

Editorial: On Freedom and Necessity

By M. Ali Lakhani

Love—and do what you wish.

(St. Augustine)

There are two ways, one wrong and one right.
The wrong way is Man's way to God, and the right way is God's way to Man.

(Abu 'l-Hasan al-Kburqani)

It is said that 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the son-in-law of the Holy Prophet of Islam, was once asked whether human beings possessed freedom or whether they were bound by the laws of necessity. According to the story, he responded by asking the questioner to raise one foot off the ground. When he had done so, Imam 'Ali responded, "So it seems you have free will." Then he continued, "Now, while you remain standing on one foot, also raise your other foot off the ground." "But this is impossible," responded the questioner. The Imam explained, "So it appears there are also limits to your freedom."

The Imam's illustration is at one level a reflection of a basic truth about the human condition—that we are finite beings possessing a limited freedom—but at another it invites the questioner to probe for a deeper solution to the dilemma of human limitations. The solution is addressed by the Sufi, Bayazid al-Bistami, who, also using the analogy of the human foot, states, "All that exists is gained in two steps: by lifting up the foot from self-interest and setting it down on the commandments of God." Bayazid's prescription hints at an intrinsic metaphysical unity in which the outwardly opposing elements of freedom and necessity are

inwardly reconciled by locating the source of freedom on a different plane—an inward plane that is not subject to the outward limitations of existence. Whosoever has accepted his limitations is free. As the Talmud states, the one who is rich is “he who rejoices in his portion.” This is a truth that finds expression within all faith traditions: it is central to the concepts of *dharmā* in Hinduism, *karma* in Buddhism, *tao* in Taoism, and submission to the Divine Will in the three major monotheistic faith traditions (in fact, it is one of the meanings signified by the very word *islam*).

In the Supreme Reality that we term ‘God’, there is no distinction between necessity and freedom, for both these principles converge in the Divine Nature. Freedom in God is spiritual determination. “God has inscribed upon Himself (as a law) intensive Goodness (*rahmāb*)” (Qur’an, 6:12), yet “The grace of the Holy Ghost is not bound by any law” (St. Gregory). These statements are not inherently contradictory but express the principal truth of the spiritual determination of the Divine Nature, reflected in the Heart of ‘Man’. From the human perspective, the Good is existentially ‘necessary’. At the same time, Goodness constitutes our intrinsic ‘freedom’. In God, these principles converge as one.

It is in the light of the Divine Nature that creation and existence can be understood, not as aspects of divine indigence or privation—which would falsely equate divine necessity with contingency—but as expressions of divine effulgence or Goodness—in which divine necessity is an aspect of freedom. Nothing exists outside God. From the merely human perspective, Man and the world are separate from God (an idea reflected in the etymology of the term, ‘existence’—‘to stand apart from’). But in reality, existence is embraced by the Absolute: “All is one”. Within this matrix, creation is the Divine Self-Disclosure of God to God. It is the great ‘play’ of life in which the infinite possibilities of existence are given finite and transient expression, like bubbles of foam upon a great Ocean. The bubbles die, the Ocean remains. “Only God is.”

From the purely human perspective, one could say that necessity recognizes the truth that “Only God is”, while freedom recognizes the truth that “All is God.” Such-and-such a man is finite, has a temporal existence, and is subject to the laws of necessity, but Man-as-such, in his spiritual core, is infinite, eternal, and free. Individual reality is contingent but the Spirit is absolute. Man lives within the confines of

the finite and the temporal, which define the dimensions of ‘necessity’ within existence, and it is in this sense that God is transcendent. But the divine Spirit, in-dwelling within the Heart of Man, opens the soul to the possibility of its ‘freedom’, and it is in this sense that God is also immanent. Thus the spiritual core—or Heart—of Man, in its oneness, is both transcendent and immanent, and reflects the spiritual determination of the Divine Nature that is the intrinsic Goodness or substance of its being. Necessity and freedom are reconciled inwardly in the Heart of Man, and it is by spiritual self-knowledge of the Heart that true freedom is attained (“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” - John, 8:32).



Freedom is not absolute independence, for one is free only to the extent that one’s freedom accords with one’s responsibility. True freedom subsists only within the confines of the Law—that is, of our primordial nature. One is free to the extent that one is liberated from the limitations of the egoic self and its worldly attachments (from, as Shelley puts it, “that unrest which men miscall delight” and “the contagion of the world’s slow stain”); and one is captive to the extent that one is subject to the fears, compulsions, carnal desires, and passions of the ego, and the allurements, illusions, and limitations of the outer world.

Freedom in this sense is a form of death—of “dying to the self” and “dying to the world.” Death, thus understood, is necessity. Each of us understands that there is no escaping death. The death to come, which will snatch us away from this physical world and by which we will one day shake off this mortal coil, is a shadow that looms over our lives as the ultimate necessity of existence, but its prospect also functions in the here-and-now as a mercy, as a symbol of self-transcendence, and of the power of liberation from contingency. Living is, in essence, the art of dying—of dying to the darkness so that one may be born to the light. This is the true goal of existence and of the quest for meaning. It is in this sense that Plato refers to philosophy as the study of death (*Phaedo*, 81A).

To accomplish the egoic death, requires the embracing of “God’s way”—of fulfilling our destiny according to the Goodness that is

warranted of us, according to the acceptance of our *dharmā*, as the Hindus would say (see, for example, Lord Krishna's counsel to Arjuna to embrace his *dharmā* on the field of Kurukshetra, in the Bhagavad Gita—*dharmā* being an aspect of his innate spiritual nature). One of the most compelling illustrations of the anguish of such acceptance is found in the Biblical episode of Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he seeks the perfection of God's will in this repeated prayer: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (*Matthew*, 26:39; also *Luke*, 22:42). While recognizing the human agony of self-sacrifice, the prayer functions as a prayer of submission through love, not of defeat. It is a prayer that acknowledges one's destiny by embracing it through Goodness, in the faith that the egoic death serves as a release from bondage. For, as St. Francis states, "It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life."



Modernism is noted for its two tendencies: relativism (the tendency to overly emphasize the subjective, contributing to the loss of objectivity) and reductionism (the tendency to absolutize reality on a contingent plane, contributing to the "closing off" of reality). In the former instance, we place a veil between the ego and the Self; in the latter, between the world and the Self. In each case, the veil is a limitation that we must overcome through transcendence. The process for this liberation is Truth and Virtue. Truth: "right thinking" based on "orthodoxy", which provides us with the doctrinal understanding of what is Real. Virtue: "right being" and "right doing", based on "orthopraxy", which provides us with methods of Self-realization. Through Truth, we see the Goodness of the Real; through Virtue, we embody it by our own Goodness. Truth and Virtue are therefore aspects of our spiritual reality (the Heart or the Self) and the limits of its self-determination (the Law).

In the Modernist outlook, the pursuit of freedom is not placed within the confines of the Law. This encroachment is noticeable in connection with the corruption of forms, which can be remarked even within the practice of religion. One finds it in other areas too, for example, in art (where the formal component is either reduced to the slavish mimicry of "realism" or to diluted abstraction and chaotic surrealism) or in

social relationships (which alternate between the demands of “political correctness” and individualism). In the case of religion, the corruption of forms expresses itself through either the excessive formalism one associates with “fundamentalism” or the syncretic eclecticism one associates with the New Age movement. In each instance, orthodoxy is subjected to infernal impulses, which either fossilize the religious forms by sacrificing the spirit to the letter of the Law, or dilute them by abstracting or virtualizing the content of the forms instead of sacralizing it as the embodiment of the Law.

The point is that Tradition requires forms. The Modernist errors are to either focus on the forms to the detriment of their content or to ignore the importance of the forms entirely. Man is neither at liberty to deny his formal limitations (for he cannot stand and lift both feet off the ground at the same time), nor to confine himself to those limitations (for he can indeed lift his feet, one at a time, and make the pilgrimage to the Heart’s shrine). Instead, it is incumbent on Man to transcend his formal limitations. The purpose of forms in Tradition is to serve as vehicles for Man’s *trans*-formation—each form serving as a potential opening to transcendence, to that Presence of Goodness or Beauty which is in all forms and is a mirror of the intrinsic Virtue that lies in our innermost Heart.