# Freedom, Fraternity, and Friends

*by Hubert Morel-Seytoux*

## The limits of freedom and the revolt to recover freedom.

There has always been the problem of where individual freedom starts and where it stops. For Quakers, it has always been framed in a moral context. Your individual freedom stops when it affects the human dignity of other beings, e.g., when it limits their right for life, wellbeing, happiness, and some level of prosperity. This is clearly stated, also in moral terms, in the Declaration of Independence. On the other hand, the Constitution departs from that perspective as it defines the limits for freedom in legal terms and in complete disregard for what was stated in the Declaration of Independence. Legalizing slavery, though hidden under the term of "property," was a clear corruption of the Declaration of Independence. As a Quaker I have to object to the worshipping of this Constitution, which is such a fraud. It has totally corrupted the moral basis for freedom and raised the concept of "property" to an idolatrous level. As a Quaker, I steadily object to that modern form of the Golden Calf.

Clearly one must define what freedom is and whether and how limits need to be placed on it. We discuss this at some length.

Is there a criterion for placing such limits? Is there a value that needs to be brought to bear? Yes, and it is "fraternity," as we shall explain, a definite Quaker value as we are the Religious Society of Friends.

So far, we have introduced the concept of freedom in a societal concept in the contact line between individual and society. There is another element, another contact line, between the individual and the cosmos. This is another important question to address and we explore it under the expression "metaphysical freedom." Does man really have any freedom at all? Before we may explore in depth the interaction between the individual and society, we may need to address first the matter of the interaction between man and the cosmos, which some interpret as the interaction between man and God. Only if we part from the belief in the existence of God can we fully appreciate the extraordinary responsibility we have with that gained freedom.

Once we have given an answer to that question, then we are back to the important question: how do I live, i.e., behave, with that complete freedom in our temporary short life? Quakers, of course, have a simple answer. They do not have a "dogmatic" creed but a "behavioral" creed, the Testimonies. When we refuse to obey laws that we consider immoral, based on these testimonies, we are willing to pay a price, even though the law is not morally justified.

But is man capable to face that freedom of action and the associated immense responsibility that goes with it when it would be so much easier to hold to beliefs that guarantee immortality and forgiveness for all our sins?

## The distinction between freedom and liberty

To refer to this concept in the French language, there is only one word: "*liberté,*" whereas in English there are two words, respectively, of Saxon and Latin roots. Do these two words have actually different meanings? Why did the ACLU choose to refer to itself as American Civil Liberties Union versus American Civil Freedom Union? The US Constitution uses the term "freedom" quite generally in the First Amendment, and the word "liberty" in the Preamble and the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments. Why were amendments written? Because the Constitution was vague or ambiguous, the Amendments were meant to correct it by being more specific. "Freedom" seems to refer to a general philosophical concept whereas "liberties" are specific and typically regulated by government. In other words, liberty cannot be understood without the associated rules that impose limits on it. Can freedom ever exist without limitations?

## The metaphysical concept of freedom

Most religions describe God as omnipotent and omniscient. Nothing happens without his will, and he knows everything, including the future. He is also (usually) supposed to be benevolent.

While attending a meeting in a mosque, shortly after the events of 9/11, some questions were asked to the Imam about these events and the death of some three thousand persons. His answer essentially was, that since He willed it, there must have been something good about it. Naturally this is hard to understand and has to be accepted by faith. Our mind cannot comprehend God, and certainly we have no right to question Him; that would show total lack of due respect. In other words, we have no freedom at all. Although we have the illusion that in the course of life, we make choices; in reality, these are predetermined. In Islam it is very clear: "*maktub,*" or "it is written." Muslims accept that concept. Members of the Taliban have no choice. They must follow the Koran, what is written.

For Christians, the concept of limits to our freedom is not so easily acceptable, and the Church has labored forever at finding a compromise. It can be summarized in simple terms: You do not have freedom and yet you have freedom, which of course makes no sense. From a theological point of view, to reclaim freedom, you have to deny the existence of God. In *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky, Ivan, the atheist, states to his illegitimate half-brother, Smerdyakov, "Everything is permitted." Complete liberty! There is neither reward nor punishment for what you do. Whatever you do is the result of your own and *free* choice.

As Camus points out, Ivan does not say this with a great deal of exhilaration, but rather with deep sadness. Complete freedom comes with a terrible price: full responsibility. In other words, as existentialists would put it, "No excuse." You cannot blame God, society, your upbringing, etc. You and only you decided.

In Camus's essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," he writes, "I have nothing to do with the problem of metaphysical liberty. Knowing whether or not man is free does not interest me. . . I cannot understand what kind of freedom would be given me by a higher being. . . The only one I know is freedom of thought and action."

Having broken with the belief of immortality, and thus being a "Mortalist" Quaker, I am fully aware of my responsibility in the choices I make.

After the Fall of Saigon, it was very clear that many Vietnamese refugees would arrive to the United States. So, with my wife Chula, we discussed the possibility of sponsoring one such family. We realized that there would be a lot of red tape and delays going through more bureaucratic procedures. We debated all reasons why we could not do it. Yes, it would entail a cost in terms of money and personal comfort. Were these valid excuses? Compared to the predicament of the refuges, our inconvenience would be ridiculously small. The conclusion was indeed: "No Excuse."

In mid-August 1975, we picked up Tang, the father; Minh, a son; Tam, a daughter; and Thui, Tam's daughter; at the Denver airport. Never in my life have I seen people so dispirited with not a single smile on their faces. The family was chosen because they spoke no English but the father had some fluency in French. They lived in our house for three months before we were able to find some housing for them, jobs, etc. Shall I enumerate some of the inconveniences this stay entailed? Just one: our youngest daughter, seven years old, slept on a cot in her mother's clothes closet in our main bedroom.

No further excuses when we took a young Guatemalan refugee into our home, who ended up living in our house for seven years.

Finally, being a mortalist Quaker makes it easy for me to donate my body for medical education, as I expect no immortality, no resurrection, and ultimately my body will experience the same fate as the two cats and one snake I buried in our backyard.

## Our down-to-earth freedom

We do not know whether we have a real freedom or not, yet in everyday life, we have to make decisions. Illusion or not, we have to live with it. In the process of making decisions, we have to decide what is right and what is wrong. But since the real freedom of action comes from the denial of the existence of God, we cannot rely upon a historic revelation that is a "Scripture," be it Torah, Bible, or Koran. Quakers are unique in that sense because we believe in continued revelation, which can be interpreted as an evolution of our way of thinking today, primarily as a result of the impact of the Age of Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. In fact, when we talked earlier about respecting the dignity of other beings, we implied other human beings; but nowadays, Quakers strongly feel that such other beings include animals beside plain human beings.

Given that there are no longer "Scriptures" to decide what is right or wrong, the choice is left to a consensus (or often a majority) of human beings. In other words, society (e.g., Congress) puts into law what is right and wrong concerning the interaction of human beings and sometimes even upon one's individual behavior. Society curbs individual freedom. It also sometimes recognizes that there are individual freedoms that cannot be curbed, even by a majority of members of that society. This is true in many democratic societies, but societies with a theocratic form of government (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Israel, etc.) act differently.

The motto of the French Revolution is "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." As was pointed out by one writer, "If there are no limits on liberty, there can be no equality; and if there are no

limits on equality, then there is no liberty." In the U.S., total capitalist freedom has brought about a tremendous inequality of wealth and power. In the Stalinist Soviet Union, there was no liberty.

The reconciliation between the two conflicting objectives of liberty and equality could only come with fraternity. Fraternity would be the guarantee through which limits would be applied or not applied. That this concept was fully understood by Quakers is witnessed in the official name of our religion, Society of Friends.

## Freedom of religion means freedom to refuse?

In an article with this title in the Satna Rosa Press Democrat, September 15, 2021, the columnist Noah Feldman, states: "When it comes to my conscience, it does not matter if I thought something different last year or last week or 30 seconds ago. What I believe right now is what matters. . . One classic definition of conscience, which goes back to St. Jerome, is that conscience is that scintilla or spark or gleam of the *inner* voice that tells me what is right." Earlier the writer had said: "The moral basis for religious freedom is the idea of the liberty of conscience, which motivated the framers of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and remains compelling today." At the end of the column, he says, "Only sincere beliefs must be respected. But sincerity is in the mind of the believer, not the eye of the beholder."

The writer does not talk about the cost associated with that refusal. It almost sounds as if he thought that there should not be a price for refusal. A number of Quakers during the Second World War went to jail for refusing to serve in the military. Yet there is no doubt that their belief was sincere and they were following their conscience. Nevertheless, they went to jail. Was that not a violation of the First Amendment, the liberty of conscience?

There is a misconception about the First Amendment. It is not about Freedom of Religion. It is about Freedom from Religion. No religion can impose its will upon the other citizens even when the members of that religion happen to be the huge majority of the citizens. In Article 6 it is stated clearly, " . . no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States." (The Constitution may be an overall fraud, but it does include quite a few worthwhile parts).

## Freedom or comfort?

In the chapter "The Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Grand Inquisitor told Jesus, whom he had arrested in Seville in the midst of the Inquisition in the sixteenth century: Why did you not bring certainty to people instead of allowing them the freedom to decide what is right or wrong, what is true or false? Why, when tempted by the Devil, did you not jump from the roof of the Temple to be caught by the angels so that people would witness your divinity without any possible doubt? People do not want freedom, they want comfort. They do not want insecurity; they want tranquil assurance of belief. So, with the Inquisition, they burn to the stakes the heretics, those who would instill doubt in the minds of the masses and disturb them from their certainty.

Ivan pursues his story: “He precisely lays it to him and his colleagues’ credit that they have finally overcome freedom, and have done so in order to make people happy.” The Grand Inquisitor continues addressing Jesus: “Man was made a rebel; can rebels be happy? You were warned . . . but you rejected the only way of arranging for human happiness, but fortunately, on your departure, you handed the work over to us. You promised, you established with your word, you gave us the right to bind and loose.”

Needless to say, the Catholic Church did not fully succeed in curbing freedom, but the trend continues for a variety of ideologies, be they Taliban, Evangelical, or MAGA Patriots. All will curb freedom for the purpose of bringing formal virtue to the world and alleviating the anxiety of an inexorable end of an earthly life through the promise of a heavenly afterlife.

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