

“Freedom is a Verb”

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*Motto: “It's a verb! It's a verb!
Freedom is a verb!
Something never finished, never done!
It's something you must make
It's something you must take
It's something you must constantly become”*

Daniel Kahn: Freedom is a verb

Dear siblings in faith, I wish to start this warm-up paper with a motto taken from one of Daniel Kahn's songs, which bears the title: Freedom is a verb.

I don't know much about the author, so if I am walking on landmines please forgive my ignorance, yet the quoted words do have a wisdom beneficial to all of us. We decided to make freedom the center theme of our Kolozsvár discussion, for quite obvious reasons: we're celebrating the year of religious freedom in the House of Religious Freedom in the birth place of a religion that has emphasized this notion as one of cardinal importance.

After setting the basic outline of my definition of freedom, as being an action, a verb, I wish to continue by narrowing down this massive subject. Ever since we started sketching this talk and the possibility of freedom being a theological problem, I have meditated on this concept, trying to find the implications it has on religiosity, on our faith, and to unravel some aspects of the myth that makes us related and also unique. For it is my long-stated understanding of liberal western religiosity that it would still have something to say to this world, if only it would take the time to step over its critical inclination and focus on a post-critical and post-modern retelling of its generative story. So, I will start with the retelling of a theological story in a possibly new or better said refurbished way, then putting it in a less theological, less Christian frame and language to show its universality. While doing so, I hope I will show how freedom is more than a social or a moral concept, it is a definitory concept for liberal thought.

Our story begins with bringing to mind the great Christian myth about the world, its beginning and also goal, or end. This is because, whether we like it or not, it is a core summarization of ancient Greek, Jewish and roman thought, and has been influential for the most

of Western thinking ever-since. This story is the formulation of Paul of Tarsus, who got his ideas by Hellenistic Jewish thinkers of his time. The story says that man was created in the image of God and sat in the Garden of Eden to tend for said garden. It was a wonderful place, with an all-you-can-eat buffet and one simple rule: disregard one tree and all its fruits. Yet Adam and Eve were persuaded by the serpent (usually identified with Satan) to eat from the forbidden fruit, thus such a change happened in their existence, that sin has been a presence in every single humans' life. The only way out of it was Gods way, who atoned Himself with the death and sacrifice of Christ, the Messiah, giving the possibility for all who believe to be saved.

The Pauline story is persuasive if you think of it, and it has been around since forever, yet it is as wrong as it can get. First of all, there is no mention of sin, not to say eternal and primordial sin, in the Genesis story. Also, why would a loving God build such a shrewd trap for its creatures? If this tree was so important and so dangerous at the same time, why didn't he put it somewhere else, maybe on the Moon? Furthermore, nowhere in Biblical Jewish tradition will you find mentioning of a primordial sin-stamp on the forehead of humanity. And we could go on and on, yet the short timeframe makes this impossible.

So, what do you remain with if you extract sin from this primordial and existential myth of Christianity. Because, you know, Paul was a Jewish scholar, with Jewish reflexes who knew that in order to step up with a new theory, you need to embed this new story in the written and oral tradition of the Chosen People. Thus, his logic is strong and biblical, even if his first premise is wrong. You remain with creation in the image of God, a change in the ontological and epistemological framework of human condition and the tension resulting from it, and a resolution through the person and the metaphor that we call Jesus Christ.

Here it goes, then, it is myth time! In the beginning God created humans on Her/His own image. Humans had the totality of their cognitive and spiritual possibilities, except one: self-reflection. They were the inhabitants of this world, the natural order of things, that we call the Garden of Eden. This planet with its complexity and richness is the mythical garden, that surrounds us, and in the beginning, humans were totally and fully part of this world, just like other animals. Yet this new creature was still very different from others. It had no claws, no sharp teeth, but a cognitive capacity unprecedented. At some point in time, this creature realized something crucial, which is represented through the fruit of knowledge of good and evil. It became aware of its own

personal existence, and aware of its one person. This is symbolized by the first thing humans do after eating the fruit: they look at themselves and realize that they are naked. The human became aware of its own being, and the world changed dramatically. She had a moral sense now, a new way of taking decisions not only on the basis of instinct or personal good, but on the basis of social and moral responsibility. And with it something grand and beautiful was born: the freedom of action. The human realized her freedom and her responsibility for her deeds and thoughts, realized this brand-new world of untouchable, yet very real things called thoughts and feelings, and sensed for the first time a new kind of thirst that of truth and meaning. New concepts and organs appeared, freedom of doing whatever is possible, and responsibility of decisions, the idea of right and wrong, the idea and possibility of sin which is basically choosing what is wrong. The possibility to see beyond the actual things, to see faces in the clouds and beauty, and law in nature. The human became a little bit akin to God, the perfect spirit.

Yet, the sweetness of being a fully developed human has its downsides as well. The great garden became hostile and scary with the ultimate demon, death, lurking everywhere. Nature was not sufficient anymore, and the eyes of this special semi animal, semi god were focused on another world, that of the Spirit. Of goodness, righteousness, freedom, beauty, science, society, time and space, existence, death, eternal life, God. And the great saga thus began, with moments of unimaginable grander and true virtue and moments of sadness and fallenness. Great achievements of global proportion and unbearable sins and wrongdoings and grief followed each other in an ever-continuing line. And everywhere and in every time the thirst to gain meaning through the newly discovered world of the spirit called the human to exploration and. Anxiety, questioning, moments of insight into something of unspoken beauty and meaning and falling flat are all part of the great journey.

Until finally – thus the story goes – a new bright light started to shine. In a small manger in Bethlehem a child was born, in poverty and hopelessness, yet at his birth the heavens opened and kissed the earth with a good news: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Obviously, this became apparent only after many years, when that baby grew up and thought the most fundamental truth to his disciples, after he was ready to give his life for the truth that he found. And this message and finding is a way to make peace between the two natures of the human: the Eden and the Spirit. This gospel uncovered a deeper synthesizing meaning, a deeper law than that of nature or society. The axiom that comes before all other axioms,

the wiring of existence, which can easily be presented in a couple of verses from old age: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” And suddenly for all that could hear and for all that could see, it all started to make sense. At the basis of every atom, at the core of every law of nature and of human action there stands a basic power, one that ultimately incorporates both Eden and Spirit. There is no anxiety anymore and no fear, only the truly fulfilled human, who dwells in two worlds, but is part of both totally. This is the meaning of salvation, not from death, because that is something inextricably bound to Eden, but from fear and hopelessness. The only thing one needs to truly learn is to fill ones’ heart with the presence of this law, and then from that respect stems for Eden and for the other and ultimately towards God. Or even more then that this binding system of universal love become the veins and arteries of God, the nervous system of the world through which the unconscious law of gravity becomes related to a mothers’ love, to the beauty of a Van Gogh painting, to the most elevated thought of a great prophet and to the humble prayer of the devout. And all these become related and absorbed in the ever-pulsating fountain of love that is called God. For there is nothing outside of God and nothing – not the smallest of atoms – that does not present the transcendence of God in its totality. And somewhere in this great system of existence there stands the human, with roots in both worlds, feeling the flow of this love through the body and the soul, experiencing through all the sweetness of being free, unbound and ready to take responsibility.

Now I am not saying that this story did not emerge in other cultures as well. It did, in many forms and variations, yet the one presented seems the most coherent for me, because is mine, like my body, my arms and my feelings and ideas. The fact that this story emerged everywhere only shows its universality and its truth.

So, what is then freedom? Freedom is what makes us human, our worth, our possibility and our great challenge, to use our awakened state to diffuse the message that Jesus and so many others have presented, the message of the universality of love in the world. A verb, not a noun, that continues to call us and to ask us to climb to the top and pinnacle of our possibilities and to bring the light of the Spirit to the flavor of Eden and to live not as specks of dust, but as lightning stars in the sky of existence.