

# THE IDEA OF FREEDOM AND PROGRESS IN ISLAM

BY DR. MOHAMMAD RAFI-UD-DIN

Before there can be any sensible discussion on Islam's attitude towards freedom and progress the concepts of freedom and progress must be defined.

When we use the word "freedom" we have to specify the purpose for which freedom is meant. The reason is that freedom always means freedom for the achievement of some goal or ideal. That is why freedom is always accompanied by self-imposed limitations which are believed to be necessary for the achievement of that goal or ideal.

Absolute freedom, freedom without limitations or restrictions, has never existed in the world in the past and will never exist in future—man is made that way by Nature. This means that there are as many varieties of freedom and corresponding restrictions on freedom accompanying them as there are goals which man can set before himself for its realisation.

Every religious, social or political community is an ideological community having an ideology based on an ideal or goal of life, which is a cracy, an ism or a religion determining the entire life of the community. The very fact that a social community has a separate existence is enough to show that it has a separate goal of its own, a separate idea of what freedom should mean and what ought to be the limitations surrounding and protecting its operation.

When the Western communities of to-day talk of freedom, they mean the freedom that suits them and suits their ideologies. But even they do not have a uniform concept of freedom. The freedom of the Frenchman is different from that of an American, an Italian or an Englishman, and that of a Russian is different from that of all others. The capitalist countries accuse Russia of having enslaved its population and Russia accuses the capitalist countries, which call themselves the "freedom-loving nations of the world," of endeavouring to perpetuate the slavery of the workers.

Both of them are right, for each of them has its own ideas of freedom and slavery relevant to its own ideal or goal of life. It is perfectly natural and not at all surprising that the so-called freedom-loving nations of

the world do not give their members the freedom to become communists. Every ideal or goal of life, whether it calls itself by the name of freedom or by any other name, must impose upon its followers the restrictions that are consistent with its nature. Whenever a community praises its own brand of freedom it has also to praise its own brand of restrictions.

If the word "freedom" in the above title means freedom as it is understood by a Western nation, Islam can have nothing to do with it, for the ideal of Islam is different from the ideal or goal of every nation of the West.

Islam is an ideology by itself. It has its own goal of life and that is to love and serve God as He revealed Himself to Muhammad (may peace of Allah be on him). From the point of view of Islam everything that enables a Muslim to love and serve God gives him freedom and everything that has the contrary result is a kind of restriction upon him which he must resent and endeavour to remove.

Again, we generally ignore the fact that restrictions upon the freedom of an ideal or a goal of life are internal as well as external impediments. We are all favourably inclined towards universal ethics and insist on a good and virtuous life. When we see a man being forced to perform an act of wickedness, we dislike it thoroughly and denounce emphatically the compulsion that is the cause of it. But it happens so often that when a man performs the same wicked deed by his own choice without any external compulsion, we give him the right to do so, although an act of wickedness performed freely and voluntarily is much more wicked than it is when it is performed under compulsion. It looks very strange. But in such cases, the difference in our attitude is created by the fact that we really do not know for certain what is good and what is bad for man to do.

An individual is not allowed to kill another individual, but since we know that killing is immoral and bad, he is not allowed to kill himself too. If we know for certain what is wrong to do, we cannot make any difference between a person who does wrong to another person and a person who does wrong to himself. If we know scientifically, definitely and certainly what is good and what is bad for us to do, many of our freedoms would vanish.

We know to-day the rules of health definitely and certainly and the result is that we enforce them for all at the point of the sword. The man who is found scattering dirt or filth on a public thoroughfare is fined or sent to prison. If we know the importance and correctness of the rules of moral health as surely as we know the rules of bodily health, we shall enforce them too at the point of the sword.

Hence what becomes of our freedom? Many of them are but the symbol of our ignorance. We make ourselves free to do everything that we like to do because we do not know what is good and what is bad for us to do. I am definite that it is the freedom of man and not his slavery that is bringing him speedily to his own ruin in this age. He is his own slave and must be saved from himself. He must be made internally free. Islam provides for the internal freedom of man and liberates him from himself.

Similar is the case with progress. When we use the word "progress" we have to specify the direction of the progress we have in view. If a highly educated and trained burglar, capable of using complicated scientific instruments in his profession, happens to impart training to his son to become an efficient burglar, he may be satisfied that his son is making progress! Certainly there are forms of progress which are one-sided, partial and sectional and which are realised at the cost of some other, more comprehensive, forms of progress.

Partial and sectional progress is dangerous, for it ignores a valuable portion of human potentialities and, therefore, brings about its own ruin. Man is so made that he can make progress only as a whole or cannot progress at all. Scientific and technological progress of the West is that of sectional, partial and dangerous character. Western thinkers have now realised very clearly the dangers of this progress and have called loudly for a halt to it. I may give a few quotations from eminent authorities. McDougall, a well-known psychologist, writes :

"Our ignorance of the nature of man has prevented and still prevents the development of all the social sciences. Such sciences are the crying need of our time; for lack of them our civilization is threatened gravely with decay and perhaps complete collapse."

Skinner, another eminent psychologist of the West, writes in his book *Science and Human Behaviour* :

"Science has evolved immensely. By seizing upon the easier problems first, it has tended our control of inanimate nature without preparing for the social problems that follow. . . . There is no problem in furthering a science of nature unless it includes a sizable science of human nature because . . . only in that case the results will be wisely used."

Islam lays down principles for the all-round, comprehensive progress of man and warns against sectional progress by citing the examples of the

'Aad and the Thamud who made tremendous progress and became very powerful, but their power brought ruin and annihilation upon them. Islam gives us the fundamentals of the much-needed science of human nature for lack of which the Western civilisation is on the verge of a collapse.

It is true that Islam must take science and technology from the West, but what the West must take from Islam is something far more valuable than science and technology. It is something without which science and technology are not only useless but also definitely ruinous.

The word "progress" when applied to the human world, has a scientific connotation too. It means revolution at its psycho-social stage. We know that biological evolution had a goal and that was not only the emergence of the final and the most perfect form of life, but also the world-domination of that form. Should we say that psycho-social evolution or, more plainly, ideological evolution has no goal? That cannot be. Biologists like Julian Huxley and philosophers of History like Spengler, Toynbee, Sorokin and many others have endeavoured to discover what the goal of ideological evolution is. They have not come to any conclusion yet. But one thing is quite clear and that is that, as the goal of biological evolution was not only the emergence of a single biological species—the final and the most perfect of all—but also its world domination, so that the goal of ideological evolution must not only be the emergence of one ideological community—the final and the most perfect of all—but also its world domination.

Some people have disliked biological analogies. But we cannot forget that life is a single indivisible unity and its nature and its fundamental qualities and characteristics remain the same at the biological and ideological stages of evolution. Hence biological analogies are surely a very dependable guide to a rational understanding of the processes of life as it is unfolding itself at the psycho-social stage of evolution.

This means, therefore, that a religious, social or political community in existence at present can be finally progressive only to the extent to which its ideals conform to the ideals of that final and perfect community which is the objective of evolution. Otherwise it is bound to be left behind by the movement of evolution, which must carry forward only the community that is potentially the most progressive. The Muslims believe on the basis of more than half a dozen emphatic verses of the Holy Qur'an that they are that final community.

This conclusion may appear to be fantastic in view of the apparent weakness of the Muslim community throughout the world at present. But

the present weakness of the community is not at all disappointing to the Muslims, because they believe that the potentialities of their ideal of *Tawheed*, which is the most perfect of all ideals that man can possibly conceive of, is a guarantee of their continued progress in all directions. The condition of the Muslim community in the modern world is similar to the condition of man a million years ago when he was a mere wild animal, far weaker than other animals of the forest like elephants, tigers, bears and lions, all of which were armed with talons, claws, teeth and trunks. Poor man had to take refuge against these mighty species on trees or in caves in order to save his life. Who could have ever thought at that time that man would not only survive but also progress and spread to the ends of the earth. As man developed physical weapons that gave him superiority over the mighty species of that age, so the Muslim community is soon going to invent intellectual weapons in the form of scientific ideas about human nature derived from their ideal of *Tawheed*, which will benefit the entire human race and give the Muslims superiority over the partially progressive intellectual communities of to-day.