

Islam—Part 5

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The problems of extreme determinism.

Since in Islam the relationship between God and human beings is that of Master and slave, God is the Sovereign Monarch and humans must submit. This overpowering picture of God in the *Qur'an* has created its own tension in Muslim theology regarding God's absolute sovereignty and human free will. Despite protests to the contrary; Orthodox Islam teaches the absolute predestination of both good and evil, that all our thoughts, words and deeds, whether good or evil, were foreseen, foreordained, determined, and decreed from all eternity, and that everything that happens takes place according to what has been written for it; Sura 6:18 says "He is the Irresistible." Commenting on these kinds of *Qur'anic* statements, Cragg points out that God is the *Qadar*, or "determination," of all things and his *taqdir*, or "subjection," covers all people and all history. Nature, whether animate or inanimate, is subject to his command and all that comes into existence—a summer flower or a murderer's deed, a newborn child or a sinner's disbelief—is from Him and of Him." In fact if "God so willed, there need have been no creation, there need have been no idolatry; there need have been no Hell, there need have been no escape from Hell" (Cragg, 44-45).

There are four basic problems with this extreme form of predetermination: logical, moral, theological, and metaphysical. In order, it involves a contradiction; it eliminates human responsibility; it makes God the author of evil, and it gives rise to pantheism.

The logical problem with Islamic determinism is that even Muslim commentators are forced to acknowledge that God performs contradictory actions. Islamicist Ignaz Golziher summarizes the situation, "There is probably no other point of doctrine on which equally contradictory teachings can be derived from the *Qur'an* as on this one" (Golziher, 78). One Muslim scholar notes, "The *Qur'anic* doctrine of Predestination is very explicit though not very logical" (Stanton, 54-55). For example, God is "the One Who leads astray," as well as "the One Who guides." He is "the One Who brings damage," as also does Satan. He is "the Bringer-down," "the Compeller" or "Tyrant," and "the Haughty." When describing people, all these concepts have an evil sense.

Muslim scholars sometimes attempt to reconcile this by pointing out that these contradictions are not in God's nature (since he does not really have one), but are in the realm of his will. They are not in his essence but in his actions. However, this is an inadequate explanation. God does have a knowable nature or essence. Hence, Muslim scholars cannot avoid the contradiction that God has logically opposed characteristics by placing them outside his essence within the mystery of his will. Further, actions flow from nature and represent it, so there must be something in the nature that corresponds to the action. Salt water does not flow from a fresh stream.

Others attempt to downplay the harsh extremes of Muslim determinism by creating a distinction, not found in the *Qur'an*, between what God does and what he allows his creatures to do by free choice. This solves the problem, but, only through rejecting clear statements of the *Qur'an*, tradition, and creeds.

These statements can be seen in connection with the moral problem with Islamic determinism. While Muslim scholars wish to preserve human responsibility, they can only suc-

ceed in doing so by modifying what the *Qur'an* actually says. Sura 9:51 declares: "Say, Nothing will ever befall us save what Allah has written for us." Sura 7:177-79 adds, "He whom Allah guides is he who is rightly guided, but whom he leads astray, those are the losers. Indeed, We have assuredly created for Gehenna many of both jinn and men. Sura 36: 6-10 reads: "Verily the sentence comes true on most of them, so they will not believe. We, indeed, have set shackles on their necks which reach to the chins so that they perforce hold up [their heads]. And We have set a barrier in front of them, and a barrier behind them, and We have covered them over so that they do not see. Thus it is alike to them whether thou warn them or dost not warn them; they will not believe."

The *Qur'an* frankly admits that God could have saved all, but did not desire to do so. Sura 32:13 declares: "Had we so willed We should have brought every soul its guidance, but true is that saying of Mine: 'I shall assuredly fill up Gehenna with jinn and men together.'" It is extremely difficult to understand how, holding such a view, one can consistently maintain any kind of human responsibility.

There is also a theological problem with this severe view of God's sovereign determination of all events: It makes God the author of evil. In the *Hadith* traditions Muhammad declares "the decree necessarily determines all that is good and all that is sweet and all that is bitter, and that is my decision between you. According to one tradition, Muhammad slapped Abu Bakr on the shoulder and said: "O Abu Bakr, if Allah Most High had not willed that there be disobedience, he would not have created the Devil." Indeed, one of the most respected Muslim theologians of all time, Al-Ghazzali, frankly acknowledges that "He [God] willeth also the unbelief of the unbeliever and the irreligion of the wicked and, without that will, there would neither be unbelief nor irreligion. All we do we do by His will: what He willeth not does not come to pass." And if one should ask why God does not will that men should believe, Al-Ghazzali responds, "'We have no right to enquire about what God wills or does. He is perfectly free to will and to do what He pleases.' In creating unbelievers, in willing that they should remain in that state;... in willing, in short, all that is evil, God has wise ends in view which it is not necessary that we should know" (Haqq, 152).

In the metaphysical problem with Islamic determinism, this extreme view led some Muslim scholars to the logical conclusion that there is really only one agent in the universe—God. One Muslim theologian wrote, "Not only can He (God) do anything, He actually is the only One Who does anything. When a man writes, it is Allah who has created in his mind the will to write. Allah at the same time gives power to write, then brings about the motion of the hand and the pen and the appearance upon paper. All other things are passive, Allah alone is active" (Nehls, 21). This pantheism is at the heart of much of medieval thought. Thomas Aquinas wrote *Summa contra Gentiles* to help Christian missionaries dealing with Islam in Spain.

This radical predeterminism is expressed in Muslim creedal statements. One reads: "God Most High is the Creator of all actions of His creatures whether of unbelief or belief, of obedience or of rebellion: all of them are by the Will of God and His sentence and His conclusion and His decreeing" (Cragg, 60-61). Another confesses:

God's one possible quality is His power to create good or evil at any time He wishes, that is His decree.... Both good things and evil things are the result of God's decree. It is the duty of every Muslim to believe this.... It is He who causes harm and good. Rather the good works of some and the evil of others are signs that God wishes to punish some and to reward others. If God wishes to draw someone close to Himself, then He will give him the grace which will make that person do good works.

If He wishes to reject someone and put that person to shame, then He will create sin in him. God creates all things, good and evil. God creates people as well as their actions: He created you as well as what you do (Qur'an 37:94). [Rippin & Knappert, 133; emphasis added]

Conclusion

The attitude of God's absolute control over every aspect of his creation profoundly influences Islamic theology and culture. Persian poet, Omar Khayyam, reflected the fatalistic strain of Muslim theology when he wrote:

'Tis all a chequer-board of night and days Where destiny with men for pieces plays; Hither and thither moves and mates and slays, And one by one back in the closet lays.

Sources

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