

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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1. Introduction

Freedom is one of the most controversial topics in the history of philosophy. It seems clear that freedom can mean different things to different people – from hard determinists who challenge its existence, to existentialists and process philosophers, who strongly defend it. Interestingly, all people seem to be *free* to use their own definitions of freedom as they desire. For instance, freedom can mean independence, autonomy, creativity, non-attachment, the ability to choose or negate, the ability to speak or do, and even the ability to survive. In this paper, I would like to briefly discuss religious freedom in two senses: religious freedom as a right and as a state of mind. I would also like to show in what way these two are connected.

2. Right

The right to freedom of religion is considered and adopted as one of the human rights by the United Nations. The compatibilist point of view seems to be appropriate for this sense. According to compatibilism, to be free means to be free from external constraint and compulsion. But why should a person have the right to be free from compulsion about religion? If there are many different religious ways, then which one is true?

There are at least three approaches to the above question: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Both exclusivism and inclusivism may be considered as kinds of religious extremism. On the one hand, an exclusivist would say that there is *only one* true religious way while, on the other hand, an inclusivist will say all religious ways are true, but their way is still the best. The school of thought and attitude which is considered intermediate is religious pluralism. Religious pluralism holds that there are many true religious paths leading to salvation.

Among these three kinds of attitude, only religious pluralism can support religious freedom as a fundamental human right. Both exclusivism

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and inclusivism cannot promote religious freedom in principle because they assume an “external obligatory force” of some kind. On the one hand, exclusivists believe and hold that there is no salvation outside their way, and so they cannot allow other believers to exercise their right to religion. They are always ready to convert other people. They know only how to preach, not how to listen. To pursue evangelism is to leave no room for dialogue. On the other hand, the inclusivists *seem* to be more open to religious dialogue. However, their dialogue will not last long in practice. Since they believe that their way is truer and safer than those of others, they will ultimately gravitate towards evangelism and place constraints on other forms of belief. As a matter of fact, those who think that their way is truer than others are both arrogant and unwise. For it is obvious that there are no neutral criteria in the world. All criteria are always relative to their users, and they are always incommensurable. I still remember a book I read when I was in the secondary school. It asserted that there are 3 major groups of mankind in the world: the Caucasoid (the White), the Mongoloid (the Yellow), and the Negroid (the Black), and that the Caucasians are the smartest. No doubt, this is because the measurement criteria (IQ tests) were devised by Caucasians.

3. State of Mind

Religious freedom as a state of mind may be classified into two sorts: self-negation and non-attachment. In the first sense, to be religiously free is to be free from one’s self. Dostoevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, made clear the difference between authentic and inauthentic freedom. Authentic freedom is identical to self-forgetfulness, whereas inauthentic freedom is the same thing as self-assertion. Freedom as self-assertion, according to Dostoevsky, will never become true freedom because it will inevitably lead to one being a slave of one’s desires. This kind of freedom will eventually lead the rich to loneliness and suicide and lead the poor to envy and murder.¹ Religious freedom can still be understood as to be *free from* sin (according to Christian terminology) or *free from* cravings (according to Buddhist terminology).

In the second sense, religious freedom as a state of mind is, in Buddhist terminology, non-attachment. To be religiously free is to be

¹ See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Andrew H. MacAndrew, New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1981, 379-80.

beyond any particular religion, sect, rule or principle. Actually, prophets, saints and *Arahats* are good examples of those who are always ready to violate any rule without guilt. Why so? Because their violations of rules are not for themselves, but for others. Let us look at a few cases. The first one is from the Bible.

It happened that one Sabbath day he was taking a walk through the corn-fields, and his disciples began to make a path by plucking ears of corn. And the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing something on the Sabbath day that is forbidden?" And he replied, "Have you never read what David did in his time of need when he and his followers were hungry – how he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the loaves of the offering which only the priests are allowed to eat, and how he also gave some to the men with him?" And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; so the Son of man is master even of the Sabbath."²

From a cursory reading of the story, it seems to be that David, Jesus and their followers broke the rules for themselves. However, from the deeper context of the Bible, we have learned that they were people who sacrificed themselves for others. It is written: "For the Son of man himself came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."³

Two other examples of violating rules can be seen in the Buddhist Scriptures. The first example is about the rape of the nun Uppalavannā.

A maiden of wondrous beauty rejects all her suitors, becomes a nun, and attains Arahatship. She takes up her residence alone in a forest hermitage. A former suitor, learning her whereabouts, goes to the hermitage and assaults her. The Buddha preaches to the monks on the transitoriness of sinful pleasures. On a subsequent occasion the monks raise the question whether Arahats are to be blamed for gratifying their passions. The Buddha admonishes them that sexual passion no more adheres to the Arahats than a drop of water to a lotus-leaf. The Buddha persuades King Pasenadi Kosala to erect a

²See Mark 2:23-28 in *The New Jerusalem Bible*.

³Mark 10:45 in *The New Jerusalem Bible*.

convent for the nuns within the city, and forbids the nuns thenceforth to reside in the forest.⁴

From the story it is obvious that wicked people cannot destroy the Arahatsip of the enlightened ones. Once you achieve enlightenment, no one can steal it from you. The enlightened always have an attitude of complete detachment. They are “beyond good and evil.” Their deeds arise always from their *agape* or loving kindness.

Let us reflect on another example from Zen Buddhism. Tanzan and Ekido, two monks, were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was falling. Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross a large mud puddle stretching across the road. “Come on, girl,” said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud. Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he no longer could restrain himself. “We monks don’t go near females,” he told Tanzan, “especially not young, lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?” “I left the girl there,” said Tanzan, and continued: “Are you still carrying her?”⁵

Of Tanzan or Ekido, I think it is clear which one possesses loving kindness. This is also seen in Christianity when Jesus admonishes the Pharisees for their insincere strictness.

It is obvious that the Buddhist way holds the logic of non-attachment or detachment. To understand this way of thinking clearly, we may compare it with other schools of logic. For instance, Aristotelian logic holds the “law of the excluded middle” as the most fundamental principle.⁶ To clarify the differences, we may use the following illustration. Suppose we are participating in a conference, and a waiter asks us, “Tea or coffee?” If we are Aristotelians, we have to choose only one thing between tea and coffee, not both (exclusiveness). If we are Hegelians, we will have both tea and coffee in the same cup (synthesis). If we are Taoists, we will have both tea and coffee in different cups (complimentarity). But if we are Buddhists,

⁴This is a short story from *Buddhist Legends* (Part I), trans. Eugene Watson Burlingame, Harvard Oriental Series, ed. Charles Rockwell Lanman, Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1995, 98; see the whole story from Part II, 127-9.

⁵*Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings* comp. Paul Reps, Rutland, VT and Tokyo, Japan: C.E. Tuttle, 1965.

⁶Both the Law of Identity and the Law of Non-Contradiction, the other fundamental laws of western logic, can be reduced to the Law of the Excluded Middle.

we may have tea or coffee (only one thing), or both tea and coffee in the same cup, or both tea and coffee in different cups, or neither tea nor coffee (not both of them).

4. Conclusion

There are no ultimate criteria or standards to judge one religion as being truer, since the truly enlightened from all religions each have their rules and logic, and their own ways for transcending their own rules and logic. Prophets, saints and Arahats can transcend not only all principles and disciplines, but also all kinds of differences and deeds. In other words, people who have true religious freedom can violate their own stricture without guilt because their deeds are always for others (including God and Dhamma), not for themselves, and do not arise from their own sins and defilements. Not only is the freedom to follow one's religious law important, equally important is the freedom to transcend those laws. In this way, the understanding of religious enlightenment is ultimately supportive of the understanding of religious freedom as pluralism.