

# A Spiritual Journey of Discovery: Breaking Free from Man-Made Autonomy through Interior Freedom

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## Abstract

Spirituality is a lifelong journey one is urged to discover in order to live life to the full. One of today's challenges is man's own creation of autonomy. This can either, if well tempered be an asset; but many a times, if misunderstood and misused can be a great hindrance.

This paper is going to present this theme from a Christian perspective, aiming to share some insights and suggestions for a spirituality that enhances man's potential towards living a wholesome life.

Within this realm, one might ask: is modern man aware that autonomy is being misunderstood and that it differs from the God-given-gift of liberty? What are the most salient barriers one must overcome in order to use liberty as an antithesis to the potential enslavement of autonomy? How can one discover new and healthier means in order to live a healthy spiritual life where the intellect and the volitional enable a healthy life based on interior freedom, where autonomy is moulded into an asset for the good of the individual and of the common good?

In *The End of the Modern World*, philosopher and theologian Romano Guardini aptly wrote that: "Once the 'autonomous' state has broken all bonds, ...man will either succeed in converting his mastery into good - then his accomplishment would be immense indeed - ...or man himself will be at an end."

**Keywords:** spirituality, journey, liberty, freedom, autonomy, virtues

## Introduction

Journeys are part of man's life. It is in man's nature to journey and all journeys leave an indelible mark in one's life. One might make meaning of an adventure, but can never live it to the full like the one who personally experiences it. One such journey, which only the bold dare to embark on, is the spiritual journey. It is a journey to the deepest core of one's being, where one meets oneself. It is only through this journey that one realises the need for inner freedom, and how this inner strength can lead man to true liberty. Liberty to overcome barriers - man-made ones, such

as autonomy. When the latter is used well it can be a great asset but alas, when misused it enslaves and encapsules man within barriers.

Through the confined space of this paper, one will get a glimpse of a few salient barriers that challenge man with the misuse of autonomy and subsequently the proposed virtues that one can practise through the spiritual journey in order to counteract the difficulties that these barriers create.

## **Defining spirituality**

Spirituality is a word frequently used, but easily misunderstood and misused. Philip Sheldrake states that despite being commonly used, the term spirituality is difficult to define (2003, p.514). One must distinguish spirituality from spiritism and spiritualism (Online Oxford Dictionary, 2018). The etymology of the word “spirituality” derives from the word *spiritualitas* which corresponds to the Greek *pneuma*, that is “spirit”. As the Sacred Scripture points out, a spiritual person is someone in whom the Spirit of God dwells (1Corinthians 2:14,15).

Spirituality cannot be limited to devotions, even if these may contribute to one’s spiritual journey. Spirituality is more concerned with the mysteries of the human being’s wholeness and how to give meaning to one’s life through a dynamic relationship with God. Thus, any generic definition of spirituality is rather problematic, since spirituality is always conditioned by the context, language of tradition, themes and symbols (Sheldrake, 2003, p.521) Furthermore, while one might propose a definition of spirituality, yet the spiritual journey is unique to every person just as much as each person is unique in existence.

As in any human relationship, the spiritual journey is a process and it is a gradual one. It is a personal one, aimed at discovering and meeting oneself, for the whole integration of oneself with the Transcendent (God), with other human beings and with the whole of creation. Sandra Schneiders states that spirituality is “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives” (2005). Hence, spirituality, which involves a relationship with God and operates through God’s gift of freedom, is aimed at liberating man from all that enslaves him, thus enabling him to better understand the meaning of autonomy.

## **A glimpse at defining liberty, freedom and autonomy**

The Oxford dictionary defines liberty as the state of being free from any oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one’s way of life, behaviour or political views (Online Oxford Dictionary, 2018). In fact, the term liberty enunciates the capacity to speak about rights, civil liberties as well as release from slavery and imprisonment.

One can say that liberty deals more with the law *nomos*, and the rights of the human being. Liberty is distinct from freedom. The latter is a gift from God, the former is gained through pain and toll. Many are those who confuse these two words. Man is created free to choose and to live one's life; liberty is always a struggle from some form of enslavement.

In the Christian tradition, the state of inner freedom is gained through the grace of God during one's spiritual journey. The main 'tool' for this spiritual journey leading to freedom is faith - a personal faith which believes that Jesus Christ is the Truth, the Way, and the Life (John 14:6). When one disconnects inner freedom from the Source - Jesus Christ - one lives a freedom based on an illusion, an illusion that demands liberation.

Besides this, many confuse freedom with liberty and with autonomy. The etymology of the word autonomy is composed of two Greek words: *auto*, meaning "self" and *nomos*, meaning "custom, or law", where man makes a clear statement that s/he is the law. From the Kantian moral philosophy perspective, to be autonomous is to act according to one's duty rather than from one's desire - the former is the right starting point (Online Oxford Dictionary, 2018).

However, if man's autonomy is seen as the right to govern oneself and one's affairs without the respect for God, for others and for creation (Pope Francis, 2015), but rather as an opportunity to act independently of all - in order to satisfy one's own desires rather than performing one's duties through responsibility, faithfulness and truthfulness - then autonomy is the destructive route for the human person.

In today's milieu, we need to break the barrier of the false and destructive interpretation of autonomy, which amongst other things, is often linked to money, to populism and to the misuse of power. When such things are exercised and further influenced by a value-free society - a society void of moral principles, based mainly on subjective, egocentric beliefs and where the common good is ignored for the 'need' of the few, when the 'few' claim they are the law, and perform thus - then each man (and society at large) has to carry out some serious reflection on how to exercise one's God-given gift of freedom, be liberated from this egoistic frame of mind and learn how to acquire the inner freedom which teaches man how to serenely live in truth amidst this chaos.

The misuse of autonomy is often demonstrated in the misuse of power. Many times these unlawful actions send a subtle message to society that God and moral principles are not totally rejected, rather they are just ignored, perhaps considered to be no longer needed! When individual conveniences prevail over good moral convictions which are the fruit of a firm relationship with God, then man and society have many barriers to overcome. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger states while being interviewed by Peter Seewald, nowadays attempts are made to create an ethic without God and to manufacture one's inner fulfilment, one's happiness as a kind of product (Ratzinger, 2002, p.28). This is an illusion! Some might view it as progress, others as very liberating, but in truth it is an enslavement, created by man for man.

Man feels liberated and really free through an ethic whereby God is put at the centre, where faith and love are like the air that one breathes and the rails of one's spiritual journey.

### **Gleaning proposals from the New Testament writings**

During his time Jesus Christ also lived in an ambience where the misuse of autonomy and power were very prevalent. In the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, the Gospels and the subsequent Letters, one finds sound moral teachings that depict how man can be aware of such realities and how one can overcome these barriers and get liberated through inner freedom. In the Gospel of St. Luke we find: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free." (Luke 8:14)

In his Letter to the Romans, St Paul clearly states that one shares in the glorious liberty of the Son of God (Romans 8:21). In the Letter to the Corinthians, he states that where there is the spirit of the Lord, there is liberty (2Corinthians 3:17). To the Galatians, he advocates that the very call to be a Christian is a sign of liberation (Galatians 5:1), resonating St John's Gospel that truth will set us free (John 8:32). Thus, it is highly evident that the Christian message is intertwined with the right use of inner freedom - a freedom from slavery of sin or the Old law, a freedom to live as sons and daughters of God.

This salvific message and mission carries within it hope and offers a faith journey which is open to all: Jews, Christians, Muslims, and adherents of other religions including those who declare themselves agnostics and atheists. It is not a liberty brought about by power, but it is a liberation through the encounter with Jesus Christ, where His Incarnation "is the point where "filial freedom" enters into the dynamism of creaturely freedom" (Melina et al., 2017, par. 5.1). It is enough and more powerful and liberating to have faith in Jesus Christ as He is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

Inspired and animated by Holy Scripture and the writings of the forefathers of the Church and of contemporary ones, Christianity has always believed that the actions and choices of man are not isolated actions, but are all integrated in life as a whole.

### **Modern Christian Thought**

Romano Guardini (1885–1968) - an Italian-born German Catholic priest, theologian, philosopher, author and academic, whose insights and writings are nowadays considered as prophetic - conveyed the following with regard to the use of power:

“The core of the new epoch’s intellectual task will be to integrate power into life in such a way that man can employ power without forfeiting his humanity” (2013a, p.119). Guardini further stresses that one might either match his power with the strength of humanity, or surrender his humanity to power and perish. Writing in the 60s, Romano Guardini suggested, that in order to counteract individual and society destruction there must be a rehabilitation of virtues (2013b, p.3).

In addition to this, along the years the Catholic Church always had to heart how to teach mankind, how to cultivate one’s freedom and how to use autonomy in a responsible manner. In the document of Vatican Council II: *Guadium et Spes*, it is stated that: “if by the term ‘the autonomy of earthy affairs’, it is meant that material being does not depend on God and that man can use it as if it had no relation to its creator, then the falsity of such a claim will be obvious to anyone who believes in God.” (*Guadium et Spes*, Vatican II, 1965, par.36)

Furthermore, in relation to man’s freedom, truth and the common good, the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* states that: “Truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery” (Pope John Paul II, 1998, par.90). Pope John Paul II, in the Encyclical - *Veritatis Splendor* wrote: “People today need to turn to Christ once again in order to receive from Him the answer to their questions about what is good and what is evil” (1993, par.8). Subsequently he wrote: “The self is fulfilled through an encounter with the fullness of Christ” (1993, pars.8,83,85). While doing so one will participate in the continuous salvific mission brought about through Jesus Christ. A salvation which is full and complete through Jesus Christ, but needs our free response and participation: “precisely the awareness of having received the gift, of possessing in Jesus Christ the love of God, generates and sustains the free response of a full love for God and the brethren” (1993, par.24).

Lately, in the Letter *Placuit Deo*, addressed to all the bishops in the Catholic Church, Archbishop Luis F. Ladaria S.J., draws our attention to two challenges that today’s society is facing, namely, neo-Pelagianism and neo-Gnosticism both of which are errors rooted in antiquity, and resurfacing strongly in modern times. Through two different yet complementary dimensions both deal with the misuse of autonomy.

During the press conference for *Placuit Deo*, the aforementioned Archbishop explained about the new form of Pelagianism in which the radically autonomous person presumes to save oneself, without the need of the grace of God (Ladaria Ferrer, 2018). Thus, with neo-Pelagianism, salvation depends on the strength of the individual and on purely human structures, disconnected from the Spirit of God, and disregarding the work of God in us and for us (2018, par.2-3). This is a clear example of the misuse of autonomy that promotes an individualistic vision of salvation, attained only through one’s own efforts and refusing God’s grace.

Additionally, when dealing with the new form of Gnosticism, Archbishop Ladaria explains that neo-Gnosticism liberates the person from both the body and the material universe, distant from the provident hand of the Creator and hence deprived from meaning. Consequently, one is made foreign to the fundamental identity of the

person, and thus can easily be manipulated by the interests of man, resulting in loss of harmony, and leading to the reign of disintegration and death (Ladaria Ferrer, 2018, par.7). This is a reductionist approach that promotes purely internal salvation, where salvation is reduced to a practice or internal feeling without God's hands.

Further elaborating on this theme, in the second chapter of the Apostolic Letter *Gaudete et Exultate*, Pope Francis refers to both neo-Pelagianism and neo-Gnosticism as two subtle enemies of holiness – deterrents to one's spiritual journey. These reductionist tendencies, are two of the most salient barriers one is to overcome, in order to vanquish the enslavement of man-made autonomy. Liberation from these, as suggested by the Pope, is brought about by truth and inner freedom (Pope Francis, 2018, par.35). Furthermore Pope Francis maintains that truth and freedom are spiritually attained if one co-operates with the grace of God, insisting that one must avoid assuming that everything depends only on human effort and will (2018, par.56). In fact, such a reductionist approach in both neo-Gnosticism and neo-Pelagianism can easily mislead the person in becoming the law himself and disregarding the grace of God, which is demonstrated in daily life through the misuse of autonomy and of power.

### **Proposals for a Spiritual Journey**

For man to be eventually liberated from the enslavement of the misuse of autonomy and of power, one is to become aware of the need of a spiritual journey. It is a lifelong journey, where one comes face-to-face with the truth about oneself and about the many things that are enslaving the person. Eventually, inner freedom is gained, and through it one gains the strength to overcome many barriers.

A spiritual journey demands the practice of virtues, which in turn are the fruit of a strong relationship with God. The practice of virtues enhances inner freedom and the more one feels free internally, the more s/he practises virtues. This is the kernel of a spiritual journey, which one is invited to take in order to overcome, in this case, barriers brought about by the misuse of power and of autonomy. These barriers include: deceptions, sloth, greed, pride – vainglory. Some virtues that could counteract these barriers include: truthfulness, courage, love/charity and humility.

The misuse of autonomy easily leads to the cultivation of all kinds of deception. Creating deceptions, living them and promoting them is harmful to oneself, to humanity at large and to all of creation. They create a make believe world, a world built on betrayals. To counteract barriers that impede, amongst others: sincerity, transparency and accountability, Guardini proposes the virtue of truthfulness (Guardini, 2013b, pp.13-23). He stresses that one should cultivate this virtue by making an effort and eventually a habit to tell the truth, telling it at the right time, and living it. Truth with love, but always the truth. Ultimately, one who holds to the truth holds to God, and one who deceives rebels against God.

Another barrier worth mentioning is sloth. The misuse of power breeds contempt and often this is demonstrated by people in the form of sloth which might be expressed through lack of commitment, indifference, passiveness. Christianity teaches that sloth is one of the seven deadly sins. It is considered as the root of all vices. Sloth is always described as self-centred. To overcome this barrier, Guardini proposes the virtues of courage, bravery and boldness (2013b, pp.97-108). One needs courage to become aware of this vice in one's life and subsequently to comprehend its harmfulness and own its consequences with responsibility. A spiritual journey enables one to come face-to-face with this truth, and to be bold enough to work on oneself to overcome it.

Greed is another barrier worth vanquishing. Greed thrives on selfishness that breeds a thirst for power. The worst experiences in man's history are all rooted and executed through greed. Greed is a vice and also one of the seven deadly sins that destroy all that is humane and beautiful in all of creation. In order to overcome this barrier Guardini proposes love. Love is the antithesis of greed. The hymn of love, described by St Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (1Corinthians 13:1-13), is a spiritual journey that combats many vices especially that of greed. True love knows no limits; greed is too self-centred.

Yet another barrier worth conquering is that of pride, of vainglory. From the onset of creation our fore parents have sinned because of pride. Pride owns no guilt feelings, and no trace of remorse is found in the heart of a proud, vain person. Pride turns man's heart into stone, incapable of any feeling, incapable of any logical reasoning. Pride's view is very myopic, it sees only the "I", the "me". Here Guardini proposes the virtue of humility. If God humbles himself for the salvation and love of humanity, why is man - a creature of God - not able to understand that pride and vainglory do not save oneself, much less the whole of creation? Why does man forget that he is not the Creator but merely a creature made by the Creator-God?

Humility is the queen of virtues. It takes a lifelong spiritual journey for any person to accept and to practise humility as a way of life. Humility is not cowardice, neither does it bring 'decadence' on anyone, much less makes one a 'slave of morality', as Nietzsche claims. Humility is a virtue of strength (Guardini, 2013a, pp.140-147). It is humility that nourishes inner strength - interior freedom that eventually enables one to vanquish many barriers in life. The proud person forgets that all that s/he is and all that s/he has is a gift, nothing is by right, there are no entitlements, all is given out of love, and that man has the responsibility to cherish and to sustain these gifts for oneself and for the wholesomeness of all creation. In his writings, Elder Joseph – the monk on Mount Athos, maintains: "Inner humility is for one to feel, that whatever he has, life, health, wealth, wisdom all are foreign, are gifts from God" (Elder Joseph, 2018).

Such a spiritual journey is undertaken by the bold, by those who want to leave a world better than the one they inhabited. This spiritual journey demands a strong relationship with God, a firm desire for one's wholesomeness and selfless love for

all of creation. Barriers might never be totally vanquished, but their strength could be diminished. Such a spiritual journey would be fruitful if the person undertaking it seeks the expert help of a professional who takes to heart one's own spiritual journey and is well versed in spiritual companionship.

## Conclusion

This paper has offered a glimpse into how, through a spiritual journey, one is enabled to discover oneself and the barriers that are hindering him and those around him, and through the practice of virtues, eventually be able to acquire inner freedom. This provides one with the inner strength needed to overcome these barriers and be liberated from those fetters that constrain one's life. As the philosopher and theologian Romano Guardini aptly wrote in his book: *The End of the Modern World*: "Once the 'autonomous' state has broken all bonds, ...man will either succeed in converting his mastery into good - then his accomplishment would be immense indeed - ...or man himself will be at an end" (Guardini, 2013, p.56). Such barriers, as man-made autonomy and the misuse of power impede one's wholesomeness and the holistic welfare of all creation. A spiritual journey is a life-long journey. When taken seriously it enables one to meet oneself face-to-face; only the bold dare undertake it, once taken its fruit is beneficial to both oneself and the whole of creation. Our world would surely be a better place if many undertake such a spiritual journey. Alas!

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## Bio-note

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