

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND HUMAN DIGNITY – PERENNIAL VALUES OF A CHRISTIAN. A MISSIONARY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Freedom is a constituent of what we call God’s “image” in human beings. It represents the effect of their good choice, the use of the gift of free will, received from the merciful God, for salvation. Human dignity is fundamental to human beings. It represents God’s gift as an inalienable right from the Creator. Human dignity is also a call from their Creator: those in Christ acquire the values of spiritual and intellectual discernment, of spiritual courage, and they oppose—in complete autonomy from God—the great virtue of Christian responsibility, the interface of human dignity, to the ideological use of human “rights”.

Keywords: freedom, freedom of religion, human dignity, human rights, Christian responsibility, religious discernment, free will

Introduction

The human being is endowed by God with gifts and a calling, and the most precious gift is the gift of choice, the free will.¹ God lays before us life and death, the blessing and the curse. From this perspective, human beings are certainly sums of their own choices. Free will is the forerunner of freedom; our freedom is limited by the extent of our good choices. The dimension of freedom is mandatory for salvation. Like freedom, human dignity is both a gift and a calling. It is a fundamental right given

1 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Religious liberty – a natural human right”, *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Ganoune Diop, Mihnea Costoiu, Liviu-Bogdan Ciucă, Nelu Burcea (coord.), Editions IARSIC, Les Arsc, France, 2015, pp.595-608.

by god to all human beings and it has a well-established place among fundamental human rights. Human dignity encompasses and gives birth to many other Christian virtues: intellectual and spiritual discernment, spiritual courage, Christian responsibility, etc. At the same time, human dignity is a remedy for the mistakes of the human beings, fallen from their communion with God. Human dignity leads to the consolidation of an authentic Christian axiological system in human beings—we can say that this virtue has a well-established place in Christian soteriology. The study will try to adumbrate some relevant aspects regarding freedom of religion and human dignity from an authentic missionary perspective.

Freedom of religion

Freedom is a fundamental dimension of the individual, freedom of expression shows the horizon of the individual, while freedom of religion is a reference of individual, because the latter is created to be in dialogue with other people. Each human being has their own horizon, but it is determined by their relationship with other human beings. This freedom can be viewed from a philosophical, as well as from a theological perspective.

The philosopher, for example, sees in freedom of expression unlimited expression possibilities which are philosophically asserted within the limits of human beings by expressions which do not always coincide with those derived from the divine law.

For example, human freedom cannot be absolute because even the individual is relative. Online divine freedom is absolute. God is limitless, bot in his being and in his freedom, but human beings are limited, because they are created and relative. We are speaking about the two realities within which we exist, the good and the bad. Good is the corollary of God and it is unlimited, while evil has appeared over time, in creation, and is therefore limited. Philosophical expressions according to which too much good could become evil, do not have a basis, because goog is good by its nature and evil is evil by its perverted nature. The difference is that good has an ontological existence, an unlimited existence, while evil is a contingency and it is limited.

Modernity separates the good and the law in an effort of emancipating itself from an authoritarian religion. Traditional tought

associates the law with the good, while freedom is a conformity with the nature of good. Freedom is not understood as the ability to create and to choose a particular good, but it involved an effort to fulfill the true nature of good.

In modern consciousness it is clear that everyone has the right to seek their own good and their own options and aspirations cannot be limited. This lack of restrictions in one's search for personal freedom legitimizes any particular endeavour for reaching it. By legitimizing all options of equality between the freedoms of the individual and those of others we relativize the status of good. Claiming the good is no longer an urgency if there is a wide range of particular options. The objective good is no longer an expression of the law since freedom of the other becomes a reasonable alternative to the personal option that is claimed from the common good.

In freedom, the human being oscillates between these two realities. And if for human society to be able to live in harmony laws were created so that people's interests do not collide but they can express themselves according to their talents, their vocation, their mission, these two—freedom of expression and freedom of religion—have to be well settled in a certain legal framework.

These two freedoms have to become principles and we need say that, unfortunately, they are not yet well defined. It is not about constraint, it is about the possibility of fully expressing one's freedom towards the other and towards society. In order for it to be fully expresses, it must not be hindered.

Freedom of expression is a privilege that every human being possesses through their own psycho-physical structure. The ability to think, to understand God, themselves and reality, as well as the ability to put into words the characteristics of human existence is and incontestable gift from God. This ability of express themselves freely is one of the constituent elements of God's image in human beings. Created in God's image, more precisely in the image of the Logos, the individual is not only a thinking being, but also a speaking one. The individual is, therefore, a logical being, a rational existence that communicates itself to others, creating a dialogue of existence.²

2 See Fernand Comte, *Dicționar de creștinism. Noțiunile fundamentale ale creștinismului*, Ed. Niculescu, București, 1999.

Communication contributes to the communion between people—that is to cooperation and the exchange of religious, cultural, economic and social values. As a result of this kind of relationships, human community appeared and developed.

As the holder of innumerable values, human community has distinguished itself throughout its history by cultivating one of these values, a value inherent to its becoming and development, namely religion, which is its relationship with God.

Unfortunately, the free manifestation of faith suffered greatly at certain times in history, being restricted. Such a ban, more or less masked, was witnessed by the whole world rather recently.

Politico-philosophical ideologies also fed to a certain extent by some religious doctrines have sometimes cultivated the idea that a world community would be created by imposing a concrete religion. And as a result, this was not only the direction of the philanthropic discourse and deeds, but also, with a similar enthusiasm, that of violence and war. The pretext has always been the same: the well-being of others.

The intention of compromising and abolishing religion has taken on certain forms in the last century. With the establishment of communist ideology, the hope was raised that religious uniformity and convergence will be achieved on earth through a dynamic abolition or through a complete denial of religion.

In Western capitalism, another kind of hope worked by spreading the notion that religion would simply be useless. Human beings would need it less and less because they would find solutions to their problems with the help of science and technology. It was thus claimed that religion would die because of the suffocated decadence.³

The twentieth century had not yet ended and the facts themselves showed how superficial and simplifying these concepts were.

Over the last two decades more than 70.2% of the world population has adopted a certain religious faith and, one way or another, more than half of the people today continue to believe in God.

In the conscience of the individuals, their thoughts and beliefs can only be “religious or secular”, because “cosmovisions are generally religious or secular”. Therefore, it is admitted that individuals are religious beings by their very nature, hence the obligation of the State and human

3 Gauchet Marcel, *Revoluția drepturilor omului*, Ed. Trei, București, 2004.

community to create a proper framework for externalizing their religious thought and beliefs and, *ipso facto*, asserting their natural and inalienable right, that is, the right to religion.

Both the “Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union” (since 2000) and the “Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe”, *id est* the “European Constitution”, the text of which was adopted by the signatory states—including Romania—in October 2004, provide for freedom of religion and its legal protection.⁴

Fortunately, the two fundamental rights—freedom of expression and freedom of religion—were recognized by the post-December 1989 Romanian legislation, being specified in the fundamental law of the nation, its *Constitution*. The current Constitution was approved by national referendum of October 18th-19th, 2003, and it was published under no. 429 in Romania’s Official Gazette no. 758 of October 29th, 2003. The amended and completed Constitution was republished by the Legislative Council in the Official Gazette no. 767 of October 31st, 2003.

As expected, the text of this Constitution entitled “*Constituția revizuită a României*” (“Romania’s Revised Constitution”), only mentions “freedom of conscience”, which embodies the two freedoms, *id est*, “freedom of thought, opinion, and religious beliefs” (art. 29), also mentioned by the 1991 Constitution.⁵

Romanian constitutionalists believe that, by guaranteeing “freedom of conscience”, “the Constitution enshrines equality between believers and non-believers and requires cultivating a climate of tolerance and mutual respect among believers belonging to different religious denominations, as well as between believers and non-believers.” In other words, only freedom of conscience can guarantee this equality between religious denominations and this climate among and non-believers. However, this “equality” and this “climate” cannot exist without a provision and guarantee for freedom of “religious beliefs”.

Thus, in Christian spirituality, freedom and responsibility are inserted into the mysterious horizon of love between individual and God. For the Christian, to be free is to know and respond to the crucified love of the Son of God. This is why the love of Christ becomes the sphere

4 Luncan Victor, Ducelescu Victor, *Drepturile omului: studiu introductiv, culegere de documente internaționale și acte normative de drept intern*, vol. I, Ed. Lumina Lex, București, 1993.

5 *Constituția României*, Ed. Lumina Lex, București, 2004.

of genuine human freedom and responsibility. The meaning and the origin of European culture is the person, and—we should not forget—the person who asks for communion. Christianity and Europe are “the mystery of the other inscribed in the heart of Unity”⁶

Unfortunately, the post-modern church is weakened after losing its communion with Christ, and this is seen in the way the church responds when confronted with moral, religious, political or social challenges. Its answers are not enough because the arguments are not fully valued, unlike the way they were valued in the early church (this shows a superiority of the early church, both in terms of unity and in its power when giving testimony and acting).

Human dignity

The human being came into being by the unification of two registers, but his dignity is their link to Heaven, stimulates their rise, representing also the source of their thought.

According to the Orthodox teaching, in agreement with the Holy Scripture, says that the human being is the creation of God, being made in his image, and his life being a free and conscious communion. Also, the human being tends to resemble their Creator, being a unitary being linked to the sensitive world. The individuals must not confine themselves to worshipping God, “but there’s also a need for believers that would fill the world with God’s grace, after they themselves belong to him. And this is why they are created by the hand of God, being honest and in his image.”⁷

Through creation, the human nature came to enjoy communion with God through the act of breathing, because—in Paradise—the human being was good and pure, because it was in a permanent communion with God, sharing the beauty and the honour of the divine image. “As the image of God, the human being imitated the pattern of divine nature and was capable of deification.”⁸ On the one hand, this

6 Olivier Clement, *Creștinătate, secularizare și Europa*, in „Gândirea socială a Bisericii”, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2002, p. 508.

7 Petru Florea, *Opera exegetică a Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul*, Ed. Academos, Târgu-Mureș, 1998, p. 68.

8 Alexander I. Negrov, *Biblical Interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2008, p. 138.

privilege that was granted to man before the fall did not represent a relationship implying that the human being and God shared the same nature, but rather one of grace, because the divine being is uncreated and infinite, so God does not share the same nature with any of his creations. This kinship consists rather in the natural powers used by human beings to attain likeness and communion with God. On the other hand, even if human beings are physically related with the animal world by following the same biological laws (instinct, senses), they are not only an animal with superior instincts and senses, but they can rise above these laws: “human beings are and are called human beings for their rational and mental soul, through which and for which they are images and likeness of God, the one who created them different from all other animals by nature, having no inward relationship with them.”⁹

God’s work of creation culminates with the creation of the human beings in his image. Also, the human beings have a dichotomous structure—body and soul. There is a very interesting symmetry between human beings and the cosmos: just as the cosmos is made up of the visible and the invisible world, the body, which is seen, and the soul, the human being’s unseen component. In addition, as the soul is within the body, the intelligible cosmos is within the sensitive one. “And the sensitive cosmos is help in place by the intelligible cosmos, just as the body is held into place by the soul. And both form one cosmos, just like the soul and the body form one human being.”¹⁰

The human being is brought into existence through God’s personal and wonderful intervention, and as a consequence of the communion between *persons*. The Creator engages into a direct interaction with the human being. Also, humans as creations in the image of God, are people capable of love, which gives them eternal value.

Another feature of human beings is that they are part of God’s dialogue with the world, being in a *perichoresis* of love with their Creator. The action of human beings has a cosmic resonance because individuals are solidary with the world that God has given them to rule, according to the biblical account, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28), which would lead to a union with God, in grace. The

9 Ierom. Mihail Stanciu, *Sensul creației. Actualitatea cosmologiei Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul*, Ed. Așezământul Studențesc Sfântul Apostol Andrei, Słobozia, 2000, p. 63.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 64.

whole world was created for the human being seen as priest, mediator and unifier of the creation with God. “By sanctifying oneself, that is by fully personalizing oneself through a permanent relationship with God, the human beings are called to expand on a cosmic scale the mystery of their transformation. Sitting in the middle of the Earth, the human being has to subdue and renew the Earth for God.”¹¹

Freedom of religion or belief and freedom of religion play a big part in preserving human dignity; moreover, they can defend the faith from a new post-modern reformulation, not without some sectarian interests supported by mass-media—as we said in the beginning of the article. This is what Dan Ciachir said on the topic: “*If people do not respect God, how can they respect their own laws and regulations?*”¹²

But let us not accuse the press of being of bad faith, but rather express our agreement with what Octavian Hoandă said: “*The things that are not published in current news publications are hardly due to any lack of freedom of conscience; they are rather caused by incompetence and lack of self-respect. If until recently the topic of freedom of conscience was discussed fiercely within journalist organisations in Cluj and even on various forums, now the same journalists are reporting (some kind of) stories that, in my opinion, are under their dignity and ability, no longer a matter of journalistic conscience and, as such, it is not discussed.*”¹³ If these freedoms will be affected, it will not happen because they are misunderstood, but because they are misused due to a lack of professionalism. Unfortunately, the prophecy of F. Fukuyama will be fulfilled: the history of recent humanity—as H.-R. Patapiević puts it—is nothing more, nothing less than the beginning of our posthumous future. Of course, such aspects cannot and should not be overlooked by the church of Christ—the only and the steadfast defence of human dignity against totalitarian threats or paternalistic entitlements of the providential state in modern times.

The church must promote human dignity¹⁴ by all means, regardless of any form of discrimination, just as the Apostolic Fathers did in their

11 Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Popescu, Diac. Doru Costache, *Introducere în dogmatica ortodoxă*, Editura Libra, București 1997, p. 116.

12 According to *Pentru integritatea Catedralei Sf. Iosif* în “Ziua”, XII (2006), nr. 3619, p. 6.

13 According to *Tabloide, manele, modele*, in “Ziua”, XII (2006), no. 3641, p. 6.

14 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Plea for Human Dignity”, *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity - A Contemporary Perspectives*, The Scientia Moralitas Research Institute, Beltsville, MD, United States of America, Volume 1, Year 2016, pp. 29-43.

dialogues with the pagans. Then, starting from this faith, the church “can protect the human dignity from all opinions that, for example, either despise, either exalt the human body.”¹⁵

No human law can so well protect personal dignity and freedom as the gospel of Christ entrusted to the church. Like the Apostolic Fathers, we must bear in mind and in our missionary discourse that the Gospel announces and proclaims the freedom of the children of God, rejects any form of servitude that ultimately arises from sin, respects the dignity of conscience and its free will.

It also urges the use of all human talents in the service of God and for the well-being of fellow human beings, and finally entrusts every human to the love of them all. In its mission strategies, the church must promote human freedom, defend and cultivate it, following the example of the apologists who overturned isolationist and slavery-based cosmologies. For a modern mission, “the church needs to promote the values of the gospels within the framework of true and authentic contemporary values.”¹⁶

All these correspond to the fundamental law of Christian *oikonomia*. For, although the Saviour God and the Creator God are the same person, master of human history, as well as master of the history of salvation, in this divine order, the freedom of the creation, and especially of the human beings, is by no means suppressed; on the contrary, it is restored and confirmed in their dignity.

The dignity and freedom of the human being become, in Western societies, ultimate values (...). The only unanimously recognized centre is the human subject, to whom the state and the society try to ensure conditions for unrestrained freedom: freedom of thought, of expression, to access information, of communication, of worship, of action. The conscience alone is master beyond the content of this freedom. It is up to it to develop ultimate meanings. Religious or not, the individuals living in the late modernity have become accustomed to creating their own image of the world, of their own destiny, and possibly even of transcendence. Submission to a doctrine or tradition and submission in general have become at least unusual, if not suspicious. A critical attitude, free-will,

15 According to *Tabloide, manele, modele*, in “Ziua”, XII (2006), no. 3641, p. 104.

16 Priest Prof. Dr. Alois Bisoc, *Introducere în teologia pastorală*, Editura Sapienția, Iași, 2002, p. 101.

choice, inventiveness, are all virtues that resonate with the common individual of our days.¹⁷

We must promote, both in theory and in practice, the love towards God and towards our neighbour, peace, justice, respect, morality, tolerance, as the Holy Fathers and the holy Apostolic Fathers defended human dignity, the values of humanity, and the possibility of bringing all our neighbours in communion with God.

As can be seen in both the Holy Scripture and the teachings of the Holy Fathers, all people are equal before God and enjoy the same dignity. By studying the Orthodox texts we realise that each human being is the subject of ontological dignity from birth and it will be one forever. “Modern world aspires to equality between people and instinctively tends to see differences—even when they have nothing to do with the economic or social status of individuals—as obstacle between people.”¹⁸

Human dignity refers to the call for holiness, desirable for all humanity. When aiming to the attributes of God, every individual can reach the highest life quality, through which all bodily and spiritual faculties of the human being reflect human dignity. At this stage of life, the individual is lifted from the status of God’s creation to that of his son, by grace.

Orthodoxy emphasizes that human rights must refer not only to those living today, but also to our ancestors, as well as to our descendants. Orthodoxy is a parable of love, a love that teaches us to give priority to the rights of those around us, and not our own.

On the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Patriarch Daniel of Romania emphasizes that “the Declaration is important for the Orthodox church because it marks a historical moment in promoting the dignity and value of the human being by recognizing their fundamental rights. In the same sense, the right to life, freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, the right to education, are all imperatives that are essential components of the social structure discourse of the church, a social discourse that articulates an ethical foundation of human rights on a true theological anthropology. It is what contemporary theologians call the “social thinking” or the “social doctrine” of the church, since the latter—even though it is oriented towards the “end time”, it has to mark the chronological time,

17 A. Manolescu, *Stilul religiei...*, op. cit., p. 31.

18 Rene Girard, *Violența și sacralul*, trans. Mona Antohi, Ed. Nemira, București, 1995, p. 58.

its connection with history. From this perspective, the centrality of the mission of the church is first to protect the creation or the world, seen as “the gift of God”, and to recognize or to affirm the dignity of the human being created in the image of God. In fact, the dignity of the human being is also the cornerstone that unites the right to exist, the right to freedom and social rights of the community firmly expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”¹⁹

We must keep in mind that theology introduces to the world the image of the individual as a free subject, capable of taking their own decisions. At the same time, the dignity of human freedom is determined by responsibility. In this sense, the rights of individuals correlate with those of their neighbour. Appreciation for one’s neighbour must be at least equal to the appreciation we desire for ourselves (according to Matthew 22:39: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself:”). Human life is not only a right, but it is a gift of God to be lived “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”²⁰ Our endeavour is mysteriously linked to the gift of God, by this ability of deification, and life is therefore a precious gift that must be defended, preserved and cultivated in the communion of the church and society. In this regard, the foundation of the social mission of the churches is the gospel of our Saviour’s love for us, for all people—a love that takes the form of evaluating human life throughout history (according to Matthew 25:31-46).

In conclusion, the church fights for the defence of human rights and moral-spiritual values of human communion, because—in society—authentic spirituality is a correlation between freedom, love and responsibility in relation with God as well as with people.

The role of the church in the moral guidance of the believers is permanent, without being limited to recommending some moral ideas; it must extend to all spheres of social life, and politics is part of it. We should not be afraid of using this term even if it has come to be considered synonymous to immorality. The church has the duty of placing the intention of purifying the political act in the minds and souls of the believers.

19 The speech of Patriarch DANIEL of the Romanian Orthodox Church at the symposium „*Demnitate și justiție pentru toți*” („Dignity and justice for all”), on Saturday, December 13th, 2008, at the Palace of the Patriarchate.

20 Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1988, p. 107.

It is high time for the church to fight for the promotion of human rights and values by becoming more involved in social life, by cultivating respect for human dignity as a human right, as Patriarch Daniel said: "Now, when the financial crisis has become a worrisome phenomenon, human dignity must be further protected from the humiliation that derives from poverty, unemployment, exploitation, social injustice, hunger and suffering. In particular situations, respect for human dignity and human rights has to be translated into concrete social-philanthropic actions and programs. In this sense, the churches base their thought on the gospel of Christ's love for all people, a love that becomes the criterion for the assessment of human life throughout history (according to Matthew 25:31-46). Of course, love for one's neighbour is a moral duty which, in the legal field, becomes a role or an obligation, since the individual should be both a free and a responsible being. And authentic spirituality is precisely the deep connection between freedom, love and responsibility in relation with God and other human beings."²¹

Also, church members should never forget that they represent limbs of the same body, the body of the Saviour Jesus Christ, and that, because of this reality, each unkind expression casts them out of the community, sets a limit, raises walls between them and others, on the one hand, and between them and God, on the other hand.

Conclusions

In the missionary field, freedom can be valued through error and confusion. We can be wrong about freedom of religion, confusing it with the acts of imposing our faith and values, through manipulation and persuasion. We can be confused about freedom when we assimilate it to libertinage of any kind, when we introduce it as the expression of an irrational and irresponsible behaviour of the individual. We agree with Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov who said that you can find your way back from error, but never from confusion, and Kierkegaard was also right when he said that "the opposite of sin is not virtue, but freedom". Human

21 The speech of Patriarch Daniel of the Romanian Orthodox Church at the international symposium „Drepturile Omului - dimensiune spirituală și acțiune civică“ („Human rights: spiritual dimension and civic action“) in Iași, organized by the Romanian Institute for Human Rights, the Metropolis of Moldavia and Bukovina, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Iași and „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, on October 20th, 2008.

freedom is seen in the first stage of one's endeavours towards salvation, in the process of gaining forbearance, the release from one's passions being associated with attaining freedom, freedom from sin.

Freedom separates good from necessity (according to St. John Damascus in his *Dogmatic*), because there is no "virtue in necessity", as the great Syrian father teaches us. This danger is great and it can compromise the whole process of spiritual progress, the whole spiritual life of the individual would be nullified.

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