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The Concept of Freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

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Preface

The present volume contains the results of a conference on the concept of freedom in Judaism, Christianity and Islam held at the Friedrich-Alexander University in Erlangen on May 10 – 11, 2017. The conference was organized by the Research Unit "Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses" (KCID) in cooperation with the Hanns-Seidel-Foundation.

The Research Unit KCID offers an innovative approach for studying the development of the three interconnected religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. With this aim in mind, KCID analyzes the history of ideas in each of these three religions, always taking into account the history of interreligious exchange and appropriation of these very ideas. In doing so, KCID investigates the foundations of religious thought, thereby establishing an "archaeology of religious knowledge" in order to make manifest certain commonalities and differences between the three religions via dialogic study of their conceptual history. Thus, KCID intends to contribute to an intensive academic engagement with interreligious discourses in order to uncover mutually intelligible theoretical foundations and increase understanding between these different religious communities in the here and now. Moreover, KCID aims to highlight how each religion's self-understanding can contribute to mutual understanding and peace between the three religious communities in the world.

In order to explore key concepts in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, KCID organizes conferences individually dedicated to specific concepts. A renowned set of researchers from various disciplines explore these concepts from the viewpoint of all three religions. The results of each conference are published in a volume appearing in the book series "Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses". Particularly salient selections from each volume are made available online in Arabic, English and German.

In this fashion, KCID fulfills its aspirations not only by reflecting on central religious ideas amongst a small group of academic specialists, but also by disseminating such ideas in a way that will appeal to the broader public. Academic research that puts itself at the service of society is vital in order to counteract powerful contemporary trends toward a form of segregation rooted in ignorance. Mutual respect and acceptance amongst religious communities is thereby strengthened. Such a result is guaranteed due to the methodology deployed by the research unit, namely the dialogic investigation of the history of concepts as documented in the present volume.

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Foundation, Dr. Katja Thörner, Ms. Ariadne Papageorgiou, Mr. Fabian Schmidmeier and Mr. Ezra Tzfadya from the Research Unit KCID, along with the student assistants. Our thanks also goes to Dr. Albrecht Döhnert, Dr. Sophie Wagenhofer and their assistants at the publisher house Walter de Gruyter for their competent caretaking of this volume and the entire book series.

Erlangen and Munich in February 2019
The Editors

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Kenneth Seeskin

The Concept of Freedom in Judaism

In Judaism, the first commandment of the Decalogue reads: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."[1] What is noteworthy about this commandment is the way God introduces himself: not as a metaphysically perfect being, not as creator of heaven and earth, but as a liberator – the one who freed Israel from the grips of Pharaoh. Given the prominence of this commandment, freedom from slavery is not only the central theme of the Passover holiday, known in Judaism as *zman herutaynu* (the season of our freedom), it is a central theme of the Sabbath as well. In fact, if you engage in daily prayer, you cannot live a single day of your life without recalling it.

It could be said therefore that liberation from slavery is the formative event in all of Judaism. In the words of Michael Walzer: "The Exodus is a story, a big story, one that became part of the cultural consciousness of the West ..."[2] It has been invoked by revolutionaries ranging from German peasants to Oliver Cromwell to the American colonists to Martin Luther King.[3] Along these lines, it is also noteworthy that the Liberty Bell, which sits in Philadelphia and symbolizes American independence from Great Britain, is inscribed with the words "Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" a reference to Leviticus 25:10, which announces the Jubilee year when slaves were to be freed, debts forgiven, and land returned to its original owner.[4] Indeed, Deuteronomy 30:19, the rhetorical climax of the Torah, contains a rousing affirmation of free choice: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – if you and your offspring would live."

Against this celebration of freedom, the standard Christian critique of Judaism is that no sooner were the Israelites freed from Egyptian bondage than they were subjected to another form: bondage to a distant, unapproachable God who insists on strict obedience to law.

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1 Note that Judaism normally parses the Ten Commandments differently than Christianity. For Jewish thinkers, "I am the Lord thy God ..." is usually taken as a commandment to accept the sovereignty of God even though it is not expressed in the form of an imperative. Cf., for example, Maimonides, Moses, *Mishneh Torah 1*, trans. E. Touger, New York/Jerusalem: Moznaim Publishing, 1989, Basic Laws, 1. 1–6.

2 Walzer, Michael, *Exodus and Revolution*, New York: Basic Books, 1985, 7.

3 Ibid., 3–7.

4 It is unclear whether the Jubilee year was an aspiration or a report of an actual practice.

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Along these lines, it is noteworthy that the Hebrew word for slavery (*avduth*) comes from the same root as the word for service to or worship of God. Strictly speaking if God freed Israel from Egyptian bondage, then by all rights, Israel would be bound to God as a result.

As enlightened a figure as Kant argued that Judaism is not a religious faith in the true sense of the term because it is concerned merely with the outward performance of statutory laws, takes no interest in their moral significance, and leaves the inner life of the person, including his feelings and intentions, unaddressed.[5] If this is true, then it is not until the emergence of Christianity that genuine freedom became possible. In the words of Paul (Gal 3:23 – 24): "Before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law … therefore the law was our disciplinarian [*paidagogos*] before Christ came …"[6]

Like Islam, Judaism is a religion of law. Although there have been attempts to introduce articles of faith to Judaism, the most notable being that of Moses Maimonides, Moses Mendelssohn was right in saying that articles of faith have always been controversial and have never attained what might be considered official status.[7] Soon after Maimonides introduced his version of them, some people questioned how many he himself was committed to. From a religious point of view, the absence of articles of faith is not necessarily a bad thing. As Kant pointed out, nothing is gained if statutory laws are replaced by statutory beliefs: beliefs one must accept without supporting evidence or rational justification.[8] It is in this spirit that Mendelssohn referred to articles of faith as "shackles of faith."

Even a cursory look at the history of Jewish thought will show that without articles of faith to rein them in, Jewish thinkers have given themselves enormous latitude in choosing systems of thought within which to craft their theories. There have been Jewish Platonists, Aristotelians, voluntarists, Averroists, Spinoz-

5 Kant, Immanuel, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. Allen Wood/George Di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 6:125 – 27.

6 The *paidagogos* was someone assigned to look after young boys for the purpose keeping them out of trouble.

7 Cf. his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, "Sanhedrin, Chapter Ten." For a readily available English translation, cf. Maimonides, Moses, *A Maimonides Reader*, Isadore Twersky (ed.), New York: Behrman House, 1972, 402 – 23. For discussion of Maimonides' principles as well as their reception by other Jewish thinkers, cf. Kellner, Menachem, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought*, New York: Littman Library, 1986 and idem, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, New York: Littman Library, 2006. Even in Maimonides' lifetime, a controversy arose over how deeply he himself was committed to these principles, especially Number 13: belief in resurrection. For Moses Mendelssohn's critique of Maimonides, cf. *Jerusalem*, trans. Alan Arkush, Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983, 100 – 1.

8 Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:166, footnote.

ists, Kantians, Hegelians, Marxists, existentialists, realists, idealists, and almost anything else one could name. In the words of Joseph Albo (1380 – 1444): "It is clear now that every intelligent person is permitted to investigate the fundamental principles of religion and to interpret the biblical texts in accordance with the truth as it seems to him."[9]

What I propose to do is to look at the concept of freedom in Judaism by examining five central themes: the giving of law, Sabbath observance, repentance, freedom of thought, and messianism. In addition to the biblical text, I will examine a prominent thinker from the middle ages, early modern period, and twentieth century: Maimonides, Spinoza, and Hermann Cohen.

It should come as no surprise that in looking at freedom from so many different perspectives, more than one understanding of it will emerge. It is customary for philosophers to distinguish freedom in a negative sense, i. e. lack of external constraint, from freedom in a positive sense, i. e. self-mastery or self-determination.[10] To take a simple example, I am not free in the first sense if a dictator prevents me from doing what I want. The classic threat to freedom in this sense is, of course, Pharaoh. Suppose, however, that while there are no external constraints to what I can do, there are internal ones. Suppose, in other words, that I am addicted to drugs or alcohol, that I am obsessed with jealousy or revenge, or that my self-knowledge is so distorted that I routinely do things that I come to regret. It could be said that under these circumstances, I am not free because I am at the mercy of harmful or dehumanizing tendencies that spring from within. We do, after all, speak of being a slave to passion. When this happens, even though the problem is internal, it would be fair to say that the person has failed to achieve an adequate degree of self-control and in that sense cannot be said to have acted freely.

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9 Albo, Joseph, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim,* trans. Isaac Husik, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1929, Book 1, Ch. 2, 55.

10 The origin of this distinction can be traced at least to Kant's distinction between *Wille* and *Wilkur* and before that to Plato's conception of *boulesis* at *Gorgias* 466b ff. The question raised by Plato is whether I can really be said to do as I wish if my action runs counter to what is in my own best interest. Contemporary philosophers often begin their discussion of this issue by citing Isiah Berlin's famous essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" in: Berlin, Isiah, *Four Essays on Liberty,* London: Oxford University Press, 1969. Berlin is right to point out that the positive conception of liberty runs the risk of becoming another form of tyranny if the question of what is in my own best interest is entirely the hands of other people. It should be clear however that the negative conception of freedom as lack of external constraint runs risks as well, e. g. if a government were to allow people to sell themselves into slavery on the ground that it is up to each individual to decide whether slavery is in his best interest.

As the various conceptions of freedom are developed, we will see that some fit better with the negative conception while others fit better with the positive conception. In the end, I will argue that to understand the role of freedom in Jewish thought, we must do justice to both.

1 The Giving of Law

The normal way to understand the giving of law in a religious context is to invoke the concept of revelation: an omniscient God gives his chosen prophet an authoritative list of do's and don'ts. There are well-defined rewards for obedience and equally well-defined punishments for disobedience. No one doubts that there are passages in the Torah (Pentateuch) that read this way *if viewed in isolation*. As Hegel put it: "All law is given by the Lord, and is thus entirely positive commandment."[11] The fact is however that these passages occur is a larger narrative in which the primary way for God to establish order is not just to hand down law but to offer a covenant (*brit*). There is now general agreement that the model for such covenants was a suzerain treaty between a sovereign and a vassal.[12] But whatever their source, the important point is that a covenant is much more than a simple decree.

In crucial places in the Hebrew Bible, God enters into covenants with Noah, Abraham, the whole Israelite nation, and David. While the latter three deal with the fate of the Jewish people, the Rabbis interpreted the first and oldest, the covenant with Noah, which contains the prohibition against spilling innocent human blood, to apply to all of humanity.[13] In simple terms, this covenant sets forth the basic principles needed to live a civilized life: prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, murder, theft, impermissible sexual unions, eating meat from a live animal, and a positive commandment to establish courts of justice.

It goes without saying that not all covenants take the same form. Sometimes they involve a relation between equal parties (Gen 21:32), sometimes between unequal parties (1Sam 11:1), sometimes the relation between a king and his council

11 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. E. B. Spears/J. B. Sanderson, New York: Humanities Press, 1962, vol. II, 211.

12 For the historical background to the biblical notion of covenant, cf. Mendenhall, George, "Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law," *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954), 24–26 as well as idem, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *Biblical Archeologist* 17 (1954), 50–76. For further discussion of the philosophic implications of this idea cf. Seeskin, Kenneth, *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, chapter 2.

13 Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 56a.

5 Messianism

Although it is often said that monotheism is Judaism's great contribution to world culture, I have argued at length that an equally important contribution is the idea that the future will be better than the past.[80] In simple terms, messianism amounts to repentance writ large for it claims that one day the evil and suffering we see around us will be eliminated making way for an age of justice and peace. We have seen that for Jews "justice" normally involves an end to exile and return to national sovereignty. Maimonides expressed the hope for a better future as follows:[81]

> King Messiah will arise and restore the kingdom of David to its former state and original sovereignty ... He who does not believe in a restoration or does not wait the coming of the Messiah denies not only the teachings of the prophets but also those of the Law of Moses our Teacher.

Strictly speaking there is no mention of the coming of a Messiah in the Torah, and it is questionable whether most modern Jews would be happy with the reinstitution of a monarchy. For my purposes, what is important here are the assumptions that underlie Maimonides' position.

The first such assumption is that human history is not destined to repeat its past mistakes: no divine decree or tragic fate prevents humanity from righting the wrongs that it has inflicted on itself. This is another way of saying that we are free to set out on a new and better course if we choose to do so. The second assumption is that either with God's help or by coming to its senses, humanity will one day make this choice. This, in turn, is another way of saying that not only are we free to set out on a better course but that it is reasonable to hope that we will. Putting the two together, we get the claim that the way things are is not the way they should be or in time the way they will be. Thus Isaiah 43:18–19: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do something new."

The theme of newness is evident in the Hebrew Bible right from the start. With the words "In the beginning ..." the Bible raises the possibility that there might also be a middle and an end. Much of the narrative of the first five books involves the theme of travel. Abraham is asked to leave the house of his

80 Seeskin, Kenneth, *Jewish Messianic Thoughts in an Age of Despair*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, chapter 1.

81 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 14, Kings and Wars, 11.1.

father and go to a new land. Jacob is constantly fleeing his adversaries. Moses escapes the Egyptian authorities and takes up residence with the Midianites. Finally there is the Israelites' 40-year journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Note, as Walzer does, that unlike the *Odyssey*, where the title character returns home, these stories have people traveling to places they have never seen before.[82] Not only do the biblical characters go from A to B, but in so doing they often experience new and unprecedented events. In short, these narratives encourage the reader to think that the future is not predetermined but open to new possibilities.

Even when the Israelites finally enter the Promised Land, obstacles remain. There are wars to fight, including civil wars, corrupt rulers to deal with, and prophetic utterances to the effect that the people have neglected the poor and strayed from God. Shortly before Moses dies (Deuteronomy 31:16–18), God tells him that the people will lust after strange gods and that his anger will be kindled against them. The result is that however momentous their entry into the Promised Land, it cannot serve as the end of the story. Something else must happen if the promise of the early books is to be fulfilled. It is hardly surprising, then, that the prophets introduce the idea that history will culminate in a cosmic upheaval in which evil will be swept away and the proper order installed.

According to Amos (8–9), the Day of the Lord will be a bitter, awful time when no light will shine and famine will destroy the land. The punishment for sin will be so severe that no one from those in Sheol to those at the top of Mt. Carmel will escape. This will be followed by a glorious period in which the House of David will be rebuilt and Israel's fortunes restored. Jeremiah (4) proclaims that the earth will be waste and void, the heavens will have no light, the mountains will quake, cities will lie in ruins, and one disaster will follow upon another. Isaiah (6) asks God to stop up the people's ears and close their eyes so that cities will be ruined and the land will be desolate. He then (Isaiah 11) proclaims that a king will come forth from the house of David and rule over a reconstituted Israel (Isa 11). That king will be the Messiah.

The word *messiah* simply means the anointed one of God. Originally it referred to kings or priests who were anointed in special ceremonies.[83] Eventually it came to mean not just a king but a redeemer who would preside over a new world order. Thus Isaiah 11:9: "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" and Ezekiel 37:5: "I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again." It is impossible to overestimate the impor-

82 Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution,* 11.

83 Cf., for example, Exodos 29:41, where Moses is told to anoint Aaron's sons.

tance of these sentiments for our understanding of history. As Kant tells us: "The hope for better times, without which an earnest desire to do something that benefits the general good would never have warmed the human heart, has always influenced the work of the well-intentioned."[84] Similarly Reinhold Niebuhr writes that: "Without the ultrarational hopes and passions of religion no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible."[85]

If causal determinism is the enemy of freedom from a metaphysical standpoint, then despair is its enemy from a moral one because it encourages us to think that we have no choice but to continue doing what we have always done even if the results are unsatisfactory. The prophetic utterances just mentioned say otherwise. A cosmic upheaval may have a devastating impact on those affected by it, but if it were to occur, it would allow humanity to forget the past and start over again, much as God does after the flood. Even if there is nothing so dramatic in store, a society that has the courage to attempt what might seem impossible to some still could accomplish a great deal. Again it is important to consider the political realities that helped shape this literature. A small nation sandwiched between much larger ones does not want to be told that all it has to look forward to is one power play after another. Reduced to simplest terms, the prophets looked forward to an age when justice would triumph over power.

This view is unrealistic, to say the least. No historical evidence supports it, and common sense argues against it. What the prophets are asking us is to put historical evidence and common sense aside and look at the world in moral rather than natural terms. In the words of Emmanuel Levinas: "This most ancient of claims is its [Judaism's] claim to a separate existence in the political history of the world. It is the claim to judge history – that is to say, to remain free with regard to events, whatever the internal logic binding them. It is the claim to be an eternal people."[86] If the debate over freedom and determinism in medieval philosophy is focused on the metaphysical space for freedom, Levinas' remarks about history are focused on the moral space. In his opinion, Judaism is distinguished by its belief that we can pledge ourselves to ideals that go well beyond anything that history can validate. From the fact that something has not happened yet, it does not follow that it can never happen.

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84 Kant, Immanuel, "Theory and Practice," in: *Perpetual Peace and other Essays*, trans. T. Humphrey, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983, 86.

85 Niebuhr, Reinhold, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1932, reprint 2001, 81.

86 Levinas, Emmanuel, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, 199.

If such thinking has preserved Judaism over the centuries, it has also cost it dearly. As the historian Heinrich Graetz put it, messianism is both Pandora's box and the elixir of life.[87] It is an elixir to the degree that it allows a people to overcome despair. But it can be Pandora's box to the degree that it opens people to false hopes, especially in times of crisis. Even a casual observer cannot help but notice that the history of Judaism is littered with false hopes, false messiahs, and wild speculation about the circumstances in which the true one will appear. Though hope is needed when things get difficult, it is precisely when things get difficult that people are most susceptible to folly.

We can see this by looking at the Roman occupation of Judea, during which two attempts at revolution failed. In regard to the first, Josephus writes:[88]

> Their chief inducement to go to war was an equivocal oracle
> also found in their sacred writings, announcing that at that time
> a man from their own country would become Monarch of the world.
> This they took to mean the triumph of their own race, and many
> of their own scholars were wildly out in their interpretations.

This led to the destruction of Jerusalem, civil war between competing Jewish factions, numerous massacres and crucifixions, and a large number of people being taken away as slaves. In the second attempt, the Jews were led by Bar Kochba, a man proclaimed the Messiah by no less an authority than Rabbi Akiba. But the revolution was defeated by a scorched earth policy meant to teach the Jews a lesson for all time.

The failure of the second attempt at revolution raised a number of questions. The first and most obvious one asks what the Messiah is supposed to be: a warrior who will put an end to foreign domination or a Torah scholar who will lead the people back to the religion as it supposed to be practiced? The second question returns us to the fundamental problem: What is the proper response to misfortune – despair or hope? Faced with these issues, rabbinic authorities in late antiquity were deeply ambivalent about the status of messianic longings. Given the horrors of exile and oppression, they were hardly in a position to squelch a belief that gave the people something to hope for. At the same time, they could not be completely comfortable with a doctrine that had led to two dis-

87 Graetz, Heinrich, "The Stages in the Evolution of the Messianic Belief," in: Ismar Schorsch (trans. and ed.), *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1975, 151–52.

88 Josephus, Flavius, *The Jewish War*, trans. G. A. Williamson, Middlesex: Penguin, 1959, 6.312–3.

astrous wars, spawned a rival religion, and on some interpretations puts more emphasis on military prowess than on observance of the commandments.

One will look in vain through rabbinic literature for a coherent view of what the Messiah will do or when he will come.[89] Rather one will find a variety of suggestions, each with a different idea of what the Messiah will be and when he will come. The Messiah will come when Israel repents and observes a single Sabbath in accordance with established rules.[90] The Messiah will come when human behavior becomes utterly intolerable and desperate measures are needed to correct it.[91] The Messiah has already come so that all we can do is commit ourselves to improved behavior.[92] The Messiah will usher in an apocalypse.[93] The Messiah is already here in the person of a leper bandaging his wounds outside the gates of Rome.[94]

It was amidst such chaos that Maimonides tried to introduce order into the discussion. Following yet another rabbinic precedent, he argues that the only difference between life now and life then is that Israel will regain political sovereignty, be at peace with the rest of the nations, and rather than constantly preparing for war, be able to devote itself entirely to study and worship.[95] In his opinion, then, there will be no cosmic upheaval or apocalypse. All references to such upheavals in the works of the prophets should therefore be read as predicting the downfall of political regimes rather than natural disasters. By the same token, Isaiah's vision at 11:6 ("The wolf shall dwell with the lamb …") is only a way of saying that Israel will live in peace with its neighbors. In fact, human behavior will be largely the same as it is now, except of course for the absence of war. There will still be rich and poor, strong and weak. In time, the Messiah will die a natural death.

As Maimonides sees it, the significance of the messianic age is that it will free people from the economic and political realities that make the current order burdensome and allow them to devote themselves to the things that really matter. In his words: "The sages and prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah that Israel might exercise dominion over the world, rule the heathens, or be exalted by the nations, or that it might eat, drink, and rejoice. Their aspi-

89 For further discussion, cf. Neusner, Jacob, "Messianic Themes in Formative Judaism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* 52 (1984), 357–74.

90 Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 97b, *Taanit* 64a.

91 *Sanhedrin* 97a.

92 *Sanhedrin* 97b.

93 *Megilla* 11a, *Sanhedrin* 97b.

94 *Sanhedrin* 98a.

95 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* 14, Kings and Wars, 11.3, 12.1. For rabbinic precedents, cf. Talmud, *Berakhot* 34b, *Shabbat* 63a, 151b, *Sanhedrin* 91b, 99a.

ration was that Israel be free to devote itself to the Law and its wisdom."[96] Again we have the joining of a negative conception of freedom with a positive one. Because peace will reign, other nations will be able to follow Israel's lead and devote themselves to the acquisition of wisdom. There is even a passage, often deleted from editions of the *Mishneh Torah*, in which Maimonides suggests that Christianity and Islam will be educate people on the virtues of monotheism.[97]

It should be understood that for Maimonides, the acquisition of knowledge involves more than the gaining of information as we understand it but rather a gradual shift in orientation from material matters to spiritual and from temporal truths to eternal. In the *Guide of the Perplexed* (3.11), he goes so far as to say that the major evils that people inflict on each other all stem from ignorance. If ignorance could be replaced by knowledge, then "they would refrain from doing any harm to themselves and to others. For through cognition of the truth, enmity and hatred are removed and the inflicting of harm by people on one another is abolished." It should also be understood that as Maimonides understands it, the messianic age will not be a utopian paradise in which people acquire immense wealth, eat lavish meals, and enjoy generous amounts of leisure time. Since these things have nothing to do with perfecting our nature as human beings, they have no place in the picture.

The thinker for whom messianism plays the most important role is Hermann Cohen. But before we can examine his views, we have to return to Kant. Kant makes clear at the outset of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Bxx) that by its very nature reason seeks the unconditioned, or as we might say, the absolute. Given a series of causal interactions such that A causes B, which causes C, etc., reason posits the idea of a first cause which is responsible for the entire series. Given the judgment that one institution is more just than another, reason is led to the idea of perfect justice. There is nothing wrong with this so long as we do not make the mistake of thinking that because reason has arrived at a certain idea, it has grounds for asserting the existence of something outside the mind to which that idea corresponds. In Kant's terms, the ideas of reason are regulative rather than descriptive. Thus:[98]

> Plato made use of the expression *idea* in such a way that we can readily see that he understood by it something that not only could never be borrowed from the senses, but that even goes far beyond

96 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* 14, Kings and Wars, 12.4.

97 Ibid., 11.

98 Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer/Allen Wood, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, A313/B370.

> concepts of the understanding (with which Aristotle occupied himself), since nothing encountered in experience could ever be congruent to it.

Seen in this way, reason offers us awareness of things to which no experience can ever be adequate. No experience can present us with a first cause or a society that is perfectly just. But that does not mean that these ideas are worthless. On the contrary, they are indispensable for practical purposes. The fact that no society on earth has ever been perfectly just has no tendency to show that we should ignore the idea of perfect justice when it comes to evaluating the societies we currently inhabit. Without the idea of perfect justice, we would succumb to a tendency to become content with *imp*erfect justice, which would amount to a capitulation to evil. This is part and parcel of Kant's distinction between *is* and *ought*. It is the job of reason to keep the latter squarely before our minds and to supply a target at which we should aim. If we were to derive our idea of virtue from experience alone, in Kant's view, we would make of it "an ambiguous nonentity."[99]

If no experience can ever be adequate to the kind of idea Kant is talking about, how can we use such ideas as targets? Kant answers that we follow such ideas "only as asymptotically, as it were, i.e. merely by approximation, without ever reaching them ..."[100] Or again: "It is man's duty to *strive* for ... perfection, but not to *reach* it (in this life), and his compliance with this duty can, accordingly, consist only in continual progress."[101] What is true of individual agents is also true of humanity as a whole. Although it must strive for the Kingdom of God, it cannot realize it by undertaking a finite series of steps.

Applying this conception of progress broadly, we arrive at the view that it is instructive to regard human history messianically – not as achieving perfection but as trying to approximate it. Accordingly we can say that religion has advanced from superstition and primitive forms of worship to more advanced forms that stress the inner life of the individual and her freedom to transform it. Political history has marched, however slowly, toward the institution of a democratic republic founded on equal rights for all citizens. Most important, from Kant's perspective, humanity has begun to throw off the bonds of its self-incurred tutelage and embrace the idea of enlightenment.

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99 Ibid., A315/B371.

100 Ibid., A663/B691.

101 Kant, Immanuel, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 446:241.

Here we must be careful. Kant is not arguing that empirical evidence gathered from history supports the claim that humanity has made moral progress. Although it may seem as if progress has been made if we look at certain periods of time, the opening remarks of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* dispel any notion that Kant was an optimist about human behavior taken as a whole. Rather, Kant's position is that for practical reasons it is beneficial to regard human history *as if* it makes progress lest we come to believe, as many do, that moral progress is impossible. The problem with the latter belief is that it would amount to another way of capitulating evil.

That brings us to Cohen. In keeping with the idea that experience can never furnish us with the unconditioned, Cohen characterizes the coming of the Messiah by saying: "his coming is not an actual end, but means merely the infinity of his coming, which in turn means the infinity of development."[102] In this way, the messianic age is always ahead of us. Along these lines, Steven Schwarzschild, a disciple of Cohen maintained that: "the Messiah not only has not come but also will never have come ... [rather] he will always be coming."[103] No matter how much progress humanity makes in creating the conditions necessary for the arrival of the Messiah, there will always be more progress to be made. In support of this, Cohen argues that man "always feels himself to be innately infirm and defective" and cites Ecclesiastes 7:20 ("For there is not a righteous man on earth, who does good and sins not.").[104]

If the messianic age is a moral ideal, then for Cohen it must be stripped of any taint of mythology. The first thing he does is to point out that it is not a return to a Golden Age or a recovery of lost innocence. At no point do the prophets

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102 Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 314–5.

103 Schwarzschild, Stephen, *The Pursuit of the Ideal*, Menachem Kellner (ed.), Albany: SUNY Press, 1990, 211. Cf. Patterson, David, "Though the Messiah May Tarry: A Reflection on Redemption," *May Smith Lecture on Post-Holocaust Christian Jewish Dialogue*, Florida Atlantic University, January 26, 2009, 16: "the Messiah is by definition *the one who tarries*, signifying a redemption that is *always yet to be*, always future, because what we do now is never *enough*." This idea can also be found in post-modernists like Blanchot and Derrida, who stress that the future must always contain an element of openness or indecidability so that the Messiah can never actually be present. Cf. Blanchot, Maurice, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson, Albany: SUNY Press, 1992, 108, 137 and Derrida, Jacques, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York/London: Routledge, 1993, 81–82. The difference is that for Schwarzschild, the messianic has the content of a Kantian regulative idea while for Derrida, who upholds the notion of the "messianic without messianism," it has no content. For Derrida, then, there is no set doctrine or structure that will be realized at a future point, only an eternal oppeness to the possibility of what could be. For further comment on Derrida, cf. Kavka, Martin, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 195–98.

104 Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 211.

suggest that the culmination of history will be a return to the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. In fact, the text of Genesis (3:24) makes it clear that such a return is impossible. Rather than going back to an imagined age before the emergence of culture and civilization, what the prophets envision, and what later Jewish thinkers like Maimonides insisted on, is a future age in which the impediments to culture are removed and knowledge becomes widespread. Thus: "All peoples transfer the Golden Age into the past, into the primeval time; only the Jewish people hopes to see in the future the development of mankind. Messianism alone maintains the development of the human race, while the Golden Age represents the idea of a decline."[105]

Along these lines, Cohen credits Maimonides with removing any hedonistic overtones from the idea of the messianic age.[106] As we saw, Maimonides claims that the prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah in order to achieve political power or to eat, drink, and be merry. They did so in order that people could devote themselves to study and worship without having to worry about war or social inequality. For Maimonides, study would have included natural science, astronomy, and mathematics in addition to the Torah and Talmud. We also saw that Maimonides rejected the idea that the messianic age will involve miracles and insisted that human nature would remain as it now is. Cohen therefore credits him with the realization that messianism is not utopianism.[107]

Cohen's next step is to purify the idea of a messianic age by arguing for its universality. True messianism involves more than just the redemption of the Jewish people but the redemption of mankind as a whole.[108] In that sense, it is similar to Kant's idea of the Kingdom of Ends. For all of his ethical sophistication, Plato did not have the idea of mankind because in Cohen's view, he lacked the central insight of all monotheistic religion: that whatever their differences, all people have a common origin in God. For Cohen, the idea of humanity is central to morality, whose primary rule is that any maxim must have universal applica-

105 Ibid., 289.

106 Ibid., 310 – 11.

107 Ibid.

108 Cohen (*Religion of Reason,* 262) argues that the prophets did adhere to a national consciousness but argues that this does not exhaust the full moral significance of their thought, which he takes as universalistic. Along these lines, it is important to recall that Cohen was not a Zionist. Cf. "An Argument Against Zionism: A Reply to Dr. Martin Buber's Open Letter to Hermann Cohen," in: Cohen, *Reason and Hope*, 170: "We invoke all those Biblical utterances which proclaim, without resorting to imagery, the One God as 'the Lord of the whole earth' (Micah 4:13)."

bility to be valid.[109] So while the prophets talk about Israel, Cohen argues that they really have a broader focus: "Thus Israel, as a nation, is nothing other than the mere symbol for the desired unity of mankind."[110]

In this case, unity means mutual recognition of the dignity of all people as ends in themselves, or as the Bible puts it, as creatures made in the image of God. Accordingly: "Messianism is the straightforward consequence of monotheism."[111] Thus the two tasks of the Messiah are the ideal of morality and the unity of mankind. To repeat: the ideal of morality does not refer to a sinless state reminiscent of the Garden of Eden but rather to a state of reconciliation between mankind and God, where mankind is honest about confessing its sins and its sins are forgiven as a result.

Finally Cohen goes to great lengths to insist that messianism refers to an age rather than the appearance of a particular person. There is, then, no cult of personality in Cohen's view of the Messiah. This means that empirical questions like how we will separate the real Messiah from pretenders, when and where the Messiah will arrive, and exactly what the Messiah will do are eliminated. As an idea of reason, the content of the messianic age is known a priori.

The connection between messianism and freedom should now be clear. Humanity is not compelled to repeat past mistakes but has the ability to renounce the pursuit of power and pleasure and set itself on a new path. According to the prophets, not only *can* this happen, but in time it *will*. In Cohen's words: "The Messianic idea offers man the consolation, confidence, and guarantee that not merely the chosen people but all nations will, at some future time, exist in harmony, as nature does today."[112]

Beyond the confidence that humanity will start on a new path, there is the conviction that as it comes closer to the ideal of a unified humanity in correlation with a forgiving God, people will be coming closer to the ideal of rational self-determination or positive freedom. Kant insists that to be moral, an action must be done not just in accordance with duty but for the sake of duty. The only way we can act for the sake of duty, which is to say the only way we can

109 For those unfamiliar with Kant's terminology, a maxim is simply the rule or principle on the basis of which a person performs an action. For example, if I give money to charity, my maxim is "One should give to charity whenever possible," or "Giving to charity is good." It should be noted that maxims can be either moral or immoral. An example of the former is "One should give to charity whenever possible." An example of the latter is: "One should lie if it is in one's interest to do so."

110 Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 253.

111 Ibid., 255.

112 Cohen, "The Messianic Idea," in: *Reason and Hope*, 126.

guarantee the universal applicability of the maxim according to which we act, is to follow the dictates of reason. According to the positive conception of freedom, then, it is reason that makes us free by setting us on the path to morality.

As humanity overcomes its obsession with power and pleasure and begins to devote itself to the goal of achieving universal human dignity, in Cohen's eyes, it is moving from self-imposed bondage to desire and inclination to freedom in the true sense of the word. In its own way, this transition would as momentous as the Exodus from Egypt – perhaps more so. The difference is that while the Exodus from Egypt was completed in the space of a generation, according to Cohen, the days of the Messiah would require the effort of multiple generations and always be a step ahead of us.[113]

6 Conclusion

It is not my purpose to argue that there is a consistent line of development that stretches from the story of the Exodus to the thought of Cohen and Levinas. It should be clear by now that Jewish thought contains several conceptions of freedom and that not all of its spokesmen would agree with other. But it should also be clear that under some description or another, freedom plays a critical role in Judaism's self-understanding. One could almost say that without the concept of freedom, the standard Christian critique of Judaism would have merit: it would be a collection of statutory laws that leave the inner life and the aspirations of its followers unaddressed. Under these conditions, service to God would resemble service to a tyrant.

Fortunately that is not the case. The dignity of the moral subject, her right to think for herself, speak for herself, redirect the course of her life, and work to correct the injustices of the past are everywhere present. Even "present" may be too weak, as we have seen, it could be replaced by "celebrated." We have also seen that as various understandings of freedom are examined, it is natural to distinguish between a negative and a positive conception. Important as it is, release from Egyptian bondage is only part of the story. There also has to be an end of the story, which is to say an age when human beings come to realize their full potential as moral agents.

If there is a philosophic lesson to be learned, it is that the obstacles to freedom come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The most obvious is the tyrant. But we could make no greater mistake than to think that once the tyrant has been

113 Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 314–15.

removed, freedom is guaranteed. In addition to the tyrant, there is divine predestination, social inequality, lack of self-awareness, stubbornness, laziness, closemindedness, and, of course, despair. If the first three are external threats, the others are internal.

For those of us fortunate enough to live in a constitutional democracy, it may be that the most formidable threat to freedom are the internal ones, in particular the view that because history has always turned out a certain way, there are no alternatives worthy of consideration – that we are destined to repeat past mistakes no matter how hard we try to avoid them. More than anything else, it is this attitude that limits our choices and prevents us from realizing our full potential. Freedom, as Emmanuel Levinas reminds us, is difficult. But then Judaism is difficult too and for exactly the same reasons.

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Nico Vorster

The Concept of Freedom in Christianity

Introduction

The central statement of the Christian faith is that God revealed himself in Jesus Christ, who liberated humanity from the bondage of sin. This confession that God saves, liberates, and redeems his children through Christ and that this act of God brings about true human freedom is essential to Christianity and informs the core content of this religion. Christianity can therefore be described as a salvific religion.

In a sense, it is not possible to speak about the origins of the Christian concept of freedom as if it is just one metaphor among many other Christian metaphors that developed in parallel during the course of Christian history. Instead, freedom encapsulates what Christianity is all about. Scholars such as Larry Hurtato, Martin Hengel, James Dunn and others have shown through the study of Christian hymns and other early Christian documentation that the confession of Jesus as Lord was part and parcel of early Christian worship.[1] From very early on, Christians understood themselves as the saved children of God, liberated and freed by the grace of God in Christ to serve God through the power of the Spirit.

Having said this, the Christian concept of freedom is not static, but has evolved over the centuries. Theologians were consistently forced to refine their understanding of human freedom in response to doctrinal controversies and in reaction to philosophical, political and social developments.

I commence by providing a short overview of the basic terminology and images used in the Bible for the concept of freedom. Since the meaning attached to biblical concepts is usually related to specific social, theological and philosophical contexts, due consideration is given to the semantic domains and theological frameworks within which these terms are employed. The most outstanding and consistent feature of biblical terminologies on freedom is that they are shap-

1 Cf. Hurtado, Larry W., *Lord Jesus Christ. Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003; Hengel, Martin, *The Son of God. The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish Hellenistic Religion*, trans. John Bowden, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976; Dunn, James, *Christology in the Making. A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, London: SCM Press, ^{3}1992.

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ed decisively by the confession that freedom finds its basis in God, who revealed himself in and redeemed humanity through Jesus Christ.

The second section focuses on the essential features of the Christian concept of freedom. The question that the section probes is: What are the main theological and philosophical principles that govern the Christian understanding of freedom? Admittedly, Christianity is a diverse religion within which different strands have formulated a wide variety of concepts of freedom. At times, these concepts diverge quite considerably. Conversely, we must not overstate the differences to trivialize the Christian concept of freedom. Ferguson[2] rightly warns that variety can be emphasized to "the neglect of the extent of the central core of the Christian faith." The Christian notion of freedom indeed exhibits some essential features that mainstream Christianity has accepted as normative through the ages.

Evidently, we cannot understand the true complexity of the Christian concept of freedom without tracing its historical development. The third section subsequently analyzes the historical evolution of the Christian concept of freedom. As noted above, various controversies through the ages have forced Christian theologians to revisit traditional Christian dogmas. These reformulations often impacted either directly or indirectly on Christian understandings of freedom. Revisions were, however, not only inspired by theological interests, but also by the rise of philosophical and intellectual movements such as the Enlightenment, Renaissance and Postmodernism; and changing political and social contexts such as the establishment of the Holy Empire, the European religious wars, the demise of monarchy, the devastating two World Wars of the twentieth century and the decolonialization period of the 1960's and beyond.

The fourth section compares some features of the contemporary Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox understandings of Christian freedom. Though these mainline traditions share some fundamental Christian premises on freedom, there are also divergences, specifically when it comes to their understanding of the relation between human autonomy and the sovereignty of God's will; God's grace and the freedom of the creature to respond to it; the organization of the church and the church's relation to public authority.

The monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam share the common premise that all human beings are created by God and that share a common descent. Yet there are also fundamental differences. Modern Christianity, for instance, is profoundly influenced by the Western notion of personhood, whereas the Islamic worldview is more communal and hierarchical in outlook. The three

2 Cf. Ferguson, Everett, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [3]2003, 612.

religions seem to exhibit common features with regard to their doctrines on creation and notions of divine freedom and sovereignty, but they diverge sharply as far as their soteriologies are concerned. The fifth section identifies the areas where the Christian concept of freedom overlaps with Judaist and Islamic notions of freedom. Possible dialogical elements are identified, while the profound differences are kept in mind.

The sixth section reflects on the contemporary influence of the concept of freedom on Christianity and Christian theological research. Specific attention is given to the rise of liberation theologies, Pentecostalism and postmodern theology within Christianity, as well as their effects on the contemporary Christian notion of freedom.

The last section concludes by discussing the present and potential future impact of Christian concepts of freedom on broader culture. The influence of the contemporary Christian tradition on human rights discourse is probed and the possible positive effects that it can have on modern culture are identified. The argument put forward is that the Christian concept of freedom can be fruitfully utilized to correct the individualistic, hedonistic and anarchistic distortions of freedom in modern culture and, conversely, to counter the coercive and dehumanizing extremes of totalitarianism and collectivism.

1 Basic Biblical Terminology

We should be cautious when assessing the terminology that the Bible uses for freedom, because biblical authors sometimes use the same expression to express different ideas. The semantic, textual, socio-historical and theological contexts within which expressions are used have a significant influence on the meaning of a concept and the intent behind its use. The term freedom, for instance, can be used in a socio-ethical, moral, legal, theological or purely practical sense, depending on the issue at hand. Biblical writers, furthermore, often appropriated Hellenistic and Stoic terminology and molded it into their own theological understanding of freedom. Though the terminology used remained the same, the ideological content changed.

The Old Testament mainly employs the term freedom in a socio-theological sense. Jones[3] notes that the Hebrew term for 'free' and 'freedom' (חופש) and its

3 Jones, F. Stanley, "Freedom," in: David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, New York: Doubleday, 1992, 855.

derivatives usually appear in discussions on slavery and manumission. In the vast majority of cases, it refers to slaves being set free by or from their owners.[4] We probably find the most sophisticated theological notion of freedom in the Deuteronomic biblical tradition, which locates it in the redemptive acts of God who liberated his people from the slavery and oppression of Egypt. Being freed from the rule of the Egyptians, the Israelites now stand under the rule and dominion of YWHW. Notably, freedom is not grounded in the social significance or the "psychological appeal" of the Exodus event itself, but in the redemptive acts of God who brought Israel out of Egypt to become his servants.[5] YHWH establishes a new covenantal society based on justice, which is opposite to the degrading slave system from which Israel escaped. The Israelites are exhorted to respect the freedom of others in the knowledge that they once were slaves themselves.[6] The Sabbath is depicted in the Deuteronomic Decalogue as a day of commemoration during which the Israelites have to remember the oppression they suffered and reflect anew on the redemption God provided during the Exodus event:

> Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and for that reason, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.[7]

By exhorting the Israelites to remember their suffering, the Deuteronomists encouraged Israel to resemble God in their actions by granting freedom to those who are weak and economically dependent.[8]

The word used in the New Testament for freedom is *ἐλευθερια*. It depicts the state of being free and is used to indicate a negation of control, domination or constraint.[9] The derivative word *ἐλευθερόω* means 'to set free' and is used in passages such as John 8:35 to signify that Christ is the source of the Christian's freedom. The most extensive use of the term is found in Pauline literature. In passages such as Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11 and Ephesians 6:8, freedom is depicted as an internal freedom that is not dependent on one's external social status. Ac-

4 Cf. Exodus 21:2,5; Deuteronomy 15:12–13, Jeremiah 34:9–11, Exodus 21:26–27. Also cf. Harris, R. Laird/Gleason L. Archer/Bruce K. Waltke (eds), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1980, 312.

5 Cf. Braulik, Georg, "Deuteronomy and Human Rights," *Skrif en Kerk* 19/2 (1998), 215.

6 Cf. ibid., 212. Deuteronomy 6:21–5.

7 Deuteronomy 5:15.

8 Braulik, "Deuteronomy and Human Rights," 214.

9 Louw, Johannes P./Nida, Eugene A., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1, Cape Town: Bible Society of South Africa, 1989, 488.

cording to Jones[10], this approach is strongly reminiscent of Hellenistic statements on freedom. Pauline literature also uses *ἐλευθερόω* to claim that the Christian is free from legalistic constraints such as abstaining from certain kinds of food or practicing meaningless rites.[11] Freedom, however, does not justify license or anarchy, but demands an obedience to the law according to God's real intent. The Christian obeys God's law out of a gratitude for being set free from the bondage of sin, not to earn her own salvation through good works.[12] In Johannine literature, *ἐλευθερόω* is used within the context of not sinning. Since Christ sets the believer free, she is no longer a slave of sin.[13]

The term *σώτηρια* refers to divine salvation and specifically denotes the state of being saved,[14] or depending on the context, the process of being saved.[15] The New Testament uses a wide variety of images to articulate the believer's salvation in Christ.[16] Victory images[17] depict Christ's death on the cross as a triumph over the evil forces of this world. Christ is portrayed as the Cosmic Redeemer who conquers the principalities and demonic forces of this world and reconciles the whole of the cosmos to God. Cultic images account for most of the biblical imagery used and portray Jesus' death as a sacrifice for the sins of the world that appeases God's anger and reconciles believers to God. The cross delivers believers from guilt and purifies them from sin. God no longer holds them accountable for their sins because of the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ.[18] Legal metaphors are often employed, intertwined with cultic imagery. They present Christ as the one who redeemed us from the curse of the law by being cursed in our place. Through his perfect obedience, Christ fulfils the entire law and makes possible a renewal of the covenant between God and his children.[19] In his letters to Romans and Galatians, Paul speaks of a change in the legal status of the believer before God. Guilty sinners are acquitted of their guilt before God in light of Jesus'

10 Jones, "Freedom," 857.

11 Galatians 5:1; Romans 7:2–3; Galatians 2:4–5, 1Corinthians 10:29.

12 Galathians 5:13; Romans 8:2–4.

13 John 8:36.

14 Cf. 2Corinthians 7:10, 1Peter 1:9.

15 Acts 13:26.

16 Cf. Vorster, Nico, "The Nature of Christ's Atonement," in: Eddy van der Borght/Paul van Geest (eds), *Strangers and Pilgrims on Earth. Essays in Honour of Abraham van de Beek*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, 140. Also cf. Blochner, Henri, "Biblical Metaphors and the Doctrine of Atonement," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 47/4 (2004), 629–645.

17 Cf. Collosians 2:1; 1Corinthians 6:20; 15:24; Philippians 2; 10; Revelation 5:10, 12:11; 15:2–3.

18 Cf. John 1:29; 19:14; Revelation 5:5–6, Hebrews 10:28.

19 Cf. Hebrews 5:8, 9 and Galatians 3:13.

sacrifice on the cross.[20] Financial and exemplarist imagery are mainly utilized, together with other metaphors. The financial images[21] portray Christ's death as a payment for sins that secures the release of the sinner, who is depicted as either a slave, prisoner or debtor. Pauline literature specifically refers to Christians being adopted as children of God, thus sharing in the inheritance rights and glory of Jesus Christ.[22] Exemplarist concepts depict Christ's death as an illustration of God's love for the world. Believers are called to conform to the image of Christ and to participate in the legacy of Christ by imitating his example.[23]

2 Essential Theological and Philosophical Features

Michael Welker[24] rightly asserts that Christianity is typified by and set apart from other religions by the confession that Christ is Lord. God identifies with humanity, he gives shape and orientation to human life and he brings humanity into eternal communion with himself through the historical events of the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the continuing revelation of Christ through the Spirit, Word and revelation. This essential premise of the Christian concept of freedom is accompanied by four related foundational confessions, namely:

a) that humans are creatures in bondage, who are slaves of sin, evil and death;
b) that humans find their redemption in Christ, who alone is able to overcome the principalities and powers of this world;
c) that the Spirit of Christ draws human beings into communion with Christ and empowers them to enact a praxis of freedom in their lives;
d) that freedom is a gift of God's grace that invokes in the believer a sense of responsibility and discipleship.

2.1 Humanity in Bondage

Over and against utilitarian and expressivist notions of freedom that define the human as an essentially free and autonomous being, Christianity posits the

20 Cf. Romans 5:2; Gal 4:24.
21 Cf. 1Peter 1:18–19; Mark 10:45, Romans 3:9; Revelation 5:9.
22 Romans 8:14–16; Gal 4:5.
23 Cf. John 12:25; Luke 9:6; Ephesians 5:1; 1Thessalonians 1:6.
24 Cf. Welker, Michael, *God the Revealed. Christology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2013, 48.

cise of human autonomy, but entails that humans participate in divine life and respond to God's gifts through acts of repentance and self-limitation.

A second difference concerns the relation between church authority and human freedom. The Roman Catholic tradition understands the pope to be Christ's representative on earth and therefore as possessing the authority to develop Christian teachings *ex cathedra* and to impose constraints on Roman Catholic preaching. Subsequently, the Roman Catholic tradition aligns the authority of Scripture closely with tradition and tends to entertain a hierarchical understanding of church government. Eastern Orthodoxy holds that the church is a non-legalistic "organically evolving community" that ought to draw all of humanity into a Christian community.[135] Whereas, the church structure in Roman Catholicism is centralized and hierarchical in nature, the Orthodox tradition, at least in theory, entertains a decentralized notion of church governance.[136] Mainline Protestantism largely stresses the sole authority of Scripture and subordinates tradition to Scripture. This results in a greater emphasis on the individual liberty of the believer. Luther emphasized the believers' freedom from the law, Calvin the freedom of the Christian conscience, and Liberal Protestantism the autonomy of the individual and his freedom to choose.

Lastly, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism diverge on the relation between religion and public freedoms. Whereas both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy traditionally viewed religion and the common good of society as inseparably intertwined, and understood Christianity as a publicly confessed way of life, the Reformers developed the two-kingdom doctrine that sought to distinguish between religion and politics. Following Luther and Calvin, seventeenth century Protestants in the Dutch Republic and the United States developed the notion of freedom of religion in order to emancipate religious institutions from political institutions. This, inevitably, and perhaps unintendedly, contributed to the modern distinction between private and public spheres life, as well as the privatization of religion.

5 Christian Concepts of Freedom in Relation to Judaism and Islam

The Western notion of toleration has had the unintended consequence of creating parallel societies in which communities tolerate each other, but live isolated

135 Williams, "Eastern Orthodox Theology," 574.

136 Cf. Pollis, "Eastern Orthodoxy and Human Rights," 351.

from one other. As can be seen in the rise of radical Islam, this has had a destructive effect on social cohesion because second and third generation migrant communities do not integrate sufficiently with their adopted societies. This leads to feelings of alienation, loss of identity and resentment. Toleration is indeed a very thin moral concept and seems inadequate to address the realities of globalization. As a consequence, we might need to find 'thicker' mediatory notions that can bridge the divide between religions and communities with different value systems. This identification of 'thicker' mediatory notions requires a mutual exchange that unlocks the civilizing potentialities of religions without assimilating the various religions into one grand narrative.

The divergences between Christian, Judaist and Islamic soteriologies are considerable and do not display an underlying unity. For example, Christian understandings of the Trinity and groundings of human salvation in the life, death and resurrection of Christ are not reconcilable with Jewish and Islamic God-concepts or soteriologies. We will therefore do well to heed the following warning of McGrath:

> Respect for the integrity of the world's religions demands that the distinctive shape of a religion's understanding of salvation including its basis, its mode of conveyance and appropriation, and its inherent nature must be respected.... It is essential to respect and honor differences here, and resist the ever-present temptation to force them all into the same mold.[137]

The discussion that follows identifies some features of the Christian understanding of freedom that overlap with Islamic and Jewish concepts of freedom. These overlapping notions might encourage interreligious dialogue and assist us in developing 'thicker mediatory notions' that empower us to bridge the divide between religious societies.

First, Christianity shares with Judaism and Islam the notion that God is the Creator of all things, that he created all things *ex nihilo* and that he is sovereign, holy and transcendent. All three religions maintain that there is a radical difference between God's essence and creation, though this difference does not mean remoteness. The Hebrew Scriptures, Christian canon and the Qurʾan affirm that God created by speaking the creative word. Creation originated through the free creative acts of an intentional Agent who himself is not dependent upon creation. This common understanding of divine freedom is important for articulating human freedom. David Burrel[138] identifies two implications of this stance for the

137 McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 327.
138 Burrel, *Faith and Freedom*, 153.

freedom of the creature. Since the Creator is an intentional agent, he is open to a personal relationship with created beings. Moreover, since the Intentional Agent is the source of the existence and well-being of created persons, he is owed obedience and gratitude.

The precise relation between divine sovereignty and human freedom is an issue with which all three monotheistic religions grapple and therefore ought to serve as an important impulse for interfaith discussions. The three religions agree that divine sovereignty does not compromise human freedom, yet they all struggle with the question on how the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom can be formulated in intelligible terms.

Secondly, all three monotheistic religions uphold the 'oneness of humanity' and the innate capacity of human beings to distinguish between right and wrong. This common theological precis is important for discussions on human freedom, because it upholds the sacredness of the human person, the essential equality of all people and the ability of the human to respond to God. Some might argue that the Islamic and Jewish traditions emphasize obedience to God's law to a much greater extent than Christianity. However, Christian doctrines on salvation by grace and justification by faith should not be misunderstood as circumventing the importance of human obedience to God's law, nor as legitimizing permissive behavior. The difference between Christianity and the other two religions does not lie in the question of whether the human person ought to obey God, but rather in Christianity's grounding of obedience in a gratitude for God's gifts in Christ that emanates in a life of conformity to God's law.

Thirdly, while the respective religions are essentially religions of Scripture, various traditions within Christianity and Judaism recognize the existence of a natural law, discernible by all human beings, while the Islamic faith recognizes the notion of *fiṭra*. Sachedina[139] defines *fiṭra* as follows:

> The sense of unity in human beings in spite of their different cultural, ethnic and religious identities represents one of the most important principles of Islam. This unity is based upon the concept of *fitra* (noble nature) with which God has endowed every human being. The notion of *fitra* has important epistemological implications that concern the nature of human beings. *Fitra* represents the primordial nature of human beings that allows them to develop ethical and spiritual knowledge. Muslim theologians have defined *fitra* as an innate natural disposition and as properties that are endowed by God to all human beings at the moments of their birth ... the notion of *fitra* implies the existence of an universal human nature that is shared by all human beings and from which they can derive their human rights.

139 Sachedina, Abdulaziz "Continuing the Conversation About Comparative Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 43/3 (2015), 552.

The notions of natural law and *fiṭra* share the assumption that moral law is universal and that humanity not only shares a common descent, but also possesses an equal dignity. This common assumption might enable the three religions to develop shared moral concepts of political and social freedoms that can be employed in increasing plural and multi-faith societies.

Fourthly, the three monotheistic religions are salvific religions that confess belief in a God who redeems. A central and recurring theme in the Hebrew Scriptures is the description of God as the Redeemer who liberated Israel from the slavery of Israel.[140] He is the God who protects and liberates the oppressed, weak and marginalized.[141] Messianism within Judaism contains a strong redemptive-eschatological element in that it awaits the coming of a Messiah that will reconcile God with his people and bring salvation to Israel and mankind. The Christian canon depicts Christ as the Messiah promised by the Old Testament prophets. He is the true fulfilment of Jewish expectations, the Son of David, the Anointed of God, the Lord and Savior who was incarnated to re-establish God's reign on earth and to liberate humanity from the bondage of sin.[142] Islam depicts Allah as a merciful God who awards repentance and obedience with eternal blessings.[143] Faith and good works are seen as closely linked. As noted earlier, the three religions diverge considerably as far as their soteriologies are concerned, but they do share a common understanding of God as Liberator and human beings as in need of salvation.

Fifthly, all three religions relate freedom closely to justice and mercy. Since they recognize that every human being carries the imprint of God's image, they correlate vertical obligations to God with horizontal obligations to human beings.[144] Freedom is seen as closely tied to a life of justice in obedience to God that is manifested in serving the well-being of others, specifically the poor and weak. This shared understanding of the relation between freedom, justice and mercy has had a profound influence on the development of welfare systems in various countries and serves as an important catalyst for the future development of shared perspectives on socio-economic rights.

Lastly, when it comes to the relation between church and state, Judaism and Christianity share overlapping perspectives, while Islam mainly diverges. Modern

140 Deuteronomy 5:6.

141 Deuteronomy 24:17–22.

142 John 1:29; Matthew 1:1–3; Mark 1:2.

143 Qurʾān 33:43.

144 Cf. Hollenbach, David, "Comparative Ethics, Islam and Human Rights. Internal Pluralism and the Possible Development of Tradition," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38/3 (2010), 580–587, 582.

Christianity and Judaism generally support the separation between religion and state and emphasize the importance of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, whereas Islamic traditions are more inclined to uphold theocratic ideals that conflate religion and politics. As Abdulaziz Sachedina[145] rightly points out, these different approaches are, among others, due to the different social contexts within which these religions developed. Islam developed within tribal communities and sought specifically in the seventh century ways to establish political societies that would transcend kinship, whereas Christianity originated within a well-organized empire where the political conditions demanded the recognition of the legitimacy of secular authority. The New Testament, accordingly, exhibits impulses that support a separation between state and religion. Judaism, in a similar vein, developed within diasporic contexts where believers were always a minority. The different contexts resulted in Judaism and Christianity being more inclined to acknowledge the validity of the secular domain and to embrace the principles of liberal democracy and western human rights discourse, whereas Muslim scholars are less inclined to embrace the notion of secular public domains. This does not mean that Islam unequivocally rejects the notion of human rights. Various Muslim scholars are currently attempting to develop an Islamic approach to human rights that recognizes the universality of certain human rights norms, while also addressing the specific needs of Islamic societies. Interfaith dialogue on human rights is probably one of the most promising areas for developing 'thicker' mediatory understandings of human freedom.

6 The Current Use and Impact of the Concept of Freedom within Christianity

The Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox traditions in Christianity are by no means homogeneous in nature. We, in fact, find various schools of thought within these mainline traditions that employ a wide variety of hermeneutical, philosophical and theological methods to address their contexts and specific burning issues. The most important contemporary developments in Christianity have been the rise of liberation theologies, Pentecostalism and postmodern theology. Each of these theological traditions has had some effect with regard to the Christian understanding of freedom.

145 Sachedina, "Continuing the Conversation About Comparative Ethics," 543–556.

6.1 Liberation Theology

From the 1960's Christianity has seen the growth of liberation theologies that were shaped in the struggle against colonialism, repression, racism and gender discrimination. At the core of these theologies lies a search for social justice and freedom. Theologies such as feminism, eco-feminism, political liberation theology and black theology argue that the biblical traditions have carried forward androcentric, misogynist, patriarchal and hierarchical patterns of thought that have subsequently been uncritically appropriated by Christian traditions.

Feminist theology challenges the patriarchal modes of thought that underlie much of Christianity's theological formulations. Traditional theology, for instance, largely used male pronouns to describe God; medieval and early modern theologians generally accepted that males reflect God's image to a larger degree than females; and the maleness of Christ has often been understood within traditional theology as constitutive of his identity, thus strengthening the notion that femaleness amounts to be less than an ideal human being.

Eco-feminism is a recent development in theology that ascribes the ecological disaster facing the world to the hierarchical thought patterns of male-dominated societies. It argues that patriarchal lines of thought have to be replaced by anthropocene values, that is, values that recognize that reality does not consist of hierarchical patterns of relationship, but that every creature possesses a dignity and value of its own within the wider scheme of things.

Political liberation theology originated in the 1960's and 70's in Latin America in response to the repressive regimes of the region. They specifically focus on the structural effects of sin and the social and political dimensions of salvation. In identifying structural sins, liberation theology utilizes Marxism as a tool of social analysis. Liberation theology employs theological narratives in Scripture, such as the exodus motive in the Pentateuch to develop God-concepts that emphasize God's option for the poor, weak and vulnerable. Since God is on the side of the poor, all theology should begin with a perspective from below, that is, a stance from the side of the sufferings of the weak. The focus of liberation theologies is praxis rather than intellectual reflection, since it attempts to transform societies through action rather than providing religious explanations of reality.

Black theology came to prominence in the United States in 1960's and 70's from where it spread to countries such as South Africa and Zimbabwe. The aim of black theology is to emancipate black people from racist oppression by upholding black dignity amidst white racism. Black experience serves as the central resource for black theology, while blackness serves as an idiom for being oppressed. Jesus is depicted as the black Messiah, that is, as the Savior of the oppressed.

The abovementioned liberation theologies have made a major contribution to the development of a Christian ethos of freedom. They shifted the focus from doctrine to praxis and from reflection to action; and they identified and criticized the patriarchal and hierarchical modes of thought that underlie much of traditional Christianity. In doing so, they brought attention to the plight of the poor and weak in Latin America, the United States and Africa, as well as to environmental degradation. The most outstanding feature of contextual liberation theologies is the wide array of attempts made to develop contextualized Christologies that are deemed as useful for political and social engagement. Though liberation theologies have made an important contribution to theological discourse on freedom, Michael Welker rightly warns that the functionalization of Jesus Christ for political and moral goals can easily lead to new kinds of distortions and ideologies.[146]

6.2 Pentecostalism

The growth of Pentecostal movements during the twentieth century is probably the most significant modern development within Christianity. According to Anderson,[147] Pentecostalism refers to a wide variety of movements that share the common feature of emphasizing the gifts of the Spirit. It includes Pentecostal denominations, charismatic movements within Catholic and Protestant churches and independent 'neo-charismatic' churches. Pentecostal movements tend to attach importance to signs, wonders and miracle healings. They are generally suspicious of academic and dogmatic theology and rather emphasize the experiential and personal aspects of faith. Emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of redemption in Christ; the authority of Scripture; the need for personal conversion; the 'baptism of the Holy Spirit' and the urgency of mission. Pentecostal services are usually spontaneous in nature, with members not only participating in, but also contributing to worship rituals.

The Pentecostal movement influenced the Christian understanding of freedom in various ways. First, it is a movement that originated within the lower classes of American society and has subsequently proven itself as able to provide a sense of belonging to the marginalized in society. The rapid growth of Pentecostalism within the impoverished areas of Sub-Sahara Africa bears testimony

146 Cf. Welker, *God the Revealed*, 37.

147 Anderson, Allan, "Pentecostalism, The Enlightenment and Christian Mission in Europe," *International Review of Mission* 95 (2006), 276.

to this. Secondly, Pentecostalism relates salvation to the direct and immediate presence of the Spirit in the life of the believer. The Spirit is bestowed by Christ on every believer without preconditions, and God is seen as present in every area of life, ready to liberate the faithful from the afflictions that they experience. God's direct presence in the lives of the faithful breaks down all dualistic distinctions between the arcane and mundane, as well as the hierarchical distinctions between clergy and laity. Because the supernatural is directly involved in the natural and directly present in the lives of the believers, the Christian community is viewed as essentially free and equal in dignity. Thirdly, Pentecostalism relates human freedom closely to a sense of communal belonging. Amidst the individualism of secular culture, Pentecostalism nurtures the importance of the church as a therapeutic community where people can experience love and healing.[148]

6.3 Postmodern Theology

Postmodernism emphasizes the situatedness of all human thinking and the relativity of linguistic discourse. As a result, postmodern thinkers resist the Enlightenment ideal of creating totalizing metanarratives and challenge the search for universally fixed and absolute truths. Postmodernists consciously embrace diversity, pluralism, particularity and relativity and actively attempt to deconstruct all systematic metanarratives that are perceived as driven by authoritarian agendas to exercise power. Postmodern theology, in a similar vein, is characterized by a search for the recovery of neglected forms of religious discourse such as the prophetical and mystical, as well as a deep concern for those repressed by totalizing systems.[149]

During the last decade, postmodern theologians have been driving a post-humanist agenda that attempts to develop a concept of freedom that takes seriously the ecological embeddedness of humanity. Post-humanist theologians reject modernism's separation of the object and subject in favor of a concept of agential realism that takes seriously the interaction of reality. We only become ethical agents through meeting others and interacting in, with and through our surroundings.[150] Protesting against individualist understandings of freedom, this approach emphasizes the need for a positive understanding of freedom as

148 Cf. Anderson, "Pentecostalism, Enlightenment and Mission," 281.

149 Vanhoozer, Kevin H., "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity," in: Kevin Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 19.

150 Rowe, "Freedom is not Free?," 66 – 67.

an existence with and for others, including non-human entities.[151] The human being exists on the same continuum as animals and is therefore embedded in creaturely reality.

7 Practical Application and Future Relevance of the Christian Concept of Freedom

Judeo-Christian concepts of freedom played a significant role in the development of the economic and welfare structures of especially Western societies, the codification of legal systems such as the Roman-Dutch legal code, the enrichment of human rights discourses and the establishment of political democracy. The tendency to assign the origins of human rights discourse and democracy exclusively to Enlightenment rationalism amounts to a gross simplification of Western intellectual history. Max Stackhouse rightly states:

> Intellectual honesty demands recognition of the fact that what passes as "secular", "Western" principles of basic human rights developed nowhere else but out of key strands of the biblically rooted religions.[152]

Concepts such as rights, the sacral dignity of the human person, freedom and fraternity were established terms in the Christian tradition long before enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant entered the scene. However, the Enlightenment couched the rights language found within the Judeo-Christian tradition into a coherent, universal, humanist and non-religious moral and political discourse. Braulik[153] rightly points out that the Enlightenment humanists were forced to do so because the "Christian" societies of the time were profoundly unchristian. John Locke and his followers knew about "rights" from their Christian upbringing and background, but they had to find a universal philosophical premise in order to oppose the sectarian and oppressive Christian societies of the time. The notion of the autonomous individual who possesses inherent rights was well suited for this purpose. Christianity therefore served as both a resource for human rights discourse and democratic

151 Ibid., 62.

152 Stackhouse, Max, "Why Human Rights Need God: A Christian Perspective," in: Elizabeth M. Bucar/Barbra Barnett (eds), *Does Human Rights need God*, 25–41, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005, 33.

153 Braulik, "Deuteronomy and Human Rights," 226.

theory, and an adversary against which the human rights discourse and democratic political theory of the times were directed.

Whereas Christianity played an ambiguous and often conflicting role in the early development of human rights discourse, various Christian traditions have made valiant attempts in the post-World War II era to give practical application to their theologically rooted concept of freedoms. Different traditions have drafted human rights declarations, anchoring human rights language in ultimate reality and promoting the common dignity of humankind. The various Christian declarations on human rights and the many Christian human rights organizations that arose are clear testimonies to this. Important Christian human rights declarations and studies that appeared after World War II were Pope John XXIII's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), the *Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops* statement in support of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1978), the comprehensive 1977 study on human rights by the *Lutheran World Federation* entitled *Theologische Perspektiven der Menschenrechte*, the 1976 document of the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches* entitled *The Theological Basis of Human Rights* and the *Reformed Ecumenical Synod's* comprehensive study that appeared in 1983 (*Testimony on Human Rights*).

The question that modern Christians face is: Do religious concepts of freedom really matter in practice? Do Christian concepts of freedom carry any potential for the future? Influential secular thinkers such as Richard Rorty,[154] Richard Dawkins,[155] Slavoj Žižek,[156] Alain Badiou[157] and others, do not necessarily deny the rootedness of both Eastern and Western civilizations in religious thought, but they argue that modern societies do not need God concepts to flourish. They insist that metaphysical and theological notions of reality are rationally obsolete and scientifically outdated and have become increasingly implausible to the modern mind.

The confines of this chapter do not allow us to entertain the question in depth or to provide an extensive critique on secular thought. My simple response is that the human person, human societies and the human realm cannot flourish or function properly without the concept of a transcendent God that reigns over material reality. Though the existence of God can neither be proved nor dis-

154 Cf. Rorty, Richard, "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality," in: Stephen Shute/Susan Hurley (eds), *On Human Rights*, 111–134, New York: Basic Books, 1993, 126.

155 Dawkins, Richard, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

156 Žižek, Slavoj, *The Fragile Absolute, Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, London: Verso, 2000, 1–2.

157 Badiou, Alain, *Saint Paul and the Foundation of Universalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

proved in an empirical natural scientific sense, it is quite telling that philosophies, worldviews and political theories that dispense with the concept of God are prone to sliding into nihilism and materialism.

The value of Christian concepts of freedom, in my view, lies in them correlating the *I*, *We*, *It* and *They* to a *Thou* who gives cohesion and direction to these relationships. Whenever the *Thou* is discarded, the relational framework in which human life is embedded seems to become distorted and a materialist struggle for resources appears to ensue. In recent years, Christian thinkers such as John Milbank have argued extensively that secular notions of reality cannot be sustained, because of their tendency to degenerate into nihilism.[158]

In various modernist and postmodernist secular narratives, the *I* has become the ultimate norm for human existence. The classic liberal tradition uses the notion of human autonomy to protect the political vulnerable spheres of human life such as physical integrity, the freedom to choose and the right to own property against external power abuse. Yet, absolute applications of the principle of human autonomy and freedom, as found in neo-liberal economic theory, have emanated in the development of extreme forms of individualism, hedonism, license and permissiveness in various societies. The deformation and erosion of social institutions fundamental to the social fabric of society and the rise of excessive individualism is a concerning sociological phenomenon in especially Western cultures. The abovementioned extremes are the result of a concept of freedom that was dislodged from the *Thou* and grounded in human nature itself, which is its own norm. However, when the *I* is seen as the ultimate norm, the *we*, *they* and *it* can only function as peripheral and often unimportant actors in my life whom I only recognize when they serve my own interests. A further result of the secular culture's rejection of the concept of God has been that the notion of guilt has been replaced by intuitions of shame. I am ashamed because I have been caught out acting immorally, but I do not experience a sense of guilt towards a transcendent *Thou* who demands obedience to his law and searches the depths of my heart. This shame rather than guilt culture has had a profound effect on the moral fabric of some communities and exhibits itself especially in the problem of corruption that is so endemic to many societies. Modern secular culture's utilitarian and expressivist notions of freedom have, indeed, cultivated extreme forms of individualism that threaten to deform and destabilize social institutions and societal spheres. To protect social cohesion, better-nuanced and integrated concepts of freedom are needed that can relate various social spheres to one other without absorbing them into one another.

158 Cf. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory.*

Social systems that make the *We* the ultimate norm tend to descend into collectivism, communalism and tribalism. The *We* is often defined over and against the *They* who represents the other, the enemy or the opposite to the ideal represented by the *We*. In Communist and Marxist narratives capitalists and religion were identified as the archenemies, in Nazism the Jews, in Apartheid ideology the 'black danger' and in African nationalist ideologies the 'colonialists' or 'white monopoly capital.' The *We* ideologies are no less materialistic than their individualist and anthropocentric *I* counterpart. In fact, the superiority of the in-group is often grounded in material reality itself: unique bodily characteristics, technological sophistication or a superior language. Consistent with its materialist presuppositions, the *We* as ultimate norm needs to secure its future against the invasive forces of the *They* by ensuring political dominance, curtailing freedom of expression, acquiring the land needed for survival, expanding weapon arsenals, protecting the integrity of the in-group's culture or ideology, destroying or subjecting so-called "subversive powers" and even engaging in ethnic cleansing or genocide. The danger inherent to *We* ideologies is not only the superiority complex that guides it, but its tendency to utilize all available tools of power to control and survive in an adversarial world where *they* threaten *me* and *us*.

The disastrous potential of materialist-oriented ideologies is becoming increasingly clear in the ecological disaster that humanity faces. When the *I* or *We* are seen as the ultimate norm, the *It* is bound to suffer. The *It*, after all, cannot speak, demand respect or challenge human power. Environmental degradation is a direct result of the instrumentalist rationality that the Enlightenment introduced. No longer was nature seen as a theater of God's works, but as an instrument to be shaped by rational acting agents for the sake of progress and self-advancement. This instrumentalist rationality combined with the nihilist human quest for the control of natural resources has been a major cause of overdevelopment, pollution and natural exploitation.

When it comes to the sins of past and present generations with regard to freedom, the Christian tradition is by no means exempt from blame. Various Christian churches, traditions and groups have abused the Christian message for violent purposes, oppression and exploitation. We only need to refer to the European religious wars, Christian justifications of slavery and gender inequality, Christian defenses of Nazism and Apartheid, the disastrous effects of prosperity theology on poor African communities and the violence preached by some political liberation theologians. Eschatological Christian notions of this earth as penultimate and passing in nature; and dualist Christian-Aristotelian anthropologies that devalued the material realm certainly contributed to environmental degradation.

However, I would argue that these distortions do not only misrepresent the Christian faith, but stand in fundamental opposition to the authentic message of the Gospel accepted by the vast majority of Christian traditions. The Christian faith should be judged by its message, not the actions of individuals or groups who hijacked the Christian faith for malicious purposes to justify acts of hatred and abuse.

In my view, contemporary culture can learn much from Christian concepts of freedom. Over and against the individualist and anthropocentric *I culture*, Christianity proclaims that human nature is neither autonomous nor ultimate in nature, but is created to glorify God and serve fellow human beings by loving them as we love ourselves. True human existence is a decentered existence for others, not free from others; it is an existence that recognizes the *Thou*, *They* and *It* as constitutive parts of our own reality. Authentic faith requires self-limitation, altruism and a sober non-materialistic lifestyle that returns God's gifts by living a life of gratitude. Repentance and sanctification through self-correction are proclaimed as essential parts of the Christian life and demands that the selfish desires of the *I* be constantly subjected to the will of God and the interests of others.

In contrast to the *We culture*, Christianity proclaims that all human beings, also non-Christians, are created in the image of God and ought to be respected as such. Every human being possesses inviolable and innate individual rights, such as a right to life that emanates from his or her God-given status as image of God. The *I* is important and should out of respect for the Creator not be violated in the name of altruism or group interests. The *We* is also important because God created human as social beings. However, the *We* is reprimanded in Biblical literature to respect the *They*. Loving the enemy, protecting the weak, doing good to all people and refraining from violence are core messages of the Christian faith and serve as a means to counter distorted and self-inflated *in-group* ideologies that proclaim violence.

In opposition to the instrumentalist rationality of modernism, the Christian faith recognizes the significance of the *It*. In Pauline literature, for instance, creation is depicted as fundamentally part of God's restorative grace and the consummation of all things. Creation is the arena of God's works, it signifies his majesty and should be respected as such. Humans acts as stewards, not owners, and they have no right to abuse or exploit nature. Human beings are themselves creatures, and are embedded in nature.

Lastly, in response to the emptiness and nothingness of nihilist and materialist doctrines, Christianity proclaims redemption, forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God and our participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Most Christians acknowledge that their faith rests on a transcendental

outlook on life rooted in the witness of Scripture and their experience of God's presence in their life; not verifiable, empirical facts. However, they argue that knowledge is not exclusively attained from 'hard science,' but that spiritual intuition and rational philosophical reflection also serve as sources of knowledge. From an intuitive, spiritual and rational point of view, I am convinced that concepts of freedom cannot function properly without recognizing the existence of a transcendent Creator who acts as the norm of all things.

8 Conclusion

As is the case with Islam and Judaism, the Christian concept of freedom has evolved through centuries and has adapted itself to various social contexts and cultures. It has learned to tread the fine line between collectivism and individualism; theory and context; freedom and anarchy; right and duty; difference and relation. If modern culture is to survive the challenges of globalism, xenophobia, hyperpluralism and tribal conflicts, it will have to develop concepts of freedom that can sustain societies. Christian concepts of freedom generally share an integrated understanding of freedom that differentiates between various societal spheres, the individual and community, rights and duties in order to relate them to each other. This approach might prove to be better in sustaining societies than the excesses that utilitarian and expressivist notions of freedom brought us. Further studies on religious notions of freedom and their utility for modern society are consequently urgently required.

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The Concept of Freedom in Islam

The issue of human freedom in Islam has become highly polarizing. Can it be said that Islam prevents or limits the freedom of individual Muslims? Can Muslims choose their own beliefs? Can Muslims use critical methods to address religious issues? Does freedom lead to immorality and does Islam limit the freedom of Muslim women?

Investigating these question starts with first defining this term in the Quʾrān. However, the Quʾrān, in general, is mainly concerned about the community of believers and their collective understanding of religion. It answers different theological questions such as the nature of resurrection, the nature of God and the importance of prophecy. On the social level, the Quʾrān provides answers to all questions concerning punishments pursuant to particular crimes as well as family problems. It also grants the believer a right to armed self-defense. However, it hardly deals with the individual's problems and rights. Its aim is to protect the community of believers and deepen their belief in God and the afterlife. Thus, the term freedom is not mentioned in the Quʾrān, as its primary concern was rather with slavery and its abolishment. Establishing the rights and duties of the individual was the concern of Islamic law, *fiqh*. Through establishing the authority of the Hadith, the early Muslim jurists could construct a Divine Law under the concept of *sharīʿa*. The *sharīʿa*, on the one hand, secured and canonized the rights of individuals, while on the other hand, it ensconced these rights with the standards of the second Islamic century culture.

In order to examine the development of the concept of Freedom in Islam, we need to survey its origins in the Quʾrān, its integration into the study of *kalām* (Islamic theology), and its conceptual explication in Islamic Philosophy, while tracing its importance into the modern period, especially in securing the right of choosing an own belief.

Thus, in this chapter, I will examine the following issues:

1) the understanding of the concept of freedom in pre-Islamic Arabia and its foreshadowing in the Quʾrān.
2) its development in the Islamic theology, or *kalām*
3) its conceptualization amongst the Muslim philosophers
4) the Sufi concept of freedom
5) the rise of the concept of freedom amongst modern thinkers
6) the freedom of women in Islam
7) the problem of apostasy as eliminating free choice
8) critical free thinking versus *taqlīd*

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9) freedom in the Shīʿite thougth
10) freedom, ethics and its limitation: "commanding right" (*al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf*)

1 The Perception of Freedom in Pre-Islamic Arabic Culture and in the Qurʾān.

The term of freedom as we understand it today in Arabic *ḥurrīya* is not to be found in Quʾrān or in Islamic theology, *kalām*. However, a variation of it is depicted in the two pair terms *the free and the slave* (*al-ḥurr wa-l-ʿabd)* on the one hand and *predestination and free will (al-jabr wa-l-ikhtiyār),* on the other hand. The pair *al-ḥurr wa-l-ʿabd*, are derived from the pre-Islamic context of slavery. The tribal system of the Arabs of Hijāz is best described in the 10 volumes work of Jawād ʿAlī *al-Mufaṣṣal fī tārīkh al-ʿarab qabl al-Islām, The Detailed History of the Arabs before Islam.*[1]

Jawād ʿAlī informs us that the Arabs largely considered themselves as the slaves of the gods. They must obey and please them in order to obtain a good, wealthy, and healthy life. Being a slave for someone who is great, powerful and just was not a shameful position. The individual in Hijāz could only be seen as a part of the clan living under the tribal laws, *ʿurf*. Although Mecca and Medina, at the rise of Islam, were considered towns, tribal customs governed the daily life. According to Jawād ʿAlī, Mecca was a trading town while Medina flourished with agriculture land. A large Jewish community was living in Medina and had influenced the customs and laws of the Medinan tribes.[2] Mecca and Medina were idolatrous communities, which worshipped many different gods. Tribes considered the gods as owning the whole of the land with its animals and human inhabitants. The names of ʿAbd al-Lāt, ʿAbd Manāf or ʿAbd Shams were known as names of individuals as well as names of tribes. These theophoric names denote the position of humanity as slaves of the gods *al-Lāt, Manāf* or *Shams*. Priests were considered the servants of the gods and those who protect their rights. Thus, all offerings of thanks should be presented at the temples.[3]

The relationship between the members of the clan and of the tribes was tied to certain laws and customs known as *ʿurf*. The authority within the tribes lied manly in the hands of male members, though there are some hints that matrilin-

1 ʿAlī, Jawād, *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī tarīkh al-ʿarab qabl al-Islām*, 10 vols, Baghdad: Baghdad University Press, 1993.
2 ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal,* vol. 4, 343 – 50.
3 ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal,* vol. 6, 17 – 19.

eal customs were older and still valid in some Bedouin clans. However, with the emergence of Islam, the patrilineal tendency prevailed.[4] Thus, the ranking was established in the following fashion: the gods existed at the top of the scale owning both animals and humans. The priests came in second as the servants of the gods. The tribal chiefs protected the rights of their tribes and served as fathers that cared and owned their children. At the bottom of the scale, they situated the slaves who hardly owned any rights. Children and most women held similar positions in which the father could sell them as slaves if he was in severe financial troubles. They could also kill their children as offerings for the gods.[5] We know from Ibn Isḥāq that the grandfather of prophet Muhammad, ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib vowed to offer one of his sons to the god *Hubal*. Upon conferring with the gods, he chose his youngest son ʿAbd Allāh, the father of the prophet. Yet he and his relatives deployed a ruse whereby they payed a ransom instead of offering ʿAbd Allāh.[6] This story demonstrates the value of the individual in tribal life. Though a person can be a free man/women, they are owned by their families and possess no individual freedom.

These tribal laws were quite strict concerning the ransom of a noble free man. If the killer himself is a noble man, the family of the one killed has the right to kill a noble man from the clan of the killer. The Qurʾānic saying "a free man by a free man and slave by slave"[7] is a tribal costum which demonstrates that the revenge must be equal. This means that a person could be killed for an act that he or she did not commit. In this community the individual can only be counted as a part of the tribe. The welfare of the tribe/clan/family comes first.[8]

In these tribal communities the noble men and women consisted of those who do not earn their nobility through handwork. In Mecca noblemen were traders who owned caravans and had the opportunity to become chiefs of the tribe. Killing them through a slave or a poor man would have to be conducted by means of ransom via the owner of the slave or the nobles of the poor man's tribe. Thus, even the freedom of revenge was carefully customized.[9]

Furthermore, any free man could be enslaved through captivity. Even noble man/women could end up in slavery. However, the position of slave is not always one of complete supplicant that would imagine today. Due to the fact that every

4 ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, vol. 4, 550 – 60.
5 Ibid., 541 – 50.
6 ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, vol. 6, 192 – 3.
7 Qurʾān, 2:178.
8 ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, vol. 5, 482 – 85.
9 ʿAlī, *al-Mufaṣṣal*, vol. 4, 563.

member of the tribe could potentially be held captive, no one could completely rely on his or her own freedom. The threat of slavery was always one to be taken seriously.

If a person became embroiled in a conflict within the tribe and could not find someone to defend him, he could be expelled from the tribe. In this case he would have no worth as regarding to ransom money and anyone could kill him without punishment. No one could survive outside the tribe.[10]

Conflicts between clans or tribes are usually solved through arbitrators. These wise men or women were known as judges and were able to solve conflicts. This kind of justice, which was only possible in these communities, could guarantee some kind of freedom. Freedom was also bound to responsibility. Free men and women are responsible for their family's children and slaves.[11] The concept of vicegerent in the Qurʾān is also known in tribal costumes. Priests, whether they be male or female, were the ones who represented the gods and protected their rights and interests. Tribal chiefs and noble men, *al-ashrāf*, came in second. Justice in this case referred to the collective welfare of the tribe; all other forms of freedom were sacrificed for its sake.

It is in this context that the Qurʾānic concept of freedom should be evaluated. The Qurʾān is in dialogue with these communities and is attempting to mirror their known and accepted values. Therefore, the term *ḥurrīya* is not found in the Qurʾān. On the contrary, the Qurʾān confirms the pre-Islamic notion of freedom and speaks of men as *al-ḥurr wa-l-ʿabd*, the free and the slave "O ye who believe! The law of equality is prescribed to you in cases of murder: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman. But if any remission is made by the brother of the slain, then grant any reasonable demand, and compensate him with handsome gratitude." (2:178)[12]

However, the Qurʾān attempts to improve this situation by introducing the concept of the *taḥrīr raqaba*, ransoming or liberating slaves as a bonus through which believers can earn high rewards and compensate for their sins. Yet in the case of killing a believer by mistake the murderer must free a slave: "Never should a believer kill a believer; but (If it so happens) by mistake, (Compensation is due): If one (so) kills a believer it is ordained that he should free a believing slave, and pay compensation to the deceased's family, unless they remit it freely." (4:92)

10 Ibid., 564 – 65.

11 Ibid., 565 – 66.

12 English translations from the Qurʾān according to the translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali (modified).

The act of liberating slaves was therefore the first serious step towards abolishing slavery. Every rich believer is called to buy slaves and subsequently liberate them.

Although the Qu'rān recognizes the concept of freedom versus slavery, as discussed above, it also presents another conceptual interpretation of freedom. Starting with the story of creation, God declares the human being as vicegerent and above all other creatures, "Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: 'I will create a vicegerent on earth.'" (2:30) God taught Adam all "names," which means that He provided him with divine knowledge, as it is said "And He taught Adam the names of all things" (2:31). The concept of vicegerent here expresses freedom in connection with responsibility, which is established through knowledge. In this way God provides the guarantee that human beings will represent Him and will not destroy the earth as the angels expressed in 2:30. However, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate from the forbidden tree, they were not alienated from God's mercy. Verses 2:36 – 9 demonstrate this dramatic event: "We said: 'Get ye down, all (ye people), with enmity between yourselves. On earth will be your dwelling-place and your means of livelihood – for a time.' Then learnt Adam from the Lord words of inspiration, and his Lord Turned toward him; for He is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful. We said: 'Get ye down all from here; and if, as is sure, there comes to you Guidance from me, whosoever follows My guidance, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. 'But those who reject Faith and belie Our Signs, they shall be companions of the Fire; they shall abide therein.'"

Az-Zamakhsharī asks in his commentary on these verses whether Adam's sin here is a major or a minor sin. Since Adam is a prophet, as it is believed among the commentators, his sin cannot be a major one. Yet, if it were a minor sin, God would not have expelled him and his wife from paradise. The solution for him is that Adam did not commit a major sin, but that the sin here is considered as major in order to emphasize its nature and its consequences. Thus, some of the traditional commentators highlight the position of Adam here as a prophet who still possess dignity and the freedom of choice since God at the end of these verses declares that "whosoever follows My guidance, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. But those who reject Faith and belie Our Signs, they shall be companions of the Fire; they shall abide therein." (2:38 – 39)

The Qu'rān also deviates from Pre-Islamic customs and presents new values. The free man or woman is the one who acts righteously and worships God truly: "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you." (49:13)

This is indeed a revolutionary concept for pre-Islamic customs of ranking and inequality. The shift between the duality of free men and slaves to the equality of believers in righteousness demonstrates the nature of the challenge that the Quʾrān is setting here: only those who reach righteousness experience equality.

Freedom and equality are two heavily related concepts: a person is free only when he or she is equal to other free persons. Muḥammad Shaḥrūr in his book *al-Kitāb wa-l- Quʾrān* reflects on the two concepts *īmān – islam* and *Muslim – believer.* He shows that the Quʾrān intends the term Islam to mean the worshipping of the one God and therefore a person is a Muslim even if he or she is also a Christian or Jew or from another religion. Thus when the Quʾrān mentions that Moses and Jesus and other prophets were Muslims it means that they all believed in the one God. However, Shaḥrūr here mainly emphasizes the equality which the Quʾrān bestows on every believer whether they be a prophet or merely a believer.[13] This is the explanation of the verse 2:62 "Those who believe, and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians,– any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve."

Indeed this verse implies a high quality of freedom and equality. Instead of the pre-Islamic concept of *al-ḥurr wa-l-ʿabd* here the Quʾrān declares that all who believe in God will be equally liberated from all burdens in the afterlife. Furthermore, verse 3:64 is clearly an invitation for dialogue and the recognition of equality: "Say: 'O People of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God.'" It seems here that the Quʾrān is emphasizing the importance of maintaining a sense of equality with those members of different religions when all recognize the omnipotence of God. The aforementioned verse, however, ends by allowing freedom of choice "If then they turn back, say ye: 'Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to God's Will)." (3:64)

13 Shaḥrūr, Muḥammad, *Al-Kitāb wa-l-Quʾān*, Damascus: Al-Alī li-n-nashr wa-ṭ-ṭibāʿa wa-t-tawzīʿ, 1990, 716 – 17.

6 Freedom and the Rights of Women in Islam

The question of how Islam treats women came to the fore when secular education was introduced in the 19th century, thereby replacing the religious education which was provided in small group settings within village and city mosques. In Egypt, Muḥammad ʿAli (1769 – 1849), an Albanian ruler under the Ottomans, started to engender a modern form of education by opening different forms of schools such as military academies, medical and engineering schools, and language-learning institutes. Subsequently, he opened a school that taught the art of a midwife in order to train female gynecologists. No preparatory or secondary schools, however, were opened for their elementary education. Early-childhood education was conducted at home. Indeed, only very few upper-class women could join the school for midwives, and even then they were shuttled by the government into arranged marriages with male doctors. The couples received housing in various towns and villages across Egypt. Public education for women began in 1870, but girls were nevertheless required to remain fully covered with the *niqāb*. Women until 1870 were mostly secluded and could only go out in the company of their male guardians.

When seeking to understand the rights of women as dictated by Islam, we must start in the seventh century and examine the status of women before and after Islam.

The first question that faces a researcher in examining the position of women before Islam regards the sources we currently have available from this period. Leila Ahmed is one of the earliest Muslim feminist theologians who has worked in this field. The main difficulty facing her while engaging the available sources regarding the pre-Islamic period was that all these texts were written by Muslim males.[66]

The most important and earliest source regarding these matters is the biography of Muhammad written by Ibn Ishāq (d. 767/150) who died about 135 years following the passing of Muhammad. Additional texts include the Hadith works of al-Bukhārī (810 – 870/194 – 256), Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 875/202) and the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* by Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (897 – 967/284 – 356). Of course we also have the Quʾrān itself.[67]

There is no doubt that Arabia before Islam consisted of Bedouins and settled tribes. Ibn Isḥāq tells us that Muhammad was sent to a Bedouin tribe for some years as an infant and a young boy in order to experience Bedouin life. This in-

66 Ahmed, Leila, *Women and Gender in Islam*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1992.
67 Ibid.

dicates that around the time of Muhammad's birth, Bedouin customs were dying out and being replaced by the settled culture of large tribes.[68] In examining marriage customs reported by Ibn Isḥāq, we realize that women had great freedom in choosing their husbands and divorcing them. Indeed the woman largely remained in her tribe when she married someone outside of the tribe. She received both a dowry and marriage gifts. Al-Iṣfahānī informs us that when women wanted to leave their husbands, they turned their tent upside down such that the door would be facing the other side of the tent. When the husbands saw this, they realized that they had been divorced, thereby rendering their continued stay within those tribe impossible.[69]

Noble women also had the custom of asking males for their hand in marriage. Ibn Ishāq reports of many circumstances in which women had asked the prophet to marry them. In nearly all marriages entered into by the prophet, his wives were the initiator of the marriage.[70] In many cases women had also enumerated several conditions within the marriage contract and it was not uncommon that they married several times even after becoming widowers.[71] Many such marriage contracts initiated by women took place after the rise of Islam. Um Salama, a wealthy widow, had initiated a marriage contract with the young man Abū l-ʿAbbās as-Saffāḥ, who proceeded to follow it. In her marriage contract, she stipulated that he refrains from taking a second wife or seeking out a concubine. Al-ʿAbbās accepted her condition and was faithful to her even when he in 749 became the first caliph and the founder of the Abbasid dynasty. That means that marriage initiated and conditioned by women carried on for at least the first 100 year after the rise of Islam.[72]

On the other hand, other sources show that in more established towns like Mecca and Taʾif, where trade flourished, a patriarchal culture dominated. The son, who was considered a valuable investment, belonged to the tribe of the father. Thus the value of women depreciated. It was also assumed that the instances of infanticide proved that the birth of girls was a source of shame within a patriarchal system. However, it seems that the impetus for infanticide was connected to economics more than anything else. Poor nomadic tribes at the mercy

68 Ibn Isḥāq, Muḥammad, *Sīrat Ibn Isḥāq*, Fez: Maʿhad ad-dirāsāt wa-l-abḥāth li-t-taʿrīb, 1976, 31–35.

69 Ahmed, *Women*, 41–64.

70 Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat*, 359–400.

71 Ibid.

72 Ahmed, *Women*, 41–64.

of persistent hanger during the year used to kill some of their infants in order to prevent them from suffering.[73]

Thus we face here a pre-Islamic Arabian community possessing matriarchal as well as patriarchal cultural traits. The emergence of the Quʾrān from this particular culture has had clear consequences. It must, namely, address both aspects of culture. Linguistically, it addressed women in their gendered form when referring to believers.

According to Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zaid (1943 – 2010), one of the most prominent modern scholars of the Quʾrān, the Quʾrān consists of a dialogue between the addresser and the addressee. Therefore, women were clearly addressed in a gendered fashion.[74] One example can be found in the following verse:

> For Muslim men and women,– for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in Charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise,– for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward. (33:35)

However, as I demonstrated above, the period in which the Quʾrān witnessed a transition from a matrilineal to patrilineal culture. The Quʾrān was therefore obliged to take into account these new cultural conditions facing its believers. Its treatment of this problem is quite praiseworthy and was fully accepted by both kinds of believers. In fact, in order to appreciate the position of the Quʾrān towards women, one should be very much aware of the pre-Islamic culture conditions. On the whole, the Quʾrān neither improved nor damaged the position of women, but simply mirrored it. Thus, the Muslim judges who formed the Islamic *sharīʿa* in the first three hundred years of Islam had the choice of determining the direction of this new body of law. The following Quʾrānic passage, for example, simply sought to depict the current situation in Medina. Instead, it was used to create a precedent for the encouragement of polygamy, a rule that contradicted its original intention Quʾrān 4:3: "If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent

73 Ibid.

74 Abū Zaid, Naṣr Ḥāmid, *Dawāʾir al-khawf: qirāʾah fī khiṭāb al-marʾah,* Beirut: Al-Markaz al-thaqāfī l-ʿarabī, 2008.

you from doing injustice." Further Quʾrān 4:129: "Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire".

By insisting on the preservation of justice, the Quʾrān is attempting here to establish a form of monogamy that was probably not desired in this period. The decision to favor monogamy over polygamy was left to the discretion of the community. This shows that the Quʾrān does not lay legal conditions, but instead sets the main ethical and moral guideposts. The main goal of the passage was to emphasize justice and to warn against the misuse of an orphan's wealth by the guardians to whom this money is entrusted. Leila Ahmed informs us that this rule was not followed in early Islam and men from patriarchal tribes married more than four women.[75]

Many traditions also mention the position of ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb towards women. ʿUmar was a very important member of the early Muslim community and became the second. He came from one of the most influential and nobel patriarchal tribes of Mecca. Although he was known as a wise and just caliph, his position towards women was quite fanatical. Many commentators reported that the famous verses concerning the veiling of the wives of the prophet and the believers reflect the position taken by ʿUmar and other early patriarchal believers requesting the prophet to demand modesty of Muslim women. This is reflected in Quʾrān 33:35 and 33:54. During ʿUmar's rule following the death of the prophet from 634 – 644, he placed strong restrictions on the wives of the prophet. He also did not allow women to attend mosque services. Although ʿĀʾisha and Umm Salama, two of the prophet's wives, were well known as imams, he did not allow them to teach men. All these rules were abrogated during the reign of the third caliph ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān. In summary, this discussion demonstrates the struggle between patriarchal and matriarchal components within early Islam. Patriarchal notions finally prevailed when Islam was transported into the Persian and Christian cultural milieus north of Arabia.[76]

6.1 The Commentators and Their Culture

Islam spread from its cultural setting in Arabia to the Persian and Mediterranean cultural contexts in the span of a mere decade following the death of the prophet. Leila Ahmed, depicts the situation of women within Persian culture in the following fashion:

75 Ahmed, *Women*, 41 – 50.
76 Ibid.

Although women, to some extent, enjoyed a degree of respect in ancient Persian culture, the dominance of Zoroastrianism in the Sassanid Empire reduced their status severely. Women and slaves in Zoroastrianism were considered as property and not persons. Women were totally subjugated to their fathers and husbands. They needed to obey their husbands fully, required to declare "I will never cease all my life to obey my husband". Women were obliged to extend their arms in greeting their husbands just as performed by in their worship of Ohrmazd. A husband could obtain a "certificate of disobedience" from the court if his wife disobeyed him.[77]

Although monogamy was widespread among the masses in the Sassanid period, polygamy and concubines were common amongst the royal families. Thus, Arab caliphs developed their harem mainly when they ruled from Baghdad in Iraq.

From Syria to Egypt, Greek-Christian culture was prevalent. Greek culture in the Middle East was of a patriarchal nature and women had very little to say. They were mainly secluded in the home and considered biologically inferior to men. This was influenced by Aristotle's view of women in Book 10 of his Metaphysics. For him, a man's nature is the most well-rounded and complete. He compared the relationship between men and women to the relationship between the soul and the body. Just as the soul has full control over the material body, so should men have complete control over women.[78]

Thus, in the north of Arabia, the patriarchal position prevailed and was highly influential in the articulation of the new religion. The transition between patriarchal and matriarchal norms in Islamic society after the death of the prophet was finally executed when Islam became the dominant religion in the Middle East and moved its center of authority permanently to Damascus and Baghdad. Commentators such as aṭ-Ṭabarī (839 – 923/224-5 – 310), considered amongst Muslims as a preeminent source of Quʾrānic knowledge, used a great deal of Judeo-Christian material known as the Israeliyyat in the interpretation of many of parts of the Quʾrān. The story of creation, for example, is interpreted fully in light of its equivalent in the Genesis book of the Old Testament. According to aṭ-Ṭabarī, Eve is created from Adam's ribs, although the Quʾrān clearly offers the enjoinder to "reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, His mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women" (4:1). Nowhere in the Quʾrān can one derive

77 Ibid., *Women*, 11 – 25.
78 Ibid., 25 – 39.

an understanding of Eve's creation as emerging from a part of Adam's body, an important fact which has several implications.

Aṭ-Ṭabarī also considers women to be responsible for the original sin by virtue of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Yet the Quʾrān clearly says "Then began Satan to whisper suggestions to them, bringing openly before *their* minds all their shame that was hidden from them (before) ... So by deceit he brought about *their* fall" (7:20, 22, emphasis by the author). Although it is clear both here and in other passages that Adam and Eve together were responsible for the original sin, aṭ-Ṭabarī invoked a tradition from Wahb ibn Munabbih (a Jewish convert, 654-55 – 728/34 – 109) testifying that it was the women who ate first from the tree and thereby convinced Adam to do the same. Although aṭ-Ṭabarī mentions this story only in the interpretation of one passage (2:36) amongst the different passages reciting the story, this particular interpretation prevailed.[79] Most Muslim men and women solely recall the story of Wahb until today.

Thus by virtue of its entrance into Persian and Mediterranean culture, the Quʾrān suffered from a severe patriarchal form of interpretation which produced negative gendered images of women.

6.2 Liberating the Quʾrān

The Quʾrān, with its dated Arabic diction and style, is difficult for Muslims today to understand. Therefore, they have become fully dependent on the help of the commentators. Translators of the Quʾrān are also fully dependent on traditional interpretations in their understanding of the old Arabic of Mecca. In fact many translations are fully dependent on traditions of interpretation rather than the original language of the Quʾrān itself.

The earliest modern commentator who challenged the authority of the traditional exegetes was Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849 – 1905). He insisted that the Quʾrān must be read as a unified message in a modern context. Its main message concerns the welfare of society dependent on historical context. This should be taken into consideration when reading any part of the Quʾrān. For example, in his interpretation of sura 4:3 on polygamy, ʿAbduh considers the condition of justice to be the most important element in building a felicitous society. Therefore,

79 Ibid., 64 – 79.

the notion of marriage inherently and implicitly forbids marrying more than one wife.[80]

Fazlur Rahman, a Pakistani theologian who died 1988, proposed that the Quʾrān must be interpreted on two levels: 1. parts which declare eternal principles and 2. others which describe contingent situations.[81] In this way it is possible to accept parts of the Quʾrān which are connected to the seventh century but examine their working for the changed situation of today, while other parts of the Quʾrān are suitable for every time and context.

6.3 Liberating Women

Let us now move to the interpretations of modern Muslim feminists who struggle to present a novel and female-friendly understanding of Islam. We can divide these modern Muslim writing on gender issues into two groups:

1) Those who are trying to interpret the patriarchal parts of the Quʾrān in order to produce a more moderate position.
2) Those who are of the opinion that today's Muslims need to recognize the culture of the Quʾrānic context and to concentrate on the overall moral intention of the Quʾrān as a guideline for behavior.

Amina Wadud (b. 1952) is an excellent example of the second group. Her book *Women and the Quʾrān* has made a great impact on this field and many of her concepts are considered as sources for a feminist reading of the text.

The Quʾrān for Wadud is both a document and guiding scripture. It facilitates a dialogue with us as well as with its original 7th century audience. It consists of a universal as well as particular discourse. The universal ethos offers the main guidelines which speak to every culture and in every language, while the particular ethos is concerned with 7th century situation in which the text is revealed. Women's attire at that time and their social behavior are not of great relevance to our situation today. To limit the text to a certain period and culture is, in effect, a reductionist position.[82]

While the Quʾrānic text consists of the revealed ideas of God, it must always find ways to speak to the people today in their myriad situations. In her study,

80 Ahmed, *Women*, 127–145.

81 Rahman, *Fazlur, Revival and Reform in Islam. A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism*, Oxford: One World Press, 1999.

82 Wadud, Amina, *Qurʾan and Woman. Rereading the Sacred Texts from a Woman's Perspective*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 1–15.

she discovered that there are differences between what the Qurʾān says and what various commentators across the ages have interpreted the Qurʾān to be saying. In the second situation, the Qurʾān is manipulated in order to express what it does not mean to express.

Wadud proposes a hermeneutical method which concentrates on three aspects of the text: 1. The context in which the text was revealed in order to understand which was its first audience and to grasp why the text is saying what is saying. The mode of historical inquiry here does aim to limit the Qurʾān to past traditions, but rather its goal is to reach an understanding of what the text is really saying 2. The grammatical composition of the text in order to be sure that the text is actually saying what might only ostensibly be articulated 3. The comprehensive worldview of the text which strives to unify the text regarding its overall message, thereby guaranteeing potential access its modern readers.[83]

Wadud's hermeneutical approach found wide-ranging acceptance among many Muslim thinkers who have devoted much effort in exploring and articulating the position of women in within Islam such as Asma Barlas, Kasia Ali, Fatima Mernissy and other.

7 Freedom of Belief and Apostasy

Parallel to the rationalistic discussion regarding the freedom of choice in the *kalām* tradition, Muslim jurists involved in the articulation of Islamic law have discussed the concepts of *ḥudūd*, the divinely prescribed punishments, as well as the concept of *at-taʿzīr*, laws which are subject to the judge's opinion. One of these laws concerns the punishment for apostasy.

The freedom of choosing one's own religion or withdrawing from all religious belief is a fundamental right of each human being. Islam faced apostate movements at a very early stage in its history, and the Qurʾān depicted this problem in approximately 200 verses such as:

> They swear by God that they said nothing (evil), but indeed they uttered blasphemy, and they did it after accepting Islam [...]. (9:74)
>
> Only those are Believers who have believed in God and His Apostle, and have never since doubted [...] (49:15)

83 Ibid.

> 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; [...]. (3:72)

Apostasy is not only an Islamic phenomenon, but also appears in the Old Testament in chapter 13 of Deuteronomy, which mention false prophets. The punishment of those who follows false prophets is the death penalty. This is addressed in Deuteronomy 13:6 – 11,

> If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, 'Let us go and worship other gods' do not yield to him or listen to him. Show him no pity. Do not spare him or shield him. You must certainly put him to death. Your hand must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. Stone him to death.

Thus, administrating punishment of apostasy was already practiced among the Jews of Medina. Therefore, when the prophet Muhammad was confronted with this problem, a mode of punishment was already available to him. Therefore the Quʾrān sought to declare another position:

> Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy hand- hold [...]. (2:256)

> Say, 'The truth is from your Lord': Let him who will believe, and let him who will, reject (it) [...]. (18:29)

Punishment of apostasy in Quʾrān, however, consists of hell when facing the Day of Judgement. Yet, there is hardly any Quʾrānic text prescribing a temporal punishment for apostasy. Muhammad in his life did render a judgement with a sentence of death in two cases, but then recanted this verdict likely due to such Quʾrānic emphasis on punishment occurring the hereafter.

Ṭāha Jābir al-ʿAlwānī (1935 – 2016) in his book *Let there be no Compulsion in Religion*, explains that the death penalty of apostasy was established in Islamic law in a later period when Muslim jurists were faced with the danger of internal or external foreign influences threatening the authority of Islam as the official religion of lands where Christianity was practiced by the majority of the population.[84]

The jurists found two Hadiths which give them the authority to retain the Jewish sentence of death for apostasy.

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84 Al-ʿAlwānī, Ṭāha Jābir, *Let there be no Compulsion in Religion*. A *Historical Analysis*, IIIT Books in Brief Series, 2012, 3 – 6.

The Hadiths:

> If any one changes his religion put him or her to death.[85]

Al-ʿAlwānī here argues that this Hadith is a Hadith aḥād, meaning that it does not fulfil the criterion of the mutwāter, which means the chain of the transmitters is known to us.

> Allah's Apostle said, 'The blood of a Muslim cannot be shed except in three cases: In *Qaṣaṣ* for murder, a married person who commits illegal sexual intercourse and the one who reverts from Islam (apostate) and leaves the Muslim group.[86]

Nearly all four Sunni schools of law, alongside a slightly different Shīʿa approach, accepted these two hadiths in favor of the death penalty. Although about 200 verses in Quʾrān discuss this problem and clearly express that those who have abandoned Islam and intended to spread doubt about the truthfulness of Islam will be punished in the afterlife, Muslim jurists insisted on a worldly punishment.[87] This insistence of such harsh punishment was intended to stop anyone from undermining the authoritative nature of Islam in the new Islamic empire. ʿAlwānī tells us that such a form of defence aimed at establishing Islam as the official religion within this period should not be undermined. That is to say that the jurists came to this position pursuant to concern for the welfare of the Islamic nation, *maṣlaḥa*, rather than establishing an eternal form of judgement.[88]

He also indicates that all four schools dealt with this subject not under the rubric of divine punishments, *ḥudūd*, but also under the judge's possibility to render judgement according to his own opinion, *taʿzīr*, or in the interest of the welfare of the *umma*. There is no consensus, however, as to what exactly should be deemed apostasy. Some jurists define apostasy only in terms of causing distress and aiming to spread anxiety amongst Muslims. In this case, such individuals should be put to death because of this particular effect, and not because of apostasy in and of itself. In contrast, others consider anyone who criticizes Islam or attempts to omit any doctrines concerning belief accepted through communal juristic consensus to be an apostate. This opinion of the latter jurists have been cited in recent cases against Muslim writers who have studied Islam critically in

85 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 4:52:260.
86 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9:83:17, cf. also Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 16:4152.
87 Al-ʿAlwānī, *No Compulsion*, 14–16.
88 Ibid., 14–16.

order to apply scientific methods of research such as Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zaid or Farag Foda or Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāha.[89]

Al-ʿAlwānī's main criticism here concerns the following point: how can we accept hadiths which clearly contradict the Quʾrān. Hadith, in his opinion, maintains the function of either interpreting the Quʾrān or to adding to cases which are not dealt with in the Quʾrān. Thus, the two hadiths cited used here do not fulfil this criterion and are harnessed to establish an independent judgement standing in contradiction to the Quʾrān. Therefore, Muslim jurists must consider them to be weak hadiths and cease to cite them as the basis for the death penalty. We should accept the treatment of the *fuqahāʾ* as historical exceptional judgements. This is exactly what Shaikh al-Azhar Aḥmad aṭ-Ṭayab expressed in a TV interview in which he said: I do not believe in the death penalty for apostasy, as Muslims are free to change their religion in light of the freedom was given to them by the Quʾrān.

8 Critical Free Thinking versus Taqlīd

The problem of critical thinking as the basis for freedom was already established in early theological discussions. The main argument in this case was that every Muslim should understand and examine his or her own beliefs. Simply following others or the elders was deemed as practicing *taqlīd*, which means blindly following without independently perceiving. The discussion around *taqlīd* layed the ground for establishing a system of scientific knowledge capable of defining what knowledge is and how to achieve it. Muʿtazilites and Ashʿarites both encouraged the theologians to develop their own opinions and not to blindly follow their masters. However, Muʿtazilites believed in what they called *taklīf ʿaqlī*, which means that every human is called upon to seek out the true understanding of God and His connection to the world through their rational capacity. This capacity is a divine grace which enables every mature person to find certainty, *al-yaqīn*, in religious and scientific maters. This rational capacity is summed up in the following fashion: intuition which each person receives directly from God such as the capacity to distinguish between good and evil independently without the need of further guidance. The holy text can, in the main, explicate details on the basis of what we already know. God also provides necessary knowledge which establishes the groundwork for our research.[90] Further, humans receive

89 Ibid., 13 – 14.

90 Cf. El Kaisy-Friemuth, "Free Thinkers of Islam," 37, 40.

form. He or she must identify the sinful behaviour and assert its evilness. They differed, however, in the methods required to stop such shameful behavior: some Muʿtazilites supported violence while others preferred more peaceful techniques.[111] Many medieval and modern theologians considered this principal to constitute a duty which Muslim should practice in a peaceful form. Contemporary rational thinkers, however, considered the ensuring of social welfare to constitute the task of the official authorities.

Nevertheless moral freedom in Islam is very much connected with Islamic ethics and morality. The Quʾrān and Hadith are the main source of moral principles. The Muʿtazilites, however, adopted the concept of intuited ethics and asserted that the human can derive universally applicable ethical concepts through their own rational power. The holy law, the *sharīʿa*, mainly provides guidance for forms of punishment in cases proven to involve immorality.

Conclusion

There have been several approaches developed in order to conceive freedom in Islam.

Primary, we have clearly established that the word freedom in the way we understand it today is not used in the Qurʾān. Here liberation meant to be a free man or women who are not possessed by others as slaves. Slavery in this time was considered a community class, which does not have the right of taking own decisions. The freedom of thought and actions was developed later under the Muʿtazili school. Their interest was both juridical to establish justice and theological to awaken the importance of the human in taking own decisions and therefore, being responsible. This freedom of human will was very important in the political changes in the early Islamic empire. Through this kind of free will the Muʿtazilis could limit the authority of the caliph and increase the importance of the, theologians (ʿUlamāʾ). Further the Muʿtazili concept of *taʿwīl*, religious interpretation, is based in their theory of free will which declare the human as rational and able to interpret and reinterpret the religion. This is demonstrated in their five principles, which reject blind following.

Thus, the Muʿtazilite concept of free will gives great value to human ability to perceive God's discourse and to adapt it to the time and context.

Further, the Arab philosophers studied the process of thinking and proved that human beings can grasp the world with its creator. For them this ability

111 Ibid., 224 – 27.

is comparable with divine will and a prove of the emanation theory. Human freedom is a part of divine freedom and can be realized through the study of philosophy.

Moreover, the Sufis also considered the human soul as a part of the divine universal soul. Freedom for them is the realization of reality of the soul and enjoying the divine freedom in the annihilation process.

Some modern Muslim thinkers realized the centrality of the human and his/her importance for understanding and evaluating the modern concept of freedom. Many of them were influenced by the Muʿtazili classical theories of the free will and used their ideas in adapting them to western modern concept freedom.

Thus, the rationalists consider freedom as a gift of God, which allows humans to reflect upon and choose that which is good, while recognizing that which is dishonorable and ignorant. This kind of freedom distinguishes the free human from the slave of *taqlīd,* blindly following others, and self-interest. Therefore, this form of freedom requires personal responsibility in order to achieve its aim. There are many verses in the Quʾrān which support this kind of freedom.

Traditionalists and Orthodox Muslims, on the other hand, believe that Islam is the source of freedom and draw its limits to their own interpretation of the Quʾrān, thereby standing against any form of change, which could result from the practice of a type of freedom which is not rooted in the holy texts.

In contemporary period, Muslims are debating between these two positions and somehow avoiding taking clear stand. The call for human rights among Muslim scholars is increasing; however, great obstacles are placed in their way.

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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.

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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 Quʾrān. Instead, there are two affiliated, yet dichotomous terms, which play an important role in the Quʾrān and Islamic theology: the free and the slave. The Quʾrānic 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 Quʾrānic 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 Muʿtazilites, who constituted the dominant stream of theology in the formative period of Islam, highlighted the free will of human beings, the Ashʿarite 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 Muʿtazilites 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 lead 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.: ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād, *ʿAbqariyyat ʿUmar*, Cairo: Nahḍat Miṣr, [10]2006, 40: "*Bima istaʿbadtum an-nās wa-qad 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 Qurʾān, 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 Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān, 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 Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān 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 forms[9] – 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.

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