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DIMENSIONS OF HUMAN FREEDOM IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

In this paper, I am thinking about human freedom within God's "wide space". How does human freedom develop within God's freedom? Where is God's freedom to be found within the dimensions of human freedom? How does faith participate in God's potentialities? Where does God throw open God's potentialities for human beings, so that that they can cross their own frontiers?

Keywords: human freedom, God's freedom, human being, Christian faith, Mikhail Bakunin, community.

1. MICHAEL BAKUNIN: GOD OR FREEDOM

There is a famous, much-quoted saying of the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, which claims that "if God exists, then man is a slave; but the human being can and ought to be free; consequently God does not exist".

In his writing *God and the State* (1871), Bakunin expounds this thesis at length: everything which is ascribed to God is taken away from the human being. "Since God is everything, the real world and the human being are nothing". "God appears, the human being becomes nothing, and the greater the deity the more miserable the human race becomes". So if we want to liberate human beings, we must negate God. Atheism is the presupposition for true human liberty. Human liberty stems from rebellion. For Bakunin as for Feuerbach, God and the human being are

one and the same, so that what one takes from the one profits the other. That is actually illogical, for God and the human being are not one and of the same essence. Ironically enough, Bakunin uses the biblical story of the fall as justification for his doctrine of freedom: "But then came Satan, the eternal rebel, the first free thinker and universal liberator. ... He frees him (i. e., the human being) and impresses on his brow the seal of freedom and humanity by driving him to be disobedient and to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge". "And God said that Satan was right" and found that the human being "had become like God". Bakunin concludes from this myth about the fall that human beings have liberated themselves – and will liberate themselves – "through rebellion and thought".

That was undoubtedly meant politically. Bakunin was living in the holy Russia of the autocratic stars and the Orthodox state church. "As the slaves of God, men and women must also be slaves of the church and of the state, inasmuch as the state is blessed by the church". Consequently, his writing *God and the State* culminates in the anarchistic cry, "Ni Dieu ni maitre" – neither God nor state! He knew only the political state god and rose against it for freedom's sake – politically speaking, rightly so.

2. THE GOD OF THE EXODUS AND THE RESURRECTION

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not a God of the pharaohs, the Caesars, and the slaves, but the God who led God's people out of slavery into liberty, as the First Commandment states. God is "the Lord" because God is the liberator. Israel's fundamental experience of God is this experience of freedom. To believe in God means nothing other than to trust in God's liberating power. Here the modern alternative "God or freedom" sounds absurd. It is the opposite that is true: God's name means freedom. As Israel's history shows, this does not just mean inner freedom, freedom of thought, or freedom of mind or spirit; it means real political, economic, and cultural freedom – In short, the realm of freedom to its fullest compass. Israel's exodus story has been communicated through the centuries to many peoples by way of the Christian Bible, and has again and again led to revolutions in the interests of freedom – among the pilgrim fathers, who emigrated from England, among African American slaves in the United States, and among

the peoples in Latin America struggling for their liberation from colonial rule and capitalism.

But there is another exodus story as well in the Old Testament: the exodus of Abraham and Sarah from their “fatherland” – from their family and their homeland – Into the country God was going to show them (Gen 12:1-3). This divine promise points forward to a “great people” and the “blessing for all peoples”. But the way there is a lonely one through the desert. This is not the freedom born out of liberation; it is the freedom that issues from alienation, alienation from everything which offers support in the world. “So (Abraham) went” (12:4). That is what the New Testament calls true faith: “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1).

God the Father of Jesus Christ, the God about whom the New Testament talks, is not a God of the political rulers and slave owners, either. But, rather, the God who raised Christ from death on the cross into the glory of God’s kingdom. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of the Son of man who was humiliated, tortured, and crucified by the Roman occupying power in Jerusalem in the name of the Roman imperial power. The person who believes in this God and follows Christ leaves behind the gods of power and throws down their idols. God is the One who “raised Jesus from the dead” – that is the Christian revelation of God: God is the liberator from the power of evil and death. God’s power creates life, where injustice and violence destroy it. Christian experience of God is an experience of resurrection. That is brought out in two key utterances of Christian faith: “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal 5:1); and “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17). The exodus experiences of Israel and of Abraham stand at the center of the Old Testament. At the center of the New are the resurrection experiences of Christ and the experiences of freedom shared by believers in Christ’s Spirit and in his discipleship.

3. HUMAN FREEDOM IN GOD

When I talk here about freedom “in God”, I do not mean special mystical experiences; I mean life in faith, a life in accordance with God, a life that participates in God’s energies in the open Spirit. In this section we shall look at the various dimensions of freedom in this divine life.

4. FREEDOM AS THE ABILITY TO BEGIN

It was Hannah Arendt who taught us to see freedom as an initiative issuing from something new, something unique, and something undeducible from anything else: *incipit vita nova* – a new life begins. Freedom does not mean the ability to do something, nor does it mean the many possibilities open to us. Freedom means that we ourselves take the initiative and begin something new with our abilities and the potentialities we see before us. To put it simply, we must know what so set about doing with our lives, so that we become truly living. According to Arendt, a simple reason why we take the initiative and can make a new beginning is something within ourselves; this is what we are born for. “Because every human being simply by being born is an *initium*, a beginning and a new arrival, human beings can take the initiative and put on foot something new”. That sounds curious, for animals are born, too, but they are nevertheless not so free as human beings. She appeals to a saying of Augustine’s: “So that there might be a beginning, the human being was created before whom there was no one” (*Initium ergo ut esse, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit*).

For “in the beginning God created heaven and earth”. Only God has the energies for the free beginning without any presuppositions, the beginning before which there was “nothing”. And God created the human being in God’s image – that is to say, Arendt concludes, as a beginner of something new, before whom there was no one comparable. Consequently, the creation of God’s human image begins with a new resolve on God’s part: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen 1:26). So Arendt writes, “With the creation of man the principle of beginning came into the world itself. At the creation of the world this still remained in the hand of God, as it were, and hence outside the world; which of course is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was simultaneously created when man was created”.

The human being’s free nature is his or her creative power, and this creative power is the ability to begin something new. In this respect the human being corresponds to the creative God and participates in God’s power to live. Conversely, God participates in this human freedom through God’s indwelling Spirit and continually awakens it afresh.

If the human freedom that corresponds to God is to be found in the ability to begin, then this directs our gaze toward the future. That

emerges with an inward cogency. Every beginning is the anticipation of the completion – otherwise it would not be a beginning. Every birth is the beginning of a complete life – otherwise it would not be a beginning. Every birth is the anticipation of a full life – otherwise it would not be the beginning of a life. Every exodus out of an outward and inner captivity is already an anticipation of the free life in the realm of freedom – otherwise there could never be an exodus. Every resurrection is an anticipation of the eternally living life. That is why “there is a magic in every beginning”, as Hermann Hesse wrote. The believers perceives this magic in God’s promise, out of which one will be “born again to a living hope” (1 Petr 1:3). Without anticipations and promises of this kind the future would hold no magic, and there would be no reason to yearn for it. In birth, in rebirth, in the ability to begin, what we anticipate are not conditions in evanescent time, but fulfillments of our hopes. We do not anticipate what will probably be tomorrow, and ought to be so the day after that, because we want to live and to affirm life. Future is not a prolongation of the present according to the surveyor’s pole of linear time; it is the fulfillment of our hope for life, which comes to meet us.

5. FREEDOM AS DOMINATION OR AS COMMUNITY?

Freedom exists in relationships, either in relationships to other people, or another person, or as a relationship to oneself. A common definition of freedom emerges from political history. The person who believes that world history is a continual struggle for power things that the victor in this struggle is the one who is free, while the loser is unfree. The free are the people with power, the people without power become the subordinate subjects of the others. In social and political history, the masters are free, the servants are dependents. Paul was familiar with this division of people into freemen and slaves (Gal 3:28). According to Roman law, only the master of the household is free; his wives, children, and slaves are not free. Freedom as lordship is a sign of a patriarchal culture, as the world lordship shows. The free man determines over himself, while the rest, the unfree, are determined by others. Lordship is a one-sided relationship of a subject to objects. This is particularly obvious in a military context: command requires obedience, preferably slavish obedience.

The bourgeois revolution did away with slavery and serfdom and surmounted princely absolutism and feudalism. But its interpretation still took its bearings from the liberty of the princes and the feudal “powers

that be". Freedom is the autonomous self-determination of every individual over his or her own life and abilities. Individual freedom is limited only by the freedom of other people. The person who claims that his or her freedom means self-determination has to respect the same freedom where others are concerned. No one determines anyone else, everyone determines oneself. Ideally this is a society of free but solitary individuals: The Lonely Crowd.

But lordship and slavery constitute only a very one-sided form of social relationship. Since in everyday life and in old age everyone as child, or as a weak and sick person, is dependent on other people, doing away with the lordship over other people in favour of general autonomous self-determination is not helpful in every situation. What is better is the transformation of lordship and slavery into mutual and alternating social representation. People with their own abilities act as representatives of others and on their behalf. They do not just stand side by side with them but are there for each other from the cradle to the grave, and act on others' behalf. One can distinguish here between a temporary representation, which is only necessary until the other person can take over his or her own responsibility, and an enduring representation necessary for life, in which people are there for one another because they live together.

In these representative relationships people take over the responsibility for each other; and ever since New Testament times these relationships have been known in the Christian tradition as love. German linguistic history shows that freedom is by no means the equivalent of lordship, for the German word for freedom is related to friendliness, which inclines toward the other person.

This kind of freedom is also called communicative freedom. I am free and feel free when I am respected and recognized by other people, and when I, for my part, respect and accept others. Then the other person is not a restriction of my freedom, but an extension of it. In mutual participation in the life of other people, individuals become free beyond the boundaries of their individuality. That is the social side of freedom. We call it friendship or solidarity. In a community of this kind individuals become persons. An individual is ultimately indivisible, but a person emerges through participation and communication with other people, that is to say, in community.

Something that is ultimately indivisible has no relationships and cannot communicate. If a human individual has no relationships it has no

characteristics either, and no name. It does not know itself. The completely “privatized” human being is an idiot, in the Greek sense of the word. Without community a human being cannot be a person; but without persons a community cannot be a human community.

What is a person? The free human being is the being that can promise, as Friedrich Nietzsche said, and who also keeps his or her promises, as every child knows. By promising, I pin myself down in my ambiguities. Through the promises I keep I become trustworthy for other people. Through one’s promises a person acquires continuity in the flux of the times. One who forgets one’s promises forgets oneself; the person who keeps one’s promises remains faithful to oneself. This identity between a human person and one’s life history is designated through one’s name. Through my name I identify myself as the one I was and as the one I will be. I sign my contracts with my name and vouch for what I say with my name.

Free human beings live in such networks of promises made and kept, agreements, and trust. The political paradigm of a free society is the covenant that is laid down in a state’s constitution, and the social contract that orders the community or polity. The paradigm of rule is *auctoritas facit legem* (“authority make the law”) while the paradigm of the free society is *pacta sunt servanda* (“agreements must be kept”). A free society is not an accumulation of independent individuals; it is a community of persons in solidarity – a community of “care and share”.

The old familiar method of government was *divide et impera* – “divide and rule”. The life of the united community consists of the bringing together of what would otherwise be divided. In shared freedom, the alienation between people is ended and the separation of human civilization from nature is surmounted. The earth is not intended to be subjected to human domination, and animals are not objects for human subjects; they are “fellow creatures”. So we shall replace the old rules of domination through new forms of community in society and with nature. Freedom as harmony will be the watchword once competition is replaced by cooperation, and a mutual give and take with nature comes into being, which will serve the common survival of all.

6. FREEDOM AS CREATIVE EXPECTATION

The experience of freedom in the Christian faith even leads beyond the unified community. For the Christian faith does not live solely in

love; it lives in hope, too. If Christian faith is resurrection faith then it reaches out toward the future and can be termed the creative passion for the eternally living life. With that it transcends the limitations of the present and crosses beyond the given reality into the potentialities of the future.

This passion does not, like dominion or community, take its bearings from what is present but from the future of what is present now”.

Christian hope is not a waiting or a matter of “wait and see”. It is a creative expectation of the things that God has promised with the resurrection of Christ. Those who passionately await something prepare themselves and their community for it. In these preparations the path of the coming One is prepared through attempts to correspond to what is anticipated with all the capacities and potentialities one has. These correspondences to the future God has promised are anticipations of this future. The person who hopes for the realm of freedom will desire liberation from political repression and economic exploitation here and now. The person who hopes for the righteousness and justice of the new earth will respect the earth here and now, will develop reverence for earthly life, and will resist its exploitations and destruction. The person who hopes for the eternally living life will be already seized here and now by this “unique, eternal, glowing life”, and will make life live wherever he or she can. This freedom is not an “insight into necessity”; it is an insight into potentiality. This freedom is not a harmony of the existing conditions of power; it is their harmonization with what is to come, as the prophecy of Isaiah says:

Arise, shine,
for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. (Isa 60:1)

If we wish to arrive at an abstract summing-up, we might say: freedom as lordship relates subjects to objects, freedom as community relates subjects to subjects, freedom as creative passion relates subjects to projects belonging to the future.