

**CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON THE FREEDOM AUTHORITY RELATION.
THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Gavril Trifa, Assist. Prof., PhD, West University of Timișoara

Abstract: *One of the most important and controversial issues in the field of humanities remains the relation between freedom and authority. The present study addresses not only theologians, for whom this issue is a classic one ever since the Antiquity, with special accents after the Renaissance, but the results of the debate prove to be extremely useful for people involved in teaching as well as for the general public, given its significant ethical implications. This paper relies on the models provided by such authors as Mircea Eliade or Albert Camus, as well as on classic theological texts from the Ecclesiast and St. Gregory the Great. The paper also proposes biblical and denominational perspectives on the concept of freedom, including the relation between individuality and collectivity in the light of one's own theological doctrines*

Keywords: *authority, contemporaneity, ethics, freedom, theological models*

Freedom as a chance to develop both in relation to oneself and to one's peers

The issue of understanding the term “freedom” definitely represents an extremely difficult endeavour, highly debated and replete with meanings or models of understanding existential themes, while problematizations are so diverse and varied that the term requires conceptual clarifications, even if they are only guidelines, as prerequisites for any existential approach. Christian theology insists on the difference between the freedom of God and the freedom of man in order to highlight the importance of the human being's invitation to assume one's own freedom: “Absolute freedom lies in our power to determine our existence on all planes, with no dependence, necessity or limit imposed on us. It is God's freedom; man has no such freedom. [...] To receive only what is given entails a feeling of dependence”¹. According to the way one understands and accepts the coordinates of freedom, each human being outlines “his own way of seeing things”, of perceiving reality, i.e. he ensures his observation of a model or a moral system because “each man's personal spiritual journey bears the seal of uniqueness and of the freedom to search for God, to be indifferent to Him or even to oppose Him.”²

Ever since the moment of their appearance, Christian morals were called to offer existential models in relation to the criteria required by its divine creator. The complexity of the Christian value system was often questioned, starting precisely from the difficulty of understanding the particular meaning that revealed faith brings to the concept of freedom, an ever topical issue in the 21st century, given the great expectations about the need for pertinent

¹ Arhimandrite Sophrony. 1999. *Viața și învățătura starețului Siluan Athonitul (The Life and Teachings of Silouan the Athonite)*, Romanian translation by Ioan I. Ică. Sibiu: Editura Deisis, p. 98 [my translation].

² Monica Opriș. 2011. *Religie, morală, educație. Perspective teologice și pedagogice (Religion, Morals, Education. Theological and Pedagogical perspectives)*. Bucharest: Editura Basilica, pp. 24-25 [my translation].

and viable answers to modern society's problems. Our endeavour represents a special challenge in which we aim to identify some solutions through the lens of patristic thinking.

One of the first fundamental ideas put forth by Christianity was the importance of linking one's life to the ecclesial body as a unique way of personal fulfilment, including the understanding and assuming of the existential dimensions of the first people's failure. Against this model, in time, some Christians' personal testimonies highlighted aspects that came to contradict the genuine sense of Jesus Christ's invitation for us to freely assume authority and to assume freedom in agreement with authority. Under other circumstances, the redeeming aspects of Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection, their emptying of meaning in a conception external to the Truth – that of the Son's kenosis and His union with human nature in order to provide a Eucharistic way of life, communion and love in a space permeated by God's presence.

In today's information-ridden society and current lifestyle, the attempt to discover this morality, the freedom in Spirit, and not to stop after a mere few steps has become a genuine human adventure. It is now important to search, to experience the journey with all its inherent ups and downs until "the gate" to the Kingdom of peace becomes the way to one's victory over a lifestyle that is subject to ontological limitations, as well as the way to the complete opening towards eternal life. In the world of faith, understanding one's personal freedom in the light of God's gentle and loving authority³ means much more than a simple adherence to an ideology, it is a genuine internal transformation: "Conversion is not an event in the realm and on the level of ideas, as so many people think today. It is not the choice of an 'ideology', not even an answer to 'problems' – a word delightfully ignored by the early Church and the Holy Scripture. It is truly an escape from darkness and despair. One comes to Christ in order to be *saved* and because there is no other salvation."⁴ Such a journey was undertaken by one of the great teachers of the Christian faith in the first millennium⁵, a theologian and a religious writer, who attained the level where spiritual certainty becomes a motivational factor to exercise freedom in the space of authority: "there is nothing that prevents us from having faith. For if we want it with all our heart, it will immediately become active in us, since it is God's gift to us and a pre-eminent characteristic of our nature, even though it is also subject to our individual power of free will."⁶

Christian denominations abound in symbolism which is accessible to the seeker in the world of questions, and all divides mean to transform in the most realistic way possible (by the process of feeding – in the case of the Eucharist) the life of he who acknowledges that he is made hungry and thirsty by the search. A series of religious or cultural ideas that came from

³ "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30).

⁴ Alexander Schmemmann. 1997. *Of Water and the Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 20.

⁵ Dorin Opreș. 2012. *Dimensiuni creștine ale pedagogiei moderne (Christian Dimensions of Modern Pedagogy)*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, pp. 39-71 [my translation].

⁶ Symeon the New Theologian. *On faith; and to those who say that those in the world cannot attain perfection virtues*. <http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/profitabletale.aspx> [Accessed 2015, May 8].

Asia or America propose alternatives adapted to the dynamics of contemporary life, especially in the case of youngsters; there are writers who talk without fundamentally raising the issue of anthropology on which they build their approach. The seeker who includes biblical texts in his readings finds out that, in their light, there has been in time an impressive series of collections and developments of reference material by including one's own spiritual experiences, a corpus generically called of the Church Fathers'. These teachers, often deemed outdated, because of a childish whim which sometimes takes over adults as well, offer surprisingly realistic perspectives on things, including for young people; these perspectives are supported by a sweetness of thought which cannot help but raise questions, i.e. offer the person a chance to find herself again in the freedom that is forever separated from libertinism.

Religious alienation is thus explained only by a cognitive refusal in relation to the too little known realities of the two-millennium old Christic spirituality, with a primarily liturgical moral – of one's anchoring in the sacred and of one's ontological abandonment to the divine – and with an invitation to the moral's "madness", which asks one to "lose one's soul in order to find it again".

Freedom in the Spirit and the "free" relation between freedom and authority

It is unanimously accepted today that, as social and cultural freedom are more and more accessible in various parts of the world, the process is accompanied by fundamental questions regarding the true meaning of freedom as ontological need for the human being. When we talk of "the modern man", of his crises and anxieties, the discourse conceals the spiritual dimension of existence, which did not use to happen in the traditional rural space, where the person's connection to the world had a basic meaning called communion. I am thinking especially of the honest seeker who lacks faith, who has no connection whatsoever with Christianity because the issue of Death as a source of all existential questions is raised in other terms; for him, death is, paraphrasing Eliade, a "rite of passage", far from the implacable end of an existence caught in the web of time. Freedom appears to us as an obvious and immediate gush before discovering the finite, as the most urgent need which modern man throws himself at. "But in modern world," writes Eliade, "Death is emptied of its religious meaning; that is why it is assimilated to Nothingness; and before Nothingness modern man is paralyzed."⁷

Sensing the grip of a temporal existence that flows without ever returning, "one-way" only, towards death, modern man finds refuge in consumer goods with an increasingly shorter-term validity, including all its forms, and especially in the idea of "freedom" as the only viable weapons to overcome the difficulty of this Sisyphus existence that grows more and more difficult to bear. Frozen before the absurd, man is left in such situations with only the freedom to stoically endure this existential given, smiling happily, as Albert Camus would posit.

⁷ Mircea Eliade. 1967. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, p. 236.

This way of thinking, devoid of the hope to escape to Something Else, is acknowledged by Saint Gregory the Great in a few lines from the Ecclesiasts. “I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all *is* vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.” (Ecclesiastes 3:18-20) Solomon revises this and presents the attitude of the believer: “For what hath the wise more than the fool? what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living?” (Ecclesiastes 6:8) Saint Gregory the Great concludes by showing the superiority of the believer’s thinking in the initiate meaning given to death: “This, then, is the great advantage man has over the animal: The animal does not live on after death, while man begins to live only when he has completed this visible life through bodily death.”⁸

On the other hand, when it is not rightly understood, God’s existence as supreme authority disconcerts both the Camusian man and the religious man. For the secularized man, God’s existence implies the violation of freedom and vice versa, so that if His existence is, after all, accepted, then it is to this God that the existence of evil is also attributed. In this picture man is acknowledged an existence similar to a puppet’s, the world becomes an immense theatre, while God appears as the Great puppeteer who “pulls the strings” or as “the heavenly spy”, as Nietzsche would call Him, whose gaze embarrasses. The conclusion of this train of thought is that if man is free, then God can no longer exist.

At the opposite pole, for the religious man, divine authority is the truth that sets him free. Only a life that moves towards the divine Archetype may be considered a personal existence out of history and death, so that one can live at the heart of absolute Freedom. However, the crisis modern society is going through relies on a terrible theological deviation from the idea of God and, implicitly, of divine authority. If we are to accept the false Western dialectics (on the one hand, the power of the Episcopacy, on the other the freedom of God’s People), everything becomes distorted, objective and out of proportions precisely because of the need for balance. Protestantism emphasizes freedom and wonders how far you can legitimate authority by saving each believer’s freedom, while Catholic thinking focuses on the very opposite – how far we can legitimate the people’s freedom by also saving the order and authority of the clergy.

Far from denying these two coordinates of church life, authority and freedom, we cannot help but smile before this endless circle. Raising the issue within the terms of an agreement between authority and freedom, yet in terms external to either, they come to oppose each other and lose their inner depth, which is the only thing that can offer a solution; the consequence is the desolate image of a scale, where the weigh moves in turn on each arm, in the shade of Chronos’ hourglass. “Conceived as an external value,” Paul Evdochimov points out, “authority changes its essence. Once internalized, it receives an extremely

⁸ St. Gregory the Great. 2002. *Dialogues* (The Fathers of the Church, vol. 39). Catholic University of America Press, p. 195.

paradoxical value: authority denies itself, it rejects any constraining power, and it rises to a higher level where it identifies with the Truth.”⁹

From freedom to truth or, about the need for certitudes

The entire Orthodox tradition¹⁰ draws attention to the danger of anthropomorphism when we attribute to God such notions as “power” or “omniscience”. God, the Christ from the Scripture, and the Church do not represent just any ordinary authority¹¹, given that it is always external to us, and it ends up chaining us, but it represents truths that set us free and fulfil us¹². The idea of fulfillment as intrinsic to the notion of authority is also revealed by Evdokimov through the lens of Karl Jaspers’ thinking: “The notion of authority comes from Latin thinking. The *auctor* is the one who supports something and makes it develop and grow. Etymologically speaking, *auctoritas* is the power to support and develop.”¹³

At a closer look, it may be seen that, paradoxically, “not even the unbeliever lives without faith”¹⁴, and the religious man will have to fight an equally heroic battle on his path to ontological fulfillment in agreement with the rigours of faith. Modern man’s problems, as Eliade also highlights, are neither new nor only his own. Anxiety before death is not a “local” problem, a revelation of historicist or existentialist philosophy, but it occurs in all religions and all cultures. What is truly unique to modern European thinking, at least for the time being, is the individual’s impossibility to overcome the amazement caused by the absurd, because living the absurd to the full can only be compared to committing a suicide while smiling, a smile addressed to no one else but to the so much denied God. Nevertheless, recent research in social sciences has shown that people who strongly believe in God’s assistance in their personal lives are capable to more effectively cope with stressful events in their lives.¹⁵ To provide constitutive elements for a functional conceptual and practical structure, American researchers are interested in examining the possibilities of one’s moral motivation in the context of specific choices brought about by one’s own value judgments so that an integrating

⁹ Paul Evdokimov. 1991. *Iubirea nebună a lui Dumnezeu (The Mad Love of God)*. Bucharest: Editura Anastasia, p. 157 [my translation].

¹⁰ Dumitru Stăniloae. 1993. *Ascetica și mistica ortodoxă (Orthodox Ascetics and Mysticism)*, vol. I and II. Alba Iulia: Editura Deisis, Mănăstirea Sf. Ioan Botezătorul [my translation].

¹¹ Gavril Trifa. 2009. *Ortodoxie și Occident (Orthodoxy and the Western World)*. Timișoara: Editura Eubee, pp. 123-198 [my translation].

¹² Dorin Opreș. 2013. *Ipostaze ale utilizării textului biblic în educația religioasă. Teorie, aplicații, cercetare (Ways of Using the Biblical text in Religious Education. Theory, Applications, Research)*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Eikon, pp. 30-35 [my translation].

¹³ Paul Evdokimov. 1991. *Iubirea nebună a lui Dumnezeu (The Mad Love of God)...*, p. 154 [my translation].

¹⁴ “I venture to say that not even an unbeliever lives without faith, for, if I should ask him who his father and mother were, he would immediately point them out to me. And if I should ask him whether he knew them at the time he was conceived or saw them at the time he was born, he would admit that he had neither known nor seen them at those times. Yet he believes firmly, for he maintains without any doubt that this man and this woman are his father and mother.” (Saint Gregory the Great. *Dialogues* (The Fathers of the Church, vol. 39). Catholic University of America Press, p. 191).

¹⁵ Neal Krause, R. David Hayward. 2014. “God-Mediated Control and Optimism: Exploring Variations by Denominational Affiliation”, *Review of Religious Research*, 56:275–290.

approach may be established¹⁶; this may bring closer the two perspectives – the religious and the non-religious ones to assume freedom and authority.

As one who belonged to the great dissenters, at least in his early writings, René de Chateaubriand confesses in the preface to the Romanian edition of *The Genius of Christianity*: “My religious sentiments have not always been what they are now. Although I confessed the necessity of a religion and I looked up to Christianity, I have nonetheless disregarded several of its aspects. Outraged at the abuses of some institutions and the vices of some people, I once made declamations and sophisms. I could blame my youth, the madness of the times, the circles I used to frequent; but I would rather blame myself; I cannot excuse what is inexcusable”.¹⁷

Chateaubriand’s world has not disappeared – that world seduced by the affirmation that Christianity is a cult born of paganism, absurd in its dogmas, ridiculous in its ceremony, inimical to arts and letters, reason and beauty, with a cult that had only caused bloodshed and the enslavement of peoples. We can easily recognize in this description the colours of a very vivid landscape – where we move about every day – the same more or less sincere unease, the same disquieting mixture of indifference and vulgar laughter when we could at least look more carefully within and around us. Death would then no longer seem as being final in itself, but we will discover that it is just a passage to another superior life where the human being will attain fulfillment in the Spirit.

Conclusions

The commandment from Eden must be understood as the foretelling of a freely chosen destiny in both its meanings. By objectifying God’s authority, His presence in creation, man chooses to live outside freedom in the Spirit, which equals man’s refusal to live according to his nature. Thus must be understood the incarnation of the Son of God, as of the Person who fully experiences the freedom of grace: “The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised” (Luke 4:18). Borrowing the expression of Professor priest Dumitru Popescu, on the existence of “the rootless man”, we contend that the meaning of our life is unveiled only in the threefold way of life to which we have been called by means of the face we have been given.

The reality of anxiety does not validate and its finality is such that the rejection of faith can only mean “closure” before the Truth. Socrates’ drama, the impossibility of reconciling truth and freedom, seems to also be the drama of modern man, who looks for his fulfillment in material values. The comprehensibility of an apparently unsolvable problem – of the freedom-

¹⁶Ulas Kaplan, Terrence Tivnan. 2014. “Moral Motivational Pluralism: Moral Judgment as a Function of the Dynamic Assembly of Multiple Developmental Structures”. *Journal of Adult Development*, 21:193–194.

¹⁷ Rene de Chateaubriand. 1998. “Prefață” la *Geniul creștinismului* (“Preface” to *The Genius of Christianity*). Bucharest: Editura Anastasia, p. 24 [my translation].

authority conflict – can only begin, at least from a religious perspective, by a return to “illo tempore”, at the time of origins, the time of man’s daily conversations with his Creator.

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