

12 Islam and the Problem of Evil

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Islam's theological, ethical and mystical traditions have adopted a range of approaches to the question of evil. They share, however, a rootedness in the Qur'ān, a text which repeatedly attends to the fact of human suffering, having emerged in a society which it proclaimed to be miserably deluded by false belief and custom and in which the physical environment was harsh and human comforts were few and basic. The travails of its first adherents, who underwent severe persecution at the hands of the pagan Meccan aristocracy, ensured that the Qur'ānic vocabulary was replete with categories of grief (*ḥuzn*), misery (*shaqāwa*), pain (*alam*) and injustice (*ẓulm*), constants which defined a form of Arabian life held to be so insupportable that it triggered the birth of a new religion which sought to challenge Arab suffering and bring about a 'healing and a mercy' (17:82).

Especially significant as a catalyst in defining the new religion's treatment of God's action in the world and Islam's response to humanity's 'creation in suffering' (90:4) was the founder's own experience. Orphaned in childhood and living in straitened circumstances, watching all but one of his seven children die and experiencing recurrent ostracism and abuse at the hands of his own kinsmen, the Prophet, according to a report attributed to his widow 'Ā'isha, 'suffered more than any man ever did'.¹ In later times a belief developed that prophets necessarily endure excruciating physical and mental traumata as part of the sacrifice they make in proclaiming God's word. They may be beheaded, like John, fall sick, like Abraham (26:80), experience acute bereavement like Jacob (12:16–7) or be poisoned, like Muḥammad, and their lives are unusually beset by personal loss and setbacks which for them are believed to be especially hard to bear because of the softness of their hearts.

Human misery was the context for the emergence of the Prophet's religion. What, then, is its right interpretation? The Qur'ān suggests a

¹ For the hadith, see Tirmidhi, *Zuhd*, 57.

variety of approaches. Its *Heilsgeschichte* offers a cyclical narration of God's reparative activity worked through prophets and saints, habitually defied by a human recidivism which engenders mass suffering, which in turn is overcome by a new Prophetic correction. This cyclic alternation of misery and vindication generally implies that in the nature of things virtuous endurance will tend to receive its due reward: Moses finally prevails over Pharaoh (20:9–79), Joseph over his brothers (12:67–100) and Abraham over Nimrod (21:69). Job is washed clean by a holy spring, and his family are restored to him (38:42–4). Often the nomadic Arabian backdrop provides a key trope: Mary, Hagar and Job are all saved by miraculous desert springs which appear as the reward for patience and endurance, water being the tradition's most common symbol for divine mercy and succour. Life in the desert is precarious, and the wisest response to suffering is fortitude, maintained in the hope of a seemingly miraculous deliverance.

Often the Qur'ān proclaims suffering to be the wages of sin and warns that entire cities have been destroyed by earthquakes, deluges or gales because their inhabitants defied God. Thus had been the fate of those who rejected Noah, Moses, Lot and others whose cautionary tales are frequently rehearsed in the scripture.² This interpretation resonates in later Islamic historiography and preaching, which often sees natural disasters following human unruliness as the sobering tokens of God's punitive ways. In this fashion the depredations of Mongols and Crusaders were treated as the just consequence of Muslim religious sloth.³ On occasion, certain illnesses were understood to be specific divine retaliations for sin.⁴

What of the apparently unrequited suffering of the innocent? Given its *sitz im leben* this also needed to be a significant theme of the scripture. The Qur'ān makes it evident that not all virtue finds a happy

² David Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers: A Qur'ānic Study* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999); Thomas Michel, "God's Justice in Relation to Natural Disasters." In *Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought*. Ed. Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi' (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 219–26, 220.

³ Ala-ad-Din Ata-Malik Juvaini, tr. John Boyle, *The History of the World-Conqueror* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), I, 16–19; Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 72.

⁴ Justin K. Stearns, *Infectious Ideas: Contagion in Premodern Islamic and Christian Thought in the Western Mediterranean* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 198–9. Thanks to Galenic influence, this type of moralising seems to have been less common than in medieval Christendom, as witnessed by the relative toleration and social integration of lepers in Muslim lands; see Michael W. Dols, *Medieval Islamic Medicine: Ibn Riḍwān's Treatise "On the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 23–4.

repayment in this world, and not every struggle will end in a mysterious but splendid vindication. Christian martyrs in Najrān are tormented in a fiery trench by a Jewish tyrant in a scene narrated by a sequence of mournful verses unwilling to foretell a positive outcome apart from the infernal chastisement which is the assured post-mortem fate of oppressors (85:4–9). In such cases justice will ultimately be done, but no relief or compensation appears to be on offer before the eschaton.

One clue to the Qur'ān's perspective seems to be supplied in its narrative of the Virgin Mary, who serves as one of its most deliberate paradigms of guiltless suffering. During the birth of Christ her labour pains become so excruciating that she cries out the nearly suicidal words: 'Would that I had died before this, forgetting and forgotten!' (19:23). After giving birth alone in the desert, this sinless paragon returns with the child to confront probable scandal and execution in Jerusalem. Her extreme physical and psychological misery are ended, however, by an unexpected miracle, as the baby in her arms speaks in her defence, proclaiming her innocence and startling the scribes and Pharisees with a brief explanation of his own Christology (cf. 19:30–32). The reader is expected to conclude that Mary's submission at the Annunciation and her patient trust during severe tribulation were in some way rewarded with the gift of Christ and the appearance of the 'good news'. Following this precedent, the idea of suffering as 'birth pangs' furnished a not uncommon metaphor in Muslim religious poetry.⁵

Such scriptural narratives were constructed as examples of what it means to be *muslim*, literally 'resigned', surrendered heart and body to God in a state of perfect trust. The Prophet's hearers in Mecca are heartened by the news that although suffering may seem entirely unmerited, it can be the enigmatic, perhaps entirely incomprehensible anticipation of God's miraculous work of deliverance. Perhaps this led to the frequent idea that distress is a sign of divine favour, an ascetical view which became widespread in some Sufi mysticism, which often identified the highest degrees of spiritual accomplishment with the virtue of *riḍā*, satisfaction with the divine decree: the saint openheartedly and without hesitation accepts tribulations simply because they are from the God whom he or she loves. This disinterested and dysteleological faith position, which sometimes reduces the significance of otherworldly redress, is regularly encountered in the Sufi literature: life with all its hardships is a divine gift in itself.⁶

⁵ A. J. Arberry, *Discourses of Rūmī* (London: John Murray, 1961), 33.

⁶ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, tr. Eric Ormsby, *Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2011), 154–65.

Characteristic, then, of the Qur'ān's soteriology is its construction of episodes of suffering which, when bravely borne, lead to a wholly unexpected and miraculous outcome: like Mary's parturitive agonies they invite an attitude of resignation and are to be read as unmerited and mysterious foretellings and therefore acts of grace. The importance of this idea is evident even in the founding myth of Islam's salvation history, which may be located in its distinctive recasting of the harrowing Genesis episode of the abandonment of the matriarch Hagar in the wilderness along with her son, in which both refuse to condemn God's command to Abraham. When thirst threatens their lives the boy scuffs his foot in the dust, and the well of Zamzam miraculously appears.⁷ In the further future, the Ishmaelites, although disdained by the sons of Isaac, then unexpectedly bring forth the 'gentile Prophet' of Mecca, thus illustrating the idea that God nurtures a preference, albeit often delayed in its accomplishment, for the suffering outcast (in this case the ethnically 'impure' African refugee woman and slave). The arduous and enigmatic rites enacted annually in the Meccan sanctuary are thought to remind pilgrims that God's providence may appear in the weakest vessels through forms of tribulation whose outcome was unimaginable at the time.⁸ Hence Abraham can tell his son that God has ordained the cutting of his throat, and his son replies: 'Father, do as you are commanded; God willing, you shall find me to be steadfast' (37:102). The commentators admiringly add the detail that even though the son's suffering was to be greater than the father's, he declined to be bound with cords for the event, not wishing to show the slightest rebellion against God's instruction. They then quote a stanza of love poetry:

Were the hand of the beloved to give me poison,
So great is my love that poison itself would taste sweet.⁹

With such narratives the Qur'ān considerably simplifies and to some extent harmonises the Bible's moral worlds. One indicative shift is the lack of a teaching of transgenerational punishment, or (its ultimate expression) an original sin which requires human beings to suffer on account of an ancestor's choice. Further, the Qur'ān's heroes are

⁷ Ibn Ishāq, tr. A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 45.

⁸ Cf. Charles-André Gilis, *La Doctrine initiatique du pèlerinage à la Maison d'Allah* (Paris: L'Oeuvre, 1982), 75–91; Ali Shariati, tr. Ali Behzadnia and Najla Denny, *Hajj* (Houston, TX: Free Islamic Literature, 1977).

⁹ Abu'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, ed. Ibrāhīm Basyūnī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabi, n.d.), III, 239.

constructed as ethically exemplary harbingers of God's desire to save sinners from evil and evildoing so that the Biblical 'texts of terror' which impute malfeasance to God's messengers all disappear. David does not now seduce Uriah's wife; Lot does not sleep with his daughters; there is no sacred extermination (*herem*) of civil populations at the hands of Moses or Joshua. The new scripture's ideal types never instigate random or unwarranted suffering, although they may justly and transparently punish the guilty or warn of God's condign yet fitting chastisement (Noah, Lot, Moses). The outcome is a thoroughly consistent theo-drama in which God's prophets endure but do not mete out undeserved suffering and are locked in ceaseless combat against agents of human wilfulness, the most extreme expression of which is idolatry, construed as humanity's perennial and most fatal temptation. In this prophetology the political and the spiritual struggle are understood to be inseparable, generating a type of liberation theology on behalf of the 'oppressed of the earth' (4:97). Religion becomes authentic in the battle against suffering and injustice: 'what ails you, that you do not struggle for the feeble among men, and the women and children who are crying: "Our Lord! Deliver us from this town where the people are oppressors!"?' (4:75). Suffering, while endured by the saints, is acknowledged as an evil to be resisted wherever possible, and the duty to reduce it is emphasised, for instance, by the imposition of a mandatory tithe, levied annually at the rate of one-fortieth of one's wealth, which is directed specifically for the relief of poverty and other forms of social distress.

A further Qur'anic explanation of innocent suffering identifies it as a trial. God tests individuals, including the innocent, by giving them prosperous or evil times (5:48, 21:35), and in places the text indicates that the purpose of creation itself is to test souls (11:7, 18:7, 67:2, 76:2), so that misfortunes like hunger and poverty may be instruments for the discernment of spirits (2:155). These trials may also double as an earthly atonement for misdeeds which otherwise would attract punishment in the next world.¹⁰ Often a soul-making theodicy emerges: adversity guides the faithful along the road to salvation. Abstention from pleasure sharpens the believer's piety, as in the case of fasting, which the Qur'an suggests has been instituted for this purpose (2:183). Suffering may be a practice of divine pedagogy or therapy which enhances an ascetic, penitential outlook that enables or accelerates the soul's ascent to God. Why has God not created mountains of gold and silver? The answer is a privative one: so that man may strive and hence learn the virtues in the hard

¹⁰ Qur'an 17:18; Bukhārī, *Mardā*, 1.

school of a world of scarcity and competition.¹¹ The means are held to be justified by such ends.

For one Sufi, 'sadness prevents the heart from grazing in the valley of distraction', whereas 'a heart devoid of grief falls into ruin, like the house which has no inhabitant'.¹² Suffering may inculcate humility, protect believers from hubris and impel them to pray and repent;¹³ after all, had not Pharaoh himself, the ultimate paradigm of hard-heartedness, repented to God when he felt himself being engulfed by the Red Sea (10:91)? The poet Rūmī (d. 1273) writes of a chickpea boiling in the housewife's pot, which, from its limited perspective, feels outraged by her cruelty:

Look at a chickpea in the pot, how it leaps up when it is subjected to the fire.

At the time of its being boiled, the chickpea comes up continually to the top of the pot and raises a hundred cries,

Saying, 'Why are you setting the fire on me? Since you bought (and approved) me, how are you turning me upside down?'

The housewife goes on hitting it with the ladle. 'No!' says she: 'boil nicely and don't jump away from the one who makes the fire.

I do not boil you because you are hateful to me: nay, 'tis that you may get taste and savour,

So that you may become nutriment and mingle with the (vital) spirit: this affliction of yours is not on account of (your being) despised'.¹⁴

Soul-making theodicies are intrinsic to the *via purgativa* normatively commended by virtually all religion, and the Muslim literature is on familiar ground here. Tears serve to water the spirit and bespeak a fair-minded and objective view of the world and of life's brevity; they build a deeper relationship with God, Who is to be loved for His own sake and not because of a future favour He might have promised; they are 'the tithe of intelligence'.¹⁵ Whether experienced or witnessed, suffering

¹¹ Eric Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazālī's "Best of All Possible Worlds"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 201.

¹² Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd ibn al-Sharīf, *al-Risāla* (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Haditha, 1974), 368, 369.

¹³ Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 112.

¹⁴ Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Mathnawī Edited from the Oldest Manuscripts Available* (London: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Series, 1925-40), III, ll.4159-63.

¹⁵ Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 371.

is often edifying, as in the case of the transformation of the Christian servant 'Addās, who was so moved by the Prophet's patience during an episode of rejection and physical injury that he converted to Islam;¹⁶ and in later times a whole literature developed consecrated to the theme of the Prophet's agonies, meditation on which was deemed to have a spiritually purgative effect.¹⁷ Some even held that the problem of private suffering which appears to have no evidentiary benefit may be resolved by assuming a salutary and hortatory effect not on any human observer but on angels and other supernatural beings who must be assumed to be present.¹⁸

However, the straightforward accounts of suffering as a punishment, test or miraculous sign of future vindication, still struggle in the case of several key categories. We have already seen that the Prophets suffer although they are assumed to be effectively sinless. They are tested, but as they are already perfect messengers of God the value of this is at best evidentiary, as a demonstration of their steadfastness and sincerity to others. However, there are further categories in which suffering seems arbitrary and undeserved by its subject: animals and children, together with other innocents whose pain seems devoid of any possible utility. We shall deal with some Muslim responses to these categories in turn.

ANIMAL SUFFERING

If suffering can be understood as a tribulation or a judgment upon morally accountable human beings, what can be the verdict of Ishmaelite scripture and theology on the existence of ubiquitous and often extreme suffering in the animal kingdom? Muslims have not attributed this to 'Adam's sin' (a view which would in any case seem hardly tenable in the light of modern palaeontology) and do not regard creation as having been damaged by a primordial human choice. The issue of animal suffering thus seems acute and is made still more so by the founding documents' explicit claim that animals are sentient beings possessed of moral rights. A large number of hadiths report incidents in which the Prophet was miraculously able to communicate with animals so that, in one instance, a mistreated camel complained to him of 'too much work

¹⁶ Ibn Ishāq, 193.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Husayn Bahrāni, *Iltihāb nīrān al-aḥzān wa-muthīr al-ikhtibāb wa'l-ashjān* (Qum: al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, 1418AH); Muḥammad ibn Naṣīr al-Dīn, *Salwat al-ka'ib bi-wafāt al-Ḥabīb* (Dubai: Dār al-Buḥūth, 1998).

¹⁸ Cüneyt M. Şimşek, "The Problem of Animal Pain: An Introduction to Nursi's Approach." In Abu Rabi, 111-34, 116.

and too little fodder'. The Prophet reproached the animal's owner and ordered that its situation be improved. The story goes on to record that other beasts then 'called out' to it, saying, 'You belong to Muhammad', and that when the Prophet died, 'it would neither eat nor drink until it also died'.¹⁹

Texts such as these forced the exegetic community to take the problem of animal suffering very seriously. Generally the tradition found that the only solution was to resort to the prediction of eschatological recompense. So sentient are animals that the Qur'an seems to promise that they will be resurrected: 'there is not an animal in the earth, nor a bird flying on two wings, but that they are nations like yourselves [...] Then unto their Lord will they be gathered' (6:38). Confirming the inference of eschatological evaluation and repair, a hadith predicted that

on the Day of Arising, all of creation will be gathered together: the cattle, the riding-beasts, the birds, and every other thing, and it shall be by God's justice that He takes the hornless sheep's case against the horned one. Then He shall say, 'Be dust'.²⁰

And again, it is said that on an occasion when the Prophet observed two sheep fighting each other he remarked, 'God knows why they fight, and He shall judge between them on the Day of Judgement'.²¹ Prompted by such texts, the great majority of theologians had no difficulty concluding that some form of post-mortem indemnity will be awarded to animals. The Mu'tazilite school, widespread in medieval times, held that God was in effect subject to an ethical obligation to recompense them. This doctrine, known as 'Restitution' (*iwadl*), was rejected by mainstream Sunni thinkers, who, as we will see, held that it was incoherent to speak of God as subject to any obligations whatsoever. God is expected to recompense animals for their innocent suffering but will do so out of His generosity and wisdom, not because universal moral axioms compel Him to do so. Still, all major schools tried to resolve or mitigate the question of animal suffering by predicting some form of otherworldly redress.²²

¹⁹ Al-Qāḍī 'Iyād al-Yahṣubī, *al-Shifā' bi-ta'rīf ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā* (Damascus: Dār al-Wafā', n.d.), I, 601.

²⁰ Cited in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (tr. T. J. Winter), *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1989), 200–1; cf. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad* (Cairo: al-Maymaniyya, 1313AH), I, 72.

²¹ Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 200, narrated by al-Bazzār and al-Ṭabarānī.

²² For more on animal suffering, see Sarra Tlili, *Animals in the Qur'an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Şimşek, in Abu Rabi, 111–34.

THE SUFFERING OF CHILDREN

The case of children in some respects recalls that of animals. Since the prepubescent young (and also the insane) are considered exempt from the yoke of the Law and any binding moral performance while remaining unquestionably sentient, their suffering cannot be a punishment. Neither can it easily be seen as a trial, since trials entail reward, a category which, again, cannot properly apply to morally immature beings. In this very difficult case Mu'tazilites sought to preserve the principle of God's justice by evolving complex theories of anticipatory chastisement under which children suffer to atone for sins which they will commit in adulthood. If they die when still children, this is because God knew that as adults they would lead sinful or miserable lives. Alternatively, children's suffering may be evidentiary, imposed in order to diminish adults' distraction by worldly comforts; sceptics did not hesitate to point out that this solution was not an ideal defence of the predicate of divine justice.

Children who die before maturity go to Heaven, through God's generosity rather than through any merit they might have shown, and this may also comprise an indemnity for their suffering in this world.²³

INNOCENT ADULT SUFFERING

It is not only in the cases of animals and children that eschatological reparation comprises a vital theme for the major theological schools. The entire Qur'an is an apocalyptic homily which ceaselessly points to the brevity of human life and the eternity of the world to come, and its emphasis on divine justice in the context of the larger cosmic schema reflects its premise of the divine mercy and appropriate agency *sub specie aeternitatis*.²⁴ Against this background, much comfort was found in the idea that in the fullness of time, human forgetfulness and the intensity of the paradisaic delights will help expunge the memory of any earthly misery. A hadith has the Prophet say,

The man who had suffered most in the world is brought, and it is said: 'Dip him into Heaven for one instant!' Then he is asked: 'Have you ever experienced any suffering?' and he replies, 'No'.²⁵

²³ Jackson Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 168–82.

²⁴ Hence its insistence on the survival of the individuated human after death: suffering can only receive its due compensation if the human subject is authentically itself in the afterlife.

²⁵ Muslim, *Şifat al-Qiyāma*, 42, cited in Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 224.

And according to a modern devotional writer,

one will wake up from a bad dream, full of fear and torment, to find oneself at home beside one's beloved, sunlight streaming through the window, a prospect of golden days before us and all our deepest longings satisfied, for how long would we remember the pain of our dream?²⁶

Paradise, expected to be a more real and clearly perceived habitat than the world which humanity currently occupies,²⁷ and which will allow believers a better insight into the adversity they had encountered on earth, will not only be experienced as a compensation for worldly travails but as their radical erasure, vindicating the Prophet's belief that in the afterlife God will be more compassionate 'than is a loving mother to her child'.²⁸ The Prophet's heavenly 'pool' visited before entry into Heaven will wash away all the believers' sorrows, and he or she may then hope for the beatific vision, a doctrine of enormous importance to Sunnism. Just as the garden of Paradise makes the blessed oblivious to their previous sufferings, the seeing of God will be so exceptional as to make them forget not only their miseries on earth but Paradise itself.²⁹

The recourse to eschatology was a frequent move. However, theologians often sought interpretations which allowed God's ways to be justified in this-worldly terms also. Many who reflected on the divine wisdom in creating instrumental, purgative or therapeutic suffering were driven by a strong determination to identify the divine purpose wherever they could. Just as God's law exists for human benefit and its individual enactments are consequently open to ratiocination (*ta'lil*) to determine God's merciful purpose therein, so also His agency in creation should be open to human analysis. This assurance was particularly habitual among Mu'tazilites. Regarding the principle of justice as the most determinative aspect of divine agency, they came to the view that God has created the best of all possible worlds, because had He not, He would have flatly contravened His own nature. God is, after all, 'the wisest of the wise' (95:8) who 'does not wrong anyone by so much as an atom's weight' (4:40).

²⁶ Charles le Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 239.

²⁷ 'Your sight is sharp this day' (50:22).

²⁸ Ḥākim, *Mustadrak*, cited in Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 255.

²⁹ Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 251. For more on theodicy and eschatology, see Nursi's twelve arguments in Thomas Michel, "The Resurrection of the Dead and Final Judgment in the Thought of Said Nursi." In Abu Rabi, 29–40, 30.

In this theology God is bound to create *al-aṣḥāh*, whatever serves His creatures best, for failing this He would not be God. If the world is imperfect, so that He has not instantiated a better world than the actual one, this must either be attributable to divine incapacity, negating His omnipotence, or to 'miserliness', in which case He would not be entirely just and compassionate.³⁰ In keeping with a wider Mu'tazilite admission this view conceded that God's agency was hedged around with a swarm of *impossibilia*: just as God cannot create His like or decree His own nonexistence, He cannot decree what is unjust. For the same reason God is not at liberty to determine human decisions, which are free, and therefore moral evil must be imputed to autonomous human volition rather than to the divine will. From this premise they spun a range of theodical moves, mostly returning to the hope of eschatological recompense for apparently unmerited worldly suffering; indeed, the whole doctrine of Restitution was driven by a conviction that God was morally bound to ensure a discernable and true justice in His cosmos.

Such conclusions about a limited divine freedom and capacity were heavily contested by the dominant school of Sunni theology known as Ash'arism, whose founder had renounced his earlier Mu'tazilite commitment following a disillusionment with its theodicy. For Ash'arism it is empirically demonstrable that ours is not the best of all possible worlds, since it is clear that a God operating under the constraints which the Mu'tazilites wished upon Him would not be able to create suffering paupers who die in disbelief and hence are destined for hellfire; and yet such people may reasonably be said to exist.³¹ Even more gravely, Mu'tazilism effectively abolishes divine freedom by forcing only a single possible action on God in each situation, thus betraying an alien Hellenistic influence leading back, ultimately, to the *Timaeus*, proposing a First Cause stripped of the freedom and analogy to personal life upon which Abrahamic monotheism rested. The Mu'tazilites had bought man's freedom at the price of God's.

Ash'arism's dissatisfaction with the choiceless Mu'tazilite deity threw up a very different set of solutions to the 'problem of evil', which amounted, in effect, to a thoroughgoing anti-theodicy. Where the Mu'tazilites had taken their cue from the principle of divine justice, the Ash'aris began with the axioms of God's omnipotence and freedom. Reducing the predicate of justice to an agency of correct creative

³⁰ Ormsby, 62.

³¹ Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad al-Bayjūrī, *Tuḥfat al-Murīd sharḥ Jawharat al-Tawḥīd* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1403/1983), 109–10.

disposition, Ash'arism boldly denied the existence of objective moral facts. Good and evil or, in the more usual aestheticising language of Muslim moral philosophy, 'the beautiful' (*al-ḥasan*) and 'the ugly' (*al-qabīḥ*), are not Platonic realities possessed of an autonomous existence, the grounds of an ontologically rooted axiology against which all actions, including God's, must be assessed, and neither can they be independently and reliably located by the human subject in the way that sensory phenomena are perceived. For Ash'arism, a school often linked to a Sufi devotional tradition nervous about the shaping of theory choice by hubris, it was arrogant as well as philosophically difficult to claim that one's mind could authoritatively identify natural facts of a moral nature and still more arrogant to claim that the Creator must be observed or considered to be constrained by those natural facts. God is not subject to moral necessity, for He is its ground. Hence for Ghazālī (d. 1111):

Good and bad, for all mankind, are descriptions of two relational qualities that vary with that to which they relate, and not of qualities of essences, which do not vary with relations. It is surely possible that a thing is good for Zayd and bad for 'Amr, but it is not possible that a thing is black for Zayd and white for 'Amr, since colors are not relational qualities.³²

For Ash'arism there is a valid sense in which one might hold that 'evil is from God', and yet this bald statement was thought to be an oversimplification as well as a sin of discourtesy. Instead, one ought to say that 'all that is created is from God', and this seemed faithful to the Prophet's own phrasing evinced in his prayer 'The good is all in Thy hands, and evil cannot be ascribed to Thee'. So for many Ash'arīs, 'evil' is a locution which carries negative evaluative content insofar as it is experienced by our human subjectivity, but it is fallacious to state that it is evil *per se* in the divine enactment.³³ This validation of human experience is said to be necessary to avoid any suggestion that evil is simply legitimate and to vindicate the rationality of acting to challenge it.

Against Mu'tazilite objectivism Ash'arism proposed a view variously described as a voluntarism, a divine command theory or a 'theistic subjectivism'. God transcends the framework of rights and duties which connect frail human subjects and so has no obligations towards us. Even

³² Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fī'l-i'tiqād*, tr. Aladdin M. Yaqub, as *Al-Ghazali's "Moderation in Belief"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 161.

³³ Muhammad Salih Farfur, *The Beneficial Message and the Definitive Proof in the Study of Theology* (London: Azhar Academy, 2010), 151. The hadith appears in the anthology of Muslim.

His greatest grace, the 'sending-down' of revelation for our guidance, was not the discharge of anything resembling a moral duty but was merely a free expression of His wisdom and gentleness (*lutf*): 'His acts are not subject to reasons and objects; He is not asked about what He does; one seeks no "Why" of him: He sends Prophets simply because it is His will, not because the interests of His servants are served thereby'.³⁴ God is thus not 'morally good' in any human sense but habitually and validly acts according to wisdom. He is just, but according to a definition which is applicable to His nature, whereby justice is 'the proper placement of things by God'. He may act in ways that to all human moral intuitions are arbitrary, but this is in no way foolish. Divine acts are unlike human acts, not least because they are not axiologically shaped by the values of obedience or disobedience.³⁵ On this conclusion, divine omnipotence includes the capacity to impose suffering that by human measuring is certainly unjust or unbearable, but this cannot compromise the principle of divine wisdom.

To the extent that His 'most beautiful names' are disclosed to the mind in scripture and in the order of nature, values may be heuristically recognised, but it is revelation alone that supplies the normative framework. Yet even the moral code enunciated by revelation is not binding upon Ash'arism's entirely free and sovereign deity: 'thou shalt not kill' is an instruction known to be incumbent upon humanity because of divine command, and yet God cannot meaningfully be said to be bound by it, for that would restrict His freedom and power and force Him to bow to a higher and external code. Even the Qur'anic principle that hints that God accepts to be constrained by values He has determined to be normative of His nature ('He has prescribed mercy upon Himself', 6:12) cannot overthrow His right to define those values. In this system, then, no theodicy is meaningful, since God is just and merciful according to a canon of wisdom which need not coincide at all with humanly detected aesthetic or revealed conceptions. Indeed, for Ash'arism, every attempt at a theodicy is likely to be hubristic, demanding divine submission to prior natural facts and compliance with humanly fallible intuitions.

Human minds cannot, then, adequately evaluate God's actions or even His legislation. True, the habits of Divine wisdom in practice tend to converge with mentally graspable patterns of appropriateness, allowing the cautious practice of *ta'wil*, but the immensity of the divine-human

³⁴ Muṣṭafā ibn Muḥammad Kestelli, *Hāshiyā 'alā Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id* (Istanbul: Shirket-i Saḥḥāfiye-i 'Uthmāniye, 1326AH), 165.

³⁵ Kestelli, 75.

gulf ensures that this cannot be guaranteed. Hence the argument that demonstrates the nonexistence of God on the grounds that He has failed various tests finds no purchase in an Ash'arite context. The Qur'an itself seems to allude to this: 'He is not asked about what He does; it is they [humans] who are asked' (21:23). God is free to administer suffering that is neither a punishment nor a trial, to give pain to children and animals and to torment His prophets, and still His justice, His 'appropriate placement of things', is not compromised. The 'semitic' conception of a sovereign personal God here trumps the Mu'tazilite notion of God as a 'cosmic justice machine',³⁶ a deity bound to deliver moral outcomes and a just world whose principles are, at least in theory, fully knowable via human cognition.

Whether Ash'arism thus made God's agency in the world essentially capricious was generally contested. The 'most beautiful names' which God gives Himself in scripture were normally held to have some content accessible to humanity: although a simple analogy between, say, human and divine love will quickly break down, a more complex and allusive relationship rooted in a matrix of equivocal predication was widely believed to exist. In the theology of the Maturidi school (also Sunni opponents of Mu'tazilism, but distinct from Ash'aris), the divine predicate of wisdom was understood as a quality which invariably led to a beautiful outcome, one which might in some circumstances be truly humanly knowable, at least in part. They agreed with the Ash'aris that God's wisdom does not obstruct the occurrence of unmerited suffering but claimed that this would still serve a higher purpose which might be known only to God, in contrast to Ash'arism, which insisted that wisdom was in effect simply a synonym for divine agency.³⁷

One counter-intuitive outcome of this Maturidi mode of argument was the conclusion that humanly perceived imperfections in the created order are in fact signs of God's existence. Whereas Avicenna, following the Greeks, had held that only perfection may be originated by the perfect, the more reflective observer knows that in the cosmic plenitude every possible form or event is real if it is in keeping with God's truly autonomous wisdom. The world's apparent flaws are a proof that it is the artefact of a volitional being and refute any necessitarian system; in fact, the world's imperfections, including the presence of inexplicable

³⁶ Khalid Blankinship, "The Early Creed." In *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*. Ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 33–54, 50.

³⁷ 'Alā' al-Din al-Uṣmandī, *Lubāb al-Kalām* (ed. M. Sait Özervarlı) (Istanbul: Islam Araştırmaları Merkezi, 2005), 101; Jackson 110–20.

suffering, are an argument for God. And the fact that God is truly free and unconstrained is demonstrated by His ability to create a world in which human utility is not in fact maximised. Our world is the most beautiful and authentic expression of a perfect God's will and nature, whether or not it gratifies our personal needs, and this beauty incorporates a host of apparent imperfections and sources of discomfort which point to the radical autonomy of its maker.³⁸

Somewhat distinct from both mainstream Ash'ari and Maturidi conceptions was the position of Ghazali (d.1111), whose conviction that 'nothing possible is more splendid than the actual' (*laysa fi'l-imbkani abda'u mimma kana*), rooted in a quiet doubt about Ash'arite nominalism's ability to proclaim a meaningfully wise deity, generated a centuries-long dispute. Ghazali's is distinguished from the Mu'tazilite position by his rejection of necessitarianism and from Maturidism by his belief in the possibility of seeing everything in creation as perfect. It is conceived in part as a support to his devotional and mystagogic programme of reliance on providence and the value of meditating on the beauty and the rational order of the natural world. The devout must look on God's works as showcases of His perfect wisdom, building on the Qur'an's cosmological arguments. A careful scrutiny of every organism, and particularly the human animal, yields an amazement and humility at the divine creative art. Scripture has insisted that 'thou shalt behold no flaw in the All-Merciful's creation' (67:3) and that 'for Him all things are according to a measure well-defined' (15:21), which means that the world comprises a divinely willed web of finely tuned structures and habitual norms of seeming causalities which in the 'most splendid' way express the operation of God's 'beautiful names'.³⁹ Because some of these are experienced by human subjectivity as strongly ethical, these require objects among the *differentia* which permit contrast and a reparative divine agency. As the twentieth-century Turkish thinker Said Nursi put it, 'Just as the Name of Healer makes it necessary that illness should exist, so too the Name of Provider requires that hunger should exist.'⁴⁰ These seeming imperfections also form part of the 'splendour' of creation.

This perspective was further elaborated by the Sufi author Ibn 'Arabi (d.1240). For him, 'evil', which is only *prima facie* and not authentic, is a consequence not of Adam's 'sin' but of an earlier act which took place *in divinis*; it is a corollary of the fact of creation itself. The Divine *fiat*

³⁸ Jackson, 111–2.

³⁹ Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *al-Ḥikma fī makhlūqāt Allāh* (Cairo: al-Qabbānī, 1321/1903).

⁴⁰ Şimşek, 124.

which enacted the world, which is composed of a vast field of interactions among the 'beautiful names', brings a distance from the primordial unity of the divine essence, which is perfect compassion. Providence brings the saint out of the idolatries of selfhood and the perception of alterities into authentic cognition of the One, in a journey 'from the shadows into the Light' (2:257), and the shadows which he or she leaves behind are the necessary consequence of the divine command 'Be!' which is differentiation itself, the 'stain of multiplicity'.⁴¹ Imperfection is what is not God. So without manifestation there would be no entification of the divine names and hence no divinely desired human journey back to God: shadows, or what humans perceive as imperfections, are just a sign that the One God's fullness is being actualised.⁴²

GOD'S OTHERNESS AND THE HELPLESSNESS OF THEODICY

Sunni theologians and mystics alike disputed the Mu'tazilite conviction that God and man inhabit the same moral community. For Sunnis, the Creator is not a component of the cosmos or a member of a class, whose existence is comparable to that of other entities. He is not subject to time, and therefore His 'decisions', not being preceded by states of indecision, are not analogous to our own. His will and power are not simply unrestricted versions of ours, since our own will and power are defined with reference to what restricts them.⁴³ His knowledge must be total, since if He knew only some things, He would be subject to some external factor which had determined which things He knows and which He does not; and therefore His knowledge is not simply a perfect version of human knowledge. It is hence likely to possess modalities which by their nature cannot be accessed or grasped by human cognition. Moreover, existing outside time exempts Him from ignorance of the future: where the Mu'tazilites had proposed a God unable to know actions before their occurrence, Sunni theology insisted on a full foreknowledge. The 'future' is a subjective human perception inapplicable to the divine totality.⁴⁴ All these conclusions strengthened the characteristic Sunni resistance to viewing the deity as a sort of humanoid.

⁴¹ John Crook, "The Theocentric Pluralism of Rusmir Mahmutcehajic and Inter-religious Dialogue in Bosnia," *Forum Bosnae* 51 (2010): 138.

⁴² William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 290–303.

⁴³ Kestelli, 72.

⁴⁴ Kestelli, 72–4.

While theodicies of various kinds may helpfully serve pedagogic ends, Ghazālī is clear that they exist only for the majority of the faithful, who need a God made accessible by some straightforwardly anthropopathic descriptions. True metaphysicians find them unnecessary⁴⁵ and shift the focus away from the God of ‘resemblance’ (*tashbih*) proclaimed in those scriptural passages which so profusely name Him, to the God of ‘otherness’ (*tanzih*) announced in other texts such as ‘Nothing resembles Him’ (42:11). This immaterial God does not possess anything like the human physiological systems and organs which support our processing of the world and our emotions,⁴⁶ and He cannot be ‘incarnated’ (still less become a corpse⁴⁷). He is properly non-affective and impassible (although this is not the same as apathy); and the seemingly humanising lexis of scripture and mysticism exists not to indicate an actual ‘personhood’ in God but to provide a context for a set of salvifically effective and needful human responses to divine initiatives and commands. This apophysis secures the final victory over the animism of ancient Arab idol-worship; a right understanding of the Second Commandment, famously dear to Islam, obviates any theodicy, and indeed makes it nearly blasphemous.

Any certainty about God’s motivations not only reduces Him to a human level but undermines the struggle against evil. Complaint is indispensable to piety and to humanity itself; an indifferent and undignified *ataraxia* is inhuman and perhaps unattainable. Mary’s cries are intrinsic to her dignity, and so is the famous and revealing prayer of the prophet of Islam, uttered after he was driven out with stones from the city of Ṭā’if:

O God, to Thee I complain of my weakness, little resource, and lowliness before men. O Most Merciful, Thou art the Lord of the weak, and Thou art my Lord. To whom wilt Thou confide me? To one afar who will misuse me? Or to an enemy to whom Thou hast given power over me? If Thou art not angry with me I care not. Thy favour is more wide for me. I take refuge in the light of Thy countenance by which the darkness is illumined, and the things of this world and the next are rightly ordered, lest Thy anger descend upon me or Thy

⁴⁵ Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā*, tr. David Burrell and Nazih Daher, as *Al-Ghazālī on the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 57.

⁴⁶ Jackson, 138.

⁴⁷ The most vulnerable point in Peter Geach’s Thomist antitheodicy, otherwise convergent in some ways with Ash’arite apophaticism. P. T. Geach, “Omnipotence,” *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 7–20, see 19.

wrath light upon me. It is for Thee to be satisfied until Thou art well pleased. There is no power and no might save in Thee.⁴⁸

It is in prayers such as this, finally, that Ishmaelite faith has most plausibly sought to engage with the pervasive presence of suffering in God's world while frankly acknowledging the implications of His power. Prayer does not deny apophysis but works with a different and more intuitive theology in a turn from the He to the Thou animated by a lived and experiential faith rooted in trust (*īmān*). This turn is validated by the rhetorical axis of the first and most liturgically indispensable chapter of the scripture, which begins with words of praise for an absent Lord and closes with an appeal to His personally experienced presence before the worshipper. The 'He', which Arabic grammar calls the 'pronoun of absence', typically denotes the transcendent God of *tanzīh*, who is misrepresented by the rationalising Mu'tazilites, who use their syllogistic apparatus to reason out God's reasons with a finite and unfit lexis and a precarious *via negativa* and thereby risk the invention of a static idol-God circumscribed by human subjectivity and culture (and gender). Such a project is apt to frustrate its own ends by contradicting the 'nothing is like Him'; for the 'He', ostensibly a 'personal pronoun', is paradoxically a marker for what is radically unlike ourselves; nothing, indeed, is like 'Him'; and His 'beautiful names' recur in the Qur'an in such a prodigious variety of contexts that they signal the provisionality and dynamic flux of all divine predication. The scriptural stories suggest that Compassion, Clemency, Justice and the other qualities never appear twice in exactly the same modality, indicating that analogising to God is an allusive, unstable enterprise more rewarding to the praying 'heart', with its fluctuating susceptibilities and insights alert to the uniqueness of the moment, then to the mind. This turn to the Thou, which somewhat resembles, in Kantian terms, the move from speculative to practical reason, cataphatically 'affirms' (*ithbāt*) the divine predicates as these present themselves to the worshipper via divine grace in each instant while recognising the futility of defining their modality (*bilā kayf*). And it is this God, as Job and Muhammad saw, who is worth believing in and complaining to.

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