



FREEDOM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE IN MEDIAEVAL ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Muna Abu Zaid ●

The question of freedom is one of *taklif* (religious obligation), responsibility, rewards and punishments. Mankind recognised this in ancient times and it still preoccupies them today.

If 'freedom' today is a philosophical, political, economic and legal concept, then a look at its origins will reveal the significance of its metaphysical aspect in Islamic thought. Initially a metaphysical concept, it had an important role that gave it new dimensions, while its empirical and practical angles were also not overlooked and their effects could be clearly seen in several areas of life.

Here we shall consider freedom as a philosophical issue; by this we mean the many-sided debate that took place between Islamic thinkers – between those who maintained that freedom existed and those who denied it. We shall also examine freedom as a state or condition, which is something that arises when a person

● Scholar and academic from Egypt.



recognises his own true nature through his public and private behaviour and the way in which he lives his daily life. Freedom can only win through when a person attaches importance to every historical event; when this occurs, it will prove its own existence.

We have chosen three models of Islamic thought – theological, philosophical and Sufi – to enable us to understand their ideas on the concept of freedom and how it is exercised in daily life.

1. The Concept of Freedom

Semantically, the concept of freedom has many meanings, most of which come from the idea of being released from restrictions or liberated from captivity. Al Raghīb al Isfahani says, ‘I freed the people when I released them and I liberated them from the captivity of prison. Liberty makes a person free, and a free person is the opposite of a slave.¹’ Among Arabs the main meaning of freedom is the converse of servitude and slavery, so that a free person (male or female) is the opposite of a slave.

The meaning of freedom as a philosophical term varies depending on the different philosophical schools. It can be ‘Will preceded by vision with discrimination. It can mean the ability to perform or desist from performing an action without submitting to any external pressure, which is the converse of the concept of *jabriyah* (determinism). Freedom of choice, or *qadriyah* (free will), is the ability of a person to choose his actions.²’ It is also ‘the characteristic of existence of a person unencumbered by restrictions who acts according to his will or his disposition.³’

So freedom is when a person is able to do or not do something according to his will and his choice. There are two types – internal and external. Internal freedom means the power to choose between two opposite

¹ Al Isfahani, Al Raghīb, *Al Mufradat fi Gharib al Qur’an (Obscure Vocabulary in the Qur’an)*, ed. Mohammed al Sayyid al Kailani, al Halabi, Cairo, 1324 AH, p.11.

² Karam, Yousuf, and others, *Al Mu’jam al Falsafi (Philosophical Lexicon)*, Cairo, 1966, pp.64 and 65.

³ Saliba, Jamil, *Al Mu’jam al Falsafi (Philosophical Lexicon)*, Dar al Kitab al Lubnani, Beirut, 1982, Part 1, p.462.



or different things and is expressed though freedom of the will or freedom of the conscience. It is the converse of coercion. There are several categories of external freedom – natural, civil, political, physical, intellectual and religious, which includes the sub-category of freedom of worship¹.

Freedom assumes an independent will. That is the key element, while capability assumes power or capacity.

2. The Source of Freedom in Islam

The source of freedom may be first and foremost natural and innate; however, the propositions put forward in Islamic thought indicate that it has basic sources in the *deen* (religion) itself. There are textual sources in the Book (the *Holy Qur'an*) and the Sunnah, as well as *ijtihad* (interpretative judgement) sources in the form of the opinions of leading Islamic thinkers.

The *Holy Qur'an* includes several major principles and ethical values governing the individual's behaviour towards other people, whether as individuals or collectively. Mohammed (PBUH) was a Messenger who called upon all people to embrace the Faith, and his mission was 'with wisdom and beautiful preaching' (*Al Nahl* – The Bees: 125) [The Arabic text says 'Al Ra'ad v. 125'. Tr.], not with compulsion or coercion. If a person chooses his beliefs this cannot mean he has been deprived of his freedom: 'Let there be no compulsion in religion' (*Al Baqarah* – The Heifer: 256) is one of the sublime principles sanctioned in the *Holy Qur'an*.

The conduct of the Prophet (PBUH) in his words, deeds and decisions is the best example and strongest assertion of the concept of freedom in Islam. His life was a practical demonstration of it; an 'ideal life' that embodied the principles and values of Islam.

The *Holy Qur'an* examines the question of freedom from several angles², including religious freedom, intellectual freedom, personal

1 Al Bustani, Boutrus, *Kitab Da'irat al Ma'aref (Encyclopaedia)*, Dar Al Ma'rifah, Beirut, 1882, Part 7, pp.2 and 3.

2 Abdul Jabbar, Salimah, *Al Din wa'l Hurriyah (Religion and Freedom)* Arab Unity Press, Libya, 2nd impression, 1991, p.148.



freedom and political freedom, which were put into practice in everyday life by the Muslim community – both rulers and subjects – since in Islam faith is not authentic unless it fulfils the conditions of freedom in every sphere.

However, the political situation quickly changed, the concepts of religion and politics became intertwined and political groups resorted to defending their positions by inventing creeds that were alien to Islam. One of these was *jabr* (doctrine of predestination).

3. The Arrival of Jabr (Predestination) Doctrine in the Muslim Community

After Islam had become well established, the notion of *jabr* first emerged as a doctrine in the form of a politically motivated concept that sought to give itself an Islamic flavour so that it could justify the political changes that had transformed the consultative style of Caliphate (as set up by the Muslim community after the death of the Messenger, PBUH) into a semi-monarchical system under Muawiyah and his progeny who succeeded him.

In Arabic the concept of *jabr*, even before Islam, has been associated with connotations of slavery and subjection. Arabs would describe tyrannical, despotic rule as *jabriyah* and a tyrannical ruler as *jabbar*. Imam Ali bin Abi Talib gives an example of this when he urges his followers to fight Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan and his companions, with the words, ‘Advance [against] a people who fight you. Let them not be *jabbarin* whom people take as masters, while they take Allah’s servants as chattels and their wealth to circulate it among themselves.’ This was a description of the regime of Muawiyah, which Ali bin Abi Talib saw as despotic and a rebellion against the Imam (leader).

Al Shahrastani defines the *jabr* belief as ‘a denial of the slave’s [i.e. man’s] true power of action, and ascribing his [action] to the Most High Lord.¹’

¹ Al Shahrastani, *Al Milal wa'l Nihal (Sects and Creeds)*, ed. Mohammed al Sayyid al Kailani, Cairo, 1967, Part 1, p.85.



There are several different groups within the *jabr* tendency, which may be put into two basic categories:

- Pure *jabriyah*, which does not recognise a person's freedom of action in any shape or form
- Middle-of-the-road *jabriyah*, which recognises that a person is free to act, but in a completely ineffective way

In the *jabr* view, a person is powerless and cannot be described as having capability. His actions are the result of coercion. He has no power, will or choice; instead, Allah the Most High creates actions in him just as He creates all other inanimate things. Actions are attributed to him 'metaphorically', just as they are attributed to inanimate objects – as one might say 'The tree bore fruit, the water flowed, the stone moved, the sun rose etc.'¹ This view maintains that every action that occurs is predetermined and predestined by Allah.

Muawiyah exploited the idea of *jabr* for political purposes when he declared it lawful to revolt against the Imam and change the regime, claiming that anything that happened was decreed by Allah. In doing so he wanted to convince people that his accession to power and the emirship of the Muslims was an act of fate. Hence, he spread the idea of *jabr*. His successors also promoted the idea and used religious language and explanations to justify their policies.

This had a serious impact on Islamic thought, which used belief in *qadr* (destiny) to justify current situations, whether in the realm of politics (to justify the power and authority of the rulers) or in cases in which members of the Muslim community created chaos and committed wrongful acts, claiming that it was not they who had committed their actions and that the only force that performed actions was Allah. This posed a threat to the principle of rewards and punishments, and was tantamount to an attempt to undermine the Sharia and the recognition of a person's individual responsibility for his actions.

¹ *Ibid.* Part 1, p.87.



4. Freedom in Islamic Thought

The promotion of the idea of *jabr* gave rise to attempts to resist it and a number of anti-*jabr* tendencies emerged within Islamic thought. As the Muslim community grew and expanded into new areas, it came under the influence of non-Arab civilisations, which infused it with their ideas and culture, and an intellectual model called *'ilm al kalam* (theology) arose based on analysis and exegesis. Muslims also came in contact with Greek philosophy and this produced what came to be known as *falasifat al Islam* (philosophers of Islam), as well as a number of ascetic spiritual movements.

These movements sought to promote the concept of freedom in theory and practice. However, the question that poses itself here is, Why did these movements try to lay so much emphasis on freedom when Islam and the practices of the early Muslims already demonstrated a commitment to it? The answer is, it was a reaction against the spread of *jabr* at that time. *Jabr* is alien to Islam and appeared in certain specific political circumstances that helped it to establish itself.

The question of freedom in Islam came to the fore during the course of discussions about *qadr*. *Qadr* is an ancient Arab concept that existed in pre-Islamic times, when the Arabs of the *Jahiliyyah* (Time of Ignorance) had a god of *qadr* called Al-lat. However, *qadr* as a concept did not crystallise clearly until the arrival of Islam, which made it one of the six creedal elements of the Faith and gave it a theoretical and practical dimension¹.

The issue of freedom has been examined under a number of headings including 'destiny', '*jabr*', 'choice', 'earning rewards or punishments for one's deeds', 'the creation of actions' and 'capability'. All these elements are integral to the concept of freedom from the theoretical point of view.

However, from the point of view of practice, as condition and experience, freedom has been considered under the headings of 'responsibility', 'Sharia *hudud* (limits)', '*shura* (Islamic style consultation)', 'justice', and '*al amr*

¹ Al Qadi, Abdul Jabbar, *Sharh al Usul al Khamsah (Explanation of the Five Principles)*, ed. Abdul Karim Uthman. Maktabat Wahba, Cairo, first impression, 1384 AH/1965 CE p.397.



bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar (commanding the good and forbidding the evil)', to name but a few.

a) Freedom in '*Ilm al Kalam*

'Ilm al kalam was the first intellectual activity to study the ideational dimensions of Islam. Leading exponents of it, ie. theologians, sought to interpret Qur'anic *ayats* (verses) that touched on the issue of freedom and show the relationship between the human will and the Divine will, as well as the extent to which man is capable of performing actions.

The leading theological groups who defended the idea of freedom were the Mu'tazilites, who sought to free the human mind and will from external control. Their position was that freedom was linked to the question of justice.

There was consensus among the Mu'tazilites that Allah was not the Creator of man's actions, nor did He play a part in creating or predestining the actions men earned in terms of rewards and punishments. Instead, it was 'Man who originates this thing which he is capable of doing in actuality, and not predestination – and in reality, not metaphorically', while in their view voluntary acts occur through the ability of man to originate them, either directly or by causing them to happen.

In the Mu'tazilite view man is free and able to choose his actions. He acts with the capability granted to him by Divine Grace. He directs this capability as he wishes and his actions come about 'in accordance with his intentions and motives'. Their evidence for this is the fact of imposed by Allah, promise given by Allah, threat made by Allah, the sending of Messengers and the existence of censure and praise, in that we differentiate between the 'doer of good and the evil-doer and the aesthetically beautiful and the aesthetically ugly; we praise the doer of good for his good deeds and we censure the doer of evil for his evil deeds; however, these would not be not acceptable reactions to an aesthetically beautiful person or an aesthetically ugly person.¹

¹ Al Qadi, *ibid.* p.332.



In addition, Allah's justice requires that a person should not be rewarded or punished for deeds that he has not done. Moreover, man does ugly deeds that it would not be correct to ascribe to Allah. 'Hence, if it is said that He, the Most High, is Justice, then this means that all His actions are good and that he does not do ugly deeds or act in violation of what He has made incumbent upon Himself.¹'

The Mu'tazilites based the principle of justice on the concept of *Tawhid* (Divine Unity). The justice of Allah excludes injustice on His part, and it is unjust to require a person to do something that is beyond his capacity and hold him accountable for something that he has been coerced into doing. Hence, in their view, man is a free being with the freedom to choose, and responsible for his actual deeds, which originate from him alone.

The justice of Allah assumes that man is free. Without freedom, prophethood or a Divine Message would have no meaning and there would be no basis for Sharia or for holding a person responsible. What would be the point of sending Messengers to someone who is not free to follow them and comply with what they call upon him to do?

The Mu'tazilites were not content merely to establish the principle of human freedom at the theoretical level, but exercised that freedom in their actions too. Many of the positions they adopted demonstrated that their view of freedom was not limited merely to theoretical investigation; they went beyond it to prove its reality in practical life.

Their vision of freedom was not limited to the specific field of man as an individual, nor was it just an exercise in abstract contemplation. Their actual aim was to ensure the freedom to protect the *deen*, raise its standing, help it achieve victory by distinguishing the Divine will from the human will, and uphold the Absolute Unity of Allah by purifying the Divine Essence from everything that tainted it. First and foremost, they liberated the mind from all traces of imitation or subservience and rejected anything that was in conflict with this position.

¹ Al Qadi, *ibid.* p.532.



For them, freedom extended into the political field when they opposed the concept of *jabr*, which the Umayyad state was trying to promote. When the Mu'tazilites discovered that these religious ideas about *jabr* had a political dimension they joined the battle against a wide range of trends and creeds, which interpreted certain Qur'anic *ayats* to serve political ends, and they fought hard against the leaders of the political wing of the *jabriyah* tendency¹.

The Mu'tazilites exercised freedom through *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar*, which was one of their five basic principles. Although most Islamic thinkers and theologians were agreed on this principle, the Mu'tazilites practiced it more than any other groups, giving it a particular priority and adopting it as an effective tool for confronting the Umayyad state.

The Mu'tazilites considered the Umayyad rulers and their walis, with a few exceptions, as usurpers who had deviated from the Sharia. They described them as misguided and immoral and their state as founded on abomination through having transformed the consultative style of Caliphate into a hereditary kingdom. Because that state was guilty of countless injustices and major sins, they saw its kings, walis and princes as illegitimate, claiming that they failed to fulfil the conditions of justice; accordingly, it was the duty of Muslims to fight them and rebel against them whenever possible².

Al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'an'l munkar means that *ma'ruf* (good) must not be lost and *munkar* (evil) must not be allowed to occur. If the number of people charged with the task of ensuring it should increase, the duty to enforce it is no longer incumbent on the rest of the community. There are two kinds: one is concerned with what some people do, while the other is concerned with what all people do. The job of the imams includes

1 Al Qadi, Abdul Jabbar, *Al Mughni (The One that Enriches)*, Part 8, (*Al Makhluq*), ed. Tawfiq al Tawil and Prof. Said Zayed, Egyptian Public Establishment for Authorship, Translation, Printing and Publication, 1963, p.4.

2 Amarah, Mohammed, *Al Mu'tazilah wa'l Thawrah (The Mu'tazilites and the Revolution)*, Al Mu'assasah al 'Arabiyah li'l Dirasat wa'l Nashr, Beirut, first impression, 1977, p.47.



laying down the *hudud* (limits of acceptable behaviour) and safeguarding Islam, while defending the borders and organising armies is the job of the judiciary, princes and other similar categories. What other individuals should do is resist evil such as drinking alcohol, theft, fornication, adultery and similar acts. However, 'if there is an Imam, he is the most proper person to obey and turn to for advice and consultation.'¹ However, since the imams at that time had not acceded to power with the consent of the Muslims, it was a duty to fight them, and that is what the Mu'tazilites tried to do during the Umayyad era.

The Mu'tazilites called for the imposition of *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* by two means – the word and the sword². Their call for people to go out and bear arms against the unjust ruling authority was a revolutionary act in support of freedom, in contrast to the *jabriyah* position, which called for a deferral of judgement, a judicial ruling on the question of criticising the ruling authority and the appointment of arbiters, thus denying people the freedom to criticise the government and the ruler, because in their view, ie. the *jabriyah* view, the ruler's actions were predestined, thereby relieving him of responsibility for injustice and corruption and removing the insurgents' justification for revolution and rebellion. It was this that led the Mu'tazilites to oppose that position.

The Mu'tazilites also defended the principle of social justice as being a fundamental factor in ensuring freedom in general, and they resisted the monopolisation of wealth and the abandonment of the Islamic approach towards social justice; this was particularly the case at the beginning of the third decade of the second century AH, or in 122 AH to be precise. The general mass of the people took part in the Mu'tazilite revolution, which broke out at that time, because they were not afraid of the economic sanctions the Umayyad Caliph Hisham bin Abdul Malik threatened to impose on the rebels.

Al Qadi Abdul Jabbar observes that the freedom enjoyed by an

¹ Al Qadi, *op. cit.*, p.48.

² Ibn al Murtada, *Kitab al Qala'id fi Tas-hih al 'Aqa'id* (*Anthology on the Correction of Beliefs*), ed. and introduction Albert Nasri Nader, Dar al Mashriq, Beirut, 1985, p.149.



individual does not entitle him to monopolise wealth for himself – an assertion that reminds us of the Islamic precept that says, Individual freedom exists as long as it does not harm the common interest. This limit on individual freedom is an extension of the freedom of society to take its just entitlements from that wealth. The Mu'tazilites rejected the unrestricted freedom of the individual to do whatever he liked with his property; what defines the domain of the owner here is not the fact that he is the owner, but whether his actions with regard to his property are useful or harmful¹.

So economic freedom in the Mu'tazilite view is based on respect for the rights of the individual and the rights of the community. Mu'tazilites linked individual freedom to collective freedom and pointed out that the Imam had a right to involve himself in people's wealth – either by giving or taking² – in exchange for protecting the rights of society with respect to individual freedom, which may be abused.

b) Freedom in the View of the Islamic Philosophers

The Islamic philosophers attached great importance to studying the question of freedom and defining its concepts. Their interest was at two levels – Divine and human – and they related it to the issues of moral philosophy and political philosophy, as well as other philosophical fields.

We have chosen al Farabi (d.339 AH) as an example of the Islamic philosophers who studied freedom and its practical applications.

As a philosopher, al Farabi was particularly interested in politics and ethics. Writing about *al Madinah al Fadilah* (The Virtuous City, or Utopia), he found himself faced with the problem of the will and destiny, so naturally he defined his position on freedom and the extent of man's effectiveness and ability to act, so that his responsibility for his actions could be determined. He also commented on people's roles in the Virtuous City.

Al Farabi also stood out from the other Islamic philosophers in that he attached the greatest importance to politics; this is something we do not

¹ Al Qadi, *op. cit.*, pp.478-479.

² Al Qadi, Abdul Jabbar, *Al Mughni (The One that Enriches)*, Part 20, Section 2, p.28.



find with the philosophers who came after him. His broad philosophical vision of political issues covered such areas as the state, the leadership of the state and the individual as citizen or active civil and political being. He also touched on the concept of justice and the state system as he believed it ought to be. His attitude and approach owed much to the situation of the Abbasid state at that time, when various different forces were challenging the Caliphate's authority with the aim of seceding from the central Caliphate.

Aware of this unhappy situation, al Farabi saw that where reform was concerned everything depended upon the leadership. His general aim was the reform of the state, the rescue of Islamic society from the plight it was in, the realisation of the Islamic goal of a government based on the principles of justice and equality, and the creation of a community of moral, virtuous individuals in which virtue would spread from the individual to the city as a whole, ie. it would be transformed from morality to politics within a framework of freedom tempered by responsibility.

Al Farabi emphasised the role of the intellect in acquiring knowledge and stated that it is able to judge an action as being good or bad; the intellect, he said, is the yardstick for judging good and evil. A person cannot totally overcome his appetites and desires because they are ruled by the physical world; the *nafs* (lower soul/psyche) can therefore only be freed through being liberated from its physical bonds, after which it, ie. the *nafs*, becomes the intellect¹.

Every human being is endowed with two forces – one rational, the other animal – each of which has a will and the power to choose, resembling a person standing between them. Each of these forces also has a dominant tendency: the animal force tends towards urgent physical pleasures, while the rational force tends towards things with 'laudable outcomes', such as the different branches of science and knowledge and actions with praiseworthy consequences. Man is free to choose between them.

Man has a will and has control over his actions if they are the result

¹ Al Farabi, *Kitab al Millah (Book of the Religious Community)* and other texts, ed. Muhsin Mahdi, Dar al Mashriq, Beirut, 2nd impression, 1991, p.69.



of knowledge and reason, and provided that they do not clash with the will and choice of others or with certain characteristics that are found in other natural objects or beings; man does what he does within the limits of the possibilities available to him. Within those limits he enjoys complete and genuine freedom.

The limits of man's freedom are beyond his control. The freedom he enjoys is not absolute to the point of chaos and disorder, but can be described as 'rationed and authentic', in that it is compatible with the intellect, the will and the ability to choose between good or evil. Al Farabi expresses this as follows: 'The nature of goodness is that it is achieved through choice and the will. Likewise, evil is committed through the will and choice.'¹ 'So anyone who aims to do good must not fail to keep his psyche awake at all times and urge it to do what is best for it, and not neglect it even for an hour.'²

Man, in al Farabi's view, is by nature a moral being. He lives his civil life within a framework of responsible freedom, just as he lives his moral life within a framework of responsible rational choice. He is not a creature that lives in isolation; rather, he is in contact with others; he serves them and they serve him, he teaches them and they teach him, he rules them and they judge him. It is this that transfers his concept of freedom from the individual sphere to the collective sphere.

Al Farabi's attitude to freedom can be clearly grasped if we understand the meaning of politics in its broadest sense, in the sense that includes ethics and society within the context of what he called 'civil science', the science that 'examines the different categories of actions and the path followed by the will, as well as the aptitudes, ethics, dispositions and characteristics which determine those actions and the path taken, including the goals those actions aim to serve, and how they should be present in man.'³

1 Al Farabi, *Ara Ahli'l Madinah'l Fadilah (Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City)*, introduction and commentary Dr. Albert Nasri Nader, Dar al Mashriq, Beirut, 4th impression, 1986, p.118.

2 Al Farabi *Risalat al Siyasa (Treatise on Politics)*, part of a collection of writings on politics, ed. Fuad Abdul Munim Ahmed, Mu'assasat Shabab al Jami'ah, Alexandria, 1402 AH, pp.8 and 9.

3 Al Farabi, *Kitab al Millah (Book of the Religious Community)*, p.69.



Al Farabi is not content merely to define the nature of freedom in theory. For him, knowledge of it must be translated into action – action that can be clearly seen in the moral and political sciences, which recognise that ethics are determined by the will. In *Al Madinah al Fadilah* he establishes the principle of human freedom, in that the will is the cornerstone of politics. As for those in the Virtuous City who are forced and coerced into committing ‘acts of ignorance’, he notes that if a person is coerced into doing something, the fact that he persists in doing the thing that he has been coerced into doing does not mean that he acquires a ‘psychological nature that is opposed to the virtuous natures’¹, since in order to acquire a moral nature (whether a virtue or a vice) a man must choose and perform an action of his own free will, without being compelled or coerced into doing it.

As regards human behaviour, theory is valueless unless it is coupled with action, because ‘the completion of knowledge is action’ and a true and just human being is one who knows what is good and does it, while a complete philosopher is one who grasps the theoretical issues and translates them into a practical philosophy so that he can change his city for the better. ‘The people of the Virtuous City have things in common which they know and do, as well as other things pertaining to knowledge and action.’² The opinions found in the Virtuous State include ‘opinions about theoretical matters and opinions about matters pertaining to the will.’³

Al Farabi’s statements about freedom cannot be confined to just its theoretical aspects. They also deal with the practical, applied sphere as well. This general approach is reflected in his other philosophical works and we will not find a single book among them that is purely theoretical or purely practical; all of them link theory closely with practice. This is a highly positive approach in that it encourages people to play an active part in life and cooperate with others, rather than being passive bystanders. Al Farabi likens the ‘Virtuous City to a complete, healthy

1 Al Farabi *Ara Ahli'l Madinah'l Fadilah (Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City)*, pp.144-145.

2 Al Farabi, *ibid.* p.134.

3 Al Farabi, *Kitab al Millah (Book of the Religious Community)*, p.44.



body in which all the organs work together to safeguard life and ensure it is lived to the full.¹

Al Farabi's most important book on politics – *Ara Ahli'l Madinah'l Fadilah (Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City)* – took him years to write. He began writing it in Baghdad and finished it in Damascus. Then he revised it and added some chapters in Egypt. The book is the result of his having experienced life in the three societies of Iraq, Syria and Egypt, a fact which he himself recognises when he says, 'The most useful thing a person can do when studying politics and other sciences is to ponder over people's conditions, activities and behaviour.'²

So his vision of freedom was not limited to theory; he also observed it in reality in people's daily lives.

In this book, and in his other writings, al Farabi sees man as a social being who can only attain virtue or become a complete human being through society. Man's aim is happiness; that is the goal of every human, who sees happiness as being the epitome of goodness and completeness. True happiness is what humans strive towards through society or, as al Farabi says, 'The greatest good and the ultimate completeness is acquired firstly in the City rather than in a community which is less than it. A city – in the sense of the community – where there is cooperation over those things that are conducive to true happiness is a Virtuous City, and a nation in which all the cities cooperate over what is conducive to happiness is a Virtuous Nation, and the same is true of a Virtuous World.'³ It is as if by so doing it fulfils the Message of Islam in that its Mission is a worldwide mission to all creatures.

Al Farabi always aimed to promote political reform, which he saw as the way to social and moral reform. He believed that a virtuous, just government could achieve the desired change and reform in people's morals and conditions. Hence, his focus was on the Virtuous Leader and

1 Al Farabi, *Ara Ahli'l Madinah'l Fadilah (Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City)*, p.118.

2 Al Farabi, *Risalat al Siyashah (Treatise on Politics)*, p. [sic].

3 Al Farabi, *Ara Ahli'l Madinah'l Fadilah (Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City)*, p.118.



his role in leading the community. This leader should pursue every action capable of achieving happiness and his attributes should include, ‘that he should be strong-willed with regard to the thing which he believes ought to be done and act as a “bridge” leading to it; he should be bold and unafraid, and not weak-minded.¹’

If there should be a free, virtuous person in a non-virtuous city, al Farabi calls upon him to leave that city and seek a Virtuous City where he can live with his companions and associates. However, he believes there is ‘nothing to prevent him from being part of the Virtuous City while living – willingly or unwillingly – in an ignorant city, [though] such a person would be a “foreign body” in such a city ... Therefore the virtuous who are driven to live in ignorant cities because there is no Virtuous City should emigrate to the Virtuous City if it should happen to exist at some time at present or in the future.²’ In other words, he should not surrender to his current bad situation; al Farabi tells him he should exercise his freedom by leaving the city that does not conform to his predilections and tastes; he should emigrate in search of the Virtuous City, particularly if he fails to convert the society in which he lives into a Virtuous Society.

So, for al Farabi freedom was not just a product of the imagination or a theoretical study. Instead, he formulated the concept as a realistic vision inspired by his day-to-day life among the societies he visited. His many journeys among various communities in their differing economic circumstances enabled him to acquire an authentic and realistic vision of freedom.

c) Freedom from the Sufi Perspective

Sufism is part of Islamic thought in its broad sense. It is hard to imagine that the Sufis had an unrealistic view of the issues and concepts of freedom, including its relationship to responsibility and the human will, whether from the point of view of the philosophers or the theologians, particularly since their ranks included distinguished philosophers, theologians and *fuqaha* (scholars of doctrine and jurisprudence).

¹ Al Farabi, *ibid.* p.129.

² Al Farabi *Kitab al Millah (Book of the Religious Community)*, p.56.

However, for them freedom had a special meaning, which is different from the meanings we have come across among other trends in Islamic thought. There is nothing odd about this because they used their own independent terminology and expressions and it is not possible to understand their ideas properly unless we can correctly interpret the words in which they expressed them. This was noted by al Qushairi (d.465 AH) when he said, ‘This sect have expressions that they use among themselves so that their meanings can be obscure to those who are not of them.’¹

Some people, who regard belief in *jabr* as the most crucial element in Islam’s spiritual life, claim all Sufis, whatever order they belong to, are followers of *jabr*².

This is completely untrue; there are some who believe in *jabr* and others who believe in free will. Most of those who champion *jabr* claim, falsely, to be Sufis and try to use Sufism as an excuse for abandoning religious obligations and responsibilities. Such people maintain that they do not attach importance to the outward aspects of the *deen* but look to its inner aspects, and that the rules extrapolated by the *fuqaha* are nothing more than external elements of the Sharia; the inner dimension, on the other hand, reveals the meaning of the Unseen. They thus make a distinction between the Sharia and the Truth and claim that they are the ones who follow the Truth.

The Sufi tendency to give priority to the ‘inner’ over the ‘outer’ has its risks, because ‘it leads to the abrogation of one’s religious duties and the denial of the principle of responsibility. Some people who claim to be Sufis have fallen into this trap and have allowed themselves to be seduced into vice and other evil deeds, using the cover of drunkenness and unconsciousness to commit acts that Allah has forbidden.’³

These people claim that ‘special freedom’ has been granted to the elite

¹ Al Qushairi, *Al Risalah (The Treatise)*, Matba’at al Halabi, first impression, 1940, p.33.

² al Nashshar, Ali Sami, *Nash’at al Fikr al Falsafi fi’l Islam (The Development of Philosophical Thought in Islam)*, Dar al Ma’aref, Cairo, 8th impression, 1980, Part 3, p.286.

³ Madkur, Ibrahim Bayumi, *Fi’l Falsafah ‘l Islamiyah, Manhaj wa Tatbiq (On Islamic Philosophy, Methodology and Application)*, Dar al Ma’aref, 1968, p.138.



which permits them to reject the outer aspects of the *deen* and allows the drinking of ‘free intoxicants’, not just for this minority but in general, on the grounds that moderation means control, that ‘talk of absolute freedom leads to disaster, madness, unbelief and hellfire.’¹

The position that rejects free will – like the extreme free will position – does not represent the majority view. Most Sufis agree with the Sunni view on freedom and affirm that people are responsible for their actions and have religious obligations. Many of them wrote about freedom, particularly al Qushairi, who included a whole chapter dedicated to the subject in his *Risalah* (Treatise), which had a huge impact on those who came after him.

Al Muhasibi (d.243 AH) wrote about freedom in his book *Al Ri’ayah* (*Guarding Allah’s Rights*). In *Al Ihyaa’* (*Revival of the Religious Sciences*), Imam al Ghazali (d.505 AH) deals with the term ‘freedom’ and its ethical and political dimensions and regards freedom as being a major value only in those two spheres. Ibn Arabi (d.638 AH) devotes some chapters of his book *Al Futuhat al Makkiyah* (*The Mecca Conquests*) to the status of freedom.

The Sufi approach to freedom is different from other approaches to the study of human actions. In their view, freedom does not merely involve a free choice between two actions; it also has the special meaning of liberating the *nafs* (lower soul/psyche) from its attachment to the world and its pleasures. In this sense it cannot be separated from the meaning of thralldom to Allah.

Sufis define freedom as a liberation from everything except Allah. It is a liberation from thralldom to the world, thralldom to the *nafs* and thralldom to Satan. It is a ‘departure from slavery to created beings and a cutting off of relations and ties with others.’² There are different classes of freedom:

¹ Rosenthal, Franz, *Mafhum al Hurriyah fi’l Islam* (*The Concept of Freedom in Islam*), tr. Ma’an Ziyadeh and Radwan al Sayyid, Arab Development Institute, Beirut, first impression, 1978, p.98.

² Al Jurjani, Al Sharif, *Al Ta’rifat* (*Definitions*), Dar al Kitab al Misri, Cairo, Dar al Kitab al Lubnani, Beirut, first impression, 1411AH/1991 CE, p.100. Also, al Khalidi, Ahmed al Naqshabandi, *Mu’jam al Kalimat al Sufiyah* (*Lexicon of Sufi Terms*), ed. Adib Nasruddin, Maktabat al Intishar al Arabi, first impression, 1987, p.28.



general, from being enslaved to desires and lusts; specific, that is to say, freedom from wants through eradicating the desire for them from the desire for the Truth; and ‘special specific’, freedom from slavery to the traces and vestiges of things so that they can be obliterated to reveal the Light of Truth.

This meaning is expressed in the words of the poet:

‘The slave is a free man as long as he is content
And the free man is a slave as long as he desires.’

This view of freedom illustrates the intimate link between the concept of freedom and the concept of thralldom to Allah. Its proponents always use the term ‘*abd* (slave) with reference to a person who is committed to the Truth and ‘*ubudiyah* (thralldom) with reference to Allah.

Much has been said by the Sufi sheikhs to explain this link. According to Ahmed bin Khusrowayh (d.240 AH), ‘freedom is in total thralldom, while to reach a state of thralldom there is total freedom.’ Bishr al Hafi (d.277 AH) says that a person who ‘wishes to savour the taste of freedom and enjoy relief from thralldom, let him purify the innermost thoughts between himself and Allah the Most High.¹’

When al Junaid (d.297 AH) was asked about freedom, he replied, ‘You will not attain true freedom while you still have a trace of the reality of being in thrall to it. If you are a slave of Him Alone, you will be free in that which is other than Him.’²

Freedom, in their view, means that a person should not desire anything of this world or of the *nafs*. If he is compelled to do so, his capability and choice will be lost. Freedom is an assertion of the *Tawhid* (Oneness) of worship and a call to surrender to none but Allah.

Tawhid is defined by Ibn al Qayyim al Jawziyyah (d.751 AH) as ‘testifying to the Singularity of the Lord, Blessed be He, the Most High, in creation and dominion, and to the fact that what He wishes, is, and what He does

1 Al Salmi, Abu Abdul Rahman, *Tabaqat al Sufiyah (Sufi Ranks)*, ed. Nuruddin Sharibah, Maktabat al Khanji, Cairo, 2nd impression, 1389 AH/1969 CE, p.104.

2 Al Salmi, *ibid.* p.158.



not wish, is not, and that not an atom moves except with His permission, and that creation is subjugated beneath His authority.¹

Total thralldom entails the 'end of planning the course of one's own daily life' and divesting oneself of everything apart from Allah. Freedom is the abandonment of thralldom to other created beings, and indeed to the whole world or, as Ibrahim bin Adham (d.161 AH) says, 'A free man is one who leaves the world before he leaves it, ie. abandons worldly things before departing this life. And the sign of freedom is when his heart ceases to distinguish between the affairs of this world and the next, so that he is not enslaved by the immediacy of his present world, nor by the future of his world to come.'²

A person who is truly committed to *Tawhid* is one who does not associate anyone with Allah in His planning, dominion and knowledge, since *Tawhid* is belief in the Singularity of Allah, and not solely belief in the Divine origin of actions and His creation of people's disobedient acts.

However, this interpretation of *Tawhid* raises a fundamental question about the concept of freedom. That is, what is the origin of people's sins and how are people held to account for them if they are not specifically the activating force that perpetrates them and do not have a real, independent capability of their own? If everything in existence is the result of a release of Divine activity, how do the Sufis explain their practical approach to behaviour and spiritual progress, through *ahwal* (ecstatic states), *maqamat* (stations along the spiritual path) and *mujahadat* (struggles with the carnal self), leading to Allah the Most High? And are they followers of *jabriyah* or *qadriyah*?

There appears to be a contradiction in the Sufi position, since they criticise both trends. Ibn al Qayyim criticises the *qadriyah* trend on the grounds that it is extremist in its support of the concept of freedom. He also criticises the *jabriyah* position, which he regards as being worse than

1 Al Jawziyyah, Ibn Al Qayyim, *Madarij al Salikin (Paths of the Spiritual Travellers)*, ed. Abdul Hamid Madkur, revised by Hasan al Shafi'i, Matba'at Dar al Kutub al Misriyah, Cairo, 1995, Part 2, p.118.

2 Al Razi, Shamsuddin, (d.660 AH), *Hada'iq al Haqa'iq (Gardens of Truths)*, ed. and introduction Said Abdul Fattah, Maktabat al Thaqafah al Diniyah, Cairo, 2002, p.143 and 144.



the *qadriyah* one and more hostile to Allah, His Books, His Messengers and His *deen*¹.

Meanwhile, al Kalabadhi (d.358 AH) says they, ie. the Sufis, agree that Allah the Most High is the Creator of all men's actions, that He is the Creator of their individual essences and that everything they do, whether good or bad, is decreed by Allah, His will and His wishes². However, to avoid adopting the position of pure *jabr* and asserting that rewards and punishments are also subject to *jabr*, the Sufis say that man has capability, which Allah creates for them along with their actions, and they agree that they 'have actions and earn the consequences of them in reality; being rewarded for them and punished for them.'³

Those who say that the Sufis fail to perform their acts of worship and avoid all the outer aspects of the *deen* entirely are wrong. This is not the behaviour of all Sufis, but only of those who, as we pointed out earlier, falsely claim to be Sufis. There are Sufis who say that the Sharia is both the beginning and the end of the road.

Al Junaid criticises a man who made the following comment on *ma'rifah* (mysticism): 'The People of *Ma'rifah* go as far as to abandon movements, ie. acts of worship, through reverence and piety to Allah.' Al Junaid's reply was: 'These are the words of the people who speak in favour of abandoning acts, ie. religious obligations, and that in my view is a grave matter.'⁴

Al Muhasibi rejects the notion that a Sufi is acting in a god-fearing manner if he fails to perform something that is obligatory. A pious man should not be asked to waste what Allah has given him. So Sufis do not abandon their Sharia obligations or responsibility, but for them freedom has a special meaning that differs from the way it is understood by philosophers or theologians. One can sum it up by saying that it is first and foremost

1 Al Jawziyyah, *op. cit.*, p.108.

2 Al Kalabadhi, *Al Ta'arruf li Madhahib Ahl al Tasawwuf (Introduction to the Sufi Sects)*, ed. Abdul Halim Mahmoud and Taha Abdul Baqi Suroor, Matba'at Isa al Babi al Halabi, Cairo, 1380 AH/1960 CE, p.44.

3 Al Kalabadhi, *ibid.* pp.46 and 47.

4 Al Salmi, *op. cit.*, p.159.



freedom of the *nafs* from social and economic pressures; this is achieved when the human *nafs* strives towards its *mabda'* (starting point/principle/foundation) through virtue of all kinds, both in theory and in practice.

Sufis do not just see freedom as a purely theoretical concept, but translate it into actual behaviour and a set of moral principles. They believe in the existence of free will and that man enjoys freedom of choice, since if he was subject to coercion he would cease to have a meaning and his reality as an entity would cease to exist. They believe in freedom and in man's ability to strive and act, since if he did not have this ability his entire conduct would be no more than an idea suspended in a brain.

Sufis were the first people to coin the term 'freedom', out of a desire to establish worship on a firm footing, demonstrate *tawhid* in all its aspects and warn people against polytheism in all its forms, as well as the hidden aspects of hypocrisy, and the duty to free oneself from the demands of the *nafs* and natural needs that hold man in thrall.

Sufis see the demands of the *nafs* that Allah has placed in them as a gateway to *munazalah* (condescendence) and *mujahadah* (struggle with the carnal self) and the purification of the *nafs*. This kind of jihad, and their striving in it, is the Greater Jihad – the jihad of the *nafs*. This puts the Sufi in the position of a person with an 'appetite for rejection'; he tries to overcome the demands of the *nafs* and bodily needs; he knows that Allah is testing him with these evils and that through his freedom he can overcome them.

The Sufis achieved freedom by resisting and killing the lusts, desires and instincts of the body and thereby cleansing the *nafs* so that they could exercise their freedom in striving, earning rewards for good deeds and raising their conduct to a spiritually higher level.

This way, which includes passing through *maqamat* and *ahwal*, is the *Way of Mujahadah*. Its distinctive feature is *taraqqi*, that is, rising above the sensory to the abstract and from the reality of the senses to a spiritual level beyond the senses. For the Sufi all this is achieved through the will, because 'the will is the beginning of the road for those who make their



spiritual journey along it ... and the will is the start of every matter, since as long as a person does not will something, he will not do it.¹

If the goal of Sufis is to reach Allah, they draw a distinction between reaching Him through *ijtihad* (effort) and reaching Him through giving generously, and they class *ijtihad* as being higher than giving generously. This was affirmed by al Junaid when he said, 'The gateway to every precious and sublime field of knowledge is the expenditure of effort, and the person who seeks Allah through the expenditure of effort is not like the one who seeks Him through generosity.'²

The Sufis' *mujahadah* of the *nafs* is designed to treat all inclinations, dispositions and tendencies. In this they are 'doctors of the *nafs*'; they diagnose the ailment and identify the cure. A Sufi sees his task as being to eradicate the numerous conflicts in his *nafs* and establish moral harmony; when this occurs, evil will be expunged from his *nafs* and his *nafs* will be transformed from *al nafs al ammarah bi'l su* (the *nafs* that is prone to evil) to a *nafs lawwamah* (self-reproaching *nafs*) and then a *nafs mutma'innah* (*nafs* that reposes in complete satisfaction).

So a Sufi seeks to use his freedom to rise to a higher level so that he can realise himself as a complete human being with an upright character.

For him, freedom is not a description of the human will, but a *maqam* (station) that he endeavours to reach through effort and exertion. It is not something that is assumed to exist so that morals can be founded upon it, but a goal he seeks to achieve and a value that defines man's position and attitude towards Allah, the world and the *nafs*. This is a different view of freedom, which is derived from his *dhawq*-inspired approach. ('*Dhawq*' – 'taste' – in the Sufi sense is the 'tasting' of spiritual bliss.) He has abandoned the sterile, unending debate about Destiny and replaced it with a creative freedom that drives man on to strive and live a life that is simultaneously spiritual and moral.

1 Al Kalabadhi, *op. cit.*, p.166.

2 Mahmoud, Abdul Qader, *Al Falsafah al Sufiyah fi'l Islam, Masadiruha, wa Nadhariyatuha wa Makanuha min al Din wa'l Hayat (Sufi Philosophy in Islam; Sources, Theories and Its Approach to Religion and Life)*, Dar al Fikr al Arabi, Cairo, 1966, p.190.



In brief, Sufis have taken freedom as a path for spiritual travellers to follow that will take them from the fresh open air to the Light of Truth. On their way they do not seek freedom; their desire is to attain the pinnacle of thraldom.

Finally, it appears that Islamic thought either accepts freedom absolutely or rejects it absolutely. Studies of it in all the philosophical and theological schools have aroused controversy, while in practice it has enriched real life and endowed it with fecundity.