

Freedom in Islam

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يتعرض المقال إلى مفهوم الحرية في ظل الإسلام. وقد وردت فيه جملة من الآيات القرآنية والأحاديث النبوية التي تثبت انتشار مبدأ الحرية في الإسلام . ووردت كذلك كثير من الحوادث التاريخية في سيرة النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم وصحابته التي كرست مبدأ الحرية في الإسلام واثبتت للعالم أن الإسلام ليس دين قهر أو احتكار أو اغتصاب للحرية الفردية

The issue of freedom of man is an ancient one, going back to the very days of the history of Humanity. Mankind was born free, from one mother and one father, but man has been unjust to his fellow human, he has transgressed against the rights of other, the strong overpowering the incapable, pushing him around and ordering him about, taking all that he wants at without regard of the fact that some things simply do not belong to him, but are the property or rights of others. It was only then when such deeds prevailed that the elements of injustice, inequality and unfairness become the norm among human communities, whereby the strong humbled and humiliated the weak, the rich took advantage of the poor, the capable domineered the incapable and people become divided into classes and some groups of people claimed for themselves rights over others, while God had endowed each and every man with the same rights, Meanwhile, other groups of people thought that they belong to a purer race, or are of nobler blood. Some have become haughty or proud on the grounds of their race, ethnic background or affiliations, forgetting that we are all the descendants of one origin, As Allah Almighty says in His holy book in the

Chapter of Chambers.

O you mankind, surely We created you
Of a male and female and We have made
You races and tribes that you may
Get mutually acquainted.

Surly, the most honourable among you
In the Reckoning of Allah are the most pious
Allah is ever knowing, ever cognizant.

Verse 13

While, the prophet (PBUH) says in one of his hadith « you are all from Adam, and Adam is from dust ».

Unfortunately, the circle of distinction and differences increased among human communities, some thought that they are better than others because of the colour of their skin, ethnic or tribal ancestry, or because they happen to speak a certain language. Although, in actual point of fact, if we really consider all these points of differences, the sensible and rational among us would come to realize that they all go to attest to Allah's ability, for the holy Quran says in the Chapter of the Romans

And of his signs is the creation
Of the heavens and the earth
And the differences of your tongues and colours.

Verse no 22

However, mankind has gone too far in this call of superiority, so much so, that some have claimed divine lineage, just like the ancient pharaohs of Egypt and there are so many autocrats and dictators who claim the same thing. Not only that, but the Quran tells us that the Jews and Christians claim that they are

sons of God. The Jews in particular have really gone so far to say that they are God's chosen people on this earth and all of mankind are here to serve them as slaves. The holy Quran replies to these allegations in the Chapter of the Table

And the Jewes and the Christians said :

We are the sons of God and his beloved

Say, why then does He punish you for your guilty deeds ?

He has created. He forgives whomsoever He

Pleases and punishes whom He pleases.

Verse 18

When Islam came, human communities were suffering from the bondages of slavery and serfdom, whereby two thirds of society were slaves to the remaining third. However, with the advent of Islam, it announced that people are equal. Because they are all descendants of the same origin, for all mankind is the descendant of our father Adam and Adam was made from dust and clay. Indeed, all humans are like the teeth of a comb, no one is more distinguished or superior than the other, because of the colour of his skin, his tribal affiliations, nationality, race or sex. Each and every one of us has the right of creed that best speaks to his logic and and each and every one of us has the right to express his thoughts and beliefs in total freedom and without any pressure or force. Furthermore, each and every one of us has the right to act in his personal and financial matters as he sees fit, as long as such acts do not infringe upon the right of others or constitutes an act of aggression or hostility against them. Each and every one of us has the right to voice an opinion concerning the general or public policy of the country in which he lives, be it relative to internal or foreign policy. In short, we can sum up these different freedoms into the following modern categories of conception :

1-religious freedom

2-freedom of thought

3-civil freedom

4-political freedom

religious freedom or freedom of creed is representative in the absolute freedom of man to believe in the religion that he chooses. Creed or religious belief is something that one feels with his soul and inner being, it cannot be forced unto one.

We have many instances in the holy Quran that confirm and assert the freedom of belief and creed and that the religion should not be forced upon anyone. Indeed, the holy book also says that the mission of the prophet Mohamed (PBUH) was to inform the people of his message and calling and not to force them to embrace Islam. The chapter of the Cave says

And say the truth is from your Lord
So whosoever decides then let him believe
And whosoever decides let him disbelieve
Verse 29

The verses of the holy Quran affirm that the mission of the prophet is to remind people, in the Chapter of El Gashiya, it says

So remind them
Surely you are only a constant reminder
You are not in any way a dominator over them
Except for him who has turned away and disbelieved
Then Allah shall punish him with great torment.
Verse 21 to 24

And Allah also says in the Chapter of Kaf

We know best what they say

And in way are you a potent over them

So remind by the Quran him who fears My threat

Verse 45

We also find this reference in the Chapter of the table

The messenger's duty is but to proclaim the message

For God knows all that you reveal

And all that conceal

Verse 99

And in the Chapter of Thunder, we read

To you is the proclamation

And we the judgment

Verse 40

Again we find in the Chapter of the Table,

Obey God and obey the messenger

And beware of evil, if you do turn back

Know you that it is Our messenger's duty

To proclaim the message in the clearest manner

Verse 92

It is related during the days of the prophet that a man from Medina by the name of Abu El Husseen, who was a Muslim, had two Christian sons. He asked the prophet for permission to force his two sons to embrace Islam. The revelation came to the prophet concerning this matter as follows.

Let there be no compulsion in religion

Truth stands out clear from error

Whoever rejects evil and believes in God

Has grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold
That never breaks and God hears and Knows all
Verse 256

It may spring to the mind of some that if this is the case for Islam to give the choice and freedom to choose one's creed, then why is there an Islamic ruling that any Muslim who reverts on his religion is punished by death ? Isn't this a contradiction with the principle of freedom of choice ? In order to answer this question, we first have to be aware of the reason for this Islamic principle. This rule was revealed in the holy Quran because some Jews had fallen into the practice of declaring at the beginning of the day had embraced Islam and then by nightfall they would announce that they had reverted to their original religion. They did this to cause confusion and spered doubt in the souls and spirits of the Muslim community. The holy book of Islam the Quran recounts this story, it says Chapter of the Family of Omran.

O ye people of the book, why do you
Confound the truth with falsehood
And keep back the truth and you
While you have knowledge ?
A section of the people of the book say :
Believe in the morning what is revealed
To the believers, but reject it at the end of the day
Perchance they may themselves turn back
And believe ni one unless he follows your religion
Say : true guidance is the guidance of God
That anyone should be brought the like of
What you have been brought , or that

They would argue against you before your lord

Say : all bounties are in the hand of God,

He grants them to who he pleases

And God cares for all and he knows all things

Verse 71 to 73

Since this was the practice of some of the jews, who bore ill feelings towards the prophet and his message and who merely wanted to spread confusion and doubt among the Muslims, the prophet said « death awaits those who revert from their religion ». Hence, it transpires that this was a strategy to offset the malicious plans of some of the jews. Another reason is that every state has its own set of laws and decrees that apply to all those who live in that country and anyone who violates any such law or decree is punishable by the state and this is not an imposition on freedom or a restriction of any freedom. What I am trying to say is that any Muslim who goes on his religion is punishable by death because he has contravened an Islamic law that applies to all those living in the Islamic state, and not disposal of money and property. This document is well known in Islam and sets out in detail all these rights. Islamic jurists and ulamas have agreed on what has become known as the five necessities, which is the respect and sacredness religious belief, life, the mind, money and procreation. This principle of the respect of the rights of non Muslims in a Muslim society was asserted again and again in many hadiths of the prophet (PBUH), especially the rights of people who believe in one of the revealed religions. On such hadith is « whoever harms a believer of the book (meaning a revealed religion), shall be my adversary, and whoever becomes my adversary remains so until the day of Judgement ». while another hadith says « whoever harms one of the believers of the book shall never smell the sweet perfume of Heaven ». A third hadith

says « whoever harms a believer of the book shall have harmed me, and whoever harms me angers allah ».

A Muslim society is required to deal with and treat non Muslims with Kindness and respect, giving them a helping hand whenever they need it, provided that they are peaceful towards the Muslims and are not antagonistic towards them and as long as they do not perpetrate acts of aggression or enmity against the Muslims or side with their enemies against them. This rule is stipulated in a number of occasions in the holy Quran, such as for instance the Chapter of the Mumtahana

God forbids you not with regard to those
Who fight you not for your faith
Nor drive you out of your homes
From dealing kindly and justly
With them, for God loves those who are just

Verse 8

The Muslim caliphs observed and abided by this rule as advocated by the Quran and the prophet (PBUH). Caliph Omar Ibn El Khattab was known for asking anyone who arrived at Medina about the people of the book (i.e. people who believed in revealed faiths) in their part of the country, lest they be treated unjustly by Muslims there and he was always assured that they met with the best possible treatment. History books have preserved a lettre addressed by Imam Ali (May Allah be pleased with him) to the person in charge of the treasury and tax collecting (El kharag) in which he warns him not to be too harsh on the people of the book while gathering taxes. The Imam said in his letter « If they cannot pay the taxes, do not force them to sell their clothes or risk their livelihood, nor force them to sell their cattle. Do not force them into

hardship if they cannot pay the due taxes. Do not and you shall be dismissed from this position ».

In the books of Islamic jurisprudence, we find more details on how a Muslim ruler or leader should act toward his people and subjects who are not Muslims and how such leader is responsible to defend them even it means risking death or fighting battles in order to defend. For instance we find that Ibn Hazm El Zahary wrote in one of his books entitled El Mohala about this responsibility saying « If we have people of the book among us and they are targeted by our enemies while in our midst, then it is our duty to go out and fight them in order to defend the people of the book who live amongst us, even if it means certain death because it is our duty to do so, as ordained by Allah and His prophet (PBUH). Failing to carry out this duty means disobedience of the commands of Allah and His prophet ». Another jurist El Karafi El Malky commented on this matter saying that « such a responsibility that puts the lives of people at risk is indeed a noble and great matter ».

We can cite here an actual event that proves this point when the Tartars attacked Damascus took hostage a large number of Muslims, Christians. A jurist called sheikh Ibn Taymiah went to the Tartar commander to negotiate the release of the prisoners, but when the commander refused to release the non Muslim prisoners, the sheikh refused his offer and insisted that all the prisoners be released, be they Muslims or non-Muslims, because he was well aware of his responsibility towards the non Muslim members of his community and of the teachings of the Quran and the prophet in this regard. In face of the determination of the sheikh not to abandon the non Muslim prisoners, the Tartar commander in the end agreed to release all the prisoners, Muslims and non Muslims.

Respect of others rights is a forgone conclusion in an Islamic society and anyone who disobeys this rule is punishable, regardless of his position in society. Each and every one of us was born a free man and we all have the right to practice our rights and freedoms, be it freedom of work, speech or any kind of activity, as long as it is permissible and does not violate or contravene public values and morals. It is related that during the time of the Caliph Omar Ibn Khattab, when Amr Ibn El Aass was Wali (ruler) of Egypt, a horse race took place in which any who desired to take part could do so. Amr Ibn El Aass' son happened to enter the race, in addition to a number of Coptic youths. The race was eventually won by one of these Coptic youths and the Wali's son found it hard to accept that he be beaten by a commoner and he vented his anger on this youth by beating and hitting him telling him how dare he beat the son of the noble one. When the youth found no one to resort to and stand by him in Egypt, he went to Medina and met with Calph Omar Ibn Khattab. He told him the whole story and Omar called Amr Ibn El Aass and his son to investigate the matter and hear their side of the story. When Omar ascertained the truth of the Egyptian youth's story, he gave him his stick and told him to hit the son of the noble man. When the young man did so, Omar told him to Amr too (the Wali) the young man turned to Omar and said « O Caliph I only need to hit he who has hit me ». Omar replied to him that the wali had enabled his son to hit him with his power. Omar then turned to Amr Ibn Aass and reprimanded and chided him severely for what he had allowed his son to get away with saying « Amr, since when do you enslave people whom have been born freemen ».

History also tells us another interesting story related to the people of Samarkund, when it was opened by a Muslim commander Kotiba Ibn Muslim who did not follow the correct Islamic procedures before taking the city. When

Omar Ibn Abdel Azziz became Caliph, the people of Samarkund wrote to him complaining about the Muslim commander's action and behaviour. Omar ordered a Muslim judge to look into the matter and hand down his judgment. At first, the people of Samarkund were skeptical wondering if a judge would rule against a Muslim commander. However, when the judge reviewed the facts of the case and it became evident to him that the Muslim commander had not followed the procedures or steps ordained by Islam, he ruled that the commander and his army leave the city and start from anew, but this time following the correct Islamic procedures, by first calling upon the people to enter into Islam and if they refuse then they have to pay a tribute, and if they refuse to pay that sum, then he should forewarn them that he will fight them so that they can get ready to do battle. When the people of Samarkund learnt of the judgment given by the Muslim judge in their favour they agreed to let matters be as they are, out of a conviction that there is justice in ruling and that there is one rule for all, be it for commoners, Muslims or non Muslims. They were also convinced of the fact that an individual in the Islamic state enjoys the same right a Muslim enjoys and that all have the same obligations and responsibilities of the Muslim members of society.

Indeed, the Islamic jurists have laid down a public rule that applies to everyone, this rule is « we are all equal in rights and responsibilities ».