

His Excellency, Āyatullāh Jawādī Āmulī's Message to the
7th Annual Conference of the Muslim Congress of America

*I seek refuge from the accursed Shayṭān.
In the Name of Allah, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful.*

All praise belongs to God, Lord of all the worlds. The blessings of God be upon all the prophets, messengers, and guided leaders—especially the Seal of the prophets, and the Seal of the saints (boundless benedictions be upon them both). We associate ourselves to them and disclaim their enemies in God's presence.

We would like to welcome all the esteemed guests gathered here—the intelligentsia and all the noble brothers and sisters in faith.

On the occasion of the upcoming festive and blessed days of Sha'ban, we offer our felicitations to the Master of the Age (aj), to all the devotees of the Quran and the Family, and to you honourable brothers and sisters. We are hopeful that the blessings of the pure prayers of the Master of the Age (aj) in this gathering and conference of yours, will lead to correct knowledge and good acts!

The announced topic of the conference is: Freedom of Man in Islam, or Islamic Freedom. The notion of “freedom” is a part of the premises and bases of many religious, moral, and legal precepts. The meaning of “freedom” is very clear; But the *reality* of freedom is very hidden.

To explain: If a researcher wishes to address jurisprudential, ethical, or legal issues—whether they pertain to political, social, economic, or cultural law—he must incisively traverse three elements or three stages: First, the clarity and lucidity of the ethical, legal, or religious precepts; Second, the derivation of those ethico-legal and religious precepts from bases—these bases are like a bubbling spring from which the secondary ethico-legal and religious precepts come forth; Third and most importantly, the derivation of these bases from sources (*archai*).

If we do not have a true source, we will not have a correct basis; and if we do not have a correct basis, then the derived precepts will not be correct.

For example, the case of “justice” is also like this. Many of the ethico-legal and religious precepts are based upon the concept of “justice.” The meaning of “justice” is glaringly clear, but its reality is extremely complex and hidden. This is because *justice* is: “to put everything and everybody in its/his proper place.” That is, everything in its own place and every person in his own place, without going to extremes,..., this is justice. But what exactly *is* the proper place of things, and what precisely *is* the right place of persons? The ambiguity starts here.

Hence, justice, which informs the basis of many ethico-legal and religious precepts, must itself be derived from a source (*arche*); Freedom must also likewise be derived.

Those who believe in revelatory sciences—who believe in God, revelation, prophethood, messengership, and inspiration that is induced in human society through the prophets—they derive those doctrines and bases from these sources. This is because God created all things and people, created the world and created man; He also created the unflinching bond between man

and the world. Each of these three sides of the triangle of creation is based on divine order and providence. If someone were to accept this source—thinking divinely—then he must ask: That God that made man, and made the world, how did He delineate justice, how did He institute freedom?

With regards to freedom, we are faced with a number of ambiguities: One: it must become clear that man's freedom is a freedom *from* what. Two: it must be known that man's freedom is a freedom *in* what. Third: it must be made plain that man's freedom is a freedom *towards* what.

What can be understood from Islamic sources is that man has an existence that is limited. And every limited existent is limited in its power, its amplitude, its path, its rising and sitting, its speech and silence, its motion and stillness, and ultimately in all of its aspects. It is not possible that the existence of a thing is finite, but its attributes are infinite and its freedom is unlimited. This is intellectually impossible—the intellect being one of the proofs of the divine Law. (The intellect is not to be juxtaposed with the religious Law, but rather it is opposed to narration; just as a valid narration indicates the Law, demonstrative intellect also indicates the Law.) Hence man, whose existence is limited, cannot have unlimited freedom. This is impossible.

Another matter: Was man created free in the first place, or not? According to many religious evidences, man was created free and with choice. That is, he can both accept and reject—in all things, whether in his beliefs or his morals and character; whether in his speech, action, or writing, he has the two options of accepting or rejecting; man can affirm, he can deny; he can attract and he can repel; he can accept or he can reject.

God created man to be free and with choices; this freedom is God-given and no one can negate this freedom from himself. That is, if he were to say, "I did this without [employing] freedom"...this is impossible. In the same way that $2+2=5$ is impossible, it is impossible that man does something without willing or without freedom. Whether in jest or in all seriousness, the action is surely accompanied by an act of will and free[choice]; and this is a perfection that God has given to man and with this perfection he tests man. If man was forced to obey, or man was incapable, he would never reach perfection.

Now, because: 1) man's existence is limited; 2) not all things are the same (or appropriate) for him—as he is not aware of the effects of all things and bodies; nor is he fully aware of the effects of actions, writings, and speech. There are many things of whose past and future he is not aware. Hence, if a man were to say that all actions are fine for me, he would be oblivious.

While it is true that God gave man freewill. But just as his existence is limited, it is impossible that his freedom should be unlimited; his existence is thus in sync with some things and out of sync with others. Hence, *freedom* in the sense of "licentiousness" is proscribed, not impossible. So while man can be licentious—it being not impossible—such behaviour is countered by reason and prohibited by textual authority; both the intellect and tradition being the two wings of the Law, or its two lamps. The religious Law is a path and a way, and these two—the intellect and tradition—are shining lights that make us aware of the Law.

To recap: 1) Man was created free; 2) All things are not equal for him; 3) Absolute and unlimited freedom is impossible; 4) Limited licentiousness is not allowed—such licence as would allow him to do what he wants, say what he wants, use what he wants, and go where he wants...this can't be. Hence, if it is assumed that he has unlimited freedom, this is intellectually impossible. If it is assumed that he has a libertine licence, this is proscribed by both reason and textual authority (but not impossible in principle).

Accordingly, ontologically man has been created free, as per the verse:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ

There is no compulsion in religion. (2:256)

What's more, man's beliefs cannot be coerced. Man was created with free-choice, for it is written that God displayed the truth to him, just as the Prophet displayed the truth to him.

وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ ۗ فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ

And say, '[This is] the truth from your Lord: let anyone who wishes believe it, and let anyone who wishes disbelieve it.' (18:29)

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا

Indeed We have guided him to the way, be he grateful or ungrateful. (76:3)

These same ideas are variously phrased in other verses. The all have to do with ontological freedom. But because all things are not equal for him, and because the Being that created the world knows the beneficial from the harmful, knows the criteria, He limits him, and in reality, He protects him from danger and destruction. God proscribes all that is harmful for him and prescribes all that is useful.

So just as justice is a value and basis that must be derived from the source of revelation, freedom, independence, and the like, are the bases for law and must be derived from the source of revelation. Revelation says that in life, you have individual rights and community rights. A nation has political rights, social rights, economic right, and cultural rights. But every "right" has an accompanying "responsibility." Others have rights too and we are responsible to make sure that their rights are kept. We too have rights that others are responsible for keeping. To transgress the rights of another, while it is compatible with licentious human behaviour, it is not compatible with the chivalric freedom.

If someone wanted to curtail our freedom, we have a right to defend ourselves and repel such an impediment; this is a type of jihad—the lesser jihad. But only that person can be involved in the lesser jihad and be victorious in it that has been victorious on the battlefield of the greater jihad. That is, in the same way that an enemy attacks from without and intends to harm, from within it is the carnal desires that attack and attempt to take the intellect as a prisoner. If a person were to lose this internal battle and if his intellect were to be taken prisoner, as per the luminous saying of Imam Ali (a) who said:

«كَمْ مِنْ عَقْلٍ أُسِيرَ تَحْتَ هَوَىٰ أَمِيرٍ»^١

“How many an intellect is there that is held hostage by the ruling passions”

If the passions begin to rule, then: **“the [carnal] soul indeed prompts [men] to evil”** (12:52),

If the intellect is taken prisoner, then that which rules the inner realm is nothing other than passion and anger. Such a man who has passion as his ruler, has anger as his commander. If he were to enter the political arena, or its like, and work to gain the freedom of a person or a nation, because he has lost inwardly, even if he were to be victorious outwardly, his victory would be temporary and in no time by a sinister turn of events his victory would become a bitter defeat. As in those places where people have revolted but have not been able to maintain [the victory]. If a person is not victorious in the greater jihad, then he cannot be successful in political struggles. Even if he were to become apparently victorious, it would take no time before he would have to give it up.

The luminous imperative of the Quran is that the Hujjaj and the Mu'tamirin must do the *tawwāf* of the Ka'bah; this is because this Ka'bah is the *bayt al-'atiq*, that is the “the free house”. It is not in the ownership or control of anybody and it teaches man about freedom and chivalric independence. Circumambulating the Free House, imbues freedom; Praying toward the Free House, also imbues freedom. The Quran calls us to enter the socio-political arena and its like, it calls us to embark upon revolution and struggle, only when we are first victorious in the inner jihad. It says:

فَلْيُقَاتِلْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ يَشْرُونَ الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا بِالْآخِرَةِ

Let those fight in the way of Allah who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter;

(4:74)

The first condition of fighting and struggle is that a person is not given to passions and carnal desires. Only he is capable of such struggle who is free from passions and liberated from carnal desires. Hence, freedom from carnal desires is a precursor to political, social, and other such freedoms.

If freedom is desired, the most desired of freedoms is ethical or spiritual freedom; after this is the outer or bodily freedom. If we are ordered to pray towards the Free House, it means, learn to be truly free.

Another saying from Imam Ali (a) holds that God-wariness frees a man from the rule and dominion of any and all rulers—from the dominion of passions, carnal desires, fantasies, ... eating and drinking, and their like.

A God-wary man becomes free from such sinister domination.

In some other luminous sayings of Imam Ali (a) it is reported that he said:

“In the past I had a brother who I held in great esteem; the reason for this was that he belittled the world.”

^١. نهج البلاغه , حکمت ٢١١ .

“The thing that made him great in my eyes was the smallness of the world in his eyes.”
Then the Imam said:

«كَانَ خَارِجًا مِنْ سُلْطَانِ بَطْنِهِ»^٢

“He was free from the dominion of his belly”.

So it is not the case that if a person [eats] whatever he wants—whether halal or haram, whether tahir or najis—that such a person is *free* from the dominion of his belly.”

But if a person were to become free of the dominion of his belly, from the dominion of passion and anger, free from the dominion of fantasies, then he would have healthy thoughts and correct intentions. Such a person would be good in both his understanding and action; as he is free from undue imagination and fantasy on the cognitive plane; and free from immoderate lust and anger on the conative plane.

Imam Ali (a) said that God-wariness is the source of all true freedom. In another of his sayings he exclaims:

«أَلَا حُرٌّ يَدَعُ هَذِهِ اللَّمَازَةَ»

“Is there no [truly] free man who can leave this chewed morsel—LUMAZAH—[for those of its ilk]”.

“Lumazah” is that morsel of chewed food that gets caught in the teeth. When someone partakes of food and something gets caught in his teeth that requires a toothpick to remove, this thing is called “Lumazah”. The Imam says that that which is in the hands of mankind today is just the “Lumazah” of the previous generation. What they used and ate, has not come to you from between their teeth. All these houses are like this, these carpets, these cars, these lands...the previous generation had these things and used them and left them as a souvenir that you now have appropriated! He said, is there not a truly free man who has put aside the chewed morsel and become free. “Is there no [truly] free man who can leave this *lumazah* [for those of its ilk]”.

If we take recourse to the revelatory source, we can get the true meaning of freedom from there; and understand where it is impossible and where disallowed; ascertaining both the nature of ontological freedom and that of legal freedom.

But if we do not take recourse to such a revelatory source, we will take the legal precepts from the conceptual bases of “freedom”, “justice” and their like, but our “justice”, “freedom”, “independence”, ... will in this case be baseless; Hence we will perforce have to turn to cultural baggage, popular customs and habits to provide it for us. But these things have no cognitive content and religious basis.

Hence freedom in Islam rests on the facts: 1) man is ontologically free; 2) legally limited; 3) this limitation is for his protection; 4) the most important freedom is ethical or intellectual freedom—in which his thought is free from the dangers of fantasy and delusion; 5) on the plane of volition, he is free from the injuries and plagues of lust and anger.

^٢. نهج البلاغه , حكمت ٢٨٩ .

When these ethical freedoms are obtained first, and thereafter he comes upon socio-political freedoms, he is then totally successful. You can see an example of such freedom in the blessed existence of Imam Husayn (a)—on the occasion of whose birth anniversary you have convened this important conference.

We pray that God all-mighty makes you all the more acquainted with the teachings of the Quran and the Family, and that He gives all of you the success and opportunity to acquire both ethical freedom and socio-political freedom; so that under the graces of His Wali, you reach that glorified chivalric independence and God-praised freedom!

May Allah forgive us and you. Peace be upon you and the Mercy of Allah and His Graces.

‘Abdullāh Jawādī Āmulī

Translated by Shuja Ali Mirza