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**FREEDOM AS GIFT AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY FROM**  
**THE CHRISTIAN TEACHING PERSPECTIVE**

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*Abstract*

This article presents the Christian teaching on freedom and realizes delineations and conceptual definitions from the perspective of the divine revelation. Freedom is an ontological gift and a human responsibility, being related to God and strictly related to doing good and the virtues. In human liberty is embedded the Creator's divine image, the believer having the duty to carry this image to an ever deeper likeness of God. In this sense, human responsibility is double, on the one hand, its consequence is responsibility for the actions committed, and, on the other hand, it relates man to obtaining God's likeness, unto deification and sanctification. The Christian teachings present man as a "person" bearing "God's image". This concept is very complex, including in itself reason, will, affectivity, liberty, conscience, love etc. From Christian perspective, liberty means "stabilization in goodness". When man does evil, man is not free, but the slave of his own lack of power. Liberty determines the spiritual progress or regression, and this fact is determined by the manner in which man's liberty collaborates with the divine grace. Christian liberty must always be ontologically regarded, as it is connected to God and has only one coordinate – the one of the good.

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## 1. Introduction

The Christian teaching presents man as a personal being endowed with reason, conscience and freedom, these making him responsible for his life and actions. According to moral definitions, “freedom is the will’s capacity of self-determination regarding its action, free from any internal or external constraint (Mladin, 2003). Certainly, as personal being created in God’s likeness, man is a being open to the communion with God and with his fellows, but also continually responsible towards the whole creation. The condition of person belongs to every human being ontologically, which involves the relation with God, by man’s quality of image, but also the delineation of his personality as actualization of all the gifts given as potential, by the realization of the divine likeness, the sanctification and the transfiguration of the human nature. Image of God, man cannot find his fullness but in the relation with the Absolute model in Whose image he was created. Thus, freedom appears as the continual deliverance from evil and identification with good (with the model). “Freedom of will means for us the manifestation of God’s love to man, it is the expression and manifestation of God’s image. Consequently, freedom is an asset of man so specific to him that it constitutes our personal dignity” (Sârbu, 1974). Man’s capacity to participate to perfection is given precisely by his freedom, which has, embedded in it, the tension after communion.

Per se, “the problem of freedom - says Nikolai Berdyaev - is actually the problem of the fundamental principle of the being and of life, namely the being depends on the freedom that precedes the being. Freedom is a spiritual and religious category” (Berdiaev, 2009). It is on freedom that spiritual progress and regress depend, and it takes place in the grace-filled ambiance by which and in which man is truly free. The relation between grace and freedom is like that between eye and light. Grace does not annul freedom, just as it does not annul nature, which it restores. Freedom lays the bases of the growth in grace and of the perfection of the moral freedom, by its continual connection with the moral law, therefore with the revealed and redeeming Good. Thus, man is a personal being, placed in front of a personal God, or, as Saint Basil says, man “is a being who received the teaching to become god” (Lossky, 1998).

The impact of this study in the theological, sociological and ethical world is actual, because liberty is understood correctly as a right, but applied mostly as libertinism at individual and society level. In the Christian theological environment, the concept of liberty is essential, but starting with Renaissance and continuing with French Enlightenment, it has suffered a significant change. On confessional plan, human liberty has a connection with God’s grace. The report between spirit and matter as a work of grace is also the report between divine and human. The Catholic theologians have defined divine grace as being a created accident and this led to the tendency to limit or to cancel freedom, in favour of divinity. Essentially, by grace, Catholic theology asserts that man takes part objectively to divine being, but in a limited manner, and his actions are foreseen and pre-determined, thus it is accentuated the action of God or grace, to the detriment of human liberty. At the counter pole, Protestantism generally asserts that man is absolutely predestined by God and, according to them, God decides, He predestines some to happiness, while others to eternal damnation. These conceptions cancel the liberty of man. Lutheran theologians speak of a relative predestination (but only of those who are good, for happiness) while the Calvinists assert absolute predetermination (Jean Calvin, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner). According to them, there might be a destiny or a system which is similar to Buddhist and Islamic fatalism, which cancels or limits the

problem of liberty. Within this frame, in the present study we propose a clear definition and the defence of the concepts of freedom and human responsibility.

## 2. Problem Statement

### 2.1. Delineations and conceptual definitions of freedom

Man, regardless of the level of history he was on, arranged his life according to certain models that he copied, sifting them through his personal experience, and so he transformed them, giving them an original content. If these existential models were from the Holy Spirit, then his life is full of morality as well; if they were outside the laws of grace and were realized by sin, then man's life and activity is immoral and contrary to the truth. Moral life, therefore, according to this logic, has to do with our active participation to the divine life, because any good deed exists only by God, - good being the essence of life, and evil being only the denial of good (not just the lack of good, as we often find even in the specialized books), evil having no existence, because it is not God who is the author of evil, but it is the freedom that man was endowed with that makes the existence of evil possible. By sin, by breaking himself free from God, man created for himself models out of his limited world, which are in no way better than himself, which he idolatrized. Idolatry and immorality are two concepts conditioning each other, generated by man's selfish love. The fact that they easily contaminated the world shows that they are related to sin, to evil, which once perpetrated asks to be repeated, multiplied - evil moves downwards like a stone pushed down to the valley, becoming like a second nature. To stop this human corruption process, a divine intervention was needed, realized at "*the fullness of time*" by Christ, God's Embodied Word.

The notion of freedom, as gift and superior capacity of man, in the context of creation is defined differently, namely, for the humanistic philosophical thinking it has to do exclusively with the human powers, whereas according to the divine revelation it is a gift of God triggering responsibility. Anthropologically, man's true freedom is strictly related to Jesus Christ's soteriological work, by which the full communion of the human with the divine is realized. Based on these considerations, Petre Țuțea affirms that freedom as an existential concept is given "*in the triangle: God, nature and man, in which God, perfect, makes His imitation possible, an imitation realized perfectly by the saints and imperfectly by ordinary believers, whose existence is filled with worldly things*" (Țuțea, 1992).

For purely rationalistic philosophers, freedom is a true mystery having to do precisely with the relation with the divinity. Bergson, for example, affirmed that all the reasoning on freedom makes freedom disappear.

Man's freedom is an inner attribute of the spirit. Once accepted, it must not be mistakenly taken for divine freedom, which is absolute, nor with absolute indeterminism. Our freedom is not absolute freedom, but is according to our measure of creature of God and is co-grown in our psycho-physical structure, it is influenceable, conditioned (Mladin, 2003). Man, according to Spinoza, is like a thrown body, which, if it had the awareness of its movement on its trajectory, would think himself free. So, as Spinoza affirms, man in the context of creation has the limits of his own being, which according to theology can be overcome only by grace, by God; "*absolute freedom is possessed only by God*" (Spinoza, 2006).

In the pantheistic philosophy, man is conceived as a rational being, dignified and free, yet designed as mode of the infinite substance absorbing him. The multitude of contrary opinions on freedom is realized in the transcendental terms of “*coincidentia oppositorum*” of Nicolaus Causanus. “*The free man - says Petre Țuțea - moves between intuition and search, approximating, feeling sometimes at ease and wondering, the revelation showing him that he is not meant for death and for the limits of the world down here*”. Man’s movement towards the sensible things gives birth to sin, by which reason, mind, freedom, and all that is related to the image, instead of looking towards the contemplation of the Creator, focus on self and so highlight the nothingness out of which the human nature has been created. The birth of sin is related to man’s reason or mind and so, during its first stage, it has an intellectual aspect, because: “*the throne of the divinity is the mind, and the throne of the mind is God and the Spirit. This is why they say that Satan and his powers and the lower orders of the fallen angels have settled themselves since God’s commandment was disobeyed in Adam’s mind and heart as on their own throne...*” (Țuțea, 1992).

Contemporary philosophy, however, identifies freedom as being man’s or the group’s capacity of self-determination, of not being constrained and of acting to finalize the aims he or they tend(s) to. This conception has Immanuel Kant as its promoter, who in his works identifies freedom as power to choose.

### **3. Research Questions**

#### **3.1. Grounds, senses and implications of freedom, from a scriptural and patristic perspective**

Freedom is related to love, this is why the source of man’s freedom is in God, who out of love created him as center and spiritual axis of the world. In the Holy Scripture, freedom determines the state of closeness to God, just as well as remoteness from God by sin means slavery. The senses and implications of freedom, from a scriptural perspective, are multiple: “you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8: 31-32). “No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, because all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15: 15). “the person who looks intently into the perfect law, the law that provides liberty, and continues in it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an active doer – he will be blessed in his doing” (James 1: 25). “You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men” (1 Corinthians 7: 23). “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3: 17). “you are no longer a slave, but a son” (Galatians 4: 7). “you, brothers, were called to freedom” (Galatians 5: 13). Indeed, since the beginning God called man to freedom, by living life in freedom (Jesus Sirach 15: 14-17), freedom being the essential principle of man’s spiritual life. As Nikolai Berdyaev says, “Christianity supposes the spirit of freedom and the freedom of the spirit, without this atmosphere it cannot even exist” (Berdiaev, 2009).

In the Old Testament, by the prescriptions of the law, the freedom desired by the chosen people is rather related by its situation in the land of deliverance; in the New Testament, it rather has a side that is inside man, highlighted by the following verses: “But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgement will be revealed, Who will give to each person according to what he has done.” (Romans 2: 5-6); “The one who

plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive his wages on the basis of his work.” (1 Corinthians 3: 8); “If I do this willingly, I have a reward. But if unwillingly, I have been entrusted with a charge.” (1 Corinthians 9: 17); “Whatever you do, do it heartily, as for the Lord, not for men, for you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as your reward, for you serve the Lord Christ.” (Colossians 3: 23-24). The logical conclusion of these verses is that it is not freedom that is the result of necessity, but it is necessity that is the result of freedom, with a very well delineated purpose, namely to lift man to a communion as full as possible with God. This is the expression of God’s love, which would have generated man’s happiness in increasingly perfect forms.

In the Patristic Orthodox Theology, freedom or true freedom represents the impetus towards God identified with God. “In a classical definition, freedom is the faculty to choose” (Evdochimov, 2009), says Paul Evdochimov, yet Saint Maximus the Confessor says: “the need to choose is a weakness inherent to the fall into sin”. “Freedom no longer bears its own reasons, but creates them for itself. It raises where the freest acts are the only complete acts” (Saint Maxim the Confessor, 1983). In the Holy Fathers’ teachings, freedom does not mean a choice between good and evil, but true freedom means choosing only what is good and deliverance from any uncertainty regarding this choice. Thus, the Holy Fathers show that true freedom, perfect freedom is the freedom of the period preceding the fall. About this, Saint John of Damascus speaks clearly when he says: “God made man by nature without sin, and by will, free... He therefore had the power to remain and progress in good, being helped by the divine gift, just as well as he had the power to turn away from god and get to evil, a thing allowed by God for the reason that man was endowed with free will. What is done by force is no virtue” (Saint Ioan Damaschinul, 1938). Yet, in order to grow spiritually in the freedom of good, one has to go beyond the state of enslavement given by sin. Paul Evdokimov says, in this sense: “The sense of the original sin is the transformation of God into an exterior authority, in the Law, a fact that leads to transgressing the divinized Law, situating man outside God. The Embodiment had to come for man to find himself again inside God. Baby Jesus had to reveal the Father’s true image, by the parable of the prodigal son, where the judicial authority is not characteristic of the father, but of the elder son. The father does nothing else except to run to greet his child” (Evdochimov, 2009).

Another coordinate of freedom, in patristic theology, is also the position of Epictetus, confirmed by the teaching of Saint Paul the Apostle, namely that any man, be he even a slave, has in him the freedom of a king. Saint John of Damascus acknowledges such a freedom, too, when he states: “in our power are the things that we are free to do and not to do, namely all the things that we do voluntarily. Because one cannot say that we act voluntarily if the action would not be in our power, And, in one word, are in our power the things followed by blame or praise and over which there is exhortation and law. It has to be known that it is in our power to choose what is to be done. Man, being rational, leads nature more than he is led by it. For this reason, when he wills, if he wills, he has the power to repress his wish or to follow it. This is why the irrational ones are neither praised, nor blamed, yet man is praised and blamed. Because man is moving freely and with reason... He wishes freely, wills freely, examines and thinks freely, deliberates freely, judges freely, settles himself freely, chooses freely, moves freely, works freely the natural things” (Saint Ioan Damaschinul, 1938). By virtue of this fact, man accomplishes God’s will, yet not conditioned from the state of slave, but given its relevance and its importance for his life, as it [the will of God] delivers him from the sphere of slavery given by sin and sinful passions. Just as John

Stuart Mill used to say: “the outer limit to my freedom reaches up to the limitation of another man’s freedom” (Mill, 1994).

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

The special and personal relation that man ought to have with God results very clearly from the creation act, from the fact that all the other beings were made by the power of God’s word: “*And God said, “Let there be...”*” (Genesis 1, 3, 6, 9), whereas man has been created by a special act, by the direct participation of the Holy Trinity. The breath of life of the Holy Spirit creates the aware and free being appearing as one who has in him the power to participate to the infinite, being a *microtheos*, yet by sin he realizes that he is not himself he infinite, always living, along with his incompleteness, the insufficiency, the relativity, yet united to the aspiration and thirst for absolute. Thus, man appears in history as a great mystery, so that, to clarify it, God Himself made Himself a man, and in order for man to be able to clarify all these he needs grace, he needs a transformation of his being, becoming God by grace: “*From the lives of the Saints we know now that man is an existence reaching the extremities, he can reach from the devil up to God, according to his free will and can become both god by grace and devil...*” (Popovici, 1997). Freedom, in the vision of the Holy Fathers, is constituted by the coordinates of God’s image in man. It is the foundation of our possibility of reaching the likeness of God. “*Man is what he is - says Saint Seraphim Rose - not because of his nature, which is dust out of the earth, but because of the supernatural grace infused into him by the breath of God*” (Saint Serafim Rose, 2011).

The man created in God’s image finds his true state, or his ontological state in Christ and with Christ. The man living in grace ontologically tends to God’s likeness in virtue. “*Man - says Saint Gregory of Sinai - was made with no corruption, as he will actually be resurrected. But not free of change, and not changing either, having in his will the power to change or not. Rottenness is the offspring of the body; and to eat, to throw out the remains, to get fat and to sleep, are natural characteristics of the beasts and of the animals. By these things being similar to animals, for our lack of submission, we fell from our goods bestowed by God, turning ourselves from rational, into animal-like, and from divine, into beast-like*” (Saint Grigorie Sinaitul, 1991). Freedom is actually the spiritual life in the Holy Spirit, the kind of life that gives sense to the human existence. Dionysius the Areopagite speaks frequently about man’s deification, in which the divine image in man is taken towards the likeness of God, this likeness being possible by the work of grace and by the contribution of the human will. Here is what he says: “*God has given us freely his existence and life. He forms what we have divine in us, according to the kind of his ineffable beauties and recalls us, by the revivifying graces of the Holy Mysteries, to the brilliance of our first destinations*”, or: “*Salvation is not possible except for the deified spirits, it is but the union with God and the likeness of God that you endeavor to have, in which your will submits to the will of God*” (Dionisie pseudo-Areopagitul, 1994). Saint Maximus the Confessor, commenting on Dionysius the Areopagite, says: “*Deification is a work of grace, yet where the will has its own contribution, being actually the perfection of freedom*” (Saint Maxim the Confessor, 1983). Human freedom must have as its purpose deification. Therefore, the sense of true freedom can be but one: the virtue that leads to man’s deification.

## 5. Research Methods

The present study presents the problem of liberty from the perspective of Christian teachings, where it is the gift of God but also human responsibility. In this study, using scientific research methods, we present an exegetical and hermeneutic analysis which is based upon the biblical text, but also the critical analysis of the Christian vision, especially the Orthodox, about the concept of liberty. The analytical frame of this research was generally backed up by a comparative study. The novelty of the study is given by the inter and trans-disciplinary approach of the chosen theme, by using methods which are specific for Christian moral theology, psychology of religion but also sociology. From its very beginning, the study has as specificity the problem of liberty and answers questions like: What is liberty? Is man free? Can we say that the contemporary man, who lives in a secularized society, is free? Can psychology or sociology of religion define “what liberty is”? Surely the answer is connected to divine revelation developed within Christian theology. Thus, the arguments we brought are specific to orthodox Christian theology, but from a transdisciplinary perspective, which is necessary in order to surpass the limits imposed by the disciplinary research and to reach what is beyond any discipline, generally obtaining an objective result. Given all these data, the specific objectives of this study are: 1. Critical description and evaluation of the Christian approaches about liberty and responsibility; 2. Identification and compared analysis of the concept of liberty and responsibility within the theology of the great Christian churches; 3. The analyze of the concept of liberty and responsibility and its implications on the religious man and the contemporary man.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Will and freedom, moral aspects

Man, being created in the image of God, is by nature free and volitional (Saint Ioan Damaschinul, 1938). Will is not an instinct but a function of the spirit. Man has the capacity to say “no”, to intervene between stimulus and reaction, to suspend the instinctive mechanism and react as he wills. With man, the instinct is guided by the lights of reason and by the energy of the will, and this in the case of certain actions that are instinctive in point of nature. Will is spiritual power, the root of an aware and rational action, which is superior to the instinctive action. Since will is superior to instinct, this means that the will is free. Freedom is an inherent quality of the will. Therefore, freedom is the capacity of the will to determine itself on its own for its action, with no external or internal constraint. Depending on the way the work of the will uses the power of nature, positively or negatively, “*it will receive its end in the good or the unhappy existence*”, which he calls “*the one and never-ending day*” (Saint Maxim the Confessor, 1983).

Naturally, reason tends towards truth, and will tends towards good. The aim of reason is to know the truth; the aim of the will is to do good. By freedom, man has the capacity to fully realize what is good, but, at the same time, under the impulse of temptations, man can choose evil. Evil cannot be the purpose of freedom. The essence of freedom has to do with the capacity of choosing between several possibilities of doing good. It is turned, by nature, to good.

The Holy Scripture shows that man is a free being “It was He who created humankind in the beginning, and He left them in the power of their own free choice. If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death and whichever one chooses will be given.” (Jesus Sirach 15: 14-17). Our Savior at the same time shows that God does not force man’s freedom, does not impose, but only proposes: “Take note! I am standing at the door and knocking. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will enter his house and eat with him, and he with Me.” (Revelation 3: 20). The Christian moral freedom is the free and permanent identification of our will with good, therefore with God’s will. This full compliance of the human will with the divine will is realized by Christ, by His sacrifice in which mankind has been progressively purified of sin and ontologically restored by the infusion of grace whose consequence is deification.

The problem of freedom, in the thinking of Saint Gregory of Nyssa is analyzed not psychologically, but ontologically, freedom being unseparated from God. Saint Gregory of Nyssa sees in the freedom of will the main content of the divine image in man. In this position, of image of God, man must have all the characteristic features of his model. He enumerates several characteristic traits that could be synthesized in two groups: sinlessness and freedom. Sinlessness is the cleanliness of the mind, of the heart, of the conscience, of everything that makes us similar to the things devoid of reason and limits our freedom. What limits freedom is evil, and God tolerates it because He tolerates the creature’s freedom. In the Orthodox theology, freedom is not confounded with the free will; they are two distinct things, but they do not exclude each other either, because “*by his freedom of choice, man is also image of God*” (Stăniloae, 1997). The free will is included in freedom, or, more precisely, this is the first step towards acquiring perfect freedom. Man has, first of all, complete freedom to choose, to follow God or to refuse Him, to choose between good and evil, to choose between life and death. “*We can say yes, because we could just as well say: Thy will be not done*” (Evdochimov, 1996).

The Orthodox Theology defines freedom in the sense of gift given to man by God. This gift, or this great possibility to be open to the divine grace, makes both spiritual progress but also spiritual regress possible. The free will can be analyzed as well from other perspectives, related to the frailty of the human being, as Saint Maximus the Confessor classifies him: as an imperfection, because the temporary need to choose represents rather a deficiency of man than an expression of his independence. Father Professor Dumitru Stăniloae says that “*the grounds of the whole greatness of man’s divine image lies in his freedom*” (Stăniloae, 1997). Freedom, in the Eastern theology, is not reduced only to the possibility of choosing between following Jesus or refusing Him. In the Holy Fathers’ writings and in the works of the great Orthodox theologians, freedom has much deeper meanings related to the process of deification and perfection of the human person, as we have shown previously; in principle, the first meaning of freedom is given by the possibility of a personal, non-determined and non-constrained choice.

## 7. Conclusion

In human freedom is embedded the divine image of our Creator, the believer having the duty to take this image towards an ever deeper likeness of God. Freedom is an ontological gift and also a human responsibility, being related to God and strictly connected to doing good and accomplishing the virtues. In



his sense, human responsibility is double, on the one hand, one of its consequences is responsibility for the acts committed, and on the other hand it connects man to the deliverance from sin for sanctification and deification.

Thus, Christian freedom must always be viewed ontologically, being related to God and having just one coordinate, that of good. The possibility of choosing between good and evil, and implicitly the free will, according to the patristic conception, is a consequence of our fall into sin. In the free will lies all man's individuality and personality. Man's power lies precisely in freedom, yet this does not coincide with the free will, with the alternative of choosing between good and evil, but with choosing good, or more precisely with the stabilization in good. Thus, freedom means full harmony and symbiosis between the work of grace and man's work, the aim being the perfection of the human being, man's accomplishment and deification, which actually mean eternal freedom and love.

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