

Human Action within Divine Creation

A Muslim Perspective

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HUMAN ACTION WITHIN divine creation has been the subject of long and controversial discussions among Muslims since the eighth century, first as the subject of study and debate in commentaries on the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth and then continuing as one of the first problems of Islamic theology. The Muslim philosophers and mystics engaged deeply in the subject and enriched its literature from their specific perspectives.

We may classify the Muslim perspectives on this important subject under esoteric and exoteric approaches. The perspective of all mystics such as Ibn al-'Arabī and some philosophers such as Shahab al-Dīn Suhrawardī and Mulla Sadrā, in some of their works (not all of them), is classified as "esoteric." I will not mention this approach in this essay.

I limit myself to the "exoteric approach," which comprises a wide spectrum from the ultraliteral interpretation of Zahiris to the maximal rationalism of Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna and Averroes. This spectrum can be seen as having two subcategories: thought that is best understood as "Islamic theology," which is relatively more textual and less rational, and thought that is more properly understood as "Muslim philosophy," which is more rational and less textual.

The theological perspective includes eight schools of thought: Ash'arī, Māturīdī, Ḥanbalī, and the banned Mu'tazilī in Sunnī Islam; Ja'farī, Zaydī, and Ismā'īlī in Shi'ite Islam; and finally 'Ibādī. The philosophical perspective includes four schools of thought: peripatetic, illuminative, transcendent, and independent philosophers such as Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī, al-Bīrūnī, Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī, and Abu'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī.

Providing a general overview of twelve schools of thought on one of the most controversial problems in the history of Islam is not easy. I will focus on the key similarities and differences between these two main perspectives without going into the details and the apologetic debates. I will offer major verses of the Qur'ān

and a few ḥadīths for each perspective as the main evidence—as well as a few theological or philosophical arguments. My goal is to demonstrate how Muslims, especially at the present time, understand human action within divine creation.

Introductory Remarks on the Unity of God

There is consensus among Muslims—regardless of their different schools, sects, and perspectives—that the cornerstone and inseparable master principle of Islamic thought is the unity of God (*tawḥīd*). This master principle has at least four levels: unity of God's essence (*al-tawḥīd al-dhātī*), unity of His attributes (*al-tawḥīd al-ṣifātī*), unity of His actions (*al-tawḥīd al-'af'ālī*), and unity of worship (*al-tawḥīd 'ibādī*). Although there are different understandings in the second and third, there is unanimity in the general understanding of the first and the fourth. Human action within divine creation is a factor at two levels of controversy regarding the unity of God: on “unity of His actions” (for the most part), and on “unity of His attributes” (to a lesser degree). To have a better understanding of the challenge, we must elaborate on the first level of *tawḥīd*—that is, unity of God's essence and its effect to other levels of this master principle of Islam.¹

Deep study of the visible world (*'ālam al-shahāda*), or natural world, teaches us that the actions and reactions of all particular beings—regardless of whether they be earthly or heavenly beings—are in intrarelation to each other, and there is no going out of this framework. Every action or reaction relates to the whole universe. From this fact we can infer a kind of unity, a large system designed and run by one operator. This is the first principle.

This natural, visible world could not be spontaneous. It is contingent and an effect of God—directly, as some “occasionalist theologians” in the Ash'arī school (such as al-Ghazālī) believed, or indirectly, with the mediation of a chain of vertical, intellectual, immaterial causes (or angels), as all the Muslim philosophers and some theologians (such as Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī) believed. According to both approaches, the ultimate originator of the world in all of its parts and aspects is no one except God. This is the second principle.

According to the principle of cause and effect, the cause of the cause of a thing is finally the cause of that thing, and the effect of the effect of a thing is finally the effect of that thing. When all of the causes lead to the Ultimate Cause—that is, God—it means that all beings, regardless of what they are, are His effects. There is neither independent existence nor any necessary being in itself except God. There is no originator of existence except God. This principle is clear in occasionalism too. It is the meaning of unity of God-as-Sustainer (*al-tawḥīd fi'l-Rububiyya*). No god but God (*Lā ilāha illā Allāh*).

In the other words, God is the complete cause (*adaquata causa*; *al-'illa al-tāmmah*) for all beings as well as their agent cause (efficient cause; *al-'illah al-fā'iliyyah*). He is independent in His origination absolutely as well as self-

subsistent in His existence and causality. He is the real one who effects. There is no one who effects in existence except God. He is the agent of all things, and all the causes are as His agents—subjects and contingent to Him. It is the common ground of Islamic thought, and all Muslims are unanimous without any differences in the master principle of unity of God.

God's Creation and His Goal

What is God's goal in creation? Why is there anything at all? Why isn't there “nothing”? Why does God create in general? These are the questions of teleology and philosophy. I will discuss three issues in this section: God's goal in creation, creation of the world, and the immanence or transcendence of God in Islam.

God's Goal in Creation

On the primary point of the necessity of a goal in actions, there are at least three approaches to this issue. The first approach is that the goal of action is exclusive to contingent dependent beings; action should have a goal in order to perfect their incompleteness. An independent ultimate being—that is, God—does *not* have any goal in His actions. It is the meaning of “God's actions are not justified with purposes.” Ash'arite theologians such as al-Taftāzani and al-Jurjāni and the philosopher Suhrawardī went in this way.²

The second approach, in contrast, contends that there are goals and benefits in God's actions—not for Himself, because He is rich—but for His creations and servants. The Mu'tazilite and Shi'ite theologians believed in this way.³ The Qur'ān explicitly denies vain creation: “Did you think We created you in vain, and that you would not be brought back to Us?” (*al-Mu'minūn* [23]:115).⁴ The goal of the creation is worship and service of God: “I created jinn and humankind only to worship Me” (*al-Dhāriyāt* [51]:56). This verse indicates that the creation has a goal. This goal is the worship of God. In the other verse, just end and recompense are introduced as the goal of creation: “God created the heavens and the earth for a true purpose: to reward each soul according to its deeds. They will not be wronged” (*al-Jāthiyah* [45]:22).

The third approach belongs to the mainstream of the Muslim philosophers: There is no action without a goal.⁵ The goal always refers to the agent and is always the perfection of the agent. The need of an agent to a goal is necessary only in the case of a material agent. In incorporeal agents, the goal is the essence of the agent itself, not something out of it. The inference of this argument is that the goal of God in His actions, including creation, is His transcendent essence—nothing else.

The benefit of the creation could not be the essential goal of God in His creation because the goal should not be lower than the existential level of the agent.

This kind of goal requires the influence of the other on God's will, and that is not accepted in the independent agency of God. There could be no motive in His action except His transcendent essence. The benefit of the others is the accident of the divine actions.

Being is good. God is the source and origin of every good. He emanates existences because their creation is good. Origination of good is God's habit, and He necessitated it to Himself, as "He has taken it upon Himself to be merciful" (al-An'ām [6]:12, 54).

God does not need worship, because He is perfect. God loves His transcendental essence. Worshipping Him is justified in this way or could be the accident of creation. According to a ḥadīth commenting on this verse, worship is the intermediate goal. The ultimate goal is "knowing God" (*ma'rifat Allāh*).⁶

Creation of the World

In Islamic understanding, the creation of the world was not a one-time action that happened in the past and was finished. creation has been continued, and God is a permanent creator.⁷ God admired Himself because of the creation of humanity: "glory be to God, the best of creators!" (al-Mu'minūn [23]:14). "We create humanity in the finest state" (al-Tīn [95]:4). The priority of humanity is because of God's spirit in all human beings. He orders the angels to prostrate to humans because of this spirit in human beings: "When I have fashioned him and breathed My spirit into him, bow down before him" (al-Ḥijr [15]:29–30). This spirit in human beings guides them to the straight path if it is not suppressed by carnal soul or devilish ego. This tendency to the good and knowing God is called primordial disposition or original nature (*fiṭra*): "So as a man of pure faith, stand firm in your devotion to the religion. This is the natural disposition God instilled in humanity—there is no altering God's creation—and this is the right religion, though most people do not realize it" (al-Rūm [30]:30).

Among the Muslim scholars, two approaches are taken to questions about the creation of the world. The first approach is to say that God creates ex nihilo: the giving of existence out of non-existence. The second approach is to claim the eternity of the world because matter, motion, and time are concomitant. That is, it is impossible to have time but no matter. The incorporeal world is eternal but is not *God*. The major distinction between God and His creation is not eternity but the contingency and dependence to God. All beings, be they corporeal or incorporeal, are contingent to God and are dependent on Him. The need of temporal being to Him is temporal, and need of eternal being to Him is eternal. This is the approach of mainstream philosophers and some theologians. However, most of the theologians believed in the creation⁸ as ex nihilo. The great Ash'arite theologian al-Ghazālī accused the philosophers, including al-Fārābī and Avicenna, of disbelief because of their notions of the eternity of the world.⁸

No verse in the Qur'ān says explicitly that God created the world out of nothing or non-existence. The theologians focus on the literal meaning of *khalāqa*—the word used most often in the Qur'ān's discourse on creation. For example: "It is He who created the heavens and the earth for a true purpose. On the Day when He says, 'Be,' it will be: His word is the truth. All control on the Day the Trumpet is blown belongs to Him. He knows the seen and the unseen: He is the All Wise, the All Aware" (al-An'ām [6]:73).

But *khalāqa* is also used repeatedly in the Qur'ān to refer to the creation from something such as clay or dust: "In God's eyes Jesus is just like Adam: He created him from dust, said to him, 'Be,' and he was" (Āl 'Imrān [3]:59). It is obvious that creation is in harmony with notions both of ex nihilo and out of something.

Philosophers distinguished between "generation" (*ibdā'*) for incorporeal beings and "creation" (*sun'* or *khalq*) for corporeal beings.⁹ They prefer the word "emanation" (*faḍl*) in place of "creation." In this Qur'ān verse, both "generation" (*ibdā'*) and "creation" (*khalq*) are used: "He is far higher than what they ascribe to Him, the Creator of the heavens and the earth! How could He have children when He has no spouse, when He created all things, and has full knowledge of all things?" (al-An'ām [6]:100b–101). The only Qur'ān verse in which *sun'* is used is this: "You will see the mountains and think they are firmly fixed, but they will float away like clouds. This is the handiwork of God who has perfected all things. He is fully aware of what you do" (al-Naml [27]:88). In Islam, God is creator or originator—not craftsman.

The Immanence and Transcendence of God in Islam

Islam teaches that God is simultaneously nearby His creation and far away from it. Although He is infinitely exalted above all creation (transcendent), He is also near us, present with us and involved in the world (immanent). However, on the one hand, a few Muslim schools of thought believed in divine anthropomorphism because of their literal understanding of the Qur'ān and Sunna; and a few of other Muslim schools, on the other hand, exaggerated in God's transcendence, denying any sort of immanence on His part. The Muslim mainstream believes, first, in the moderate transcendence and immanence of God—God's *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*—but, second, strongly rejects incarnation in human or any other form, and, third, rejects pantheism or panentheism as well.

Thus, the mainstream position is that God is present in His creatures; there is no place empty of Him; but His presence is a *transcendental* presence. This is the primary principle of perceiving God: "There is nothing like Him" (al-Shūrā [42]:11). Keeping this primary principle in mind, we may perceive God's presence with His creatures, especially human beings, as these Qur'ān verses attest:

He is the First and the Last; the Outer and the Inner; He has knowledge of all things. (al-Ḥadīd [57]:3)

He is with you wherever you are; He sees all that you do." (al-Ḥadīd [57]:4b)

We created man—We know what his soul whispers to him: We are closer to him than his jugular vein. (Qāf [50]:16)

Believers, respond to God and His Messenger when he calls you to that which gives you life. Know that God comes between a man and his heart, and that you will be gathered to Him. (al-Anfāl [8]:24)

As these verses make clear, from an Islamic point of view, God is with each one of His creatures; nearer to them than their jugular vein, between them and their hearts, nearer to them than they are to themselves—but in His glory and majesty, and His transcendence.

Among the verses in the Qur'ān related to immanence is this one about the breathing the spirit of God in human: "You Lord said to the angels, 'I will create a man from clay. When I have shaped him and breathed My Spirit into him, kneel down before him'" (Ṣād [38]:71-72). "Breathing His spirit" means the origination of the incorporeal soul. Human beings have this ability to follow God and run toward Him. Related to this are several clear ḥadīths from 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib:¹⁰

"He is with everything, not through association (*muqāranah*)."

"He is other than everything, not through separation (*muzayalah*)."

"To know Him is to profess His unity; and professing His Unity is to distinguish Him (*tamyiz*) from His creation."

"The standard (*ḥukm*) for distinguishing is separation (*baymunah*) in attribute, not separation in terms of distance (*uzlah*)."¹¹

None of the classical Muslim theologians and philosophers perceived God's "withness" (*ma'lyyat*) and presence as divine immanence in the sense of *incarnation* or *pantheism* or *panentheism*. There is unanimity on this point among the Muslim scholars to this day.

The Dignity and Task of Humankind within God's Creation

In this section I discuss three issues: the major point of dignity of humankind, the nature of vicegerency, and the question of whether vicegerency belongs to the individual or to the community.

The Major Point of Dignity of Humankind

"We have honored the children of Adam" (al-Isrā' [17]:70). Humankind has dignity because God breathed into him of His spirit and bestowed on him the

primordial disposition or original nature (*fitra*). Humankind because of this advantage was honored with the position of stewardship or vicegerency (*khilāfa*). This vicegerency was not exclusive to Adam but to the children of Adam—that is, humankind: "your Lord told the angels, 'I am putting a vicegerent on earth'" (al-Baqara [2]:30). This verse is about Adam, but according to three other verses—"It is He made you vicegerents on the earth" (Fāṭir [35]:39; al-An'ām [6]:165; Yūnus [10]:14)—the term *vicegerent* is plural, not singular, and thus includes all of humanity. All of these four verses are talking about the same issue: vicegerency of humanity on the earth. As the Qur'ān speaks of it, "earth" is not exclusive to our specific planet; rather, "earth" means *ālam al-shahāda*—the visible or the material world.

Although the majority of Muslim scholars interpreted the story of creation in a factual frame, it seems that it is symbolic regarding some deep transcendental facts. The clearest evidence of this symbolic language is the verse of Trust, which focuses on this exact issue: "We offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, yet they refused to undertake it and were afraid of it; humanity undertook it—they have always been inept and foolish" (al-Aḥzāb [33]:72). It is obvious that the offer of God to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains was symbolic, as was this offer to humankind. What was this Trust? There is no doubt that it was that vicegerency. It means that humankind's vicegerency on the earth is God's vast Trust. No creature in the visible world except humankind was able to undertake a Trust of this enormity. Humankind did not know the magnificence and difficulty of this Trust in the beginning; nevertheless, they undertook it.

The Nature of Vicegerency

Two factors in humankind prepared it to undertake this enormous Trust: first, humankind's knowledge, and second, his choice. The first factor is mentioned in the story of creation; "And He taught Adam the names of all things" (al-Baqara [2]:31). It is clear that "the names of all things" is the symbol of inherent knowledge in humankind's original nature (*fitra*). Although all human beings have the ability and potentiality to actualize the vicegerency (God's vast Trust), human beings have choice and free will by which to accept or reject it in practice. Humanity's free will is mentioned in the Qur'ān repeatedly.

"By the soul and how He formed it and inspired it [to know] its own rebellion and piety! The one who purifies his soul succeeds and the one who corrupts it fails" (al-Shams [91]:7-11). Here again is mention of God's breathing of His spirit into humankind and bestowing on humanity its original nature (*fitra*). It means that human beings have the choice to undertake the Trust and purify their souls and go in the right path, which will be the actualization of the vicegerency; or they may corrupt their souls, ignore their original nature, and turn their back to God. It is clear that persons who make the latter choice are not God's vicegerents until they repent and return to Him. "We created man from a drop of mingled fluid to put him to the test; We gave him hearing and sight; We guided him to the

right path, whether he was grateful or not" (al-Insān [76]:2-3). The Qur'ān explicitly describes the free will of humankind in the story of creation. God showed both the straight path and perversion. Those who are grateful and choose the straight path are actually God's vicegerents, and those who go astray and are ungrateful are not actually God's vicegerents until their return and repentance.

God's purpose in bestowing vicegerency is the perfection of man in the process of creation of the body, breathing the spirit, original nature, knowledge, guidance, showing the good and evil, testing, and finally human choice. The perfection will be the achievement of the soul choice, that is, the straight way. It is the goal of creation in the other verses; I mean worship or knowledge as in tradition. In other words, this purpose could be spiritual meeting with God, and annihilation (*al-fanā'*) in His love and pleasure. This is the station (*maqām*) of perfection.

"[But] you, soul at peace: return to your Lord well pleased and well pleasing; go in among My servants; and into My Garden" (al-Fajr [89]:27-30). This heaven is more than a material garden; it is God's pleasure. This is the supreme felicity: "God has promised the believers, both men and women, Gardens graced with flowing streams where they will remain; good, peaceful homes in Gardens of lasting bliss; and—greatest of all—God's good pleasure. That is the supreme triumph" (al-Tawba [9]:72).

There is a tight relationship between creation and vicegerency, on one hand, and test (*al-ibtilā'*) and perfection, on the other hand. This world is the time of testing, and the other world is the time of result. Testing is for the purification and perfection of humanity. It is not for increasing the knowledge of God. He is omniscient. Human suffering is because of this big test. Life in one of its meanings is the taking of this test. "Exalted is He who holds all control in His hands; who has power over all things; who created death; who created life to test you and reveal which of you performs best—He is the Mighty, the Forgiving" (al-Mulk [67]:1-2). One of God's goals in the creation of life and death is a test. This test is for purification and perfection that is tied to human deeds. Which of you is best in deed?

Life in this world is mixed with suffering. "We have created humankind for toil and trial" (al-Balad [90]:4). This world does not have capacity for real happiness. The real happiness is the result of two elements: sound faith and good deeds. Both are required for salvation. Neither sound faith without good deeds nor good deeds without sound faith would lead to real happiness and salvation. Human action has a very large role in vicegerency. "Every soul is held in pledge for its deeds" (al-Muddaththir [74]:38). The message of this verse is among the most beautiful of this kind in the Qur'ān: "good words rise up to Him and He lifts up the righteous deed" (Fāṭir [35]:10). "Good words" demonstrate sound faith, in other words, believing in God and believing in the Hereafter: "The believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians—all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good—will have their rewards with their Lord. No fear for them, nor

will they grieve" (al-Baqara [2]:62). This phrase "those who believe and do good" is used in the Qur'ān repeatedly; for example, "As for those who believe and do good deeds—We do not let the reward of anyone who does a good deed go to waste" (al-Kahf [18]:30).

Vicegerency: Individual or Community?

Undoubtedly individuals and communities are both responsible for their deeds in this world, and both of them will be asked about what they have done in the Day of Judgment. Vicegerency and the responsibility of individuals in general are clear. Here the Qur'ān mentions the responsibility of individuals in relation to creation and the Day of Judgment:

[God will say], "Now you return to Us, alone, as We first created you: you have left behind everything We gave you, nor do We see those intercessors of yours that you claimed were partners of God. All the bonds between you have been severed, and those about whom you made such claims have deserted you." (al-An'ām [6]:94)

Another clear indication of individual responsibility is this:

Has he not been told what was written in the Scriptures of Moses and Abraham who fulfilled his duty: that no soul shall bear the burden of another; that a human being will only have what he has worked towards; that his labour will be seen and that in the end he will be repaid in full for it; that the final goal is your Lord." (al-Najm [53]:36-42)

Each human being is responsible for his or her deeds individually. This individuality will be the main aspect of creation, resurrection, and vicegerency.

The membership of a human being in a family or community does not negate this individuality and personality. Those memberships will add new responsibilities to one's major individual responsibility. Family is the second level of responsibility: "Believers, guard yourselves and your families against a Fire fueled by people and stones" (al-Tahrīm [66]:6a). The third level of responsibility is to one's community: "Be a community that calls for what is good, urges what is right, and forbids what is wrong; those who do this are the successful ones" (Āl 'Imrān [3]:104). We will be asked not only about our deeds but also about our community in the framework of our abilities: "Beware of discord that harms not only the wrongdoers among you: know that God is severe in His punishment" (al-Anfāl [8]:25). In the Day of Judgment both communities and individuals will be called to account: "You will see every community kneeling. Every community will be summoned to its record: "Today you will be repaid for what you did" (al-Jāthiyah [45]:28).

But is there any relationship between community responsibility and service as God's vicegerent? Is each community recognized as the vicegerent of God on the earth? It is not clear. I analyze the facts that we have in this case. On one hand, the diversity of communities is accepted not only as a fact but also as God's will:

People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into nations and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In God's eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most aware of Him: God is all knowing, all aware. (al-Ḥujurāt [49]:13)

On the other hand, the purpose of this communal pluralism and diversity is an existential test:

We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good; you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about. (al-Mā'idā [5]:48b)

From the third perspective, the community of believers was characterized as a justly balanced community: "We have made you into a just community, so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others and so that the Messenger may be witness [to it] before you" (al-Baqara [2]:143a). This characteristic is not only a simple label achieved by confession or heritage of its members. It is not achieved except through sound faith and good deeds. The community of believers, because of the faith and good deeds of its members, will be the witnesses over the communities. This is a spiritual witness and example, nothing else. Although it is possible to equate this spiritual witness with service as God's vicegerent, there is no evidence in the Qur'an or tradition of this equivalence. *Maqām* of spiritual witness in the Qur'an is different and separate from *maqām* of vicegerency.¹² The former includes God; the latter is exclusive to humankind individually. There is no evidence of community vicegerency in the Qur'an.

In our day and age, the exercise of vicegerency in a religiously and ideologically plural world is not different from the exercise of religion per se. The concept of vicegerency does not depend on the premodern era; thus, it need not be changed in the modern era. It is a matter of spirituality and does not deal with this religion or that ideology. It is about truth, not labels. It is about the real faith of heart and dispositions, not the claims of the tongue. Diversities of religions and ideologies that occur in this realm demonstrate that vicegerency is much higher than it. Vicegerency and pluralism do not conflict with each other, because they are not on the same level. The essence of vicegerency is to be understood—as was made clear in *Sūrat al-Baqara* (2):62, above—as sound faith in God and the Last Day, and righteous deeds regardless of religion and ideology.

Human Action within the Sovereignty of God

Human action and free choice in relation to God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence has been a controversial subject in Abrahamic religions in general, and in relation to the unity of Divine acts (*al-tawḥīd al-'af'ālī*) in Islamic thought specifically. There are three subtopics to be considered here: elaboration of God's attributes, notions of moderate human free choice, and classification of verses on the doctrine of mediation between determinism and delegation.

Elaboration of God's Attributes

With regard to discussion of God's attributes, four key problems must be addressed. First, if God knows everything that can be known, He knows human acts before they occur; this leads to determinism because humans are not able to act outside Divine providence and omniscience. Second, if God can do everything that is plausible, there would be no role for human choice in the full omnipotence of God. Any role for human will would mean shortcoming in the sovereignty of God. Third, if there is no ground for human free choice, human sin and committal of evil is not consistent with God's omnibenevolence. Fourth, believing in the notion of unity of Divine acts (*al-tawḥīd al-'af'ālī*) requires negation of any kind of non-divine causality, including agency of human action. There is no ground for human free choice, according to this understanding of the unity of God.

These problems arose from an anthropomorphic understanding of God's attributes, weakness in philosophical foundations, and literal interpretation of the scripture and tradition. However, they are resolved by recalling that God's knowledge does not have any restrictions. God does not have mind. His knowledge is not conceptual or empirical knowledge through imprinted forms. His knowledge is knowledge by presence (*al-'ilm al-ḥuḍūrī*). There is nothing absent from Him. His knowledge is divided into knowledge before and knowledge after the generation of created things. God is omniscient. But His full knowledge does not lead to determinism. Human existence, what is in the human mind, human choice, and action are in God's transcendental presence. God's transcendental knowledge of human choice and mind does not impose any restriction on human freedom. These restrictions are the consequence of our finite knowledge, not God's transcendental infinite knowledge:

In whatever matter you may be engaged and whatever part of the Qur'an you are reciting, whatever work you are doing, We witness you when you are engaged in it. Not even the weight of a speck of dust in the earth or sky escapes your Lord, nor anything lesser or greater: it is all written in a clear record. (Yūnus [10]:61)

Predestination and destiny (*al-qaḍā' wa'l-qadar*) do not lead to determinism and negation of human free choice, because human free choice is a part of the human essence according to divine predestination and destiny. In other words, God designed the human essence with free choice, while He designed other creatures without it. This free choice is inseparable from human essence: Free will and choice are among the existential originators (*al-mabādi' al-wuḡudiyya*) of the human essence in God's decree. There is no escape from His predestination and destiny. "He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth, and when He decrees something, He says only, 'Be,' and it is" (al-Baqara [2]:117).

Deterministic interpretation was a pre-Islamic misunderstanding that the Qur'ān explained and condemned. "The idolators will say, 'If God had willed, we would not have ascribed partners to Him—nor would our fathers—or have declared anything forbidden'" (al-An'ām [6]:148a). Tyrannical rulers followed this misinterpretation after Islam to justify their rule.

God's omnipotence does not deny human free choice. Human agency is not horizontal and in competition with God's agency. "God is not to be frustrated by anything in the heavens or on the earth: He is all knowing, all powerful" (Fāṭir [35]:44b). Human agency is vertical, and God is in the chain of causes of human act and the cause of causes. Human agency includes free choice.

Moderate Human Free Choice

Muslim philosophers and theologians, regardless of their diversities, are unanimous in their affirmation of God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence and of the unity of Divine acts (*al-tawḥīd al-'af'ālī*). Yet all Muslim philosophers and the mainstream of Muslim theologians believe in some kind of human free choice. The prominent Muslim theologian Muhammad 'Abduh, Egypt's grand mufti in the early twentieth century, commented: "The doctrine of determinism was the idea of a small, extinct range; and the doctrine of the mediation between determinism and absolute free choice has predominated among the Muslims."¹³ 'Abduh is correct. Two radical tendencies were marginalized: that of the ultraliteralist determinists and that of the radical rationalist Mu'tazilites who believed in delegation (*al-tafwīd*) or absolute human free choice. I focus on the doctrine of the mediation between determinism and delegation as the mainstream Muslim approach in its two versions of moderate human free choice. The first is the theory of acquisition (*kasb*), popular in Ash'arism; the second is the theory of human agency as the secondary cause, popular in the school of justice in Islamic philosophy and Shi'ism.

The main point of the theory of acquisition is the importance of distinguishing between two elements in human action: creation as God's act and acquisition as human act. God directly creates the power, action, and *kasb* within the human subject—which is no more than the receptacle, the place (*mahall*), as al-Jurjānī

expressed it in his commentary on 'Aḡḡid al-Dīn al-Ījī's *al-Mawāqif fī 'ilm al-kalām* (Stattons in the Science of Kalām).¹⁴ According to al-Ghazālī, the meaning of acquisition is the creation of a human's action by God at the time of the human's will and power, but there is no effect of the human's power in the creation of his action.¹⁵ The major benefit of this theory is moral responsibility of human as the Ash'arite scholars expressed. There is no role for the human in his act except synchronization (*al-muqārana*); at the time of generation of power and will in the human, God creates human acts. This synchronization attributes the act to the human as acquisition. Although the theory of acquisition was welcomed by the majority of Ash'arite theologians, some distinguished Ash'arite theologians—al-Juwaini, al-Sha'rānī, and Muhammad 'Abduh among them¹⁶—denied it as being indistinguishable from determinism.

In support of this position, Ash'arites refer to this Qur'ān passage: "How can you worship things you carve with your own hands, when it is God who has created you and all your handwork?" (al-Ṣāffāt [37]:95–96). Their argument is based on taking "ma" in "ma ta'malun" as *masdariyyah* (infinitive), giving the sense that "God created you and your deeds"—not as *mawsula* (conjunction), giving the sense "God created you and the idols that you carved." According to the context of the verse, the latter interpretation is correct.¹⁷

Another verse, "People, remember God's grace towards you. Is there any creator other than God to give you sustenance from the heavens and earth?" (Fāṭir [35]:3), denies that there is a creator independent of God, but pagans understood the exclusiveness of any creator, regardless of whether it is independent or contingent (including human agency in its acts). The Qur'ān makes clear that creation by human beings is acceptable, with God's permission: "I have come to you with a sign from your Lord: I will make a bird for you out of clay, then breathe into it and, with God's permission, it will become a real bird; I will heal the blind and the leper, and bring the dead back to life with God's permission" (Āl 'Imrān [3]:49a). So there is no problem with human agency in human creative actions taken with permission of God.

The second theory takes a mediating position between determinism and delegation (*madhāb al-amr bain al-amrain*). This position is based on several philosophical principles. Its first principle is that, aside from God, all beings are contingent beings in all of their affairs and their actions. The relationship between cause and effect in precise elaboration is the relationship between creatures that are needy (such as humans) and the One who is rich, God. The contingency, or dependence, or need is not something added to a creature's being. Rather, in its essence, this being per se is needy and is contingent to its transcendent cause. This is the deep meaning of this verse: "People, it is you who stand in need of God—God needs nothing and is worthy of all praise" (Fāṭir [35]:15).

There is no doubt about the unity of Divine acts (*al-tawḥīd al-'af'ālī*); but this does not necessitate occasionalism. Although independent origination is exclusive

to God, the causality of contingent beings is possible, dependent on God's permission and providence. Human action is not independent of God. On the one hand, it is needy and contingent on God in its being and essence, and, on the other hand, it is impossible to deny or neglect the causality of human action. Human action is attributed to God and humans from two considerations. It is not correct to say it is exclusively God's act, so there is no effect from the human side except the receptacle, the place (*maḥall*); however, it is not solely human action, because both the human agent and his action are always needy and contingent on God. Human beings are the agent of their acts, and simultaneously their acts are God's acts. There is no conflict between these two causalities, because they are in the vertical causes—God is the cause of causes.

The object of God's will is human beings with their free choices, regardless of what they choose—not human beings without choice. Evil human acts do not pose a problem for this analysis because, first, the world is dominated by good; minor evil, which is not an essential object of God, is required as the consequence of the material world, within the context of prevalence of the good. Second, the whole of existence as such is good; evil is relative to specific situations and cannot be attributed to God. All we know under the name of evil is evil accidentally. It means that what is outwardly evil is not evil in its essence, and that essence is attributed to God. God is omnibenevolent; He is the origin of any good: "Anything good that happens to you is from God; anything bad is ultimately from yourself. We have sent you as a messenger to people; God is sufficient witness" (al-Nisā' [4]:79).

Classification of Verses on Doctrine of Mediating Between Determinism and Delegation

There are three groups of verses related to the doctrine of mediating between determinism and delegation that should be read in relation to each other and not separately.¹⁸

Group One: Verses that indicate that nothing happens except by God's will, providence, and permission. This group negates the doctrine of delegation (*tafwīḍ*). Examples are "But you will only wish to do so by the will of God, the Lord of all people" (al-Takwīr [81]:29) and "Say, 'I have no control over benefit or harm, even to myself, except as God may please'" (al-A'rāf [7]:188a).

Group Two: Verses that indicate human free choice and negate determinism, such as

Whoever does good does it for his own soul and whoever does evil does it against his own soul; your Lord is never unjust to His creatures (Fuṣṣilat [41]:46);

Say, "Now the truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so" (al-Kahf [18]:29);

If you are ungrateful, remember God has no need of you, yet He is not pleased by ingratitude in His servants; if you are grateful, He is pleased [to see] it in you. No soul will bear another's burden. You will return to your Lord in the end and He will inform you of what you have done: He knows well what is in the depths of [your] hearts (al-Zumar [39]:7); and

Serve God, be mindful of Him and obey me. (al-Insān [76]:3)

Group Three: Verses that indicate two attributes to God and to human beings simultaneously. For example,

It was not you who killed them but God, and when you [Prophet] threw [sand at them] it was not your throw [that defeated them] but God's, to do the believer a favour: God is all seeing and all knowing. (al-Anfāl [8]:17)

Here the Qur'ān has attributed a single act (throwing) to God and to a human being simultaneously. The same thing occurs in other verses: "Fight them: God will punish them at your hands, He will disgrace them, He will help you to conquer them, He will heal the believers' feelings and remove the rage from their hearts" (al-Tawba [9]:14–15a). In a third example, the Qur'ān attributes the same issue to God in one verse and to humanity in another: "Even after that, your hearts became as hard as rocks, or even harder" (al-Baqara [2]:74a¹⁹); and "But they broke their pledge, so We distanced them [from Us] and hardened their hearts" (al-Mā'ida [5]:13a).

A close reading of verses in the first and second groups indicates that the Qur'ān clearly negates determinism and delegation. Verses in the third group illustrate a core doctrine of the Qur'ān—that is, a position of midway between determinism and delegation (*madhab al-amr bain al-amrain*).

To summarize, in mainstream Islamic thought, the lesson of the Qur'ān is that human action is attributed to God and to the human agent simultaneously. The human agent has free choice in his acts. Human free choice and power are based on God's power, providence, will, and permission. In their existence and in all aspects and affairs of their lives, including their acts, human beings are not independent of God.

Notes

1. For more information, refer to al-Sayyid Muhammad Hussain al-Tabātabā'i, *Nahāyātul Hikma* (Ultimate wisdom) (Qom: Mu'assasah al-Nashr al-Islami, 1996).

2. Al-Taftāzani, *Sharḥul-Maqāsid*, vol. 2 (Qom: ash-Sharif ar-Radhi, 1989), 156; al-Jurjāni, *Sharḥ ul-Mawāqif*, vol. 8 (Qom: ash-Sharif ar-Radhi, 1991), 202; and Suhrawardī, *Al-Mutārīḥat wat-Talwihāt* (Tehran: Anjuman-i Shāhīnshāhī-i Falsafah-i Irān, 1977), 437.

3. Nasir ad-Din at-Tussī, *Tajridul I'tiqād*, with commentary of al-Hilli: *Kashul-Murād fi sharh Tajridul I'tiqād* (Qom: Mu'assasah al-Nashr al-Islami, 1996), 422.

4. This and all quotations from the Qur'an are according to M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

5. Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of Healing*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005).

6. From an authoritative hadith of Hussain ibn Ali ibn Abi-Talib, in *Tafsir Nur al-Thaqalayn*, vol. 5 (Tehran: Isma'iliyan, 1994), 132.

7. Mulla Sadra, *Risālatu Hudūth al-'Ālam* [Recital of the Creation of the world] (Tehran: Bunyad-e Islami-e Hikmat-e Sadra, 1999).

8. Refer to Al-Ghazālī, *Incoherence of Philosophers*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002); and Averroes, *Incoherence of Incoherence*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000).

9. Refer to Avicenna, *Remarks and Admonitions: Physics and Metaphysics*, trans. Shams C. Inati (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

10. The son-in-law of the Prophet, his cousin, the fourth Righteous Caliph and first Shi'ite Imam.

11. William C. Chittick, trans., *A Shi'ite Anthology*, selected by Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (London: Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1979).

12. *Māqām* means spiritual, mystical, or moral station, state, stage, abode, or position.

13. Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Risālat hal naḥnu mussayyarun am mukhayyarun?* [Are we determined or offered free choice?] 11, reported by Ja'far Sobhani, *al-Ilahiyyat 'ala Huda al-Kitāb wa as-Sunnat wa al-'Aql*, by Ḥassan Muḥammad Makki al-'Amili, vol. 2 (Qom: Mu'assasat ul-Imam as-Sadiq, 2009), 262.

14. Al-Jurjāni, *Sharḥul-Mawāqif*, vol. 8, 48.

15. Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Iqtisād fi al-I'tiqād* [Mediation in belief] (Cairo: al-Halabi, 1965), 47.

16. Al-Shahrestāni, *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, vol. 1 (Cairo: al-Halabi, 1967), 98–99; Al-Sha'rāni (Abdul-Wahhab ibn Ahmad), *Al-Yawāqit wa al-Jawahir fi Bayān 'Aqidat Akabir* (Cairo: al-Halabi, 1959), 139–41; and Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Risālat fi al-Tawhid* [A recital on unity of God] (Cairo: Dar ash-Shurouq, 1994), 62–63.

17. Ja'far Subhāni, *al-Ilahiyyat 'ala Huda al-Kitāb wa as-Sunnat wa al-'Aql*, by Ḥassan Muḥammad Makki al-'Amili, vol. 2 (Qom: Mu'assasat ul-Imam as-Sadiq, 2009), 283.

18. *Ibid.*, 283–86.

19. See also al-An'am (6):43, which is similar.

On the Possibility of Holy Living

A Christian Perspective

LUCY GARDNER

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:1–2)

Faced with a task that feels like trying to pack the world into a suitcase, I have deliberately decided not to attempt a hurried historical overview of Christian disagreements about the nature of our existence—and our freedom, in particular. Instead, I offer a brief personal theological guide to negotiating the thematic landscape from one particular Christian point of view. This touches upon Christian beliefs about the person of Christ (the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity; in particular), which cannot be fully explored here. It is, however, my hope that these reflections will demonstrate something of the ways in which these beliefs and doctrines work in relation to other themes.

Creation: Learning to See the World

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . . God said "Let there be . . ."; and there was. . . . And God saw that it was good. God said "Let . . ."; and it was so. . . . And God saw that it was good. (from Genesis 1:1–25¹)

The Christian doctrine of Creation is about learning to see and understand the world (that is, the whole universe and everything that is) in the light of its

3. Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi, *Tajridul I'tiqād*, with commentary of al-Hilli: *Kashul-Murād fi sharh Tajridul I'tiqād* (Qom: Mu'assasah al-Nashr al-Islami, 1996), 422.
4. This and all quotations from the Qur'an are according to M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
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6. From an authoritative hadith of Hussain ibn Ali ibn Abi-Talib, in *Tafsiṭh Nur al-Thaqalain*, vol. 5 (Tehran: Isma'iliyan, 1994), 132.
7. Mulla Sadra, *Risālatu Hudūth al-Ālam* [Recital of the Creation of the world] (Tehran: Bunyad-e Islami-e Hikmat-e Sadra, 1999).
8. Refer to Al-Ghazālī, *Incoherence of Philosophers*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002); and Averroes, *Incoherence of Incoherence*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000).
9. Refer to Avicenna, *Remarks and Admonitions: Physics and Metaphysics*, trans. Shams C. Inati (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
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14. Al-Jurjāni, *Sharhul-Mawāqif*, vol. 8, 48.
15. Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Iqtisād fi ul-I'tiqād* [Meditation in belief] (Cairo: al-Halabi, 1965), 47.
16. Al-Shahrestāni, *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, vol. 1 (Cairo: al-Halabi, 1967), 98–99; Al-Sharāni (Abdul-Wahhab ibn Ahmad), *Al-Yawāqit wa al-Jawahir fi Bayān 'Aqidat al-Akbar* (Cairo: al-Halabi, 1959), 139–41; and Muhammad 'Abduh, *Risālat fi al-Tawhid* [A recital on unity of God] (Cairo: Dar ash-Shurouq, 1994), 62–63.
17. Ja'far Subhāni, *al-Nahyyat 'ala Huda al-Kitab wa as-Sunnat wa al-'Aql*, by Hassan Muhammad Makki al-Amili, vol. 2 (Qom: Mu'assasat ul-Imam as-Sadiq, 2009), 283.
18. *Ibid.*, 283–86.
19. See also al-An'am (6):43, which is similar.

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Lucinda Mosher and David Marshall, editors (Washington, DC: Georgetown
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GOD’S CREATIVITY AND HUMAN ACTION

Christian and Muslim Perspectives

A Record of the Fourteenth Building Bridges Seminar

Hosted by Georgetown University
School of Foreign Service in Qatar
May 3–6, 2015

LUCINDA MOSHER and
DAVID MARSHALL, *Editors*

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK PRESENTS the proceedings of the fourteenth annual Building Bridges Seminar, convened at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Doha, Qatar, May 3–6, 2015, with university president John J. DeGioia present as host and participant. Launched in 2002 as an initiative of the Archbishop of Canterbury—and with the stewardship of Georgetown University since 2013, this gathering of scholar-practitioners of Islam and Christianity convenes annually, alternating between Muslim-majority and Christian-majority contexts, for deep study of selected texts pertaining to a carefully chosen theme. The circle of participants is always diverse ethnically and geographically, and balanced evenly in the number of Muslims and Christians—with a substantial number of women included in each group, and with a few emerging scholars joining the seasoned experts. Among the Christian scholars—who have always been for the most part Anglican or Roman Catholic—are usually included Orthodox and Protestant scholars as well, and this was the case in 2015. Similarly, while the Muslim participants are predominantly Sunni, Shi'ite scholars have always been included. Since 2013 Daniel Madigan SJ, Jeanette W. and Otto J. Ruesch Family Associate Professor in Georgetown's Department of Theology, has served as chair of the proceedings.

Qatar is a familiar venue for the seminar. We were hosted in Doha in 2003 by the emir of Qatar, and on the Georgetown campus in 2011 and again in 2013. As has often been the case, the seminar commenced with a pair of evening lectures at an event open to the public. The three workdays of the seminar—all in closed session—followed a fixed pattern: a morning lecture on the topic for the day, in preparation for two hour-long small-group text-study sessions; an after-lunch lecture, likewise followed by two hour-long small-group text-study sessions; and late-afternoon summary discussion in plenary. This volume provides the reader with edited versions of the eight lectures, arranged here in pairs.

In part I, readers will find the 2015 seminar's public lectures: "Human Action within Divine Creation: A Muslim Perspective" by Mohsen Kadivar (Duke University) and "On the Possibility of Holy Living: A Christian Perspective" by Lucy Gardner (University of Oxford). These are overviews, each laying out the complexity of the seminar's theme and some directions for deeper study. Kadivar concentrates on the exoteric approach to the matter, which itself ranges from ultraliteralist to maximal rationalist, as it plays out in Islamic theological and philosophical writings. He introduces such topics as God's unity, immanence,