

Part I. Divine Predestination: How Far Real?

Geschrieben von: Abdur Rab

Dienstag, den 16. Februar 2010 um 22:50 Uhr - Aktualisiert Donnerstag, den 01. April 2010 um 21:23 Uhr

by Abdur Rab[*]

Abstract. The kind of approach to the subject of divine will and human freedom that dominates the religious outlook (belief system) of Muslims is that major events such as life, death, livelihood, etc., if not all that happens, are divinely preordained, fixed, and inevitable — i.e., unalterable by human effort. Such a belief is encouraged by the Hadith literature and the opinions of some Muslim theologians. However, the Quran does not support this belief. This article demonstrates, in light of the Quran, that this idea is a major misconception. The Quran strongly upholds human freedom, responsibility, and accountability. Destiny, of course, plays a part in human life. But that part often gets overemphasized to the virtual exclusion of human freedom. The truth is, as it has been throughout the history of human civilization, that man is largely the architect of his own destiny. If that is not the case, the whole foundation of religion falls apart.

Introduction

Throughout recorded history, perhaps no other religious subject has generated so much controversy and confusion than that surrounding the issues of divine will and human freedom to act. Much of the controversy, or rather confusion, is ostensibly based on a literal reading of scriptural texts and speculation. There has been little discernible concerted effort on the part of the Muslim theologians to reconcile and consistently piece together the different threads of insight into this subject that are found in the Quran. Those who have been critical of Islam, have portrayed the Quranic message as teaching a fatalistic doctrine of predestination.[1] Regrettably, such a doctrine has gained widespread acceptance among Muslims, who generally

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believe that major events such as life, death, livelihood, etc., if not all that happens to them, are due to God's will and preordainment, and that they are virtually, if not totally, powerless in influencing the course of such events. This view parallels that widely held among Christians, influenced by the ideas of theologians such as Augustine, Martin Luther and John Calvin.

This paper attempts to discuss this subject in two parts from the Quranic perspective. This part will examine whether divine predestination, as generally understood, makes any sense in light of human freedom, responsibility and accountability, taking for granted that predetermined destiny plays a part in human life, effectively limiting human freedom to an extent. A second part will attempt to further clarify what divine will really means, and how it can be distinguished from human will, and how and to what extent real destiny is at work for human life.

The Doctrine of Predestination

In Islam, the popular view on predestination comes from one of the most orthodox, and early schools of thought, the Asharite school, founded by an Iraqi Arab theologian al-Ashari (874-936 AD), and from theologians such as al-Ghazali (1058-1111 AD) of Iranian origin, and ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328 AD) of Turkish origin. Their view on this doctrine can be summed up thus: God preordains everything that happens on earth, including what man wills and does, and what befalls man, good or bad. Even a modern Egyptian-American scholar, Rashad Khalifa (1935-1990 AD), who commands our great respect and admiration for championing the cause of the Quran-only movement, unfortunately, erred about this doctrine. While recognizing that man is absolutely free to believe or disbelieve in God, he presents the view that God wills and knows who is going to be a good or bad person even before his or her birth — that it was not Joseph's will, but God's will, that deterred him from committing an indecent act.

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Brief summaries of their views on predestination are placed in a Box at the end of this article.

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This kind of ambiguous, dualistic thinking is characteristic of beliefs generally held by Muslims. Among modern scholars, Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938 AD), the Pakistani Poet-Philosopher and a great progressive Islamic thinker of modern time, did an excellent job in doing away with the fatalistic doctrine of predestination by reconciling God's knowledge and power with man's free ego (See below for elaboration). Of course, in Islam's early history, the rationalist theological school, Mutazilites, represented by Wasil ibn Ata (d. 748 AD) and his followers, whose theology thrived in Basra and Baghdad during the 8

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centuries, countered the doctrine on the basis of the basic conception of God as just and impartial, but their position on predestination was partially tendentious as, in their zeal to show God as distinctly different from man, they stripped God of attributes, which looked to them anthropomorphic.

A literal reading of some verses of the Quran, of course, gives the impression that nothing happens except with God's knowledge and will. But this will of God is rarely, if ever, analyzed properly in light of the world view of the Quran. There are numerous other verses that speak about human freedom, responsibility and accountability, about God's justice and impartiality, about the way God acts, and about how human beings can receive divine help, forgiveness and grace. This is, of course, not to say that human beings are not under some control of predetermined destiny, a topic that will be discussed at some length in the second part of this article. But this destiny part often gets much overblown by theologians and scholars to the virtually complete denial of human free will.

The Quran contains a whole host of ideas concerning divine will and decrees and human beings' capacity and responsibility — ideas that are well worth pondering by all believers. On close reflection, these ideas can be found to be essentially inter-linked and coherent.

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The Quran itself claims that there is no incoherence in it:

4:82 Will they not then ponder the Quran? Had it been from other than God, they would have found in it much inconsistency.

Some of the verses from which the doctrine of predestination is deduced center around the Quranic word *taqdir*, which literally means “measure” or “proportion” or “destiny”. The following Quranic verse, among others, has been misunderstood by many:

25:2 He (God) hath created everything in due measure (proportion or destiny).

This verse is related to other verses that describe God’s will and knowledge, which have also given rise to a confusion that is of the same nature as that with predestination. Simply put, this doctrine means that God knows in advance all events, He predetermines all events, and He wills all events and, therefore, all events take place in accordance with what God knew, planned and willed. This view is clearly flawed, since if this is true, the Quranic verse “Man has only that for which he makes effort” (20:15; 53:39) cannot have any meaning. For, if God decides beforehand what man will do, He cannot legitimately make him responsible for anything he does and the whole system of rewarding for good work and punishing for bad work completely breaks down, and there remains no role for religion to play for man. The Quran clearly states that a human being is responsible for his or her own life or actions, and that he/she has been

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endowed with free choice and freedom of action (5:105; 3:11; 18:29; 76:3, 29):

5:105 O ye who believe! *Ye are responsible for your own selves.* Those who are misguided can cause you no harm if ye are on the right path. Unto God ye all will return. And then He will inform you of what ye used to do.

2:195 And spend in God's cause, and *let not your own hands lead you to ruin;* and do good, for God loveth those who do good.

18:29 And say, "The Truth (hath now come) from your Lord; *let, then, him who willeth believe (in it), and let him who willeth reject (it).*

Verily

We have prepared for the wrongdoers a Fire whose walls will surround them.

Many other Quranic ideas reinforce the point that God does not predestine in the popular sense. These ideas are that God does not change the condition of human beings unless they themselves change their own condition, or their own selves, that God guides only those who are just and righteous, and that He does not guide those who are unjust and wicked, that He rewards human beings for good deeds and punishes them for bad deeds, that God is just and impartial, that He does not do even the least injustice to man, that He does not discriminate between people except on the criterion of righteousness, and that He does not act arbitrarily, and so on and so forth. Some of these verses are worth citing:

13:11 Verily God changeth not the condition of men until they change their own selves (*nafs*).

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8:53 God never changeth the blessings (*niamat*) with which He hath graced a people until they change their own selves.

2:286 God tasketh not a soul beyond its capacity. *For it (is only) that which it hath earned, and against it (only) that which it hath deserved* .

28:84 If one doeth any good work, the reward for him is better than his deed; but as for one who doeth any evil deed, the doers of evil deeds will be requited to the extent of what they do.

42:30 And any misfortune that befalleth you is because of your own deeds.

3:117 It is not God Who doeth them any wrong, but it is they who are wronging themselves.

4:115 We (cause) him (to) turn to that to which he himself hath turned.

19:76 God increaseth the guidance of those who go aright.

25:70 Excepted (from grievous retribution) are those who believe, repent, and do righteous deeds; for such God would change their bad deeds into good ones.

2:26 God leadeth astray only the evildoers.

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All these verses amply prove the point that it is only human work that determines one's fate. All these ideas effectively demolish the fatalistic doctrine of predestination. As Panullah Ahmad, a modern Eastern writer of a beautiful book on spirituality, aptly remarks, "He [God] has not certainly predestined a man to be a thief or a good man. [...] man only comes to naught by worshipping predestination in the act of foolish acceptance of the so-called inevitable." [4] According to the Egyptian reformist thinker Muhammad Abduh also, Islam does not teach predestination devoid of the freedom of human choice (See Box below).

It was Iqbal, however, who has given us a coherent notion of God's knowledge and power and human free will, innovation and progress. He forcefully and beautifully describes God's knowledge and power (omniscience and omnipotence) in a way that includes His fore-knowledge of possibilities of future events, not of events as such as a fixed order of things —

a notion that admits of freely exercised creativity on the part of humankind as participants in the divine course of events. "The future certainly pre-exists in the organic whole of God's creative life, but it pre-exists as an open possibility, not as a fixed order of events with definite outlines," Iqbal notes. He continues,

If history is regarded merely as a gradually revealed photo of a predetermined order of events, then there is no room in it for novelty and initiation. Consequently, we can attach no meaning to the word 'creation', which has a meaning for us only in view of our own capacity for original action. The truth is that the whole theological controversy relating to predestination is due to pure speculation with no eye on the spontaneity of life, which is a fact of actual experience. No doubt, the emergence of egos endowed with the power of spontaneous and hence unforeseeable action is, in a sense, a limitation on the freedom of the all-inclusive Ego. But this limitation is not externally imposed. It is born out of His own creative freedom whereby He has chosen finite egos to be participators of His life, power, and freedom. [5]

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By conceiving humankind, “of all the creations of God,” as “capable of consciously participating in the creative life of his Maker,” Iqbal has in fact accorded man the status of an agent of God. In another place of his monumental work, Iqbal speaks of man’s independent power and capability, “Hard his lot and frail his being, like a rose-leaf, yet no form of reality is so powerful, so inspiring, and so beautiful as the spirit of man!” Interpreting the Quran’s verse ‘Verily God will not change the condition of men, till they change what is in themselves’ (13:11), he refers to God as a co-worker with man, provided man takes the initiative:

It is the lot of man to share in the deeper aspirations of the universe around him and to shape his own destiny as well as that of the universe, now by adjusting himself to its forces, now by putting the whole of his energy to mould its forces to his own ends and purposes. And in this process of progressive change God becomes a co-worker with him, provided man takes the initiative.[6]

The Quran states that God breathes of His spirit (*ruh*) into man (15:29; 32:9; 38:72). Man is made superior to, and worthy of reverence by, other creatures (2:30-34; 7:11). Whatever is in the universe has been made amenable to service for humankind (31:20; 45:13; 16:12-14). All this also points to a human being’s capacity for independent action.

Consider another group of Quranic verses that points to the idea that God does not really independently will for us

— verses that also effectively rebut the fatalistic doctrine of predestination

. First, note the following verse:

36:47 When it is said unto them: Spend of that with which God hath provided you, those who

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disbelieve say to those who believe: *Shall we feed those whom God, if He willed, could have fed? Ye are naught else than in clear error.*

In this verse God rebukes those who skirt their duty to help the poor, and the helpless on the plea that if God willed He could have fed them (See also related verses 107:1-7; 90:12-16). This clearly suggests that God does not make one rich or poor of his own volition, and that it is the duty of the rich to feed the poor.

Also note that the Quran emphatically states that God does not act arbitrarily; He acts through His laws or ways, which never change (35:43), and through the work of free agents such as human beings and other creatures, and through the working of Nature (2:251). What God does is what He creates, or *vice versa*. That God does not create or act arbitrarily, chaotically, or incoherently is also reflected in the following verse:

67:3-4 *He Who (God) hath created seven heavens in full harmony one with another. No fault canst thou (Muhammad) see in the creation of the Most Gracious. And turn thy vision (upon it) once more; canst thou see any flaw? Then turn thy vision (upon it) again and yet again; thy vision will return unto thee dazzled and fatigued.*

The idea that God never discriminates between people except on the sole criterion of righteousness is also antithetical to the idea of preordained destiny. The Quran is emphatic that all that really matters to God for a man or a woman is righteousness (*taqwa*):

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7:26 O children of Adam! We have indeed inspired unto you (the need for) clothing to cover your shame, as well as for your adornment, but the clothing of righteousness is what the best is.

49:13 Verily the most honorable in the sight of God is the most righteous.

The idea of predestination is also incompatible with God's mercy and compassion. The Quran contains advice for human beings not to despair of His mercy:

12:87 (Joseph's father addressing his other sons says): O my sons! Go forth and try to obtain information about Joseph and his brother; and *do not give up hope of God's spirit (rawoh or life-giving mercy or support); none but people who deny the truth can ever despair of God's spirit*

39:53-4 Say: O my servants who have transgressed against their souls! *Despair not of the mercy (rahmat) of God. Verily God forgiveth all sins.*
Verily He is Ever-Forgiving, Most Merciful. And turn unto Him repentant, and surrender unto Him before the punishment cometh unto you, when ye cannot be helped.

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Any evildoer thus has a way out for him to shun all evil deeds and become good. Of course, he will have to atone for his past evil deeds, repent and mend his conduct. He needs to replace his bad deeds with what are really good. With proper and adequate repentance, he should seek, and can expect to receive, God's mercy and forgiveness of his sins.

Additional statements in the Quran reinforce the idea that God does not will or act in the popular sense. God says that if He willed, He could have guided all of us (6:149), that if He willed, He could have made humankind one nation (5:48), and that if He willed, all would have believed (10:99). The import of all these verses is that God does not directly determine our affairs. He does not help anyone unless he or she deserves it by his or her own individual effort, or by a sustained combined effort of heredity and/or environment. A good example of the fruit of a sustained combined effort of heredity is the Prophet Jesus who was a prophet from the day he was born (19:29–34), while the Prophet Muhammad was predominantly the result of his individual effort. It would be a folly to think, by literally reading the verse 49:13, that the division of human beings into, say, nations and tribes is God-made. However, to distinguish between what is God-made and what is man-made is a tricky thing to do. We discuss this question more fully in Part 2 of this article under the topic of what God's will really means.

What about the empirical demographic data — e.g., differences found in gender, complexion, look, shape, and health condition and longevity of people across borders, and/or over time? Do such differences support predestination? Ask, for example, the question: Has God fixed everybody's longevity — or the time (and the place) when (or where) the persons X, Y or Z are going to die? Many would rush to say: Yes. They could cite part of one verse in particular, that was revealed in the context of the battle of Uhud, in support of their contention:

3:154 They (a party of the soldiers who participated in the Uhud battle) said: If we had a say in the matter, none of us would have been killed here. Say (to them): Even if ye had remained in your own homes, those (of you) for whom death had been decreed would indeed have gone

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forth to the places where they were to lie down.

If one wishes to correctly interpret this verse, he/she would need first to understand the meaning of this decree, and how it gets implemented. We discuss this in Part 2 of this article. Suffice it to say here that death can be caused by myriad reasons. Hence, even if one is killed in a battle, it could not be asserted with absolute certainty that he or she would have averted death by not joining the battle. The differences in the longevity of different people the world over, or the improvement in such longevity over time, cannot be said to have been preordained by God. We know such differences are accounted for by many reasons such as differences in existing climatic and hygienic conditions in which people live, the kind, quantity and quality of available food supplies, the income situation or purchasing capacity of people, the quality of life lived by them, their dietary, work and exercise habits, and their health consciousness, the general environment in which they live, the kind and quality of medical facilities that are available, and patients' access to such facilities. A recently published book has documented that there has been radical life extension over time due to improvements in bio-medical science and that this would likely have a far-reaching impact on existing religious beliefs.[7] Did God preordain this improvement in longevity? Over the last millennium, mortality was dramatically reduced the world over. For example, in the United Kingdom, the average life expectancy of a male child more than doubled, from 31.3 years during 1276-1300 to 76 in 1998.

[8]

Also, we could not say that God predetermined or caused the differences in longevity in various countries and regions. Some diseases such as smallpox has been completely eliminated, and bubonic plague virtually eliminated, while malaria, poliomyelitis (polio) and measles have been eliminated or eradicated in large parts of the world, and are well on the way to be eliminated from much of the world. Cholera, tuberculosis, heart disease and many other diseases are curable; so is most cancer, if detected at an early stage. Diabetes can be kept under control. Note, however, that incidence of new hard-to-cure diseases such as aids has also increased, which offsets some of the gains made in the area of overall disease control.

Before we conclude this part, it would be in order to quote some Hadith texts. It is the Hadith that has brazenly promoted divine predestination, and has thus exerted the most influence in misleading Muslims into believing it. In two Hadith reports, for example, the Prophet is alleged to have said that not only the sex of a person but also whether he or she would be a good or a bad person in life, and how long he or she would live, and what will be his or her provision are

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all decided in the mother's womb, even before the child is born (*Bukhari*, Book 8, Vol. 77, #593 and 594). In another Hadith, the Prophet allegedly said that everyone would do in life deeds for which he or she has been created to do, or he or she would do those deeds which would be made easy for him or her to do (

Ibid

, Book 8, Vol. 77, #595). Still another Hadith is as follows:

"Allah created Adam ... brought forth from him a family and said, 'I have created this family ... for hell, and their actions will be like those of the people of hell!" Then a man said to the Prophet, 'Of what use will deeds of any kind be?' He said, 'When Allah creates his servant for Paradise, his actions will be deserving for it until he dies - and when Allah creates one for the fire, his actions will be like those of the people of hell till he dies, when he will enter therein." (*Mishkat*, Vol. 3, Chapter XXXII:4 and 14).[9]

Conclusion

In the history of human civilization, perhaps no other branch of religious thought has been so misinformed, so misleading, and so debilitating to human spirit, enterprise, creativity, and accountability as that which espouses divine predestination. This doctrine is largely a misconceived dogma, a myth that needs to be exploded once and for all for the greater benefit and progress of humankind. This is rather fatalism or fatalistic attitude that belies God's Laws or the logical system. Fatalism or blind dependence on God, which negates the relevance of man's own efforts is, therefore, not only a real obstacle for one's spiritual progress, but a great impediment to overall human progress, and should therefore be shunned.

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This is, however, not to deny that destiny has, of course, some influence on human life. This is because there are factors that are beyond the control of human beings. Besides, we all are subject to God's inexorable laws, which govern not only the physical universe but also the sphere of non-material world – the psychological, metaphysical and spiritual aspects of human life. This we discuss in Part 2 of this article. But we need to be always on guard not to exaggerate the role of destiny in human life lest we should go amiss about our own responsibility. We should never slight the primary significance of the role of human endeavor in changing humanity's lot. Man is largely the architect of his own destiny. That is the lesson we should all learn from the history of human civilization.

Box. Summarized Theological Positions of Some Muslim Scholars on Divine Will and Predestination

Scholars of the Asharite School of Thought. http://www.ghazali.org/articles/kamali.htm	The Asharite is the most orthodox
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According to the Asharians, "Nothing exists upon earth be it good or bad qada that which God wills. ... G
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Al-Ghazali http://www.ghazali.org/articles/kamali.htm	(1058 CE-505 AH/1111 CE). H
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Al-Ghazali asserts that when fire and cotton are placed in contact, the cotton is burned directly by God rather than the fire.	not his
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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ash%27ari#Al-Ghazali>

Ibn Taymiyyah	(661AH/1263 CE-728 AH/1328 CE)
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<http://www.scribd.com/doc/16603238/Expounds-on-Islam-by-Ibn-Taymiyyah>

According to him, God's omnipotence and foreordainment of things are not inconsistent with man's freedom.	not
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According to him, another site notes, God has foreknowledge of, and He acts behind His will or consent behind the scenes.	not
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<http://www.kalamullah.com/Books/Qadar.pdf>

Rashad Khalifa	(1935-1990). A staunch advocate of Islamic rationalism.
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The Mutazilites,	the earliest of Muslim rationalists.
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<http://kalamullah.com/sects00.html>

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They defended the position, as a central part of their doctrine, that man was free to choose and act and
http://cyberspacei.com/jesusi/inlight/religion/islam/islam3.htm#_Toc503180032

Muhammad Abduh

(1849-1905), the Egyptian reformer

<http://islambasics.com/view.php?bkID=156&chapter=0>

[*] Author of *Exploring Islam in a New Light: An Understanding from the Quranic Perspective*, 2008 (Website: www.explorequran.org ; website blog: <http://deenresearchcenter.com/Blogs/tabid/73/BlogID/18/language/en-US/Default.aspx>).

[1] For example, see Blair, the Rev. John C., *The Sources of Islam*, the Christian Literature Society for India, 1925; also available at web link:

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http://www.muhammadanism.org/blair/sources/blair_sources.pdf

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[2] Cf., *Quran: The Final Testament*, Appendix 14: Predestination; web link: <http://www.masjidtucson.org/quran/appendices/appendix14.html>

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[3] Most of these ideas are covered in this author's book *Exploring Islam in a New Light: An Understanding from the Quranic Perspective*

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[4] Ahmad, Panaullah, *Creator and Creation*, Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh,

1986, p. 107.

[5] Iqbal, Muhammad, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lecture III, originally published by Oxford University Press, 1934; available on the web link:

http://www.tolueislam.com/Bazmdrlqbal/Al_Reconstruction.htm

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[6] *Ibid*, Lecture I.

[7] Maher, Derek F. and Calvin Mercer (Ed.), *Religion and the Implications of Radical Life Extension*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

[8] BBC News, December 27, 1998; web link: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/241864.stm> .

[9] Cited in web link: <http://www.bnvillage.co.uk/village-square/71780-there-basis-free-will.html>)

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Quelle: <http://www.free-minds.org/node/223>