

Predestination and human Responsibility in medieval Islam: some aspects of a classical Problem*

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The question of God's omnipotence and determination (or predestination) of natural and voluntary events (*qadar*) occupies a central role in medieval debates in Islamic theology. It revolves around a basic conflict between two core concepts in Islam: God's omnipotence and human responsibility, a necessary presupposition for affirming God's justice, another divine attribute alongside His omnipotence. God's omnipotence is described as His power to determine His creation. Equally significant is the principle of the individual's responsibility and accountability for his or her acts, namely in the Day of Judgement. For many Muslim authors God's power is His single most important attribute; however, if human beings are unable to choose between good and evil, and if they are compelled in every respect, then to be judged for their acts would certainly detract from God's justice. In consequence, the notions of heaven and hell as the destination of

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righteous Muslims and sinful Muslims respectively would be undermined. The argument for and against divine *qadar* turns on a subtle point, that of the creation of man's acts. In Hodgson's words, 'if God is truly the sole creator, as the Quran seems to imply, He must be not only more powerful than anyone else but alone responsible for all that is'.¹ He adds that 'human acts form part of God's creation; therefore He alone must have decreed them, and the human actors can have no power over their destiny'.² If God is the sole creator of human actions, not only are humans impotent to change any state of affairs, but in addition they cannot be made responsible for any good or evil actions that they perform. This is a problem, or dichotomy addressed by countless Muslim theologians and philosophers. The present study does not aim at a comprehensive treatment of the problem, rather it broaches some of its main aspects, and points at the intersection between theology (*kalām*) and philosophy in the medieval debates over *qadar*.

God's determination of events in the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* literature

Before proceeding to the particulars of the polemic in its historical setting, a closer examination of the term *qadar* is needed. God's determination of events, *al-qadar*, 'has the meaning of measure, evaluation, fixed limit ... In its technical sense *qadar* therefore designates the divine decree in so far as it sets the fixed limits of each thing, or the measure of its being'.³ In the Qur'an, other forms of the root appear, such as *miqdar*, signifying 'measure', and the divine name *qadīr*, meaning 'powerful', 'able', 'omnipotent' – from the first form of the verb. We also find *muqtadir*, the active participle of the eighth form, meaning 'omnipotent'. This term, *qadar*, is frequently found in combination with the Arabic term *qadā'* – to form the expression *al-qadā' wa-l-qadar*) which in this context denotes God's decree and predestination. 'On the basis of the Quran the word *qadā'* can be understood as God's eternal decision or decree concerning all things. It is given different interpretations, especially when contrasted with another

¹ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, p. 262.

² *Id.*, *ibid.*, p. 264.

³ 'Qadar', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Edition (ed. E. van Donzel, B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat), vol. IV, pp. 365-366 (by Louis Gardet).

term, *qadar*... For instance, according to al-Bukhārī, *qadā'* is the eternal, universal and all-embracing decree of God, while *qadar* denotes the details of His eternal, universal decree'.⁴

One must add that the belief in God's *qadar* constitutes the sixth article of *imān*, faith, in the Islamic Creed, after the belief in God and his attributes, as well as in the Prophets, the Angels, the Sacred books and the Day of Judgement. Belief in *qadar*, God's determination of events, is thus an article of faith in Islam. However, the connection between human and divine action was understood and articulated differently by various Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*) and philosophers.

Islamic theology developed out of a reflection on, and hermeneutic of, the Qur'an. The term *kalām* ('dialogue', 'debate') usually translated as Islamic (speculative) theology, belies the real difference vis-à-vis Christian theology. The various medieval schools of *kalām* offered alternative interpretations to the questions at hand (for instance God's attributes, the status of the Qur'an, or prophecy), none of them having the force of dogma, as was the case in medieval Christian theology.

One philosopher who sought a definite solution to all the main problems in Islamic theology was Andalusian Muslim philosopher and jurist Averroes (d. 1198) in his work *Kashf 'an manābij al-adilla fi 'aqā'id al-milla* (*Uncovering the methods of proofs concerning the beliefs of the [religious] community*).

Since the debate over *qadar* and the question whether it can be reconciled with human free-will is firmly rooted in the Qur'an, it is important to mention some of the *suras* which prompted the debate.

Among the *suras* (Qur'anic verses) which indicate God's absolute power are those quoted by Averroes in the chapter on *al-qadā' wa-l-qadar* of his *Kashf*, such as 'Verily, all things have we created in proportion and measure (*bi-qadar*)' (54: 49),⁵ which translates literally as 'we have created everything through *qadar*', or 'No misfortune can happen on earth or in your souls but is recorded in a decree before We bring it into existence: that is truly easy for God' (57: 22).

⁴ 'Al-*qadā'* wa-l-*qadar*', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Edition (ed. E. van Donzel, B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat), vol. IV, pp. 364-365 (by Gy. Káldy Nagy).

⁵ All translations of Qur'anic verses are drawn from *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, trans. 'A. Yūsuf 'Alī, unless otherwise indicated.

Among the Qur'anic verses which point to human responsibility for one's own acts, with the underlying assumption of human free choice, is for instance, 'Or He can cause them to perish because of the (evil) which they have earned; but much does He forgive' (42: 34)⁶, or, 'Whatever misfortune happens to you, is because of the things your hands have wrought' (42: 30); or 'It [the soul] gets every good that it earns, and it suffers every ill that it earns' (2: 286); or still, 'As to the Thamūd, We gave them guidance, but they preferred blindness to guidance' (41: 17). These verses are all singled out by Averroes to exemplify human choice. One verse stating God's justice in judging humans states: 'Then, on that Day [the Day of Judgement] not a soul will be wronged in the least, nor will you be recompensed except for what you have done (36, 54).⁷

In his work entitled *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam*, Montgomery Watt tackles both the doctrine of human responsibility and aspects of God's omnipotence and each creature's dependence on Him according to Islam. This total dependence is seen in one's need for God to bring about faith and keeping one's faith in Him as well as other matters such as physical sustenance. Further significant themes include the 'Sealing', the idea that God seals people's hearts, thereby preventing them from believing and consequently attaining salvation. Montgomery Watt also highlights God's fixing the date of a person's death, or, as it is usually referred to, one's 'term' (*ajal*).⁸ One such instance is 'He it is Who created you of clay and then decreed a stated term' (6: 2).

In addition to the Qur'an, *qadar* as opposed to human free will is a recurrent theme in *ḥadīth* literature which compiles the deeds and saying of Prophet Muhammad. Things and events are said to be predetermined and written down before actually happening. Montgomery Watt dubs this the theme of the 'Pen'. He quotes one particular tradition (*ḥadīth*) to this effect:

I heard the Apostle of God say ('Ubāda b. al-Ṣāmit is reported to have said): the first thing God created was the Pen. He said to it: write. It asked: Lord, what shall I write? He answered: write the

⁶ Translation slightly modified.

⁷ Translation modified. Dmitry Frolov discerns in the Qur'an an emphasis on fate in the early Meccan verses, and an emphasis on God's mercy in the later Meccan verses. See 'Freedom and Predestination', in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 3.

⁸ Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam*, p. 16.

destinies of all things till the advent of the Hour. My son, I heard the Prophet of God say: Whoso dies with a belief differing from this, he belongs not to me.⁹

Another tradition referring to the development of the embryo in the mother's womb conveys the same principle:

When the embryo has passed two and forty days in the womb, God sends an angel, who gives it a form and creates his hearing, sight, skin, flesh and bones. This having been done, the angel asks: O Lord, shall this be male or female? Then the Lord decrees what He pleases, and the angel writes it down. Then he asks: O Lord, what shall be his term? Then the Lord will say what He pleases, and the angel will write it down. Thereupon the latter will go away with the scroll in his hand, and nothing will be added to or subtracted from the decree.¹⁰

Another tradition (*ḥadīth*) confirms this principle 'The Prophet said: Verily, one of you is gathered together in his mother's womb forty days, then he is a clot of blood the same time, then an angel is sent to him and four things are ordained: his sustenance, his term, whether he is to be miserable or happy'.¹¹

Some Western scholars have considered the deterministic streak which permeates *ḥadīth* literature a remnant of the fatalistic worldview of the pre-Islamic era. In pre-Islamic poetry, a prominent element is 'Time' or 'Destiny', *dahr* or *zamān* in Arabic. In Noeldeke's words, 'The poets are continually alluding to the action of Time, for which they often substitute 'the days' or 'the nights'. Time is represented as bringing misfortune, causing perpetual change, as biting, wearing down, shooting arrows that never miss the mark, hurling stones and so forth'.¹² *Dahr* is not a personified element, it is rather seen as an abstract, impersonal force, and something that is not to be worshipped but has to be squarely faced.

⁹ Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam*, p. 17.

¹⁰ *Id.*, *ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹ *Id.*, *ibid.*, p. 18.

¹² Quoted in Watt, *ibid.*, p. 21.

Within classical Islamic literature, certain traditions favour human freedom of action, but after AD 700 the overwhelming consensus among traditionists is that God fully controls human destinies. According to Watt, the fact that the traditions express a predominantly predestinarian view, as opposed to the libertarian view to be found in the Qur'an, goes back to, and draws on the pre-Islamic worldview. However, the more libertarian trends are to be found in the early history of Islamic theology, only to be rejected later, when the predestinarian current is preferred and crystallizes.

Whatever the origin of the predestinarian doctrine to be found in early Islam, it is certain that the issue of *qadar* engaged the attention of Islamic scholars from an early stage.

The development of the concept of *qadar* in the theological schools

With regard to *qadar* one should not overlook a movement that began at a very early period. This is the Qadariyya, or Qadarites, who were so styled on account of their belief in man's power (*qudra*) to act.¹³ Whether they were a united religious or political group or, instead constituted by different subgroups is a moot point. The Qadariyya, or some of their sects, upheld that only good comes from God and that all evil comes from man. Therefore, no evil act is attributable to God. The Qadarites further state that God delegates a certain power to humans whereby they are able to perform good actions of their own will. They hold that God bestowed on them the full capacity to act, for instance to perform daily actions such as eating and drinking, standing and sitting, sleeping and waking, and more fundamental ones such as believing in God. One group denies that God knows beforehand future human acts and what happens to them. One

¹³ 'We must distinguish between the terms *qadar* and *Qadariyya*. According to proto-Sunnite and Sunni theologians, *qadar* meant God's predestination, as in such books on the topic as *Kitāb al-Qadar* (On Predestination) by al-Faryābī (d. 301/903), and *al-Qadā' wa-l-qadar* (On Preordainment and Predestination) by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210). Moreover, in the major collections of *Hadīth* – such as those by al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), Muslim (d. 261/875), and Abū Dawūd (d. 275/889) – one finds chapters on *qadar* (predestination). In Mu'tazilite circles, however, the word *qadar* was not taken as a reference to predestination but rather as a reference to *qudra*, meaning the ability of humans to act independently of God.' Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History*, pp. 161-162.

group also denies that God creates a child born of adultery, that He determines such events, purposes and knows them. This group also defends the idea that God only provides what is legitimate, i.e., He does not provide sustenance for someone who steals and eats forbidden food.¹⁴

The theological dispute had significant political implications. It is known that the Qadariyya were opposed to the Umayyad dynasty and moreover resisted the notion that the Caliph is God's deputy on earth and that any action by him was justified.¹⁵ Their theological stance on human responsibility means that not even the caliphs are free from committing errors.¹⁶

Although famed theologian al-Hasan al-Basri's (d. AD 728) position is close to the Qadarites, it has been much debated whether he was actually a Qadarite. He admits that God has foreknowledge of things to come, but he thinks of this knowledge as descriptive rather than determinative. And like them, he defends man's power to act. On the other hand, he invites us to accept events as they come, and believes that certain aspects of a person's life are determined by God.¹⁷

The main Qadarite positions were to be adopted and developed later on by the Mu'tazilites, a rationalistic theological school that originated in the 8th century C.E. and knew its heyday in the first half of the 9th century, especially during the caliphate of al-Ma'mūn, son of the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. Some later authors went as far as to identify Mu'tazilites with the Qadariyya, but in the 8th century there were Qadarites who were not Mu'tazilites and vice versa. The Mu'tazilites, like the Qadarites, viewed a person's responsibility for his or her acts as a necessary assumption for divine justice, and considered humans alone to be responsible for evil. God's justice is one of the fundamental doctrines upheld by the Mu'tazilites with reference to the nature of God. Indeed, they styled themselves as *ahl al-'adl wa-l-tawhīd*, the champions of (God's) justice and oneness. Their stress on

¹⁴ Watt and Marmura, *Der Islam*, vol. II (*Politische Entwicklungen und theologische Konzepte*), p. 87.

¹⁵ *Id.*, *ibid.*, p. 72

¹⁶ "The Umayyads, especially during the reign of 'Abd al-Malik, are believed to have adopted predestination in an attempt to legitimize their claim that their rule was ordained by God; after all, they were God's deputies (*khalīfās*).⁷ Suleiman Ali Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History*, p. 196.

¹⁷ Suleiman Ali Mourad defends that while al-Hasan was a Qadarite, predestinarians also claimed him as belonging to their ranks. "With regard to theology, al-Ḥasan ... believed in the doctrine of free-will, namely that sins are the result of human choice and cannot be attributed to God", *Early Islam between Myth and History*, pp. 241-242. However, he defends that, contrary to previous assumptions, al-Ḥasan could not have been the author of the *Epistle to 'Abd Al-Malik*, against the predestinarians. See *Early Islam between Myth and History*, chapters five and six.

God's oneness led them to argue that the divine attributes referred to in the Qur'an cannot be taken as entities ontologically separate from the divine essence. Following the same argumentative line, they claimed that the Qur'an was the created word or speech of God, since to claim that it has existed for all eternity meant that there was another eternal being alongside God, and only God is eternal. Their rationalistic vein meant that they preferred a metaphorical to a literal reading of the Qur'an whenever mention is made of God's bodily parts. The principle of God's absolute justice meant that He can only command what is good, and is in no way responsible for evil perpetrated by men. If men do not act of their own free will they cannot be held accountable for their acts. In short, they cannot not possibly be rewarded or punished for actions for which they are not responsible or cannot avoid.

How do they stand in relation to the Qur'anic statement to the effect that God is the Creator of everything? They place two restrictions on this thesis. One is their contention that a thing's essence is already established before it actually begins to exist, and that the divine creative act confers existence on those things, i. e., beings whose essence is already constituted before their existence. The second restriction concerns voluntary human action. God is not the creator of everything that exists insofar as human beings are autonomous in their free choice of action. Only a person who is the author of his act, in every sense of the word, can be truly responsible for that action.¹⁸

Upon the death of Al-Ma'mūn the Mu'tazilites and their views came under attack, and Mu'tazilite influence waned. One theologian, al-Ash'arī (d. 935), was to become arguably the most prominent opponent of the Mu'tazilite school in which he had been trained. At the age of forty, having studied with a Mu'tazilite scholar, he rejected the Mu'tazilite legacy and opposed Mu'tazilism on several counts. Not only did he provide a wholly different interpretation of the Qur'anic verses that simultaneous stress God's power over everything and man's responsibility for his actions, but he also rejected fundamental doctrines put forth by the Mu'tazilites.

Al-Ash'arī opposed the notion that divine attributes repeatedly mentioned in the Qur'an are in any way to be interpreted metaphorically, and

¹⁸ Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 369.

instead viewed them as entities in their own right. Accordingly, he accused the Mu‘tazilites of denying God’s attributes. He opposed the Mu‘tazilite metaphorical reading of the Qur’an. More important though for our discussion is his theory of human action. He does not refrain from stating that God is the creator of everything, including humans’ sins and all their actions. All this is willed by God, including the evil acts. This is based on a Qur’anic verse, to the effect that ‘it is God who created you and what you do’ (37: 96)¹⁹. The discussion turns fundamentally on the interpretation of the Qur’anic passage. The preceding verses tell us how Abraham approaches his idol-worshipping people and destroys their idols. The Mu‘tazilite interpretation, setting the verse in its context, claims that what is meant by the phrase ‘and what you do’ refers to the idols, meaning that God is the one who created the idols, and that these have no life or power.²⁰

In an attempt to reconcile God’s omnipotence and human responsibility, al-Ash‘arī devises a theory whereby God is the creator every single human act, whether it is voluntary or compelled; but while the voluntary act is created by God, a person acquires or appropriates that act, i.e., makes it his or her own. Thus, without losing sight of *qadar*, underlying divine omnipotence, al-Ash‘arī accounts for human responsibility and ultimately accountability in the Day of Judgement. Later, another Muslim theologian, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), would also reject Qadarite and Mu‘tazilite views defending free will as this would undermine God’s creation of all events, including human acts.²¹

Two philosophers’ views on *qadar*

The debate around the issue of *qadar* was not confined to theological circles. Several Muslim philosophers also engaged in the debate, and held strong views.

Avicenna (Ar. Ibn Sīnā, d. 1037) is known to have composed at least three treatises on the subject. Contrary to his purely philosophical treatises, these short treatises refer directly to Qur’anic verses and *ḥadīth* literature,

¹⁹ My translation.

²⁰ Gimaret, *La Doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 377.

²¹ See Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism*, pp. 105, 112, 134-135.

rather than Greek philosophy. While contributing to the debate that was taking place between Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites, his discussion is heavily informed by the Greco-Arabic philosophical tradition. This means that when explaining God's action in the world, he considers primarily the chain of causal necessity whereby God did not create directly every single thing but rather acts through secondary causes. In one of these treatises, he states that 'Determination (*qadar*) is the existence of reasons and causes and their harmonisation in accordance with their arrangement and order, leading to the effects and caused beings'.²² He does not deny, however, that every being, if all its causes are considered, is ultimately the product of God's action. In fact, Avicenna takes the most radical deterministic position in every respect. In the ethical domain, he holds that human acts are indirectly but effectively determined by God through a hierarchical series of secondary causes. This position stems from his theory of divine causation, which concludes that from God only one effect proceeds. From this effect another effect proceeds, and so forth until the heavenly realm is formed. This heavenly, supralunary, realm is responsible for everything that happens on earth. Therefore, God is the cause of everything that exists.

In his *risāla fi sirr al-qadar* (translated by George Hourani as *Treatise on the Secret of Destiny*), Avicenna says that 'The first premise is that you should know that in the world as a whole and in its parts, both heavenly and earthly, there is nothing which deviates from the fact that God is the cause of its being and coming to be and that God knows it, controls it, and wills its existence; it is all subject to His control (*tadbīr*), determination, knowledge, and will'.²³ Another principle of Avicenna's metaphysical system is that everything that comes to be does so through a necessary cause, which means that everything is necessarily as it is and could not have been otherwise. As we have seen, this view has important ethical implications, for not only are human acts determined but also humans' thoughts and their volitions. In these treatises specifically dedicated to the issue of *al-qadā' wa-l-qadar* God's decree and determination of events, he passes over in silence the problem of human responsibility.

Following a similar argument, Averroes (Ar. Ibn Rushd, d. 1198), also stresses the issue of secondary causality in connection with God's *qadar*.

²² Avicenna, *Lettre au Vizir Abu Sa'd*, 2001, p. 122*. (My translation, in Catarina Belo, *Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes*, p. 114).

²³ Hourani, 'Ibn Sīnā's 'Essay on the Secret of Destiny'', translated by G. Hourani (modified), p. 60.

One chapter of his book *Kashf 'an manāhij al adilla fi 'aqā'id al-milla*, (*Uncovering the Methods of the Proofs concerning the Doctrines of the Faith*), entitled *mas'ala al-qadā' wa-l-qadar*,²⁴ is specifically devoted to the issue. Averroes poses the question whether a person coerced in his or her actions is free to act by way of acquiring them. He quotes passages from the Qur'an which accommodate one or the other perspective, and then the various theological schools and their positions are mentioned. Finally, arguments from reason are adduced.

On Averroes' contention, no one can dispute that God is the only creator, indeed the only agent (*fā'il*). On the other hand, one cannot be held responsible for actions he or she was not able to perform of his or her own free will. Accountability implies the capacity on the part of that person to act autonomously. Therefore, God creates in us a power to act and to choose a course of action, opting between two opposites. Furthermore, it is God who makes available the causes through which we operate, and it is He who removes any obstacles precluding those acts. However, these are attributed to us rather than to God. We appropriate these actions by our will and with the concurrence of external causes. The external causes condition our choice of one of the opposites. This is explained in the following way: we desire something when we form an idea of it. Then we accept it. And this acceptance or assent (*taṣḍīq*) is not due to our choice. The corollary of all this is that our acts follow a definite order and are in harmony with external causes, indeed they depend on these causes. Our actions are doubly determined by our own internal causes and external causes. The position implicitly expressed in this chapter seems to point to a complete determinism of human action. Averroes provides details about God's causality which are elsewhere expressed in his commentaries on Aristotle and also in his *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* (*The Incoherence of the Incoherence*). This causality is effected through the movement of the heavenly bodies. A glance at the strict causal principles defended in his commentaries on Aristotle is consistent with this strong defence of God's omnipotence.²⁵

²⁴ Ibn Rushd, *Kashf 'an manāhij al-adilla fi 'aqā'id al-milla*, pp. 186-193.

²⁵ For a detailed discussion of *qadar* in Avicenna and Averroes, see my *Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes*, respectively pp. 113-119, and pp. 209-222, and also my 'Ibn Rushd on God's Decree and Determination (*al-qadā' wa-l-qadar*)', in *Al-Qanṭara*, XXVII, July-December 2006, pp. 245-264.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, there were two main groups which defended human freedom, both originating in the first two centuries of Islam. These are the Qadarites and the Mu'tazilites. Among the groups concerned with stressing God's omnipotence over human free will are the Ash'arites and other theological groups such as the Jabarites, who defended the coercion of human acts by God.

Traditionally, theologians and philosophers alike have drawn on the Qur'an for the both the affirmation of God's *qadar* and/or the defence of human free will. However, the interpretation of the Qur'anic message on this issue has widely varied throughout the history of Islamic thought. In the first two centuries, one finds the libertarian view, which stresses one's freedom of action, as well as a defence of divine predestination but in the course of time, and as Sunni theology crystallises, God's *qadar* became the theologians' overriding principle.

While philosophers such as Avicenna and Averroes praised and admired Mu'tazilite theology – characterized by a marked rationalism observable in their metaphorical reading of the Qur'an and avoidance of any sort of anthropomorphism in speaking of God – they lean towards a more deterministic view of human action, by using the Aristotelian framework of natural causation. Thus the philosophers while true to the Greek philosophical tradition, confirm the predestinarian tendency of medieval Sunni Islamic theology.

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