

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

QADAR AND DECREE:
COMPARING ISLAMIC AND REFORMED VIEWS ON FREE WILL AND
PREDESTINATION

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BY
ZACHARY S. KEUTHAN
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I. INTRODUCTION

In his book, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Loraine Boettner draws attention to the provocative claim by Samuel Zwemer that "Islam is indeed in many respects the Calvinism of the Orient." Noting the "strange parallel between the Reformation in Europe under Calvin and that in Arabia under Mohammed," Zwemer explains,

It, too, was a call to acknowledge the sovereignty of God's will. 'There is no god but God.' It, too, saw in nature and sought in revelation the majesty of God's presence and power, and manifestations of His glory, transcendent and omnipotent. 'God,' says Mohammed, 'there is no god but He, the living, the self-subsistent, slumber seizes Him not, nor sleep—His throne embraces the heavens and the earth and none can intercede with Him save by His permission. He alone is exalted and great' It is this vital theistic principle that explains the victory of Islam over the weak, divided and idolatrous Christendom of the Orient in the sixth century.¹

It is this point of God's sovereignty in Islam and Calvinism that I wish to explore in this paper. To what extent is Islam's teaching regarding free will and predestination the same as the view found within the Reformed tradition of Christianity? In what respects are they similar? In what respects do they differ?

In order to address this question, I will first explore Islam's view of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Here I will underscore the similarities between Islam and Calvinism, and in doing so vindicate Zwemer's provocative claim. After noting the similarities between Islam and Calvinism, I will suggest crucial differences between the view of predestination advocated by Islam and the view espoused by Calvinism. Ultimately, I wish to vindicate two propositions. First, I wish to show that Islam and Calvinism do share many similarities and tendencies, and therefore Reformed Christians need to be careful to avoid unfair critiques of Islam's view of predestination. That said, I also I wish to show that while Islam and Calvinism

¹Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1932), 318–319.

affirm divine sovereignty and human responsibility in similar ways, there are yet considerable differences regarding predestination which the Calvinist can and ought in good conscience address.

II. FREE WILL AND PREDESTINATION IN ISLAM

Before addressing the question of free will and predestination in Islam we need to acknowledge from the outset that like Christianity (even Reformed Christianity), there is considerable diversity within Islam.² Throughout history adherents to Islam have differed widely over the exact relationship between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Broadly speaking, the same three tendencies found in Christianity can be found in Islam: Some emphasize man's responsibility over God's sovereignty, some emphasize God's sovereignty over man's responsibility, and others hold God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in tension. In addition to differences in tendencies, we must acknowledge diversity within Islamic sources. When we say "Islam's view" do we mean the view found in the Qur'an, the Hadith, the Islamic theological and philosophical schools, or the average Muslim on the street? In order to have a balanced picture of Islam's view of predestination, we need to acknowledge various Islamic sources and voices.

And yet even as we recognize this diversity, it is possible to discern a general view in mainstream Islam respecting free will and predestination. For instance, R. Kevin Jaques, notes that belief in predestination is recognized as one of the chief articles of Islamic faith among Sunni Muslims (by far the largest group of Muslims in the world). Jaques writes,

While Islam has historically eschewed authoritative bodies for issuing creeds with the authority of an ecclesiastical order, several statements of orthodox belief have, over time, come to be recognized as defining Sunni faith (*iman*). From these creeds six central beliefs have been distilled that have come to define orthodox faith. Belief in God and his

² See James N. Anderson, "Islam Today," *Tabletalk Magazine*, April 1, 2016. To access the article online, see <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/islam-today/>

attributes, prophets, angels, sacred books, the Last Day, and predestination has, by Sunni consensus, come to define normative Islam.³

Given Jaques' analysis it is not surprising to find scholars who regard predestination as a central article of belief in addition to the traditional five articles of Islamic beliefs. For example, Tilman Nagel, writes, "Power or 'divine destination' is one of the central themes of the Koran."⁴ Colin Chapman notes that summaries of Islamic faith often "add the predestination of good and evil."⁵ Muslim scholar 'Umar S. al-Ashqar states the belief in predestination "is one of the basic principles of faith, without which a person's belief is incomplete."⁶ To add predestination to the list of Islamic belief should not surprise us. At least on the surface, predestination would seem to flow naturally from any monotheistic religion which strongly emphasizes God's sovereignty over his creation.

Typically, the Islamic concept of predestination is conveyed by the Arabic word, *qadar*, which literally means "power." *Qadar* refers to God's power in decreeing everything that takes place.⁷ Thus, observes Jaques, in Islam, "Predestination means that God has total power over all creation and therefore determines the course of all events."⁸

This view is well attested by the Qur'an and subsequent Islamic traditions. For example, Surah 9:51 reads, "Only what God has decreed will happen to us."⁹ Surah 57:22 says, "No misfortune can happen, either in the earth or in yourselves, that was not set down in writing

³ R. Kevin Jaques, "Religious Beliefs" in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, Volume 2, Editor in Chief, Richard C. Martin, (New York: Macmillan Reference USA: Thomson/Gale, c2004), 583.

⁴ Tilman Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology: From Muhammad to the Present*, trans. Thomas Thornton (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000), 13.

⁵ Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 72.

⁶ 'Umar S. al-Ashqar, *Divine Will and Predestination: In the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, Islamic Creed Series, vol. 8, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005), 21.

⁷ James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur'an*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2013), 150.

⁸ Jaques, "Religious Beliefs," 584.

⁹ *The Qur'an*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 2008).

before We [God] brought it into being—that is easy for God.” The Qur’an presents God decreeing not only earthly events but also the faith and fate of humanity. For example, Surah 10:99 exclaims, “Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. So can you compel people to believe?” Surah 74:31 boasts, “... God leaves whoever He will to stray and guides whoever He will—no one knows your Lord’s forces except him.” Perhaps most striking is Surah 76:29–31 which says, “This is a reminder. He who will, let him take a path to his Lord. But you cannot will unless Allah wills; Allah is Knowing, Wise. He will admit to His mercy whom He will, but for the unjust He has prepared a painful torment.”¹⁰

This strong predestinarian impulse carries into the *hadith*. In his book, *Islam: What Every Christian Should Know*, Bassam M. Chedid records several passages representing (supposedly) Muhammad’s view of free will and predestination. In one *hadith* Moses blames Adam for losing Paradise for the rest of humanity. In response, Adam asks, “Do you blame me for [an] action which Allah had written in my fate forty years before my creation?”¹¹ In another *hadith* Aisha consoles herself at a funeral of a child thinking, “There is happiness for this child ... for he committed no sin nor has reached the age when one can commit sin.” Muhammad replies, “Aisha, peradventure, it may be otherwise, because God created for Paradise those who are fit for it while they were yet in their father’s loins and created for Hell those who are to go to Hell. He created them for Hell while they were yet in their father’s loins.”¹² Given its importance for our discussion the following story from the *hadith* is worth citing at length:

Narrated 'Abdullah: Allah's Apostle, the truthful and truly-inspired, said, "Each one of you collected in the womb of his mother for forty days, and then turns into a clot for an equal period (of forty days) and turns into a piece of flesh for a similar period (of forty

¹⁰ This citation of the Qur’an comes from White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur’an*, 152. The reference he gives is wrong. He cites the passage as Surah 7:29–31 when it is actually found in Surah 76:29–31.

¹¹ Bassam M. Chedid, *Islam: What Every Christian Should Know* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2004), 118.

¹² Chedid, *Islam: What Every Christian Should Know*, 120.

days) and then Allah sends an angel and orders him to write four things, i.e., his provision, his age, and whether he will be of the wretched or the blessed (in the Hereafter). Then the soul is breathed into him. And by Allah, a person among you (or a man) may do deeds of the people of the Fire till there is only a cubit or an arm-breadth distance between him and the Fire, but then that writing (which Allah has ordered the angel to write) precedes, and he does the deeds of the people of Paradise and enters it; and a man may do the deeds of the people of Paradise till there is only a cubit or two between him and Paradise, and then that writing precedes and he does the deeds of the people of the Fire and enters it.¹³

This story carries the Islamic predestinarian tendency to an extreme. Leaving aside the problems inherent in this construal of divine sovereignty for the moment, there is no question that this story underscores the power of Allah's decree.

Despite this strong emphasis on divine sovereignty, the Qur'an and subsequent Islamic tradition still seek to preserve human responsibility. John L. Esposito observes, "the Quran is not decisive on the question of free will and predestination. Many passages uphold the former and many passages uphold the latter. The Quran is uncompromising, however, on the absolute power of God, without whose permission or creative act nothing at all occurs." And yet, notes Esposito, at the same time based on the Qur'an Muslims also believe "human beings are morally and ethically responsible for their actions but are utterly dependent upon God for the ability and power to act."¹⁴ Reflecting on this tension, Jaques notes "This ambiguity has never been settled fully," and has become regarded as truly paradoxical within Islamic theology.¹⁵ Esposito traces the history of this theological tension nicely, writing,

Early Islamic theology developed several distinct understandings of destiny. The Qadari movement upheld the power of the individual; the Murjia tended to deemphasize the efficacy of human volition. Later discussions between Mutazili and Ashari theologians further refined the discourse to such a degree that it is difficult to determine from the

¹³ White, *What Every Christian Should Know About the Qur'an*, 155–156.

¹⁴ John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (New York: Oxford Press, 2003), 153.

¹⁵ Jaques, "Religious Beliefs," 584.

theological works themselves just where the will of God ends and the will of the human being begins.¹⁶

One example of this refined discourse about God's sovereignty and man's responsibility is the concept of *kasb* "which asserts that God creates acts that humans then acquire or own, thus involving their culpability for action or inaction."¹⁷ This concept sought to mediate the tension, or at least, explain how man is culpable for his actions.¹⁸ In this way, *kasb* attempted to "safeguard both the notion of 'free choice' (*ikhtiyār* [q.v.]) strongly expressed within the subject, and the just, frequent retribution augured in the *Qur'ān*, while at the same time taking nothing away from God, who 'created you, you and that which you do' (*Qur'ān*, XXXVII, 96)."¹⁹

III. COMPARING ISLAMIC AND REFORMED VIEWS ON FREE WILL AND PREDESTINATION

Having briefly surveyed Islam's view of free will and predestination, we are now in a position to compare it to the view found in the Reformed tradition. Before rushing to differences, we need to note in what respects they are similar.

Perhaps the chief similarity lies in the fact both affirm God's absolute sovereignty while still affirming the mysterious reality of man's responsibility. In several places the *Westminster Confession of Faith* affirms God's sovereignty in no uncertain terms. For instance, in chapter 5, we read, "God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least."²⁰ In chapter 3, we read, "God

¹⁶ Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 153.

¹⁷ Jaques, "Religious Beliefs," 584.

¹⁸ For an example, see Feryal Salem, "Freewill, Qadar, and Kasb in the Epistle of Hasan al-Basri to Abd al-Malik," *The Muslim World* 104, no. 1-2 (Jan-Apr 2014): 198-219. Salem writes, "I propose in this study that the position attributed to Hasan al-Basri in this letter is one that neither rejects freewill, nor *qadar*. Rather he appears to reconcile both of these disparate theological elements with the idea of *kasb*, or the acquisition of reward and punishment, guidance and misguidance, based upon the merits of freely chosen actions."

¹⁹ L. Gardet, "Kasb," in *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs (Brill Online, 2016).

²⁰ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 5.1.

from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”²¹ A few sentences later, God’s sovereignty over the eternal fate of every individual is affirmed. We read, “By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and other foreordained to everlasting death.”²² Even sin itself falls under the sovereign purview of God. In a stunning statement we are told, “The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends.”²³

In addition to affirming God’s absolute sovereignty, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* also fully affirms man’s responsibility. For instance, in chapter 5, we told that even while sin falls under God’s control, “the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who being the most holy and righteous, neither is, nor can be, the author or approver of sin.”²⁴ In chapter 6, we are told that every sin brings “guilt upon the sinner; whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God,” indicating man’s culpability.²⁵ Finally, in chapter 9, we read, “God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to good or evil.”²⁶ While this statement may not satisfy those who

²¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 3.1.

²² *Westminster Confession of Faith* 3.3.

²³ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 5.4.

²⁴ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 5.4.

²⁵ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 6.6.

²⁶ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 9.1.

hold to a libertarian view of free will, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* nonetheless asserts man's authentic moral agency.

Clearly, Islam and Calvinism teach God's absolute sovereignty while still affirming the mysterious reality of man's responsibility. Given this similarity, Reformed Christians need to be careful to avoid unfair critiques of Islam's view of predestination. For one, Calvinist should not immediately dismiss Islam as fatalistic.²⁷ While, as we will discuss, there may be reasons for seeing Islam as fatalistic, its affirmation of determinism *in of itself* does not warrant such characterization. On this ground, the Calvinist would have to call himself a fatalist as well. Likewise, it would also be unfair to dismiss Islam's view of man's freedom as illusory. If Calvinist wish to appeal to the notion of mystery when it comes to such matters as God's sovereignty and man's responsibility (as I think is right), that same courtesy needs to be extended to Muslims.

That said, even apart from trying to resolve the philosophical tension inherent in conceptualizing the eternal decree of God in the temporal activity of man, there are considerable differences in Islam's view of predestination compared to Calvinism. In particular, the theological context in which the doctrine of predestination is embedded in Islam and Calvinism is radically different, and this contextual difference makes all the difference for the doctrine itself. In the remaining section of this paper, I will discuss some of these distinct differences concerning predestination given the respective theological context in Islam and Calvinism.

²⁷ This is not to say fatalism is absent from Islam. For example, Sufism, a mystical tradition within Islam, provides some extreme examples of fatalism. See Peter J. Awn, "The Ethical Concerns of Classical Sufism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 240–263.

The most important factor to realize is that whereas in Islam predestination occurs within the context of Unitarian monotheism, in Calvinism predestination occurs within the context of Trinitarian monotheism.²⁸ In his book, *Delighting In the Trinity*, Michael Reeves indicates that this difference is not insignificant. He writes,

Allah is a single-person God. In no sense is he a Father (“he begets not”), and in no sense does he have a Son (“nor is he begotten”). He is one person, and not three. Allah, then, is an utterly different sort of being to the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit that difference . . . is going to mean that Allah exists and functions in a completely different way from the Father, Son, and Spirit.²⁹

Reeves’ observation holds true when we consider the doctrine of predestination in particular. Because Calvinism recognizes God as Triune it has the resources to account for several important doctrinal and existential concerns which plague Islam.

First, unlike Islam, predestination in Calvinism maintains the integrity of God’s character. In Islam, Allah’s decree is solely an expression of his will, and not his character. In contrast, in Calvinism, predestination is an expression of God’s character. In particular, predestination expresses God’s mercy (seen in the elect) and his justice (seen in the reprobate).³⁰ What is arbitrary in Islam is purposeful in Calvinism.

Closely related, Calvinism upholds the justice of God in way that Islam does not. This is perhaps most clearly seen in one of the *hadiths* referenced earlier where irrespective of the kind of life a Muslim lives God can utterly change his eternal destiny (see bottom of page five).

Commenting on this passage, James White notes the utter injustice underlying this understanding of God’s decree. He writes, “The disconnection presented between the life of the good or the evil

²⁸ In beginning this way, I am following the line of reasoning found in Colin J. Sedgwick, “Predestination, Pauline and Islamic: A Study in Contrasts,” *Vox Evangelica* 26 (1996): 69-91. Even so, I have decided not to follow his taxonomy entirely, in part because I disagree with some of his suggestions.

²⁹ Michael Reeves, *Delighting In the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012), 17–18.

³⁰ This is precisely what we see in Romans 9.

... renders Allah's decree utterly capricious and empties it of moral or ethical meaning."³¹ One cannot escape the sense that in Islam God may be powerful but he is not just. In Calvinism, however, rather than undermine God's justice, predestination upholds it.

It should be noted that this sense of arbitrariness not only undermines God's justice but also undercuts any sense of assurance in Islam. No matter what kind of life a person may live God's decree can overtake them in an instance. In contrast, Calvinism gives a sense of assurance by means of covenant and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.

In terms of covenant, God in Christ has committed and bound himself to deal with Christians in light of the covenant of grace. Reflecting on this, Charles Spurgeon remarks that though Islam,

*Has grasped a certain sort of predestination which it has defaced into blind faith; but even with that to help them, and the unity of the Godhead as a powerful light to aid them, That sect has grasped a certain sort of predestination which it has defaced into blind faith; but even with that to help them, and the unity of the Godhead as a powerful light to aid them, they have never thought out a plan of salvation so just to God and so pacifying to the troubled conscience as the method of redemption by the substitution of our Lord Jesus.*³²

In Calvinism, there is an ordering of God's redemptive purposes which are accomplished by Christ and applied in time to believers by the Holy Spirit. In this way, God's covenantal dealings with humanity in Christ buttress assurance in the Christian life. Because God has committed himself to us by means of covenant, and a covenant which works itself out in a 'chain of salvation,' Christians can have assurance as they progress in the Christian life. Those whom God called, he justified, and those whom he justified he will glory (Romans 8:30). There is no sense

³¹ White, *What Every Christian Should Know About the Qur'an*, 156.

³² Charles H. Spurgeon, "Our Manifesto," Sermon No. 2185. Delivered on Friday Morning, April 25th, 1890. Cited from <http://www.erictyoung.com/2015/01/07/christianity-in-contrast-to-islam-and-all-other-religions-charles-spurgeon/>

that a person whom God has enabled to live faithfully will has his fate changed at the last minute. This notion of God working out a committed and orderly plan of salvation is completely absent in Islam.

Also missing in Islam is the testifying work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers. In Calvinism, the Holy Spirit objectively witnesses to our spirit that we belong to God. For example, Romans 8:16 is proof of both the witness of our spirit *as well as* the witness of the Holy Spirit himself that we are children of God. Paul writes, “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” Given the covenantal work of the Triune God in general and the work of the Holy Spirit in particular, predestination in Calvinism provides grounds for assurance in way that Islam simply cannot.

Finally, because Calvinism focuses its doctrine of predestination in Jesus Christ, it underscores and reassures us of God’s essential goodness. Although there yet remains great mystery regarding God’s eternal decree in Calvinism, Christ’s incarnation and crucifixion gives us every reason to trust God. There is no higher proof of God’s love for sinners than the incarnation and crucifixion. While we may not understand God’s decree, we have every reason to trust that he knows what he is doing. There is no such assurance in Islam. God may be powerful but what proof is there he is good?

IV. CONCLUSION

I have shown that while Islam and Calvinism affirm divine sovereignty and human responsibility in similar ways, there are yet considerable differences regarding predestination which the Calvinist can and ought in good conscience address. In particular, the theological context in which predestination is embedded in Islam and Calvinism significantly shapes and informs how the doctrine works itself out. What is harsh in Islam is warm in Calvinism. What is

impersonal in Islam is personal in Calvinism. What is arbitrary in Islam is purposeful in Calvinism.

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