

Islam, Predestination and Free Will

by Rebecca Bynum (Nov. 2006)

Qur'an 3:145 No soul will ever die unless it is Allah's will. The length of each life is predetermined according to the Scriptures. Those who wish to receive their reward in this world will receive it, and those who wish to receive their reward in the world to come will also receive it. And We will undoubtedly reward those who serve Us with gratitude.

3:154 Then, after the trouble Allah sent down upon you, He sent down calmness to wash over some of you. Some were overtaken by sleep, and others lay awake, stirred by their own passions, ignorantly thinking unjust thoughts about Allah. And they ask, "What do we gain by this affair?" Say: Truly the affair is entirely in Allah's hands. They hide in their hearts that which they do not want to tell you. They speak out saying, "If we had any say in this affair then none of us would have been killed here." Say: If you had stayed at home, those of you who were destined to be killed would have died regardless. This has taken place so that Allah might test your faith and see what is in your hearts. Allah knows the deepest secrets of every heart. Those of you who fled in cowardice on the day the two armies met in battle must have been tricked by Satan because of some evil you have done. But now Allah has forgiven you for Allah is forgiving and gracious.

There are two opposite concepts contending for primacy in these verses. One is the concept of testing that involves a notion of some sort of free of will on the part of those being tested and the other is the concept of predestination which essentially nullifies the concept of free will. Allah is depicted as being in such complete control that Muhammad's decision (or was it his decision?) to engage in this battle had nothing to do with the deaths of his men. They simply would have died anyway because their deaths were predestined and no action or non-action on the part of a mere human can change that predetermined fact; one's number is simply up, so to speak. All those men dead upon the field of battle would have died in their beds regardless and at the very same hour, and therefore Muhammad could not reasonably be blamed for their deaths.

With Islam it is important to understand that opposites such as the concepts of predestination and free will do not negate one another: both are considered equally true. And so there is a need to identify the overall trend. Imagine a river: on the surface are swirling eddies and if one measured the direction of the water there, one would get opposite and conflicting directions even though below the surface the overall

movement of the water is in one direction only. So it is with Islam. When one seeks to identify the overall movement and direction of Islamic thought, there are many who will point to eddies on the surface as evidence for a contrary proposition. It is my contention that where there is conflict between the will of man and the will of Allah, the will of Allah always triumphs in Islamic philosophy because the power of Allah is thought of as absolute: he does not curtail or restrain his power in any way. In other words, Allah does not respect the free will of man, in fact, human free will is illusory at best.

By this logic, all three thousand people who lost their lives on September 11, 2001 as a result of jihad action would have died at that hour regardless. And furthermore, because Allah did not intervene, it was Allah's will that it happened. The jihadis who perpetrated this act, were only puppets on a stage, obeying the will of Allah according to a pre-written script. They did not cause all those deaths and all that destruction; rather, according to Islamic logic, Allah caused it as punishment for our sins, the sins of America as a collective entity.

This further reduces to: everything that occurs in the reality of the material world we live in is a direct result of Allah's will. Human will is but an instrument of the will of Allah and therefore does not have an independent existence in the overall trend of Islamic thought. Even though the concept of "testing" is present, Allah's will is never subservient to human will.

I contend this is the equivalent to asserting not that everything is God's will, but rather that nothing is God's will, or even that there is no God, because there is no distinction between what is and what is not God's will in the reality of the material world: the good and the evil deeds of man are both equally and ultimately the result of the will of God. In this view, as the Pope pointed out, God's purpose is so transcendent as to be unknowable, which is to say, God is unknowable to the individual. And again there is no practical difference between that and the assertion that God does not exist, for His will, and therefore God himself, according to Islam, cannot be known. This is equivalent to saying that the difference between good and evil cannot be known, and this is so regardless of the existence of a list of accepted and prohibited actions put forth as "God's will" by Islam on the basis of Muhammad's example as the ultimate arbiter between truth and error. Goodness and Truth do not have an independent existence in Islam; they are entirely dependent on the Islamic creed.

Furthermore, according to [Winston Churchill](#), the Muslim belief in predestination engenders a "fearful, fatalistic apathy" which "paralyses the social development of those who follow it," for Allah's will is fixed in a one-size-fits-all pattern and is not unique to the individual believer. The individual's relationship to Allah is bound completely by the believer's obedience to Islam. Therefore, believers in Islam are actually barred from the greatest adventure known to man, that of finding God (goodness, truth and beauty) as an individual experiential reality. This is so because Allah's will is so transcendent as to be incomprehensible. Thus the "testing" of the believer is reduced to a test of conformity to the creed rather than a testing of the ability to discover what is right and true uniquely for himself. This is equivalent to [Allah is Dead](#). The most

heinous acts, collective and individual, can be rationalized as “Allah’s will” and this of course is a prescription for social chaos. The violence and attitudes that the canonical texts of Islam naturally give rise to are repeatedly demonstrated wherever Islam is suddenly unconstrained, as with the removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime, or the pseudo-nationalism of the PLO and its many security forces, as is clearly observed in Iraq and Gaza today. Then consider Condoleeza Rice’s wishful [and bizarre comparison](#) between the “Palestinians” and America’s Founding Fathers.

According to [Richard Weaver](#) the endowing of cultural forms with the idea of immanence historically gives rise to social cruelty. It is the deification of a cultural system, such as the deification of the Church during the years of the Inquisition, or the deification of a political system such as communism, that creates conditions in which human sacrifice, often on a massive scale, becomes justified. In this view, the cultural structure essentially replaces the concept of a living God (dealing directly with autonomous human beings) and thus human freedom, happiness and ultimately lives are sacrificed to the cultural form in proportion to the fanaticism engendered by the belief in it. [Thomas Mann](#) writes, *“And has not form two aspects? Is it not moral and immoral at once; moral insofar as it is the result of discipline, immoral – yes, actually hostile to morality – in that of its very essence it is indifferent to good and evil, and deliberately concerned to make the moral world stoop beneath its proud and undivided scepter?”* Indeed, if morality is not conceived and actuated as being an individual matter, must it not at some point become coercive and cruel? And what could be conceived of as more cruel than the removal of an individual’s God-given freedom? Under Islam, the removal of that freedom is so complete as to deny it exists at all.

Another bedrock problem lies in the failure of Islam to recognize God as a self-limited or self-limiting being, at least in so far as He acts within the material world of time and space (both obviously limiting factors separating the finite from the infinite). The existence of natural law is further evidence of this. Christianity recognizes a God who is not whimsical, who has set his laws in motion and does not violate them. Thus, these laws may be discovered by His reasoning creature and therefore science, and all that flows from science, becomes possible because it is conceivable.

Another limitation of God is the divine respect evidently given to human free will. Indeed, in the western world at least, if someone claims to be coerced by God, (“God made me do it”) we consider that person to be of doubtful sanity. However, according to Islamic thought, Allah is not limited by natural law, or by reason, or even by goodness and truth. Said Pope Benedict XVI in his [Regensburg address](#):

As opposed to this, the faith of the Church has always insisted that between God and us, between his eternal Creator Spirit and our created reason there exists a real analogy, in which unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness, yet not to the point of abolishing analogy and its language (cf. Lateran IV). God does not become more divine when we push him away from us in a sheer, impenetrable voluntarism; rather, the truly divine God is the God who has revealed himself as logos

and, as logos, has acted and continues to act lovingly on our behalf. Certainly, love transcends knowledge and is thereby capable of perceiving more than thought alone (cf. Eph 3:19); nonetheless it continues to be love of the God who is logos. Consequently, Christian worship is worship in harmony with the eternal Word and with our reason (cf. Rom 12:1).

The unspoken assertion here is that the divine will can be known, that good and evil can be distinguished by reason, and that God can be approached through the mind – by our decisions first to *know* good and to then *be* good. In Islam, on the contrary, the bridge to God through the reasoning mind is cut. Allah demands unquestioning obedience and total sacrifice, including the sacrifice of the ability to know good from evil as an individual, private matter, for the will of Allah is not a personal experience. The Islamic system has totally usurped the place of the living God for the believer: worship and obedience are one.

I believe most Christians and Jews would concur: neither scripture, nor ritual, nor community, nor the religious edifice of the church or synagogue is *God*. They would also concur that God's will can be known as *good* and that good can be distinguished from evil by the human mind even without reliance on scripture or religious teaching. These things are guides that help the believer find God in his own soul. But when religious forms, in their arrogance, become a substitute for God, then the potential for evil and the cruelty of cultural coercion rapidly ensue. In order for cultural progress to occur, man must be free to distinguish the greater from the lesser. For example, which is the greater evil: adultery itself, or the stoning as punishment? Jews and Christians answered long ago: the stoning is the greater evil. Muslims, on the contrary, and despite their modern protestations that “this is not the true Islam,” are forever barred from making such a judgment, because the will of Allah is absolutely transcendent and unreachable through the mind.

Therefore, what western reason would deem psychopathological murder/suicide, Islam calls the “martyrdom of the sainted” without guile. The reason of Islam exists entirely within the bounds of Islam. A bridge of reason simply does not exist between our two worlds, as it does not exist between the individual Muslim and the will of Allah.

And reason cannot compromise with unreason without destroying the basis for its existence. By the same token, unreason cannot become reasonable without destroying itself as well. There is simply no way the hoped-for “reform” of Islam by way of reason would not end in Islam's ultimate destruction, but this is not an outcome to be feared. It should be welcomed.

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