

Freedom and Belonging

BY RICHARD BAUCKHAM

Freedom is such a potent—even a magic—word that it can become dangerous. Indeed, some ways of understanding and practicing freedom make it destructive of community. How can resources in the Bible and Christian tradition help us construct a positive relationship between freedom and belonging?

Freedom is a hugely potent word, especially in our contemporary world. It could plausibly be claimed that freedom is the primary value of modernity, and that postmodernity, while changing many things, has certainly not changed that. Of the three components of the slogan of the French Revolution—liberty, equality and fraternity—it is liberty that has worn best and come to be most widely valued. But this is not to say that freedom always means the same thing. Big words like that rarely do. Isaiah Berlin said that the meaning of freedom “is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist.”¹ It is a potent, even a magic, word and for that very reason can also be dangerous.

There is a widely perceived contemporary problem with the compatibility of freedom and community—between the human need to be independent and the human need to belong. The increase in both the desire and the concrete opportunities for individual freedom—along with doubtless other connected factors like increased mobility—have led to an atomized society; community is no longer a given context of relationships in which individuals find themselves embedded, but results only from the free choice of individuals to associate. Most people want to belong, but many experience this as in tension with the desire for freedom, and contemporary cultural and economic factors give a strong advantage, in this tension, to individual freedom. Community loses out.

Is freedom necessarily destructive of community? Does community necessarily inhibit freedom? Must we be content with some kind of uneasy balance between the two? Or does the dilemma result from particular constructions of freedom and community in modern Western culture? Are there ways of understanding and practicing freedom that actually enable community rather than destroy community? I would argue that there are resources

in the Bible and the Christian tradition for constructing a positive interrelationship between freedom and belonging.

If freedom conceived as opposed to belonging, exalted as a value purely in itself, leads not only to the destruction of community but to the distortion of freedom itself, then that is an aspect of a wider point: in a pluralistic society like the modern West there is a real danger of freedom becoming the only com-

mon value. If this happens, freedom will be seriously distorted, even destroyed, because freedom only really flourishes for human good when it is valued in a context of other prime values and virtues. A so-called freedom-loving society will be no more than a jungle of competing interests unless it values other goods as well as freedom. The pioneers of modern democracy, in the United States and elsewhere, took this for granted, but we can no longer afford just to assume it.

Since freedom is such a big word – susceptible to so many interpretations and uses – we need to consider a variety of kinds of freedom that have become culturally dominant in the modern and contemporary periods in the West (and exported to other parts of the world).

DEMOCRATIC FREEDOMS

Since the rest of what I say about the legacy of the European Enlightenment, the culture of modernity, will be mostly critical, I want to stress at the outset the positive aspects of freedom that the Enlightenment has bequeathed to us. The Enlightenment insisted, with some degree of novelty, on the rights of the individual over against the power of society or the state. Ideas of the dignity of the individual and the fundamental human rights of the individual that must be universally respected took their modern form through the Enlightenment, though arguably they have roots in the Christian tradition.

The notion of human rights – though it is probably not a matter of self-evident universal values as the Enlightenment believed – has proved very useful legally and internationally. Some people now associate talk of rights with contemporary hyper-individualism and the decline of social obligation; yet this view of rights without responsibilities is not the fault of the idea of human rights itself, but of the decay of a wider context of values.

FREEDOM FROM ALL LIMITS

However, modern concepts of freedom range much more widely than those enshrined in democratic political systems. In the spirit of modernity there is an aspiration to absolute freedom or freedom from all limits whatever. A famous and remarkable passage from the fifteenth-century philosopher Pico della Mirandola will illustrate this well. Pico imagines God addressing Adam, just after creating him:

The nature of other creatures, which has been determined, is confined within the bounds prescribed by us. You, who are confined by no limits, shall determine for yourself your own nature, in accordance with your own free will, in whose hand I have placed you.... We have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that, more freely and more honourably the moulder and maker of yourself, you may fashion yourself in whatever form you shall prefer....²

In his own voice Pico continues, “O sublime generosity of God the Father! O Highest and most wonderful felicity of man! To him it was granted to have what he chooses, to be what he wills.”³ This is a portrait of humanity as the creature with no given limits, absolutely self-determining, able to choose what it will be – in effect, self-creating. What Pico has really done in this passage, following the tendency of the Italian Renaissance to treat humanity as a god, is transfer to human beings a theological understanding of God as the absolutely self-determining reality.

It says something about the continuity of this notion of human freedom from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment that Pico does more or less what in the early nineteenth century Ludwig Feuerbach advocated. For Feuerbach our ideas of God are just projections of human qualities and potentialities, and thus we need to reclaim our humanity by rejecting the transcendent God and re-appropriating for humanity our own true divinity. This is what Pico was doing, except that he did not give up belief in God. What he effectively gave up was the finiteness of humans as finite creatures, investing humanity with the infinite freedom to transcend all limits that theology had attributed to God.

One cannot deny that the rejection of given limits in the project of modernity was genuinely liberating in important ways. It rescued people from fatalism – from simply acquiescing to circumstances out of a general conviction that

nothing can really be changed. It gave huge energy to the project of improving human life and its conditions. But it had a Promethean tendency — a tendency to suppose that all given limits can be transcended and abolished. We have seen the downside of this understanding of freedom in the ecological crisis, which in many ways has been a very hard lesson in learning that there simply are given limits in the nature of things, and that humanity's attempts to dis-

The modern notion of individualistic freedom is a full-scale revolt against the given. It rejects dependence. It is not received from others or enhanced by others. It is an inherent capacity the individual deploys in an exercise of self-creation.

regard these have been reckless and ignorant, bringing on disasters that no one predicted. This rejection of human finiteness — the understanding of freedom as an ability, even a right, to break out of all restrictions and to recognize no limits — has been very damaging when adopted as an idea of individual freedom.

Modern individuals came to think that the more freedom they have the better and that the freedom they

wanted was self-determination. In this understanding of freedom, other people can only be restrictions on freedom. Society becomes a sort of contract in which we promise not to exercise our own freedom to the extent of impinging on other people's freedom. John Stuart Mill's famous definition encapsulates this notion: "The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to attain it."⁴ Freedom here is something one exercises as an independent individual. It has no positive relationship to anyone else's freedom. Essentially it sees freedom as competitive. On this definition of freedom, my freedom really would be increased if I denied other people their freedom, overruled their freedom, and subjected them to my will.

For someone really driven by this kind of freedom other people simply get in the way. For society to be possible at all, according to Mill's argument, we must in fact compromise our own freedom in order to allow others theirs. But this restriction of our freedom is precisely a restriction: we would be able to be freer if it were not for other people. So freedom and society pull in different directions.

This is where we first see the incompatibility of freedom and community. Obligations to other people restrict freedom. Accordingly, the lowest-common-denominator morality of contemporary Western culture puts obligation to others in an entirely negative form: do what you like so long as you do not

harm anyone else. This is what we are left with if freedom for the individual is understood as transcending all limits and if freedom is the only common value left in a pluralistic society.

FREEDOM AS MAXIMAL INDEPENDENCE

Modern individualistic freedom is a full-scale revolt against the given. This means not only that it accepts no given limits, or does so only grudgingly, as a concession; it also means that freedom is conceived as complete independence. That is, it rejects dependence. Freedom is not received from others or enhanced by others. Freedom is an inherent capacity that the individual deploys in an exercise of self-creation. Each has, in Pico della Mirandola's words, the freedom to choose who they will be.

This kind of freedom as maximal independence makes people unwilling to make long-term commitments or to stick with relationships or situations that are not going well. People want the right to move on. They want to keep their options open. They hate being dependent on others because it is restrictive. All these facets of freedom are antithetical to community, which requires such old-fashioned virtues as faithfulness and commitment. Or, to put it another way: maximal independence is incompatible with belonging.

Of course, people still want to belong, but contemporary people experience the desire to belong as in considerable tension with freedom. They get divorced and then they regret it. Or they want lifelong loving commitment to a partner, but feel it would be unbearably restrictive actually to marry. Family relationships are obvious victims of freedom as maximal independence, but neighborliness is another. Even spirituality is affected: private versions of new age spirituality leave one freer in this sense than so-called institutional religion that requires commitment and obligation.

Lest we think of this solely in terms of attitudes in people's minds, we should note that economic factors play a role: it is hard to belong when you have to keep moving from one job to another or from one place to another. How many people now have neighbors they have known all their lives or colleagues they have worked with all their careers, as most people did not so long ago?

FREEDOM AS CONSUMER CHOICE

Alongside freedom as maximal independence the other dominant aspect of freedom in contemporary Western culture is freedom of consumer choice. Having choice can certainly be a good thing. Even rather trivial forms of choice make life more enjoyable. But we may well wonder whether our society has not gone about as far as it can in simply multiplying choice in every aspect of life that can be bought. Consumer choice certainly can be a means of commercial manipulation cloaking itself in the illusion of freedom. But probably the worst manifestation of a consumer culture occurs when the model of consumer choice is applied to things other than those we purchase, such as choosing our moral values.

The effect of a culture that overvalues consumer choice is to give the impression that freedom is really enhanced by the mere multiplication of choices, regardless of how we exercise choice. What matters is having the choice, not making the right choice, not choosing well or rightly. This is one of the points where one may fear that freedom is becoming the only value. Distinguishing good choices and bad choices is serious when there are accepted notions of good and bad. In a culture that socializes people into a range of values and virtues that constitute the good life, the main value of choice will be that it enables the making of good choices. Freedom is a faculty, and choice is an opportunity for the good. But without a widely accepted range of values and virtues, choice becomes the good that is valued in and of itself.

FREEDOM AS DOMINATION?

A question that must always be raised about freedom is whether it has domination as its corollary. In other words, is it freedom for some at the expense of others? Is it the freedom the master enjoys only because he has slaves? It is easy for us to see that ancient Athenian democracy was possible for the free citizens of Athens only because their slaves and their wives did all the work and left them the free time to engage in the democratic debates and decisions of direct democracy. Modern democracy was for a long time really a kind of plutocracy in the sense that there was a property qualification for voting. Universal franchise came late in the day. The economic relationships that free some while enslaving others are not always so obvious, but there are always economic aspects to freedom. What is happening in a democracy where the poor have the vote but few of them actually turn out to vote? How far does consumer choice in the West depend on cheap labor, not to mention child labor, in parts of the developing world?

We have already observed that for freedom conceived as maximal independence for the individual, other people appear only as restrictions on the freedom of the individual. But we also have to press, in some cases, a harder critique: are freedoms we value ourselves only possible because others are denied freedoms?

Freedom, we have to conclude, is such a magic word, such an alluring notion, that it is also a powerfully ideological word—in the bad sense of “ideology,” meaning that it mystifies a situation we would dislike or be ashamed of if we saw it more clearly. Freedom can cloak oppression and justify selfishness. It covers a multitude of goods and a multitude of evils and a lot of rather ambiguous things. It deserves a lot more critical attention than our society usually affords it, while priding itself precisely on its freedom.

BEYOND HYPER-INDIVIDUALISM: RECIPROCITY

To construct a notion of freedom that can serve as an adequate alternative to the kinds of freedom that in the contemporary world are proving inimical to human flourishing, there are two motifs that I draw from my understanding of the Bible and the Christian tradition: freedom is finite and freedom is relational.

Freedom is finite. That means, partly, that it is given, just as for finite creatures all goods are received. Freedom is given ultimately by God, but also in the concrete circumstances of life it is given by social structures and traditions and by other people. We do not simply win freedom for our individual selves; we receive it. We grant freedom to each other (or fail to do so); we enhance each other's freedom (or suppress it). In a well-functioning community we are not restrictions on each other's freedom, but enable each other's freedom. Freedom is not a zero-sum game, so that the more freedom I have the less you have. The more freedom we give each other the more we all have.

If we are given freedom by others, then it is a mistake to want a kind of independence that excludes any sort of dependence. The independence of finite creatures is always rooted in their more fundamental dependence on God. But the same is, less absolutely, true of our dependence on other people. Children grow to independence from the dependence they have on adults, and are forever indebted to those adults for the independence they acquire. But adult independence also is always only an aspect of the complex web of interdependence that human society is. Moreover, in the context of current ecological threats, it is vital to recover a lively sense of human dependence on the rest of the natural world. Human independence is rooted in dependence on nature, just as all creaturely existence is rooted in dependence on God the Creator.

That freedom is finite also means that it has limits. It is the condition of a finite creature to live within limits. But of course finite creatures are created such as to find fulfillment

within limits. Limits belong to the good of finite creatures. I would not be happier if I could be in two hundred places at the same time, because I have not been made to find happiness in such a capacity. This does not mean that we can always know in advance where we shall find the limits to be (could humans, for example, colonize Mars?).

But we should not find the very idea of limits alien and restrictive, and so we should be open to discovering limits at the same time as we may discover new possibilities. In other words, we must abandon that element in the modern spirit that aspired to the limitless freedom appropriate only to God. Feuerbach was wrong: in the concept of God we recognize necessary distinctions between God and ourselves; we recognize ourselves to be finite, not infinite.

To construct an adequate alternative to the kinds of freedom that today are proving inimical to human flourishing, there are two motifs that I draw from the Bible and Christian tradition: that freedom is finite and that freedom is relational.

Freedom is finite, and it is also relational. Not only do we give and receive freedom, but furthermore freedom is fulfilled in being freedom for. The contemporary concept of freedom is deficient in having no real idea of what freedom is for. When freedom is the only value, it becomes no more than having the choice to do whatever one chooses, which in itself is entirely without value. What I choose to do with my freedom could be wholly destructive to myself as well as to others. For freedom to be worth anything we have to have notions about what it is good to choose. Once we see this truth, the tension with community disappears. Freedom is for the common good.

However, in order to sustain such a notion of freedom as rooted in givenness and dependence and fulfilling itself in serving the common good, we need a good deal more than this notion of freedom itself. We need a context of other beliefs and values. This is only possible when hyper-individualistic, modern or postmodern persons are able to transcend their supposedly autonomous, self-sufficient, wholly self-determining selves, and find their true selves in relation to God – the truly determinative reality that graciously gives to us selves that subsist in freedom and relationships.

NOTES

1 Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958), in Henry Hardy, ed., *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 160-217, here citing 168.

2 Quoted in Delwin Brown, *To Set at Liberty: Christian Faith and Human Freedom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), 6.

3 Ibid.

4 Quoted in Alexander Passerin d’Entrèves, *The Notion of the State: An Introduction to Political Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 204-205.



RICHARD BAUCKHAM

is Professor Emeritus of New Testament Studies at the University of St. Andrews in St. Andrews, Scotland.