

Freedom Dialogue Group

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There are many universal human rights: arguably, freedom is one of the basic ones, intertwined with life itself. As Tipu Sultan, the famous Indian resistance leader against the British exclaimed, “Better to live one day, free as a lion, than to live as a slave for a thousand years.” Caliph Omar once berated one of his commanders who had followed the common pre-Islamic medieval wartime practice of enslaving the women and children of a defeated army, “How could you enslave people whom God had created free?!” echoing Moses’ defiant response to Pharaoh in the Qur’an (26:22), “Is this the favour of which you are reminding me: that you have enslaved the Children of Israel?”

Theologically, true faith is based on free will and free choice: any practice that is not free, including faith and religious observance, cannot be genuine. Hence the famous Qur’anic declaration (2:256), “There is no compulsion in religion!”

The centrality of freedom to faith raises important issues: e.g., drugs, alcohol, mental illness, carnal lusts and social pressures all mean that our choices and decisions in life are not totally free: how then are these actions judged by fellow humans and by God? In particular, one of the goals of religious practice has always been to remove internal shackles that inhibit our expression of humanity, enabling greater self-awareness and realisation of our potential. Thus, a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad says that, “the world is a prison for the believer,” i.e., the moral person and great sages survived imprisonment because they were, internally, free spirits.

Ideas of freedom and liberty have, of course, strongly shaped the modern world since the 18th century with the abolition of slavery, French and American republican ideals, and anti-colonial independence movements.

It is my firm belief that the great philosophers, sages, and prophets – Moses, Mary, Christ and Muhammad, Buddha and Confucius, men and women of God through the ages – supported the liberation of men and women of all colours, races and religions, children and slaves, individuals and populations, from the yokes of tyranny and oppression. Our modern heroes in this regard range from Wilberforce to Jefferson to Gandhi, Jinnah, Martin Luther King, and Mandela.

