

## THEOLOGY: FREEWILL AND PREDESTINATION



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The debate over freewill and predestination represents one of the earliest theological schisms in Islamic history. It began in the Umayyad period (661–750), though its roots actually go back to the troubled second half of the caliphate of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, whose assassination in 656 led to the first intra-Muslim civil war, which included the Battle of the Camel in 656 and the Battle of Ṣiffīn in 657. During his reign, ʿUthmān made a number of appointments of governors and officials that were seen by his opponents as favoring the members of his extended family – the Umayyad clan of Quraysh – and their supporters. ʿUthmān was thus accused of making wrong decisions, and dissatisfaction with his rule increased. The rebels besieged his house, and because he refused to honor their demands, they killed him. From that point onward, there was no caliph in Islam whose authority and legitimacy went unchallenged by some Muslim groups.

ʿUthmān’s successor, ʿAlī, could not establish his legitimacy either, and following the Battle of Ṣiffīn in 657, a group of his supporters, who came to be known as al-Khawārij (“the Dissenters”), denounced him because he agreed to make peace with his opponent Muʿāwiyā. In their view, ʿAlī had violated God’s commandments and committed a grave sin, and they assassinated him in 661.

How did the question of a caliph’s authority come to be associated with the predestination/freewill controversy? The answer is that Muslim scholars and politicians began to debate whether or not the caliph is to be held accountable for his decisions. Those who favored accountability were therefore legitimizing military opposition and assassination as a way to punish a caliph, whereas the other side would insist on unconditional acceptance or at most pacifism. But opposition leads to intra-Muslim civil war, which Muslims had just experienced. Therefore, the larger question was whether the bloodshed was something for which the Muslims were responsible or part of a divine plan, which led to the theological inquiry into human behavior, ability and responsibility.

The first group to articulate a position in this controversy were the Umayyads, the dynasty that ruled the Muslim world from the time of the assassination of ʿAlī until 750. The Umayyads, starting in 661 with caliph Muʿāwiyā, recognized the problems that would ensue if their authority was not accepted. Their solution was to redefine the concept of the caliph as not simply a successor of the Prophet Muḥammad, as the term was previously understood, but as God’s caliph, in the sense of God’s deputy.

The caliph is simply the agent who executes God's will; he does not determine it himself, and thus he cannot be held accountable.

The customary method of investigating questions of Islamic doctrine is to begin by examining pre-Islamic Arab society, Qur'ān, and *ḥadīth* for evidence about whether the Arabs in pre-Islamic times upheld a particular doctrine, and whether it was endorsed by the prophet Muḥammad and his new religion. In the case of the predestination/freewill controversy, however, this traditional exercise does not provide satisfactory answers as to why Muslims uphold one doctrine or the other, in part because the roots of the debate are primarily political, and it was shaped over a number of decades. Moreover, most of the theologians who elaborated the doctrines of predestination and freewill were not Arabs, nor did they live in Arabia. Thus the supporters of each position were not necessarily adhering to an already established doctrine, and they did not approach the religious sources with an open mind, in order to determine what they said and follow it. Rather, they went back to the religious sources (Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*) – and only after these were established as the most important religious sources for Islam – in order to find legitimization and support for their already formulated ideologies, and refutations of their opponents' views. Invariably, when they came across verses or *ḥadīths* that disagreed with their position, they either simply ignored them or reinterpreted them to mean something else. When we look at pre-Islamic customs, Qur'ān, and *ḥadīth*, we must keep in mind that they did not necessarily pre-determine the controversy, but rather they were sources for the ammunition that each camp used against the other.

### Pre-Islamic Arabs

Medieval Muslim sources tend to stress that pre-Islamic Arabs were predestinarians, though the evidence at hand is not conclusive. Our clearest window into the pre-Islamic Arab belief system is pre-Islamic poetry, which contains many references to time (*dahr*), death (*manāyā*), and other terms as agents that determine people's fate. But these references are often associated with one's life span (*ajal*). For example, the pre-Islamic poet Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā (d. before 625) included in his famous ode the line "Death, I believe, is like a sightless, aimless camel: whom it strikes it kills, and whom it misses lives and grows old." Another well-known pre-Islamic poet, ʿAṭfah ibn al-ʿAbd, chanted: "If you cannot stop death from reaching me, let me, at least, face it with what I have." The Qur'ān seems to confirm this pre-Islamic belief, as in verse 63.11: "God does not save a person's life when his/her *ajal* comes." Yet the issue of one's responsibility for his or her actions is rarely discussed in the poetry, and the historical record, as slim and unreliable as it is, tends to support an ideology of free-will mixed with a belief in fate. It is said that when the notable poet Imru' al-Qays (d. c. 550) received the news of the slaying of his father, he was feasting with a group of companions. He said to them: "Today we drink wine, and tomorrow we attend to this matter" (*al-yawm khamr wa-ghadan amr*), "this matter" being the seeking of revenge on those who killed his father. He did not say "This has been predestined and I have to accept it." It is also said that the grandfather of prophet Muḥammad made an oath to sacrifice his son ʿAbdallāh, the Prophet's father, for God, the Lord of the Ka'ba. But he had a change of heart and decided to cast lots before God to see if it would be acceptable to substitute a number of camels for his son. He received a

negative result, but did not give up and accept the decision as God's predestined plan. He kept repeating the casting of lots and raising the number of camels, until it came out to his liking, and his son was saved. What this tells us, if these stories are authentic, is that some pre-Islamic Arabs did not simply accept fate as an inevitable thing, but rather made every attempt to manipulate it.

### **Qur'ān**

In the Qur'ān we find a rather conflicting position on the doctrines of freewill and predestination. On the one hand, it contains verses like the two below that assert God's control of everything.

We have created for Hell many of the Jinns and humans. They have hearts but no awareness, have eyes but no vision, and have ears but no perception. They are like beasts of burden, even worse. They are the heedless ones.

(Qur'ān 7:179)

Every single thing we have created with divine portion.

(Qur'ān 54:49)

Qur'ān 7:179 declares that God has created a group of people whose end is known to be in Hell and who are incapable of avoiding that fate; it is inescapably ordained. Qur'ān 54:49 says that behind everything is a divine plan. Nothing escapes God.

On the other hand, there are Qur'anic verses that seem to say the exact opposite. For instance, in matters of belief, one verse in the Qur'ān instructs the prophet Muḥammad: "Say: Here is the truth from your Lord, it is to you to believe [it] or disbelieve [it]" (Qur'ān 18:29). The prophet is to offer the revelation to his audience, and it is up to them to accept or reject it; that is, their freewill determines their acceptance or rejection of God's message. Another verse suggests that God interferes only after the act has been committed: "He leads astray none but the wrongdoers" (Qur'ān 2:26). Here the Qur'ān speaks "wrongdoers," people who have already chosen to do wrong. God's leading them astray refers to the punishment they have earned by their choice of actions.

This inconsistency caused immense anxiety for later theologians who struggled with the verses of the Qur'ān in order to streamline them in support of their respective theologies. A predestinarian theologian would dismiss the verses that endorse freewill as requiring further inspection. Similarly, a freewill theologian would dismiss the predestination verses as requiring further scrutiny. This led to the development of a genre of Qur'anic exegesis called *Mutashābih al-Qur'ān* (the "ambiguous verses" of the Qur'ān), where the *ambiguous* verses, the verses that contradict one's beliefs, are listed and then are interpreted to mean the exact opposite of what they appear to say.

### **Ḥadīth**

The *ḥadīth*, which was collected long after Muḥammad's death, is not as confusing, although it has its own problems. The prophet Muḥammad is reported to have said, "He [i.e., any Muslim] who denies *qadar* has reneged his faith," and "Those who

believe in *qadar* are the heathens of my community.” The problem with these two *ḥadīths* lies in the term *qadar*, which means either freewill (humans’ power to determine their actions) or predestination (divine decree). Obviously, Muḥammad could not have uttered both *ḥadīths*, for in the first he makes the belief in *qadar* a basis of faith, whereas in the second, it becomes a basis of disbelief. Moreover, there is no way to determine in what sense the Prophet and his audience understood the term *qadar*. Later Muslim scholars from both the predestinarian and freewill camps quoted these *ḥadīths* to refer to the opponents of their camp. Hence, the believers in freewill, originally named Qadarites (*al-Qadariyya*), and their successors consistently used the two *ḥadīths* cited above to denounce the predestinarians, whom they also called Qadarites or Compulsionists (*al-mujbira*); the latter term reflects the belief that God compels the individual to a certain behavior and the individual has no power to change it. Similarly, the predestinarians would cite the same *ḥadīths* as denouncing the believers in freewill.

The majority of *ḥadīth* material tends to endorse predestination, but that does not necessarily mean that the prophet Muḥammad promoted this doctrine. Rather, it is a reflection of the fact that most *ḥadīth* scholars, especially those who collected the authoritative books of *ḥadīth*, were predestinarians, and thus often fabricated sayings that endorse their beliefs and attributed them to the prophet of Islam and his companions. The few traditions that uphold freewill they intentionally ignored, and did not include them in their *ḥadīth* collections. But at the same time, those *ḥadīths* that endorse freewill are not necessarily authentic either. They might equally well have been fabricated by the proponents of the freewill doctrine in order to legitimize their belief and at the same time answer the predestinarian *ḥadīths*.

Two of the *ḥadīths* that endorse predestination read:

The Prophet said: “God, almighty, took a handful of mud and said: ‘These are in Paradise and I do not care.’ He took another handful and said: ‘These are in Hell and I do not care’.”

(Ibn Ḥanbal 1954–8: V, 68)

The Messenger of God said: “A human is conceived in his mother’s womb for forty days, for another forty days he becomes a clot, and for another forty days he becomes an embryo. Then God sends an angel to establish four things: its allotment, its life-span, and whether damned or blessed. Then he blows into it the soul. By God, a person would do the work that leads to Hell until he is an arm away from it, but what has been predestined [for him] gears him to do the work that leads to Paradise, and so he enters it. Similarly, a person would do the work that leads to Paradise until he is an arm away from it, but what has been predestined [for him] gears him to do the work that leads to Hell, and so he enters it.”

(al-Bukhārī 1984: *Kitāb al-Qadar*, 1)

*Ḥadīths* like these clearly state that God predestined everything at the time of creation: the people of hell as well as the people of heaven. Each human receives his lot while in the womb. He will do exactly what had been predestined for him – no more, no less.

An example of a *ḥadīth* that endorses freewill reads:

The Messenger of God said: “At the end of time, there emerges in this [Muslim] community a group who commit sins and blame them on God’s decree. He who refutes them is like one who unsheathes his sword (to fight) in the path of God.”

(Mu’ayyadī 1993: I, 250)

This particular *ḥadīth* is quoted in a Zaydī text, which considers fighting in the path of God (*jihād*) a binding duty on Muslims. Thus equating the act of standing up to refute the claims of the predestinarians is as noble as fighting *jihād* in the path of God.

### The Umayyads

Now, to return to the Umayyads, they championed and promoted an ideology that rested primarily on predestination. Concerned with the challenges to their legitimacy as a ruling dynasty, they and their supporters maintained that the caliphs were God’s deputies, who simply execute God’s will. Thus any criticism of them is a criticism of God, and any revolt against them is a revolt against God. In order to disseminate this ideology, the Umayyads enlisted in their service a number of religious scholars and poets whose task was to provide a religious defense of the predestination doctrine. It was these religious scholars who furnished a number of *ḥadīths* that depict the prophet Muḥammad and his companions defending predestination and condemning freewill.

Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 685–705) is probably the most important political figure in early Islam who sponsored the dissemination of Umayyad predestination theology. When he was named caliph, there were several contenders who challenged him, most notably Ibn al-Zubayr in Mecca. Even after Ibn al-Zubayr was killed in 692, it took ‘Abd al-Malik seven more years to subdue other contenders, especially in Iraq. ‘Abd al-Malik emerged from these encounters victorious, and that success helped cement the ideology that he promoted among the large majority of Muslims. Indeed, according to the Umayyad propagandists, if he had not had God’s backing, he would not have been able, against all odds, to defeat his many enemies. The poets of his court composed verses that praised ‘Abd al-Malik as “the Caliph of God.” For example, the renowned Christian poet al-Akḥṭal (d. before 710), wrote in an 84-line ode: “To a man whose gifts do not elude us, whom God has made victorious. . . . The Caliph of God, through whom men pray for rain.” It is God who made ‘Abd al-Malik victorious, and as God’s deputy, people should seek his intercession with God for such divine favors as rain. Another renowned poet, al-Farazdaq (d. 728), wrote: “You are to this religion like the direction of prayer, by which people are guided from going astray.” Again, ‘Abd al-Malik is the compass that keeps Muslims on the right path to God, and prevents their going astray. Such poetry was not simply meant to praise and please ‘Abd al-Malik. It was intended to rally the general Muslim public around the doctrine of predestination, and in doing so the court poets were primarily promoting the official Umayyad ideology.

Besides poetry and *ḥadīths*, ‘Abd al-Malik took other measures that help us understand how he wanted his subjects to perceive him and his rule. The construction of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the widespread Islamicization process were also

indicative of an Umayyad predestinarian ideology. One of ‘Abd al-Malik’s objectives in ordering the construction of the Dome of the Rock was to provide the Muslims under his rule, those in Syria and Egypt, with a holy place to which they could go on pilgrimage, especially since Mecca was then under the control of his rival Ibn al-Zubayr. Obviously the Dome of the Rock was not meant to replace Mecca, but rather to provide a temporary alternative. Moreover, ‘Abd al-Malik also intended to send a message to the other two monotheistic religions – Judaism and Christianity – that Islam had triumphed by God’s decree. Other aspects of the Islamicization process include the move to a new system of coinage that did not have images of rulers on either side. That ‘Abd al-Malik was able to enact and enforce these changes tells us a great deal about the fact that he believed, or at least wanted his subjects to believe, that God was guiding his way.

### The Qadarites

That the Umayyads and their supporters rallied around the ideology of predestination meant that some, but not all, of their rivals chose the freewill doctrine. They came to be known as Qadarites, because they believed in humans’ ability (*qudra*) to determine their own actions. The extremists among the Qadarites promoted a complete freewill theology: everything that happens in this world is the result of human behavior, and God has no power to change it. Among the early theologians of freewill were Maʿbad al-Juhanī (d. c. 700) of Baṣra and Ghaylān (d. c. 743) of Damascus, both of whom were executed by Umayyad rulers because of their religious opposition, but more importantly their involvement in anti-Umayyad political factions.

The moderate Qadarites, who represented the majority of the movement, upheld a more balanced theology: good deeds result from God’s guidance, but sins are the sole responsibility of those who act them out. It is important to note here that the only thing that united these Qadarites was the belief in freewill. They did not share political goals, nor were they united on other religious views. Their only political success occurred in 744, when a group of Qadarites in Syria staged a revolt and declared as caliph a member of their movement named Yazīd ibn al-Walīd, who was the son of an Umayyad caliph. Yazīd died six months into his term in office, and the Qadarites again were subjected to Umayyad persecution. When the Umayyads were ousted from power by the Abbasids in 750, the views of the Qadarites became less popular, since their main appeal had been that they challenged the Umayyads.

One major figure to promote the moderate Qadarite view in the Umayyad period was al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728). He was from the town of Baṣra in southern Iraq; Baṣra at that time was an anti-Umayyad stronghold, and in a span of 40 years, several major rebellions against Umayyad rule took place there. Al-Ḥasan seems to have been involved in anti-Umayyad activities, and had to hide from the ruthless Umayyad ruler of Iraq al-Ḥajjāj (d. 714). His main specialty as a scholar was in Qurʾānic studies, as both a reciter and an interpreter of Islam’s holy book. He also made a living by preaching, especially on moral issues. Al-Ḥasan gathered around him a large group of disciples, most of whom were Qadarites, who passed down some of his teachings. But some of his students became predestinarians, and they claimed that he was never a believer in freewill, or that he had been at one time but changed his mind toward the end of his life and became a predestinarian. Both groups generated sayings and short

letters that they attributed to him in order to back their claims. One such text is an epistle, allegedly written by al-Ḥasan to ʿAbd al-Malik, which contains a sophisticated, highly developed, and comprehensive refutation of predestination theology that accepts only the authority of the Qurʾān and ignores entirely *ḥadīth*.

### The Muʿtazilites

*The Epistle to Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik*, which could not have been written by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, provides the general theology of freewill that was upheld and defended by the groups that elaborated the freewill doctrine and made it a sound theological system in the eighth and ninth centuries: the Muʿtazilites. An excerpt from the *Epistle* shows how the Muʿtazilites refuted their opponents and argued the case in support of freewill:

Among the issues they also contest is [God]’s, almighty, saying: *We have created for Hell many of the Jinns and humans. They have hearts but no awareness, have eyes but no vision, and have ears but no perception. They are like beasts of burden, even worse. They are the heedless ones* (Qurʾān 7:179). They have interpreted this to mean that God has predisposed his creation. He made one group for Hell; they are unable to [show] the obedience he demanded from them. He made another group for Heaven; they are unable to [show] the disobedience he forbade them from. This is similar to creating the short unable to become tall, and the black unable to become white, and then torturing them for not obeying Him. They have indeed described God with the most repulsive descriptions. But God [in Qurʾān 7:179] has foretold that they shall end in Hell because of their malicious acts. He described them when He said: *They have hearts but no awareness, have eyes but no vision*, [till the end of] the verse. He, almighty, similarly said: *Then he was picked up by the family of Pharaoh to be their enemy and a cause for regret* (Qurʾān 28:8). But they picked him (Moses) up to be a comfort for them, similar to His, almighty, saying: *We give them respite that they sink deeper into sin* (Qurʾān 3:178). He foretold that they increase in sins by His decree because they abandon obedience. For God has spoken to the Arabs in the way they know their language. One of the sages of the Arabs said in poetry:

For death mothers feed their babies,  
just as for the destruction of time houses are built.

[God] has informed that children will ultimately die and houses will ultimately become ruins. But the young are fed to grow and live, not to die, and houses are constructed to provide a shelter, not to be destroyed. After all, the Qurʾān, O Commander of the Faithful, is in Arabic. God has revealed it to an Arab people. He spoke to them in their own language, which they mastered very well.

(Mourad 2006: 221–2)

The quote starts by stating the predestinarians’ belief that God creates a group of people predisposed to a particular type of behavior and then tortures them for

engaging in that behavior. This claim is then refuted, the main argument being that in Qur'ān 7:179, God is actually foretelling that the end of those people will be in Hell because of their disbelief and malicious acts. God did not create those people to be destined for Hell. What shows the veracity of the argument is that in another verse (Qur'ān 28:8), God says that the Pharaoh and his wife picked up Moses to be their enemy, and clearly what is meant is that they picked him up from the Nile river to be comfort and joy to them, as an adopted son, but that he ended up being their enemy.

This style of dialectical diatribe was originally championed by the Mu'tazilites, and because of its effectiveness was later adopted by most Muslim theologians. It was originally borrowed from Hellenistic philosophical and Christian theological disputations. Moreover, as we can see in the quote above, the proponents of freewill argued that an excellent command of Arabic semantics and poetry were required for the proper interpretation of the verses of the Qur'ān. In other words, when one goes to the Qur'ān to determine its position on a particular issue, one must be well equipped with the necessary tools to decipher its true meanings. Otherwise, one risks being misguided by the apparent, but incorrect, meanings.

This theology was first introduced by Abū 'l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf (d. c. 842), and was further developed by later Mu'tazilites, including Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 915) and his students. Abū 'l-Hudhayl was born in Baṣra to Persian parents. At that time, Baṣra was the most powerful base for the Mu'tazilites; the movement had started there in the early eighth century. Abū 'l-Hudhayl was the first Mu'tazilite theologian to conceptualize some of what later became known as the five principles (*al-uṣūl al-khamṣa*) of the Mu'tazilites; the belief in these five principles became the defining factor that determined who is/was and who is/was not a Mu'tazilite. One of these principles is the belief in God's justice. According to Abū 'l-Hudhayl, God does not do wrong. When he punishes and rewards a person, he does so because of the obligation (*taklīf*) under which he placed that individual. *Taklīf* means that God established the laws and gave humanity the choice of abiding by them or violating them. He warned humanity that those who violate the laws will be punished and those who abide by them will be rewarded. (The belief in punishment and reward is another of the Mu'tazilite five principles.) Hence, for God to impose a punishment or grant a reward and at the same time be just, people have to have the choice to obey or disobey, which means that they have to have the freedom as well as the capability to choose.

The Mu'tazilite movement, which comprised scholars who championed the use of dialectical disputations to argue theological questions, was initially divided over the question of freewill. The point that had to be settled was not only whether or not God predetermines everything, for there are other theological convictions that could be compromised by accepting one position or the other. For instance, if one accepts predestination, then humans have no power over their actions, and subsequently an individual cannot be held accountable for his or her sins. But since these sins lead to Hell, that would mean that God destines a person for a particular sinful behavior and then punishes him or her for acting those sins out. This makes God unjust. But God is just (*'ādil*). Therefore, the belief in the justness of God requires the rejection of predestination.

The belief in freewill, however, has its own theological challenges. If humans are responsible for their actions, then the question that poses itself is whether or not God knows of human action prior, during, or after the act. If God does not know of the

action until it is happening or just happened, then he is not all-knowing (*ʿalīm*), for the latter requires that he knows everything before it occurs. And because some theologians would not accept a compromise in the belief that God is all-knowing, they would reject freewill as a plausible doctrine. These challenges to both sides of the freewill question were no secret to the theologians of medieval Islam.

One theologian who did not accept either position was Ḍirār ibn ʿAmr (d. c. 815). He asserted on equal par the justness and all-knowing-ness of God, and therefore, to settle the problems in each doctrine, he proposed the notion of *kasb* (acquisition), which was later elaborated by other theologians, such as al-Ashʿarī (d. 935) and his school. What this notion of *kasb* means is that at the time of action, God creates in the individual the ability to act independently of His knowledge. Thus the individual acquires this power and acts, and God judges him or her on the basis of the choices the individual makes and the result of his or her action. Ḍirār was a member of the Muʿtazilites, but because his views were rejected by all subsequent Muʿtazilite theologians, he was posthumously ostracized from the movement.

Another example that demonstrates the interdependence of theological doctrines relates to the doctrines of God’s justness, freewill, and the createdness of the Qurʾān. Again, if one were to start from the assertion that God is just, then God could not condemn an individual to Hell without giving that individual the chance to save himself or herself. For example, Qurʾān 111:1–5 reads:

May the hands of Abū Lahab perish, and may he himself perish. Neither his wealth nor gains will avail him. He will burn in a flaming fire. His wife will carry the firewood that will burn her, with a rope of fiber round her neck.

Here, if the Qurʾān is not created, that is, if it is co-eternal with God, then God condemned Abū Lahab and his wife to Hell before they were even born and therefore they had no chance whatsoever to save themselves from that fate. This makes God unjust. But, again, God is just. Therefore, these verses must have been created by God after Abū Lahab, who was Muḥammad’s uncle, and his wife persisted in their rejection of God’s message and their persecution of Muḥammad’s followers. Therefore, the Qurʾān is created (the belief in the createdness of the Qurʾān is one of the five principles of Muʿtazilite theology).

### Sunnīs

When Sunnī Islam started to form itself into an independent sect in the ninth century, Sunnī theologians were initially divided over the issue of freewill and predestination. Some adopted the Muʿtazilite position, but most Sunnī scholars favored predestination. Gradually, the Muʿtazilite movement fell from favor with Sunnī political rulers, and by the thirteenth century it had lost its appeal and it became nonexistent.

The downfall of the Muʿtazilites meant the success of the dominant theological school in Sunnī Islam: the Ashʿarite school. Al-Ashʿarī, whose name was given to this school by later followers, borrowed Ḍirār ibn ʿAmr’s concept of acquisition (*kasb*) and made it the central point of his predestination theology. Al-Ashʿarī began his career as a Muʿtazilite theologian, one of the students of the notable Muʿtazilite scholar Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī. Following the death of his mentor, al-Ashʿarī established his own teaching

circle and gradually distanced himself from some of al-Jubbā'ī's views. The concept of *kasb* was meant to introduce a compromise that both predestinarians and believers in freewill would accept.

The Ash'arites' articulation of their position is that at the time of action, God creates in the individual the ability to do the act on his or her own, but that ability cannot overpower God's predestination. In other words, even though God has already determined what the individual will or will not do, the actions will be acted out on the basis of the individual's decision. But this decision is not an open choice. The Ash'arite school maintained that the ability created in the individual only allows him or her to perform the act; it does not allow him or her to do its opposite. This view challenges the Mu'tazilite position, which asserted that this ability is created long before the act is about to be committed, and the individual has a free choice to perform either the act or its opposite.

The Ash'arite position in support of predestination was primarily promoted on the basis of an "accept it as is" approach. It was not, therefore, a satisfactory option for theologians, who would naturally want to pursue the issue and revisit it in light of the religious and socio-political developments in the Muslim world. For example, another popular theological movement among Sunnīs, the Maturidite school, named after the theologian al-Māturīdī (d. 944), who came from Samarqand in Central Asia, was not satisfied with the rather unconvincing assertions of the Ash'arites, especially the question of when people receive the power to commit the act. The Maturidites maintained that humans possess the ability to act long before the acts are committed. Another Sunnī position is represented by the Ḥanbalites, one of the four schools of Sunnī law and the only one that developed its own theology. They asserted that God is the creator of everything and His sovereign will governs human acts, yet humans have the capability to choose between good and evil. However, it was precisely out of fear that the fierce theological debate within Islam might be ignited again that later Sunnī scholars became more and more alienated from the field of theology and did not encourage specializing in it. The most prolific scholar of medieval Islam, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), wrote that the study and teaching of theology leads to losing one's coherence, common-sense, and above all faith. This position contributed to the transformation of Sunnī Islam into primarily an orthopraxy rather than an orthodoxy; in other words, the religion's main emphasis became proper behavior rather than proper belief. It also enhanced the popularity of mysticism as an alternate theology among Sunnī scholars.

### The Shi'ites

The success of the Mu'tazilites can only be measured in Shi'ite Islam, for it made a lasting impact on Zaydite and Twelver theologies; the other major Shi'ite sect, the Ismā'īlites, adopted a neoplatonic system of theology. The Shi'ites, who call their leaders *Imāms*, believe that the leadership of the Muslims belongs to the descendants of Muḥammad through his daughter Fāṭima and her husband 'Alī. Like the Umayyads, the Shi'ites initially adopted a predestination theology: their right as leaders of the Muslims is a divine ordinance, and it is not for the Muslims to decide or debate the matter. One early Shi'ite theologian who endorsed predestination was Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 795), who lived in Kūfa, Iraq, and was a close disciple of the fifth Shi'ite

Imām Jāfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 765) and his son Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d. 799). Hishām believed that the acts of humans were created by God, and that there is an element of compulsion that determines the outcome of human behavior. But God does not know of or determine the acts of a given human being until he or she is born.

In time, predestination became unpopular among Shi'ite theologians. The Zaydites elaborated a leadership system emphasizing that an Imām's legitimacy has to be demonstrated on the battlefield, by standing up to challenge injustice. Thus their theologians realized that predestination would not work for them, because it requires accepting things as they are. By the end of the ninth century, the Zaydites had adopted Mu'tazilite theology, including the freewill doctrine.

Similarly, the Twelver theologians, especially after the occultation (*ghayba*) of the twelfth Imām in 874, started too to realize that predestination was becoming a disuasive rather than persuasive theology. In other words, if God preordained that leadership belongs to the direct family of the prophet Muḥammad, then the Imāms should be in power; but many of the Imāms died in prison or as a result of poisoning. The fact that they were not in power means that there is no such thing as complete predestination.

The Twelver theologian who made the most compelling case for the freewill creed was al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 1044). He was heavily influenced by the teachings of the Mu'tazilites, and borrowed some of his views from them. Al-Murtaḍā asserted that good behavior is by God's decree, but evil behavior is the result of the choices humans make. He refused to accept that calamities (natural disasters, sickness, etc.) are included in the category of evil, for there is a divine wisdom for them to occur. Only the acts of humans fall under evil or good, and they are produced on the basis of freewill.

Once the freewill doctrine became popular among Shi'ite theologians and scholars, they began to invent sayings and anecdotes that endorse it and back-projected them to their Imāms in order to demonstrate that the freewill belief had always been the hallmark of Shi'ism.

### Modernity

In modern times, the two dominant sects in Islam, Sunnīs and Shi'ites, maintain their respective positions. The Sunnī theologians for the most part adhere to Ash'arite theology that endorses predestination along with the notion of acquisition; the Maturidites still have a following in Turkey and Central Asia, and the Ḥanbalites in Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the Shi'ite theologians (Twelvers in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and some other Muslim countries, and Zaydites in Yemen) assert the moderate freewill belief. Yet, within Sunnī Islam there can be detected a growing trend, though it remains a minority movement, that pushes for the re-adoption of the Mu'tazilite position concerning freewill. This has been especially the case given the socio-political conditions of the modern Muslim world.

At the popular level, however, the situation is much more complex. One often hears the words "what is written cannot be avoided" (*al-maktūb mā minhu mahrūb*). What this means is that what God has predestined for a person or a community cannot be changed. Thus people must accept what comes to them of good or bad fortune. This rather passive approach is reminiscent of those medieval groups labeled as Compulsionists. Yet, again, the situation is much more complicated than that. Many of the

same people who repeat “what is written cannot be avoided” would also say “the individual should seek in order for God to help him or her” (*iṣā yāʿabdī la-iṣā māʾak*), which asserts a moderate freewill belief: the individual has to take the initiative, and God’s blessing follows. Thus, after some 13 centuries of debate, the difficult issues of freewill and predestination remain essentially unresolved in the minds of many Muslim believers.

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