Freedom, Its Limits and Boundaries

Since Islamic society must be administered on the basis of Islamic laws and decrees, the law-implementers must not go beyond the bounds of Islamic decrees and orders since people are bound to act upon Islamic laws. A skeptical voice questions: Is this concordant with human freedom? In making rules and regulations for his life and the manner of implementing them, man has to be free. For us to say that he has to move within the framework and observe the rules and regulations is inconsistent with human freedom, which is one of his inalienable rights.

Before dealing with the above skepticism and question, I deemed it necessary to state a point as an introduction which is also beneficial in other discussions and which must be given close attention. Once we are dealing with essential and joint concepts, for example, in natural sciences it is not difficult to understand essential concepts, like “water,” “movement” and “lightning”; in medical affairs, “eye,” “ear,” “hand and foot,” “stomach,” “lung,” and “liver,” because everyone knows what these terms mean.

However, understanding intricate concepts – like philosophical concepts and concepts used in social sciences and humanities such as psychology, law, political science, and the like – is difficult. Some times terms have many definitions which can easily confuse. While discussing such terms, people do not arrive at definite and certain conclusions.

For example, all of us are familiar with the term “culture”. This term has often been used in educational systems, poems, literary works and daily conversations. Yet, if one is asked what culture is, not a single person in one thousand could define culture correctly. Even the experts who have come up to define the term “culture” believe that this term has fifty to five hundred definitions! Naturally, when the commonly used term ‘culture’ can be so ambiguous in its definition, the ambiguity will consequently influence everything associated with it, especially social issues.

When there will be talk about cultural development, it will be pertinent to ask what cultural development is, what its manifestations are, and, in what form and way it takes place. If a budget for cultural development is approved by the Islamic Consultative Assembly but specific expenditures and clear manifestations of it are not taken into account, there will be difficulty in defining this term, only certain manifestations will become the object of attention, and the ground for abuse by exploiters will be opened.

Different outlook on concept of freedom

Intricate concepts like freedom have no specific manifestations and are difficult to define. Whenever freedom is mentioned, the listener feels pleased. Almost all peoples and nations believe in the sanctity of freedom because man inherently wants to be free.

If we try to examine the set of articles, books and treatises relevant to the concept of freedom, especially works published in recent years, we will find out that there is no common and specific concept about freedom among authorities and writers. A person defines freedom in a certain way and defends it while another person defines it in a different way and criticizes the other definition. Given this difference and divergence of opinion, they cannot arrive at a consensus on which the discussion can be concluded. Once we know what freedom means we can reply to the question whether freedom is harmonious with Islam or not.

Regarding a term which has numerous meanings - such that Western writers have mentioned as many as about two hundred definitions many of which are close to one another, their difference being only a matter of commission or omission of one or two words, there also being cases where the definitions are inconsistent with one another - how can they judge whether it is harmonious with Islam or not?

Similar to the term “freedom” is the term “democracy”, which is a Western term. It is sometimes defined as “populism” as well as “the government or sovereignty of the people”. But an exact and specific meaning of it has not yet been presented. It is not clear whether democracy is a form of government or a set of social behavior. Is it related to the realm of government and political issues, or to the realm of sociology or management? There are many discussions in this regard. In addition, the translation of such terms from one language to another exacerbates the ambiguity and problem.

Similar is the case of the term “liberalism” which was formerly translated as “freedom-loving” and like the term “freedom”, possesses distinct attractiveness, sanctity and desirability. As such, during the final decades of the Pahlavi rule, parties described as “freedom-loving parties” were formed.

So, in view of the ambiguities existing in such intricate concepts, the discussion will be problematic because the concepts tend to become error-prone. It cannot be said with certainty that this is the limit of the meaning that will no longer be changed. Such concepts are extensive, have no definite limits and boundaries and being broad in meaning.

Naturally, these difficulties make the discussion ambiguous and complicated. Now, in view of these problems, ambiguities and difference in understanding and outlook on freedom, if we want to compare each of these definitions with Islam, such a work in the academic

environment will be onerous and complicated, let alone in a public discussion meant for a diverse strata of people. As the only option, we will have to use the empirical and comparative approach to see what notion the proponents of freedom hold about it and what they want from it. Then we will see whether what they want from it is harmonious with Islam or not.

What do those who advocate and defend freedom, and claim that there is no freedom in this country (Iran) want from freedom? Is there no freedom of the press? Or, do the people have no individual freedom? Do they have no political, social and economic freedom? Or, do they have no freedom of expression? Basically, it must be seen in what condition and way these claimants regard the people as free.

Freedom as not absolute and rejection of freedom's predominance over religion

Usually, individuals exploit intricate and ambiguous concepts such as "freedom" to serve their motives. They mention these concepts equivocally so that the addressee understands it in a certain way while they mean something else, and thus they advance their sinister motives. For example, in the discussions, speeches and articles, some magazines and newspapers have posed this question: Has religion predominance over freedom, or vice versa? Is freedom the basis while religion follows it, or vice versa?

Undoubtedly, this question seems to be scientific and great curiosity is aroused to know whether religion or freedom predominates. But in actual discussion, if we say that religion predominates, they will say, "Since a person should be free to accept religion, as long as he is not free how can he choose a religion and predominates it? So, it becomes clear that freedom predominates over religion." They then conclude that religion cannot restrict freedom because freedom is the basis of religion! So, man can do whatever he likes and think in whatever way he wants! As you can see, this fallacious argument seems to be reasonable because if a person is not free, how can he accept Islam?

It thus follows that freedom predominates religion, is the basis of religion, gives credence to religion, and is essentially the reason behind the existence of religion. In this case, religion can no longer remove or restrict its producing and constructive element. In the end, they conclude that in every religious environment, every person should have ultimate freedom!

Others argue that when man is created, he is not a slave but free. So, he should also remain free all his life. They also argue that to have autonomy and freewill is an unequal value. As such, if at the time of coming to this world the hands and feet of man are paralyzed and he is dumb, what is his value? His value lies in his being free to go wherever he wants, do and say whatever he likes. Since man has been created intrinsically free, it follows that he should also

be legislatively free!

This is the same fallacy that incorrectly deduces “dos and don’ts” from “being”. But if we try to deal with these subjects seriously, we need to present precise academic philosophical discussions before arriving at any conclusion.

As stated earlier, if we try to discuss the definition of freedom, we have to examine tens of definitions. As such, it is better to deal with its manifestations and ask those who are shouting for freedom: “Will you allow somebody to slap you and agree that he is free to do so?” They will say, “Obviously, we do not mean a violation of the rights of others.” We thus conclude that freedom is desirable as long as it does not violate the rights of others and thus it is not absolute. Now, if we ask them, “Will you allow anyone to say anything about your family and chastity? He will not beat you. He will only insult you, revile you and abuse you.”

Naturally, they will not allow it because this act is also a violation of the integrity and chastity of every respectable person in society. Thus, it is clear that attack on one’s integrity and chastity is not only confined to physical violation.

Now, if someone wants to write something in the newspaper against a person and besmirch his reputation, there is no physical contact and there is no verbal insult and defamation, will that person allow him? He will certainly not allow him. He will regard this act as a violation of his reputation and integrity. He will not allow others to besmirch his reputation and trample upon his rights. Thus, so far three main conditions of freedom have been confirmed. If these conditions are not observed, the rights of others will be violated.

Need to observe the values and sanctities of every society

Another point which we have to deal with is that values and sanctities are different in every society and considered relatively. For example, in some societies there is no problem if a person wants to have a relationship with the sister or daughter of another person. As, in European and American countries, if a person wants to establish a friendly relationship with any woman there is no restriction if it is with the consent of the two parties.

But if the woman is forced she goes to court to say that he had sex with her without her consent, and the court will examine her claim. But there is no problem if a man and a woman have a voluntary sexual relationship! If a person tells another, “Your sister is my girlfriend and last night we were together in a certain place,” this statement is not strange in Western culture. In fact, some would even be pleased to hear it. In our society and environment, however, it is uncalled for and treated as an abuse, and no one has the right to say so.

From this, we can deduce another thing and that is, every society has its own values and

regards certain things as respectable and sanctified which another society does not. Now, what is the source of these values and sanctity? Undoubtedly, it is the culture, social environment and beliefs of every society.

Obviously, these values are defined according to the culture and social environment of every person in every country. Hence, if in a certain place something is sanctified and respected according to the specific culture of those people, it should not be violated and slighted. No person has the right to say whatever he likes anywhere. He has to speak carefully, so that the values of those people are not violated. In our society, however, being different from that of the West, freedom does not allow anyone to say anything about people.

Thus, freedom, as some have imagined is unacceptable to any rational person. In Islamic society, no one has the right, under the pretext of freedom, to disrespect the sanctity of Islam and those that are dearer to people than their own lives.

Our people proved that they were willing to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of their dear ones for the sake of Islam. When a person is insulted in the West in any way - for example, it is said to him that he is ugly and big-nosed - he has the right to go to a court of law and file a complaint. In our culture, if a person abuses something which is dearer to the people than their mothers, fathers, spouses, and children, do the people not have the right to protest against him for expressing his disrespect for their most valuable possession, under the name of freedom?

Illegitimate motives in exercising freedom

What do those who talk about freedom and allege its absence in Iran, want to say? Some of them yearn for the Western lifestyle. In Iran this practice is not allowed. Why? Is it because the Islamic government receives orders from Islam, God and the Prophet (s)? They do not want to accept the decree of God, so they object to the orders of the wali al-faqih, while the wali al-faqih does not say anything from himself:

فَإِنَّهُمْ لاَ يُكَذِّبُونَكَ وَلَكِنَّ الظَّالِمِينَ بِآيَاتِ اللّهِ يَجْحَدُونَ

Yet it is not you that they deny, but it is Allah's signs that the wrongdoers impugn.""

Does the duly competent faqih and marja' at-taqlid [source of emulation] say something about himself? Whatever he says is taken from the Qur'an and a hadith, words of God and the Prophet (s), but they do not want to acknowledge this fact. In open spaces at prestigious

American universities, male and female students behave in a manner that we are ashamed of mentioning. It is obvious what must be taking place in the places of pleasure of such a society. If a film taken in one of these places of pleasure is placed at the disposal of the youth in this country, you might guess what impact it will have!

Naturally, a youngster who watches such a film will have no peace of mind when he goes to the university in the morning because he remained awake the night before. There is already an intense sexual urge in him, which watching such a film will intensify and deprive him of tranquility and peace of mind. When such a youngster shouts that there is no freedom, it means that “You do not allow me to do the thing I wish to do” and all the allegations against the Islamic government stem from the desire to gratify the sexual urge. So you need to know what you want from freedom.

If you want permission from an Islamic government to do whatever is permitted and practiced in the environment of unbelief and atheism, rest assured that it will not be allowed, because the people sacrificed their beloved ones for the sake of implementing the values of Islam, and not allowing Western debauchery and corruption to become rampant.

Some people might say that we are indeed Muslims, have voted for this system, believe in the Imam and the Leader, and we do not want the kind of freedom prevalent in the West. Rather we want to have the freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of action. Grant this freedom to us and allow us to say whatever we want. This point of request is reasonable.

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one of the primary rights considered for all human beings is the freedom of expression and the freedom of the press as democratic principles. They will be told, “You are free to write and express your opinion regarding the performance of the implementers of laws. But, if you want to write something about the Islamic principles and values and negate everything, or insult religious sanctities, you will have to question yourself, not the government.

Limits of freedom of expression

If freedom means speaking and writing freely about things that are not permissible in action, it is clearly paradoxical. When somebody utters a single offensive word against you, you are ready to go to a court of law and file a complaint? How come you do not allow somebody to publish certain personal matters about you in a newspaper yet demand the freedom to divulge the secrets of a nation? How come divulging personal secrets of a person is not permissible, but divulging the secrets of a nation is permissible?!

In your opinion, when a person turns into seventy million people, divulging his secrets becomes

permissible! Should it not be proper to observe a limit with respect to a society both in speech and writing, and realize that everything cannot be uttered and written? Every society has its sanctity, rights and values, which must be preserved, not violated.

How can one allow the abuse of the religious sanctity of a society of sixty-million people which has offered hundreds of thousands of martyrs for its preservation? Do you think that there should be no limitation? Under the pretext of freedom, you demand no legal restrictions and limitations? Is freedom absolute? If freedom were really absolute, it follows then that I also have the right to say anything I want about a person! When the reputation and sanctity of a seventy-million strong nation are violated and a complaint lodged against you, you cry 'freedom of expression'?!

Which fallacy is more serious: tarnishing the reputation of a person or a nation of seventy million, nay a society of one billion Muslims? What kind of logic is this? The fact that the freedom of expression and the press has been stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is defamation of religious sanctity also permissible?! One ambiguous word – "freedom" – is used, interpreted and exploited by whoever pleases to do so.

Need to explain concept and manifestation of terms

Instead of using ambiguous and confusing terms, I will focus on their manifestation to decide whether a demand is permissible or not. For example, instead of asking whether Islam is compatible with democracy or not, you have to ask, "What do you want and what do you wish to do? If you want to disregard God and His decrees, then this is not permissible in Islam. If democracy means that the people have the right to enact any law even if it is against the law of God, we will not accept such a democracy even if the whole world backs it up.

However, if by democracy it means that the people have the right to chart their own destiny without compulsion, provided they uphold the sanctity of Islamic values, laws and foundations, then this is something that has been functioning in our country from the beginning of the Revolution. If we claim that in no country in the world is the vote of the people respected as much as in Iran, it is perhaps not an exaggerated claim. Since I have no sufficient documents and evidence at my disposal, I say "perhaps" but I personally believe that such freedom does not exist in any other place in the world.

So, instead of debating on the word "democracy" and whether Islam is compatible with it or not, it would be wiser for you to specify its manifestations. For example, does Islam permit legalizing homosexuality? Islam will never allow it even if all the people unanimously approve it. If democracy is so unrestricted and unlimited, we do not accept it.

However, if by democracy you mean that the people should have free elections, freely elect the members of parliament and the president, and have the right to call to account the members of parliament and other government officials, this freedom must surely exist as it does, and we totally support it. So, instead of using terms equivocally and disputing over them, it is better for us to discuss manifestations. Concepts such as freedom, democracy, liberalism, civil society, civilization, and culture are ambiguous and elicit various interpretations. To dispute over them is in no way reasonable. Instead, you have to say what you want so that we can say that it is .consistent or inconsistent with Islam