

# The freedom of will and the doctrine of the divine institution in Muslim thought

Dimitrios Athanasiou\*

The main questions regarding the relationship between God and the human being in Islam focus on the issue of divine decision, which constitutes the predestination by God for good or evil, as well as the issue of the freedom or otherwise of man's will. It is about *qadar*, which means the divine decree/institution or the eternal decision of God, who determines everything. This issue has been a major concern in Islamic thought since the early years of Islam. It can easily be argued that the Qur'an has enough foundations for the doctrine of divine predestination. For example, we read: "God has made you and the works of your hands"<sup>1</sup>. Elsewhere it is pointed out: "Since the judgment is predestined by Allāh, you have not the slightest help for him against God"<sup>2</sup>. "Allāh elects for His mercy whom He wills"<sup>3</sup>.

The prophetic tradition, which preserves the sayings of Muhammad, is also on the same wavelength. According to this tradition, the prophet

---

\* Dimitrios Athanasiou holds a PhD in Theology and currently is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Social Theology and Religious Studies of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

1. *The Qur'an* 37:96.

2. *The Qur'an* 5:41.

3. *The Qur'an* 2:105.

of Islam includes the divine decree in the articles of faith (*arkān al-imān*)<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, there are passages presenting a different point of view to the issue, although fewer and subject to many interpretative approaches. We read for example: "Those who submit to God and do good will be rewarded by their Lord, they will not be afraid and will not be sad (on the Day of Judgment)"<sup>5</sup>.

On the basis of the relevant Qur'anic passages and the whole discussion, the issue of theodicy and the extent to which the freedom of man is guaranteed has arisen in Islam. From very early on, reasonable questions arose, such as: since God predestines men's deeds, what is the men's responsibility for their deeds? How is it compatible with God's justice for some to be rewarded and others to be punished? These and other similar questions led to theological disputes among the emerging theological groups of early Islam. In the present article we will attempt to outline the initial theological controversies and debates on the issue of human freedom and establish the Islamic view on this issue today.

### The first attempts to understand the issue

One of the first groups to attempt to understand the problem of theodicy and human freedom was the Qadariyyah, who first appeared during the time of Muhammad's conquests (mid-7th century)<sup>6</sup>. They were not an organised theological faction but a stream of free thinkers. This group denied the doctrine of a divine institution (*qadar*), claiming that it is the man who determines his future and the course of his life and not God<sup>7</sup>. The Qadariyyah are among those who tried to explain the doctrine of the divine constitution logically, emphasizing that man is absolutely

---

4. Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Tahqiq Abū Qātiba al-Fariaby, Dār Tayibatān, Riyād 2006, p. 23.

5. *The Qur'an* 2:112.

6. M. Al-Jamih, *Al-'Aqīda al-islāmiyyah wa-tarikhūha*, Dār al-Minhāj, al-Qāhirah 2004, p. 65.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

free<sup>8</sup>. This group actually came into conflict and ruptured with the group on the other side of the river, which argued the exact opposite thesis regarding the doctrine of the divine constitution. Specifically, this group was the Jabriyyah, who maintained that man is “forced” and condemned to follow the course of his life as God has ordained for him<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the former, the followers of Qadariyyah, called the latter Jabriyyah, i.e. “followers of compulsion”; this is because the latter insisted that man is forced to live according to God’s plan<sup>10</sup>. In contrast, the Qadariyyah were called so pejoratively, because they adhered to the doctrine of divine decree (*qadar*), while at the same time emphasizing man’s free will<sup>11</sup>.

Another group of early Islam that attempted to understand and articulate a discourse on human freedom was the Mu’tazilah. This group accepted five fundamental principles, one of which concerned the issue of human freedom and divine justice. This was the second fundamental principle, called “the justice of God” (al-‘Adl)<sup>12</sup>. For the Mu’tazilah, the concept of justice is absolute and is directly linked to the acts of God<sup>13</sup>. This connection concerns two relative points: the acts of God and the acts of man. The Mu’tazilah made a distinction between the acts of God on the one hand and those of man on the other<sup>14</sup>. For them, the acts of God do not contain evil<sup>15</sup> and therefore are not related to those of man<sup>16</sup>. This is because it would be impossible for evil acts to come from God. For the Mu’tazilah, it is impossible for God to have created evil

---

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-67.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

12. F. ‘Awan, *‘Ilm al-Kalām w-madrāsuh*, Dār al-Thaqāfa lil-Nāshr wal-tawzī , al-Qāhirah p. 206.

13. A. Ibn ‘Abdullah, *Al-Mu’tazila wa-uşūllhūm al-khāmsa wa-mawqif ahl al-sunnah minha*, Maktabit al-Rūshd, Riyād 1995, p. 151.

14. F. ‘Awan, *op.cit.*, pp. 210-212.

15. A. Şobhy, *Fī ‘Ilm al-Kalām*, (1), Dār al-Nahḍah al-‘Arabiyyah, Bayrūt 1985, p. 142

16. F. ‘Awan, *op.cit.*, p. 206.

and failure<sup>17</sup>, since these elements are not consistent with the nature of the Creator.

On the contrary, according to them, man's actions are absolutely free and thus man can choose between good and evil<sup>18</sup>. The Mu'tazilah therefore maintained the absolute freedom of man, in which God does not interfere<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, the distinction between the two kinds of actions, those of God and those of man, preserves the goodness of God, since God cannot do evil and err, and furthermore underlines the freedom of man.

At the same time, the fact that God does not interfere with man's choices and actions and that man is absolutely free in them implies that God is just<sup>20</sup>. Thus, for the Mu'tazilah, God's justice must be understood in this sense, inextricably linked to man's absolute freedom. For, according to them, it would be unjust for God to predestine and predetermine the course of man's life, because it would be unjust for God to judge men on the Day of Judgement for their actions, that is, for something that he himself would have predetermined for them from the beginning<sup>21</sup>.

Thus, the Mu'tazilah took over and systematized in a way the ideas of the Qadariyyah. They were proponents of divine justice, emphasizing that it is unjust and individual for God to punish people for actions they are not responsible for. If God commands people to believe and to do good works, that means that people are free and able to act and believe. In this sense, both the Qadariyyah and the Mu'tazilah were the first Islamic theological groups to support the autonomy and freedom

---

17. A. Şobhy, *op.cit.*, (1), pp. 142-145.

18. M. Al-'Abduh, T. 'Abd l-Halim, *Al-Mu'tazila bin al-qadīm wal-ḥadīth*, Dār al-Azqamah, 1987, pp. 57-59.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 57. At this point it is worth noting that the denial of the divine decree by the Mu'tazila was mainly of political significance, since they wanted to declare with this doctrine that God is not responsible for the injustice committed by the rulers of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750), as reported by the Iraqi-born Rashid al-Khayoun, an expert in Arabic literature and Islamic philosophy. Cf. R. R. Al-Khayoun, *Mādhhab al-Mu'tazila min al-Kalām ilah l-Falsafah*, Dār lil-Nubūgh, Bayrūt 1994, p. 66

20. F. 'Awan, *op.cit.*, p. 214.

21. F. 'Awan, *op.cit.*, p. 214.

of man's will, while at the same time refuting any question of divine decree or predestination.

### The Sunnis' viewpoint and the acceptance of the divine enactment (al-qaḍā' wa l-qadar)

In distinction to early Islamic groups of the *Kalām*<sup>22</sup>, such as the Qadariyyah<sup>23</sup> and the Mu'tazilah<sup>24</sup> who rejected the doctrine of the divine decree by advocating the absolute freedom of man, the followers of Sunni Islam were advocates of qadar. As believers and followers of the tradition, many times interpreting the various Qur'anic issues literally, they attempted to establish their positions on Qur'anic foundations by formulating the relevant arguments.

Sunni Muslims embrace the divine decree (*qadar*) of good and evil, as they believe in the wisdom and the will of God. Everything takes place with the permission and will of the Creator and always with absolute justice. Whatever God Almighty desires will come to pass and whatever

---

22. The Arabic word "kalām" means "speech", "discourse". In the religion of Islam it acquires the meaning of the word or saying of God, and in this sense the Qur'an is called "Kalām Allāh" ("word of God"; *Qur'an* 9, 40, 31, 27, 6, 34). On the basis of this meaning, an Islamic theology called "Ilm al-Kalām", i.e. "science of the word of God" or "Islamic dialectical theology" was developed. These were the first Islamic groups to attempt to articulate theological discourse using ancient Greek philosophy and Christian theology. For related studies on Islamic dialectical theology (*Kalām*), see A. Tritton, *Muslim Theology*, London 1947; H. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1976; J. van Ess, "The Beginnings of Islamic Theology", in J. E. Murdoch - E. D. Sylla (eds), *The Cultural Context of Medieval Learning*, Dordrechtand/ Boston: Reidel 1987, pp. 87-111; Idem, "The Early Development of Kalām", in G. H. A. Joynboll (ed.), *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1982, pp. 109-123; A. Treiger, "Origins of Kalām", in Sabine Schmidtke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbooks: Handbook of Islamic Theology Online*, Oxford 2014, pp. 27-43. In the Greek literature an important study has been carried out by Angeliki Ziaka, *Tò Kalam kai tà islāmiká reύματα skéψης*, Thessaloniki: University of Macedonia, 2016.

23. M. Al-Jamih, *op.cit.*, p. 65.

24. M. Al-'Abduh, T. 'Abd l-Halim, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

He does not desire will not take place. There is no power and authority apart from the Creator. Thus, Sunni Islam is dominated by the idea of the omnipotence of God, who is unlimited, sovereign and free to act as He wills. Consequently, Sunnis accept that God creates human actions and predestines the human path.

In specific, according to the Sunni understanding, the doctrine of the divine decree has the following four main points:

(a) The belief that God knows everything, all that is done and all that is about to happen<sup>25</sup>. There is nothing in heaven and earth that the Creator does not know<sup>26</sup>. Past, present and future are known to the Creator<sup>27</sup>.

b) All the above is written by God in the guarded eternal table (*al-lauh al-mahfūz*) before the creation of the universe<sup>28</sup>. This is recorded with clarity in the Qur'an: "Do you not know that Allāh encloses in His omniscience all that is in the heavens and the earth? All this is (written) in a book and all this is easy for Allāh"<sup>29</sup>. Moreover, the prophetic tradition testifies that the first thing that God created was the pen, with which He gave the order to write down all the things that would be created in the future by the beings that were to be created until the Day of Judgement<sup>30</sup>. With this scroll/pen was written the destination of the creatures on the guarded heavenly table five thousand years before the creation of the world<sup>31</sup>. The predestined are neither replaceable nor changeable<sup>32</sup>.

---

25. S. Al-Fawzan, *Mujamlu 'Aqīdat al-Salaf al-Salih*, Dār al-Baidāh, 2012, p. 29.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

29. *The Qur'an* 22, 70.

30. Al-Tirmidhī, *Jamī'at al-Tirmidhī*, (2), Tahqiq Bashār 'Awad, Dār al-Ghārb al-Islāmī, Bayrūt 1996, p. 29.

31. 'A. Al-'Abbād, *Sharḥ ḥadīth Jibrīl fī 'ālīm al-Dīn*, Maktabat al-Mālik Faḥm, Madīna al-Munawwara 2003, p. 61.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

c) Everything that unfolds in the world is divine will<sup>33</sup>. The Qur'an states: "But you cannot do anything except as it is the will of Allāh, who is the Lord of the universal world"<sup>34</sup>.

d) Everything in the world is a creation of God<sup>35</sup>; consequently, no one can create anything in the universe, including man's own actions, except God Himself<sup>36</sup>. This does not mean for the Sunnis that man is not free to choose good or evil<sup>37</sup>. However, this choice is made by the will of God, as is typically mentioned in the Qur'an: "...you can do nothing except as it is the will of God"<sup>38</sup>.

The divine decree determines the age of every human being from the time he is in his mother's womb; therein is recorded his future and his actions<sup>39</sup>. The yearly appointment is set for him, as is done on the night of the divine decree, as well as the daily appointment, which concerns life and death daily<sup>40</sup>.

For the Sunnis, those who deny the doctrine of the divine decree, depart from the foundations of the faith and act like the Qadariyyah and the Mu'tazilah, since they do not attribute creation to God<sup>41</sup>. For Sunni thought, God is the one who does both the good and evil works of man, which man is not predestined to do, but has the free choice<sup>42</sup>. God creates the possibility and the will of man and the man carries it out<sup>43</sup>.

---

33. S. Al-Fawzan, *op.cit.*, pp. 30-31.

34. *The Qur'an*, 81:29.

35. *The Qur'an*, 39:62.

36. S. Al-Fawzan, *op.cit.*, p. 31.

37. S. Al-Fawzan, *op.cit.*, p. 32.

38. *The Qur'an* 81:29. S. Al-Fawzan, *op.cit.*, pp. 32-33.

39. S. Al-Fawzan, *Al-Irshād ilāh ṣaḥīḥ al-'Itiqād*, (2), al-Mamlāqa al-Arabiyyah, Riyāḍ 1994, p. 272.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

## Epilogue

Based on the above, the idea that all deeds are destined by God and that they are written on the heavenly table in every detail, as well as the duration of the life of every human being is written on it, has spread in Sunni Islam. The basis of Sunni thought is the belief that God is the ruler of all beings and aspects of life and the one who determines everything. Whatever he determines, no one can ignore or overrule it. God not only predicts the future, but also predetermines it. In this perspective, the divine decree is the last pillar of Sunni doctrine. On the contrary, the ideas of the Mu'tazilah and the Qadariyyah did not finally take hold and essentially disappeared from the forefront of Islamic history.

The prevalence of the doctrine of the divine decree has an impact on the societies of the East, as it is very distinct in the way of life and functioning of most Muslim societies. The organizational and caring nature observed in Western societies is not found in their traditional Islamic counterparts. On the contrary, even in the era of post-modernity, Muslim societies remain entrenched in their own rigidity. There is an indifference to systematic organization, as it is assumed that everything is guided by the will of God. It is no coincidence that the phrase used by Muslims for every issue that concerns them is "by the will of God" or "God first, if it be done" (*'inšā'ā-llāh*).