, John Stuart, *On liberty*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, 80–81.

⁹ Linz, Juan A., “The Religious Use of Politics and/or the Political Use of Religion: Ersatz Ideology Versus Ersatz Religion,” in: Hans Maier (ed.), *Totalitarianism and Political Religions. Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorship*, trans. Jodi Bruhn, London/New York: Routledge, 2004, 109.

or in the case of freedom of conscience. There are, however, also correlations which allow for a sense of mutual reinforcement. The protection of the individual against every form of slavery is a common motif in Judaism, Christianity and Islam and coincides with the roots of political liberalism. Obviously, this can be seen not only in different forms of Liberation Theology, but also in the defense of human dignity and the empowerment of the weakest members of the society.

5.2 Autonomy versus Obedience

Another aspect of freedom that plays an important role in the Enlightenment is the autonomy of the individual. Accordingly, every adult person who is not suffering from debilitating pathologies is able to govern him- or herself and to choose personal ideals that guide his or her actions. The ideal of autonomy also entails the assumption that personally held ideals should be based on free deliberation i.e. independent from any kind of external manipulation. To free oneself from the inner bondages of passion, on the one hand, and from external manipulation on the other, is the ideal of emancipation and individual freedom rooted in human reason. At first glance, this seems fully opposed to the notion of obedience to God and his laws that characterizes to some degree every religion, but in particular characterizes “religions of law” like Judaism and Islam. In Christianity, the strong emphasis on obedience to religious laws was replaced – especially in the Lutheran tradition – by a steadfast faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is not surprising that Christian philosophers of the Enlightenment like Immanuel Kant described “*Jewish faith*, as originally established,” as “a collection of merely statutory laws”¹⁰ and denied its very status as “religion.” The idea that Jews and even Muslims believe in a God “who demands obedience to such laws solely”¹¹ is still widely prevalent. This leads to the assumption that these religions are oppressive, depriving their adherents of individual freedom and subsequently inhibiting individual autonomy. In fact, the soteriological aspect of freedom as the result of the salvific suffering and death of Jesus is foreign to Judaism as well as to Islam. From a Jewish and Islamic perspective, the idea that the death of one person redeems the sins of all humanity – or at least of the believers in Jesus Christ – is not infrequently considered as a

¹⁰ Kant, Immanuel, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, ed. and trans. by Allan W. Wood/Georges di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 154.

¹¹ Linz, *The Religious Use of Politics*, 168.

legitimator of licentious behavior subsequently characterized as non-religious. When we see the obedience to God's Law as well as the redemption in Jesus Christ in a broader context, however, it becomes obvious that there are also commonalities between the concept of freedom in each of these three religions. When we understand obedience as part and parcel of the covenant, it becomes clear that adhering to religious commandments constitutes an act of voluntary inner consent that can be understood as "faith alone". When redemption through Jesus Christ is considered under the rubric of grace, one can understand such a notion of redemption as an acknowledgment of the limitations of the will and as an act of self-submission to God.

The idea of limiting the human will is deeply embedded in the concept of freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and it may sometimes provide a course correctively to a purely secular concept of freedom. On the other hand, a non-religious person may be more sensitive to tendencies that privatize freedom in the name of religion and to delegate human responsibility to God.