

All Islam Ever Wanted was Freedom

In life, there is only truth, as a reflection and confirmation of the Absolute Truth, Almighty Allah (*al-Haqq*). What we think of and call falsehood is imaginary. It does not really exist. It is only a temporary and conditioned absence of truth.

Likewise, there is only light in this earthly life, for Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth, which is the source and quintessence of the former.

There is no actual ontological darkness. Its existence, too, is illusory. What we perceive as darkness is no more than a transient and conditioned absence of light.

Even Satan, the incarnation of evil, was not created and preordained as such. He only chose to be so, and was granted by the leave of Allah to operate in such a role until an appointed term.

There is nothing that is intrinsically evil. Evil is only that which some people, under the sway of Satan's whispers, concoct, while manipulating and abusing certain innocent components of life. In other words, evil is a consequence of some people's devilish creativity.

Accordingly, we should never unduly worry about the provisional existence of falsehood and its closest ally, darkness. Neither Satan should be a person's greatest worry. Rather, what we should worry about is the absence of truth and light. If they are brought about, falsehood and darkness, as a result, will instantaneously fade away and vanish.

That is so because the two elements cannot coexist. Truth and light are the antidotes for falsehood and darkness respectively. Similarly, a true believer and servant of Allah is the antidote for Satan and his advances: "Feeble indeed is the cunning (strategy or plots) of Satan" (*al-Nisa'*, 76).

This is the message of the Qur'anic verse (*ayah*): "And say, 'Truth has come, and falsehood has perished. Indeed is falsehood, (by nature), ever bound to perish'" (*al-Isra'*, 81).

An example of this is a person who comes for a purpose to a dark room. Certainly, the person will not panic, nor be put off, because of the room's condition. The only thing he will be concerned about is finding a switch to turn on the lights. That is, he will worry about and attend to the real things. Doing so will solve all his problems. The presence of darkness in the room and its being an obstacle will not

even cross his mind. There is darkness in the room just because the lights are turned off.

As indispensable as they are, at the heart of truth and light lies freedom. It is their soul. In equal measure, at the center of darkness and falsehood lie denial of freedom and its mishandling. Allah declares: "And say: 'The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills - let him believe; and whoever wills - let him disbelieve (reject the truth)'" (al-Kahf, 29).

By freedom it is meant not merely to do whatever and whenever one wills. Rather, freedom means to independently know what is needed to be done to self-actualize, and to be able to do it freely without interferences and constraints.

The meaning of true freedom

Just as there are only truth and light, likewise there is only freedom. Impediments and limitations are artificial. There is a direct object targeted by its subject with nothing standing between them.

That is the way Almighty Allah created and sustains life.

The whole universe exalts and declares the praises and glory of its Creator. As such, it serves at once as a testimony to, and sign of, truth. The same holds true as regards the earth and man in his capacity as Allah's vicegerent on it.

Man has been created free and on *al-fitrah*, which is a pristine and natural state of purity as well as disposition to worshipping the Creator and living His Absolute Truth. It is a primordial instinct for man to draw ever closer to his "heavenly", so to speak, origins.

Accordingly, man's task is but to stay the course and ward off everything that could divest him of his honorable status and his most prized possession: freedom. He only needs to actualize and cherish his recollection of Allah and the truth of Islam - as the only religion in the sight of Allah and the only heavenly-sanctioned life paradigm.

Man simply needs to remain himself and be free. His life, though physically confined to the earth, is to establish reciprocal relationships with the Divinity. He is also to ascertain and unleash the infinity of his metaphysical self, and as such, get access to the infinite meanings, experiences and splendor of the transcendent realm.

Man will realize that the best road to freedom is to identify his being and his limited domain with the ultimate spiritual domain, and to lose himself in serving

it. The path to happiness and self-realization will then become unobstructed and clear too.

It follows that servitude to Allah alone denotes the truest form of emancipation and freedom. It guarantees enduring elation in the spheres of consciousness, knowledge and attitudes. In this manner, there is no limit to people's confidence, enthusiasm, hope and faith.

However, what many people today call freedom is the most awful form of enslavement and oppression. People have turned their backs on the Heaven, worshipping, in turn, brief material things, their animal desires, and self-styled ambitions and goals. Thus trapped, they have become the slaves of their own egos and wants. Much-talked-about freedom is as much a fraud as any other professed value and existential meaning and purpose.

Preservation of freedom a must

One of the main aims of incessantly sending Holy Prophets to mankind was to enlighten and free man from whatever forms of religious, cultural and civilization enslavement that he might have invented and imposed upon himself. Another aim was to eliminate all the influences and their protagonists, which were supporting the morbid trends.

The order of things, both natural and man-generated, were thus to be restored. The freedom and purity of man, together with the pristineness and wholesomeness of life and earth, were to be brought back as closely to the state of their primordial selves as possible.

And that, surely, ought to signify the core, as well as pinnacle, of the notion of sustainability and of each and every authentic sustainable development drive. Little wonder that Islam through its legal doctrine of *maqasid al-shari'ah* (objectives or purposes behind the rulings) gives the idea of sustainability a great deal of attention.

The intention was to promote freedom as the greatest asset of man, and to spawn generations of free men and women, who will then constitute free societies. It proved time and again that freedom, coupled with genuine faith, is most powerful and undefeatable. Whenever fully instituted, its triumphs were ensured, and its adversaries never stood a chance.

Freedom is without equal. The only thing that its opponents can do is to slow its march to success by a variety of forgery and exploitation means.

The case of Prophet Musa (Moses)

For example, the Qur'an explains that Pharaoh, even though of the greatest corrupters and makers of mischief on earth, was ostensibly powerful and successful merely because he oppressed his people and broke them up into different sects and parties. Simply put, he denied them their freedom, dictating afterwards the terms of their material and spiritual wellbeing.

Allah says: "Indeed, Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and made its people into factions and sects, oppressing a sector among them, slaughtering their (new-born) sons and keeping their females alive. Indeed, he was of the corrupters" (al-Qasas, 4).

Hence, when Prophet Musa (Moses) was sent to Pharaoh and his establishment, and had to confront his magicians in an epic duel between truth and falsehood, he put emphasis all the way through on the idea of people's physical and spiritual freedom. He demanded that his people, the Children of Israel, be released from the centuries-old slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the Holy Land in Palestine and its Jerusalem and *al-Masjid al-Aqsa* (Canaan).

The key moment was the contest with the magicians. Musa used that opportunity to destroy the myth of Pharaoh's greatness and invincibility. He wanted to bring home to the people that Pharaoh's designs were nothing but a scam of the highest order, the beginning and main cause of which were his acts of denying people their basic right of freedom and a clever manipulation of everything else directly and indirectly related to it.

Musa thus proposed that his contest with the magicians - the face of Pharaoh's ideology and regime - be held on the day of the Festival and that the people be gathered in the early forenoon (Ta Ha, 59). Musa wanted everybody to be there and witness first-hand the fatal blow to Pharaoh's government and its ungodly schemes. He also wanted them to do so in the morning during the brightness of the day when human perceptive powers are sharpest and visions surest and most definitive.

Musa wanted to trigger a chain reaction that would start with the emancipation and freedom of people's minds and souls, leading up to their physical freedom and the freedom of their total being. And that spelled a disaster for Pharaoh, for nothing could stem the tide of freedom and its vast ramifications for injustice and tyranny. The situation manifested itself in the Magicians' instantaneous prostration to God - following Musa's triumph and their as well as Pharaoh's emphatic defeat - sincerely repenting and rejoicing at their discerning of truth and their tasting of the true meaning of life and liberty.

When Pharaoh threatened the magicians that he will punish them for their betrayal by cutting off their hands and their feet on opposite sides, and by crucifying them on the trunks of palm trees, they - as finally free people enabled to distinguish truth from falsehood and to think freely - calmly responded to Pharaoh and his threats: "Never will we prefer you over what has come to us of clear proofs and (over) He who created us. So decree whatever you are to decree. You can only decree for this worldly life. Indeed, we have believed in our Lord that He may forgive us our sins and what you compelled us (to do) of magic. And Allah is better and more enduring" (Ta Ha, 72, 73).

Moreover, when Musa miraculously left Egypt with his people (an event called the Exodus), and when they stood at the threshold of the Holy Land, the meaning and significance of true freedom again came to the fore, perhaps most dramatically.

The Children of Israel were asked to enter the Holy Land and fight their enemy, the land's occupiers. They were promised victory if they did so. However, they declined, rebelled and defied the divine orders.

In reality, there was more to the insubordination and rebellion of the Children of Israel than meets the eye. The incident demonstrated that for the Children of Israel, true freedom was a farfetched proposition. Though physically free, they were still saddled with a spiritual and mental bondage.

Consequently, they were denied entry to the Holy Land for forty years. That was a punishment, firstly for their appalling spiritual and psychological state, and secondly for their resisting of Allah's command, resulting in them wandering in the wilderness uncertain of where they should go and what they should do. After forty years have elapsed, only then were the Children of Israel allowed to go in.

Yet, there is another dimension to the episode.

The Children of Israel were taken out of Egypt to the Holy Land with the aim of settling therein and creating a civilization of their own. The age of slavery, ghettos and diaspora was over.

However, they proved incapacitated and well short of the qualifications required for the fulfilment of the task. If they were allowed to proceed in such a state to their destination to undertake the demanding process of civilization-building, they would have caused in the long run more damage and pain than benefit and overall goodness, not just for themselves, but also their future generations. Unquestionably, such are the gravity, intricacy and two-sidedness of the civilization-building enterprise.

During the forty years of life in the wilderness, a new completely free generation of the Children of Israel was raised. They were not part, nor did they carry the scars, of the Egyptian bondage, and were raised under the watchful eye and painstaking guidance of Prophets Musa and his brother Harun (Aaron). As such, they were qualified to enter and inhabit the Holy Land and perform what was expected from them.

Lessons learned

The message conveyed thereby is that great civilizations are engendered and built, not copied, imported or purchased. To do so, power, armies, land, people, resources and other sheer quantitative variables are not enough. What is needed most is all-inclusive human development steeped in complete and authentic freedom. A corollary of this blend is creativity - freedom's sister - that recognizes no imposed false boundaries, nor point of reference.

The strength of a civilization depends on the strength of its people's creativity, freedom and holistic human development. A deterioration in any, or all, of the three leads to a commensurate deterioration in the body of a civilization.

Perhaps, today's Muslims could learn an invaluable lesson from the history of the Children of Israel. Repetitive calls for a renaissance of Islamic civilization could be heard loud and clear almost in all corridors of the Islamic and Muslim cultural presence. Much efforts, time and resources are poured into the idea. Nonetheless, very little progress has been made thus far; the reason being either the total negligence, or merely partial treatment, of the three most critical components, the triplets: freedom, human development and creativity. Apparently, the priorities have been misconstrued and mixed up.

There is no Islamic renaissance as long as the interests of politicians and political parties, governments and their narrow agendas, royalties, and certain institutional entities, are venerated and served at the expense of the interests of the Islamic message and the Muslim *Ummah* (community) *en bloc*. The two are simply incompatible.

For example, how can there be a renaissance in education when many new universities are built but no adequate academic freedom is ensured, and the last thing students are taught in their curricula is creativity and creative, along with critical, thinking? Or how can there be a renaissance in politics, economic development, art and architecture when corruption and diverse forms and levels of dishonesty are rife at every level of countries' institutional presence and operation? In this way, freedom and creativity become highly politicized and maltreated, and so, turned into forms of suppression and banality. If openly

promoted, freedom and creativity may yet become dangerous for the establishments.

Some people just seem to be happy about ubiquitous hypocrisy, and about building castles in the air and leading an unrealistic existence removed from the pressures and challenges of everyday life.

The case of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and his mission

When Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) migrated from Makkah to Madinah with his companions, he did so - as is often emphasized - due to the pressing safety and security concerns, which to some extent is true. However, he did so, primarily, because he realized, after thirteen years of trying, that Makkah - ill-disposed and hostile as it was - was proving deficient for the implementation of Islam as the religion of freedom, cultural refinement and civilizational consciousness and growth. Other alternatives, therefore, had to be sought.

Madinah turned out to be everything Makkah wasn't. It was an epitome and receptacle of the earliest manifestations of Islamic civilization. Central to this new culture was the liberation of people from worshipping and submitting themselves to anything and anybody other than the Almighty Creator. People were governed by higher spiritual and moral standards than such as pertained to their own personal, tribal, or traditional interests.

The stage was set for the new code of conduct when the Prophet at the beginning of the Charter, or Constitution, of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious city of Madinah clearly stated that its citizens, Muslims and non-Muslims, formed one nation - *ummah*. The content of the Charter oozed throughout the assurance and facilitation of peace and concord, combined with human freedom, dignity and productivity.

Madinah was a truly free and progressive society. It was a model that all subsequent Muslim societies and urban centers tried to emulate. It was a stage where integration, supreme justice and human rights prevailed, where equal opportunities for all were provided, and where, perhaps for the first time in human history, inter-faith dialogues and positive interactions - especially between the followers of the Abrahamic religions - on a regular basis transpired.

The new traditions have been enumerated in the following Qur'anic words: "Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives and forbids

immorality and bad conduct and oppression. He admonishes you that perhaps you will be reminded" (al-Nahl, 90).

It should be observed that the emphasis in the verse is on a communal, reciprocal and all-embracing good behavior, transcending for a while the parameters of religion, traditional customs and social mores.

It was owing to that that Madinah was thus called. The name "Madinah" is derived from the words "maddana" and "tamaddun", which mean "to civilize" and "civilization" respectively. Apart from the word "tamaddun", the word "hadarah" is also employed in Arabic to imply civilization. "Hadarah" (civilization) is derived from the words "hadara", "hudur" and "hadir", which mean "to be present", "presence" and "he who is present" respectively.

That denotes that in Islam, for a civilization to materialize and grow, the presence of enlightened, free, visionary and dedicated people is essential. Their mere presence will ensure the provision of conducive conditions and facilities for a civilization. Their roles and productivity will be the cause, and the advancement of civilizational ingredients the effect.

Undoubtedly, the Islamic message was always about such a developmental exemplar. Islam aims but to create free, dignified, devoted and productive persons whose societies will then be shaped in their own image.

Why did Muslims fight?

Islam and Muslims also fought simply to ensure that those noble principles are upheld. They did not fight because of the empire-building and colonization impulses - although many chapters of Muslim long history are stained by the deeds of a number of individuals and groups who deviated from the established patterns. By and large, wars were sometimes defensive in nature, and at other times with the intention of removing impediments to freedom, justice and conveyance of truth.

On account of that, in Arabic, "conquest" means "al-fath", which means "opening"; that is to say, opening places and territories, together with people's hearts and minds, to the message of Islam, after which it was entirely up to people if they wanted to follow or reject it. Islamic conquests could additionally be interpreted as acts of ensuring and disseminating freedom, and its protagonists as "freedom-fighters".

Hence, the conquest or takeover of Makkah, for example, is termed "Fath (Opening of) Makkah". Also, the renowned book of a Muslim historian, Ahmad b.

Yahya al-Baladhuri, on Muslim conquests is called "Futuh al-Buldan", which means "Openings (*futuh*, plural of *fath*) of Lands (Countries)".

All Islam and Muslims ever wanted was freedom: freedom for themselves and for others. Islam does its best to remove all the obstacles and veils that may stand in the way. Reason for this is that Islam as the truth revealed by the Absolute Truth (*al-Haqq*) fears nothing and nobody. It wants to create milieus rooted in justice, transparency and trust, in that they are most conducive to its thriving. Only against the backdrop of such socio-political and intellectual settings can Islam's true colors be perfectly displayed, and can others be able to see and appreciate them. By advocating freedom for others, Islam and Muslims, in effect, work for their own benefits. It is a long-term strategy that eventually secures a huge dividend yield.

This approach was epitomized in the Prophet's sending of letters to the world's leaders, inviting them to Islam and proposing that they, too, become instruments of these new heavenly-authorized concepts of freedom, life and justice. The gist of a letter to Heraclius the leader of the Romans, for instance, read: "I invite you with the invitation of peace. If you establish peace, then you will find peace and God will double your reward. If you turn away, you will bear the Arians' sins (for your perpetuation and facilitation of their misguidance and errors)."

Furthermore, when 'Uqbah b. Nafi' - a Muslim general who "conquered" much of the North Africa, including present-day Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Morocco - reached the Atlantic Ocean, he knelt down, raised his hands towards the Heaven, and said: "O Allah, be my witness that I have taken Your Message up to the end of the land; and if this ocean were not in my way, I would have proceeded to fight the pagans until none would be worshipped except You."

'Uqbah b. Nafi' spoke and reported to Almighty Allah alone, instead of his ego and any of his soldiers, peers, or superiors. He was answerable but to the Divinity.

Towards the same end are the Caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab's words to his governor in Egypt: "What makes you enslave the people, who were born from their mothers in freedom?"

Islam's famous credo that "there is no compulsion in (acceptance of) religion" (al-Baqarah, 256) is universal. It contains all, not only physical, but also non-physical cultural, psychological and spiritual elements. Just as there should not be compulsion in accepting religion, similarly, there should not be compulsion in not accepting religion either. Freedom needs to work both ways.

Freedom and missionaries

Muslims are sometimes accused of being extremely intolerant towards missionary activities that target them and their Islam, especially in Muslim-majority countries. However, that charge is wrong and completely unfounded.

Muslims are only against secretive and clandestine proselytizing activities in their midst, whereby certain individuals' and groups' weaknesses and vulnerabilities are aimed to be exploited. That is perceived as grossly unfair and opportunistic a course of action. In the process, people's freedom is being negated, at worst, and manipulated and swayed, at best. And that is the crime Islam and Muslims go all out to prevent from happening.

Inherently, Islam and Muslims are not against anybody. What is more, they are open to dialogues, interactions and debates with the proponents of any ideology and religion, in any setting and under any conditions where openness and honesty are observed. By the way, that is exactly the core mission and purpose of Islam as the embodiment of truth.

Whoever wants to directly and sincerely share - and debate - his ideas, beliefs and values with Muslims, he is always most welcome. This can be done anywhere, including the most important centers of Islamic spirituality and scholarship. But the sessions are to be conducted directly and publicly. Let all people have an opportunity to witness and comprehend truth and its antitheses, allowing the spirit of Prophet Musa's victory over Pharaoh and his magicians to live forever.

Therefore, Islam and Muslims are in no way against missionaries. They are just against their covert strategies and methods. Dealing (openly debating) with missionaries, in point of fact, could be turned into one of the most potent means of *da'wah islamiyyah* (promoting Islam and inviting people to it). Islam's and Muslims' firm position is a reflection of their detestation of darkness, confusion, lack of spiritual freedom, deceit and double-dealing.

In addition, what Islam and Muslims are ready to offer others in their midst, that is exactly what they want and expect from others when in their own midst, no more and no less. For example, today in the West where Muslims are extreme minorities, all that Muslims want is freedom and their basic human rights. They do not want, nor expect, anyone to love them, or accord them some special favors. Freedom will be sufficient, for Islam when it is free it is an unstoppable force (and its adversaries know that, hence all the noise, campaigns, movements, etc., against it).

However, such by no means is the case. The inference can be corroborated by the fact that in many circles in the West, it is held that Islam is a religion of violence, terrorism and narrow-mindedness, that it is fundamentally anti-West and anti-

integration, and that it harbors the ideas of exclusivism and clash of civilizations. In some places, that is part of an official national doctrine.

Those views - which are so flawed that they border on the insane and ridiculous - clearly demonstrate that Islam and Muslims are not as free as they should be, and as purported and publicized. Besides, they are constantly at the receiving end of endless malicious campaigns. A great many aspects of those crusades are attempted to be secretly transported through missionaries to the Muslim lands - and minds - as well, for which reason they and their activities are not welcome. Missionaries and their clandestine tactics are risk to freedom and its antithesis.

A word on apostasy

Finally, apostasy is also loathed and severely dealt with in Islam because it represents exploitation and ill-treatment of freedom.

There is no apostasy *per se*, as no true Muslims will ever apostatize or renounce their Islamic faith. This assessment has been nicely encapsulated in the words of Heraclius, who said to Abu Sufyan b. Harb that nobody who embraced Islam became displeased and discarded it because "this is (the sign of) true faith, when its delight enters the hearts and mixes with them completely" (Sahih al-Bukhari).

What is called today apostasy, by and large, is all about ignorance, negligence and vested interests, coupled with fraudulence and outright exploitation.

At the personal level, an apostate is held accountable for failing to take advantage of Islam's and his own freedom, and to establish that Islam is the absolute truth and to embrace it as such.

This is when apostates are original Muslims - in which case the societies and their institutions are also to be blamed for breeding causes and so, allowing such things to happen. Sometimes, admittedly, apostates are the victims of a higher and institutionalized dereliction and confusion.

When apostates are former converts, they are to be held accountable twice as much. Reason is that they misused their freedom of belief and choice twice: firstly when they ostensibly became Muslims, and secondly, when they left Islam's fold. Needless to say that freedom is a trust from Allah upon man. Hence, he must take it very seriously and responsibly. His destiny in both worlds depends on it.

At the social level, when apostates start championing and spreading their spiritual and intellectual disorders to others, the matter takes on a different, yet critical, character. In that case, Islam - as the religion of both personal and collective

experience and wellbeing, and as the religion of spiritual, cultural and civilizational development - is being targeted and undermined by its former dishonest members. All Muslims and their cultures, as well as civilization, as a result, feel affected.

This type of apostasy is a form of treason. It is the crime of betraying the entire Muslim community (*Ummah*) and its interests. And like in most cases of treason, a person guilty of it shall suffer death as a maximum punishment. Most importantly, his crime will be, apart from maltreating and abusing his own freedom, his deliberate attempts to influence others to do the same.

Definitely, neither annulling, nor abusing, of freedom is acceptable.