



Schuon on Khilafah and Freedom in Islam

An examination

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“Now the existential determination of man, which he shares with every pebble is one thing, and another is his liberty, which he owes to his deiform personality thanks to which he participates in the Divine Nature.”¹

Here Schuon contests the rights of liberty vis a vis what is known in Islam as Ubudiyyah (Slave-hood). He justifies liberty, inter alia, by linking it, in a special way, with another Islamic notion, namely, Khilafah (Vicegerency). He also appeals to the symbolism of Salah (Islamic ritual prayer) to press his point.

“The fact that in the Moslem prayer the vertical positions alternate with the prostrations expresses in its way the two aspects of man, that of “slave” (‘abd) and that of “viceregent” (khalifah); These are two aspects and also two relationships which must not be confused, whenever there is a need to distinguish them.”

Schuon seems to say that Khilafah is chiefly an expression of the freedom of Man. It is something additional to Ubudiyyah, and has an entelechy which is different, rather antipodal to it. Although, he seems to be accepting as a point of minor importance, that the difference between the two is qualified and not absolute, but he does not at all indicate this qualification, which is to practically treat it as absolute. Since, Ubudiyyah is generally considered in Islam to be the essential relationship of Man to God, Schuon’s implied suggestions cannot be left unexamined.

On the issue of freedom itself, he seems to imply that freedom, per se, is an important and positive aspect of Man which should be cherished, actively preserved and expressed as an independent mode. This, not only appears to be not fully concordant with Islamic ethos, but somewhat approaching Renaissance Humanism, so it too brooks perusal.

Islam says that all creations of God including Man are His Abd (Slave; plural: Ibad; Adjective: Ubudiyyah). Their essence is absolute submission to Him. In the language of Metaphysics, the Contingent are the instruments of the Absolute. Islam then describes yet another status of Man. He is the Khalifah (Vicegerent; Adjective: Khilafah) of God. He rules, in a limited arena, on behalf of God. Islam sees Khilafah not as a coordinate but a mode of Ubudiyyah. It signifies nothing additional to Ubudiyyah. Rather, it (Khilafah) is only one of its expressions.

¹ Schuon, F “On the Divine Will” in “Christianity/Islam Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism” Select Books, Bangalore, India, 1996, pp. 265-266.

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The Contingent rules because the Absolute makes it possible and commands it. The Contingent rules as the Absolute bids. The Khalifah (Vicegerent) has to simply implement the Shariah. His ruling, actually doing God's bidding, is nothing but the obeying of a Divine Command.

It could be justified, for some limited purposes, to differentiate between Ubudiyyah *expressed as* Ubudiyyah (Servitude) and Ubudiyyah *expressed as* Khilafah (Vicegerency). For instance, a Faqih (Jurisconsult), on not finding an explicit rule for a situation in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, has to himself come up with the solution. Quoting an explicit rule of the canonical texts would be Ubudiyyah expressed as Ubudiyyah. If one becomes used to it as the only expression of Ubudiyyah one could, oblivious of the bidding to assume responsibility in certain circumstances, shy away from exercising one's mind to come up with the answer on not finding an explicit rule in the Canon. So, it is definitely useful to distinguish between the essence and form of Ubudiyyah so that, when needed, the form of Ubudiyyah (but not the essence) could be substituted by the form of vice-rulership. But even that form would be informed by the essence of Servitude. To follow our example, the elucidation and articulation of a personal opinion would be undertaken, but as an exercise in obeying God since He had bid the Slave to do so. In addition to this motivational quality, the process of discovering the solution is objectively 'obediential' in that it is undertaken within the framework of Islamic Law and with constant prayer to God to guide the Heart aright, not as an exhilarant exercise of free and untrammelled individuality. This rather long illustration shows that Khilafah is not even a qualification of Servitude, much less an addition to it. Ubudiyyah is the Contingent's essential and exhaustive relationship with the Absolute, that includes Khilafah.

Khilafah (Vicegerency) is not only a mere expression of Ubudiyyah (Servitude) but one of its higher degrees. The exercise of Khilafah can have two aspects: aspiring to Khilafah eg waging Jihad to get the power to rule; and attaining to Khilafah, eg getting the power to rule and exercising it to implement Shariah. According to Islam both these aspects are perfections of Servitude not its substitutions. God calls the Believer to wage Jihad, to gain and/or preserve Power, calling it 'Helping God', an eloquent synonym for Khilafah, as being true to one's original claim of Belief and Servitude.

"O ye who believe!
Why say ye that
Which ye do not?

.....
Truly Allah loves those who fight in His Cause
In battle array.....

.....
O ye who believe!
Be ye helpers of Allah:"
(Qur'an: 61-2,4&14)

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He attains to Khilafah, for instance establishing Islamic Government, after he has traversed the preliminary degrees of Servitude.

“Allah has promised, to those
Among you who believe
And work righteous deeds, that He
Will of a surety, grant them
In the land inheritance
(Of power), as He granted it
To those before them; that
He will establish in authority
Their religion-the one
Which He has chosen for them”
(Qur'an: 24-55)

This conclusively shows that far from being a libertarian respite from Servitude, Khilafah amounts to its culmination.

Speaking in terms of Islamic Esoterism, the Contingent rules to the degree it effaces itself vis a vis the Absolute, giving free hand to It to work through him. It is one aspect of Fana fi Allah (Annihilation in Allah) and Baqa bi Allah (Subsistence through Allah). Man's annihilation before God so that he may subsist in God's Activity through him. So, Khilafah is not only not at all distinct from Ubudiyyah but rather the acme of Ubudiyyah, where the Abd (Slave) totally relinquishes his individuality to become an instrument of the Lord's Rule.

Taking recourse to symbolical exegesis of Salah (Islamic Ritual Prayer) Schuon equates its initial posture Qiyam (standing upright) with freedom of vicegerency. But Man stands with folded hands, eyes downcast and facing the Ka'ba, which bespeaks servitude rather than freedom. And this too, can be deemed to symbolize the aspiring to Khilafah rather than its attainment, because according to the great Moroccan Sufi Saint, Shaikh Ahmad al Alawi has shown that the two Sajdahs (Prostrations) are the real Qiyam²². So, if it is assimilated to Qiyam, Khilafah begins as servitude (standing with folded arms) and is realized as extreme servitude (prostration). Freedom nowhere comes in. Man stands up, before God, to show not freedom but quasi-responsibility because he has been *so bidden*.

Coming to the issue of Freedom as such, not merely as a concomitant of Khilafah, one can say that freedom is never a concern of a traditional man. His freedom is a given fact. Thus, the Qur'an first directly calls upon Man to offer Worship (Ubudiyyah):

“O ye people!
Worship your Guardian Lord”
(Qur'an:2-21);

² Lings, M “A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century” George Allen & Unwin, London, 1973, pp. 188-189.

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and later merely talks of his Khilafah and the conferment of powers needed for exercising it, particularly the intelligibility of Universe.

Behold, thy Lord said to the angels; 'I will create
A vicegerent on earth.'

.....

And He taught Adam the names
Of all things;"
(Qur'an:2-30&31)

It is significant that, he is directly called to Servitude, while his Khilafah, and related powers are mentioned indirectly. This reflects the reality that his Khilafah-related freedom is a given fact while Servitude, including the relinquishing of his duties as Khalifah strictly according to God's wishes, is the thing for which he should be consciously concerned and engaged. Instead of winning, preserving or flaunting his freedom, he is more concerned about rightly exercising it, so that he may be in harmony with the Absolute. So, he ardently looks for guidance, both in Revelation and in his own Self, in terror, lest he misuse his (given) freedom and fall in perdition.