

Question 23: Purpose of Religion

Question: Did religion come to imprison us or to set us free?

Brief Answer

Freedom, from the point of view of religion, can be studied under two headings: spiritual freedom and socio-political freedom. From the spiritual perspective, man's essence or immaterial self is free from corporeality, materiality, and material characteristics. It is nostalgic of its place of origin, the realm of the Dominion and the spiritual world. But due to the attachment of his soul to the body, it is entangled with worldly and material affairs.

Man has no choice but to pursue his perfection through the means that this world affords, for this world is the cultivation field for the hereafter. However, most people tend to view the world in an independent way and are ignorant of its true value which is found in its relation to the hereafter. Hence they get caught up in frivolities and trivial pleasures and this bars them from ascending to the heights of perfection. Instead of concentrating on the essence and reality of things they are distracted and consider the sensible phenomena as ultimate reality—being utterly oblivious of the *malakut* (the celestial realm) and spiritual reality of things.

It is in this vein that the seekers of the material world perceive freedom as paramount to enjoying the pleasures of the world without any restraints, whereas true freedom lies in extricating oneself from the snares of lust, and it is this freedom which religion encourages. From the religious point of view, even the mighty king who is constantly expanding his empire might be a slave, a slave to his self, while it is very probable that someone living in utter poverty might have absolute sovereignty.

In conclusion: what the seekers of the material world pursue is the illusion of imaginary freedom, but that which religion encourages is real freedom.

Regarding social and political freedom, Islam neither advocates radical freedom and anarchy, nor does it compel the believer to surrender to all external circumstances and unjust powers, something that would undermine his dignity.

It can be said that individual and social freedoms do exist in Islam but with a qualification that fundamentally distinguishes them from those that are espoused by the Western worldview. For Islam is Allah-centred, and as such, ordains that man, in his intellectual discernment and application of will, refer only to Allah (awj). In the domain of moral upliftment and cultural progress, Islam exhorts the human community to establish justice and forbids its members from infringing on the rights of each other, while at the same time encouraging them to expand their knowledge and intellectual endeavours with a view to the proper application of knowledge.

Detailed Answer

Our spirit, from the point of view that it is essentially immaterial, is free from matter and body and the properties of bodies. The spirit of man has neither length, breadth, height nor depth, nor qualities such as heat, coldness, the six directions and the other attributes of bodies. The spirit is from the world of “command” (*alam al-amr*) and looks towards its own world. The beings of the realm of existence are either in the world of creation and matter or in the world of dominion (*malakut*), command, and immateriality.

Above the world of bodies that contains temporal and mutable things, there is another world that contains beings that are not subject to change and do not exist in time. This is the world of command that envelopes, comprehends, and rules over and above the world of creation. Both the command and the creation belong to Allah (awj) as the Noble Qur`an has indicated:

“Be aware that the creation and the command belong to Allah, who is High and is the Creator of the World.”¹

The descent of the spirit from the world of command to the world of creation means that the human soul is in a certain sense imprisoned in the lower world (*dunya*). Yet, it is necessary for man to obtain his acquired perfections by means of this world and it is because of this that this world is considered the cultivation field for the next world.

Looking at this world as if it were independent and by itself keeps man away from spiritual wayfaring and journeying to the next world. It makes him forget about even the possibility of soaring free in the supernatural realms. If man persists in this myopia and grounded behaviour, he begins to think that he will be in this world forever. According to the words of Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع), “He who looks at the world with insight, the world will give him wisdom and he who sews his eyes unto the world, the world blinds him.”²

The life of this world. Allah (awj) has described the life of the world as follows:

“Verily, the life of this world is sport and vanity.”³

Play or sport is an action whose goal is imaginary. Vain actions are those that that make man forget

others. The verse indicates the fact that the life of this world (that is the attachment of the soul to the body) busies man with himself to the point where he forgets others. The cause of this is the fact that the world deceives the soul in such a way that it makes him think that he is the body or one with the body. After being deceived in such manner, it is only natural that he becomes disconnected from the other world and forgets all of the greatness and beauty that was in the world of command. In this way, his life passes in sport and vanities. He turns to everything with imaginary and fanciful goals. When he reaches those illusionary goals, he finds nothing.

Allah (awj) says that:

“Those who disbelieve, their actions are like a mirage in a desert. The thirsty person believes it to be water. When he reaches it, he does not find anything there except Allah.”⁴

The person who believes in the primacy of material beings turns all of his attention to sensible things and he is totally unaware of the hidden aspect of things. Such a person wastes his life in eating, drinking and play. According to the words of the Noble Qur`an, they only know the apparent aspect of the world and they are unaware of the next world.⁵

But the person who looks at the hidden aspect of things takes their apparent aspect as only a sign for the hidden. He considers the apparent to be a shell for the kernel that is the hidden. In no circumstance will he sacrifice the kernel for the shell. As the Commander of the Faithful, ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) has said, “The friends of Allah are the ones who look at the hidden nature of the world, while the ordinary people look at the apparent; they are concerned with the future while the people are concerned with transient things.”⁶

Those who seek the world surmise that freedom means having all their worldly wishes granted and having unlimited use of riches. They are not aware of the fact that in reality, if we give in to the commands of our carnal soul, we become ever more bound by the shackles of our material body. This is because the carnal soul is that aspect of the human soul that pays more attention to bodily desires and hopes to remain forever in the world.

In reality freedom means to be free from the snares of this world and our lower desires. This is the freedom that religion seeks to achieve. According to religion it is possible for someone to be the king of the world but because he is entrapped by his base desires, he is not free. How many a people exist who live in the most constricting poverty yet remain the masters of their own will. If the power of desire and anger come under the guidance of reason, then not only will they not corrupt the soul, but rather they will grow and become beneficial. True freedom is the dominion of reason (over desire and anger) in the kingdom of the soul.

According to religion, slavery is the domination of anger and desire over man. As Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) has said, “How many an intellect is in the captivity of its desires.”⁷

Again, that great personality has said, “Is there not a free man amongst you who would give this (the world) to its owner?! Know that there is no greater trade for your soul than heaven. Therefore do not sell your soul for less than that.”⁸

When man becomes free from his base desires, he will be successful in society and his cultural activities. As can be understood from the Noble Qur`an, man faces enemies from the outside and the inside who wish to enslave him. Freedom from these two kinds of enemies constitutes the inner and outer freedoms. Unfortunately some groups like the Sufis have overemphasized inner freedom to such an extent that they have forgotten the outer enemy i.e. the false Gods of gold and embellishment. In opposition to them, some groups have spent all their energies in fighting outer powers, seeking to gain freedom in society. They consider every limitation to be the cause of man’s slavery.

There is another group that believes that in order for man to reach perfection, felicity, and freedom, both kinds of freedom are necessary. These two freedoms are interrelated. Freedom in society is not possible without spiritual freedom.

In order for us to make an ideal and humane society it is necessary that we don’t go to extremes and obtain both types of freedoms. Therefore, in religious ideology and thought, neither is absolute freedom permissible nor are we compelled to accept all the external conditions of an unjust government. Hence in Islam there is a concept of social freedom, but it is very different from what is meant by the term in the West.

The great prophets came to construct the world but they look at the world in view of the afterlife. In this view, the present world is like a cultivation field for the next world and in which we make our afterlife with our actions. The prophets came in order to teach people how to live in order to be successful in the hereafter. Therefore, the injunctions of the prophets are for today but only so that we can obtain the hereafter.

Religion has its own views regarding economic, political, and social development. It has not relegated this matter to the intellectuals of society. The religion that claims universality and considers all human beings to share in its vision must, by its own logic, hold a comprehensive view about their development. Therefore, understanding religion is quintessential. Of course, this is very difficult.

Religion has three dimensions, one of which lies inside the soul of man. The other two lie outside him. The two that lie outside are the Qur`an and the noble progeny of the Prophet (ﷺ). The inner dimension of religion is the power of reason and the innate nature of man; these two are called the “proofs” of religion. Something that reason clearly understands to be true also carries religious authority. Because of this religion is a combination of reason and tradition.

Because the basis of all affairs is Allah (awj), and because it is He who creates all things and the success and loss of man lies in His hands, therefore, all the aspects of man’s life should reflect His orders, whether in economics or any other field. In ethical and cultural matters Islam has invited people

to justice and has forbidden people from trampling on the rights of others.

From another point of view, it has encouraged people to learn and teach others and to apply one's knowledge correctly. There is no good ethical precept except that which religion has invited us to and has made it either obligatory or recommended to act upon it.

The religion of Islam is global. This religion says you can live peacefully with those who do not defy or deny religion. It does not prohibit to live peacefully with those who don't want to fight you, overthrow religious governments or want to banish you from your home.⁹

'Progress' can be either good or bad. Bad progress is wasteful and lavish living. The Qur'an considers all those things to be bad. It scolds those who waste Allah's (awj) blessings. In regards to those who only think about personal success it says,

"Some are they who only think about themselves;¹⁰

"they eat as the cattle eat."¹¹

Also, the Qur'an has scolded those who hoard gold.¹²

"Unfortunately, miserliness has made its home in man's soul."¹³

"Whoever frees himself from the clutches of his own greediness is successful."¹⁴

Good progress is to work hard and be satisfied with little. From this point of view, if man works hard for his needs and for the needs of society, this effort can be called *kawthar*.

1. Surat al-A'raf (7), Verse 54:

﴿ أَلَا لَهُ الْخَلْقُ وَالْأَمْرُ تَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴾

2. Nahjul Balaghah, Sermon 82:

وَمَنْ أَبْصَرَ بِهَا بَصَرَتَهُ وَمَنْ أَبْصَرَ إِلَيْهَا أَعْمَتَهُ

3. Surat Muhammad (47), Verse 36:

﴿ إِنَّمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهُوَ ﴾

4. Surat al-Nur (24), Verse 39:

﴿ ...وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَعْمَالُهُمْ كَسَرَابٍ بِقِيَعَةٍ يَحْسَبُهُ الظَّمَانُ مَاءً حَتَّى إِذَا جَاءَهُ لَمْ يَجِدْهُ شَيْئًا وَوَجَدَ اللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ ﴾

5. Surat al-Rum (30), Verse 7:

﴿ يَعْلَمُونَ ظَاهِرًا مِّنَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ عَنِ الْآخِرَةِ هُمْ غَافِلُونَ ﴾

6. Nahjul Balaghah, Short Saying 432:

إِنَّ أَوْلِيَاءَ اللَّهِ هُمُ الَّذِينَ نَظَرُوا إِلَى بَاطِنِ الدُّنْيَا إِذَا نَظَرَ النَّاسُ إِلَى ظَاهِرِهَا، وَاسْتَعْلَمُوا بِأَجْلِهَا إِذَا اسْتَعْلَمَ النَّاسُ بِعَاجِلِهَا

7. Ibid., Short Saying 211:

كَمْ مِنْ عَقْلٍ أُسِيرَ تَحْتَ هَوَى أَمِيرٍ

8. Mizan al-Hikmah, no. 3589:

أَلَا حُرٌّ يَدْعُ هَذِهِ اللَّمَاطَةَ لِأَهْلِهَا إِنَّهُ لَيْسَ لِأَنْفُسِكُمْ نَمَنٌ إِلَّا الْجَنَّةُ فَلَا تَتَّبِعُوهَا إِلَّا بِهَا

9. Surat al-Mumtahanah (60), Verse 8:

﴿ لَا يَنْهَاكُمُ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ ﴾

10. Surat Ali-'Imran (3), Verse 154:

﴿ وَطَائِفَةٌ قَدْ أَهَمَّتْهُمْ أَنفُسُهُمْ ﴾

11. Surat Muhammad (47), Verse 12:

﴿ وَيَأْكُلُونَ كَمَا تَأْكُلُ الْأَنْعَامُ ﴾

12. Surat al-Tawbah (9), Verse 34:

﴿ وَالَّذِينَ يَكْنِزُونَ الذَّهَبَ وَالْفِضَّةَ وَلَا يَنْفِقُونَهَا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَبَشِّرْهُمْ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ... ﴾

13. Surat al-Nisa' (4), Verse 128:

﴿ وَأُحْضِرَتِ الْأَنفُسُ الشُّحَّ ﴾

14. Surat al-Hashr (59), Verse 9:

﴿ وَمَنْ يُوقِ شُحَّ نَفْسِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ... ﴾

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