

A Christian Response to the Islamic Doctrine of Predestination

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Abstract

Predestination is a doctrine that has received a lot of theological space both in the Christian and Islamic circles, however, the doctrine has had a lot of diverse views from great theologians of the Church in the early years of Christendom. The debate around this doctrine and especially on the position of man's free will and his choice of acts concerning God's election or predestination has given birth to many theological positions throughout the centuries. In his teachings to Muslims, Muhammed was against the discussion of God's nature and predestination by his followers. The probable reason for the prophet's adamancy about discussing God's nature and predestination was fear of schism that could rock his newly formed Islamic religion as it was with the Christian religion. After the death of Muhammed, many Islamic theological schools came into being because of their political interpretation of the legitimate leadership line that Muslims should follow. The doctrine of predestination became a subject of interest to many of the Islamic groups that came into existence while they were discussing their theological ambitions. While there is a lot more on the subject in discussion, this paper seeks to discuss theological positions of different Islamic theological thoughts that later became Islamic theological schools. These schools formed many of Islamic doctrines that are taught and embraced by Muslims in the world. The paper will later propose some Christian responses to the Islamic doctrine of predestination and give implications for Christian witness.

Key Words: *Islam, Al-Qadar, Jabir, Predestination, Christian, Witness, Qur'an*

Introduction

The debate around the doctrine of predestination, and especially on the position of man's free will and his choice of acts concerning God's election or predestination, has given birth to many theological positions throughout the centuries. Muhammed discouraged his followers from discussing the nature of God and predestination because he did not want to see his newly formed religion rocked with schism like the Christian religion which he accused of lack of unity amongst other divergent views (Saeed, 2006, p. 60). Many Islamic theological schools came into existence after the death of Muhammad. This was because of the political interpretation of the legitimate leadership line that should be followed by Muslims after Muhammad. The groups that differed and split went on to formulate their theological interpretation that would suit their theological ambitions. It is out of such discourses that the doctrine of predestination came into being. Predestination in the Qur'anic and Islamic usage has a set of meanings which all center around the power of God over human beings and their future fate.

The author will explore the usage of Arabic words used in the Qur'an to denote the power of God over all things and his power to define their future. The author of this paper will discuss theological positions of different Islamic theological schools of thought. He will later

propose some Christian responses to the Islamic doctrine of predestination and give implications for Christian witness.

Al-Qadar

The Arabic word is used to describe divine willpower over all that exists in the universe (Saeed, 2006, p. 160). Allah's power and predestination are used interchangeably whereby Allah's power (*al-qadr*) is manifested by the presence of his angels. If God has destined for something to happen, then it is the work of the angels to put it into action (Abdul-Rahman, 2003, p. 471).

Al-qadar is used to show the vast measure of the plan of God over all things. It also has the connotation of pre-planned things that no one can change (Morgan, 2010, p. 5). In other words, it is God's determined plans which are realized (Nagel, 1999, p. 210). This leaves human beings without any clue of their future fate other than to continually hope and pray that God may have predestined them to paradise. *Qadar* is used in the Qur'an to mean a decree or a command (Hoffman, 2012, p. 31). From this perspective, it means that man does not have any choice apart from acceptance of what has been determined for him by God. In other words, God has determined (*qadar*) all events, including man's actions (Watt, 1985, p. 25).

Jabr

Jabr was used to denote a matter that lies somewhere between mandatory and the free will of human actions (Watt, 1985, p. 29; Langermann, 2011, p. 273). *Jabr* and *Qadar* are used to mean free will and predestination respectively (Nasr, 2013, p. 302).

The Islamic theological views of predestination

Islamic theology has developed over the years with various schools which came out with divergent views on the legitimate heirs of Muhammad. At the Battle of Siffin, Ali, who was nominated as the third heir of the caliphate, fought with Mu'awiya and later agreed for an arbitration with him. Ali's arbitration agreement was not received by his followers who later broke away from his camp and opposed both Ali and Mu'awiya (Saeed, 2006, p. 61). This led to their withdrawal and they earned their name as the Kharijis (Ibid.) This group and other groups later emerge as schools which based their arguments on leadership and theological interpretations. It is in this regard that various views on God's power over future determination were born. These schools appeared after Mohammed borrowed extensively from some Greek philosophies. This would later be reflected in the theological interpretations of various Islamic schools of theology.

The Qadariyya

From the perspective of the traditional theological thought, the question of predestination is tied up with man's free will and God's will in the Islamic view: however, the hadith are clear on the free will of man, and in this sense, man has no free will apart from what God has willed even before someone is born (Hoffman, 2012, p. 31). Such a view has attracted a lot of concerns, one being whether God is just in his dealings with man. Such theological concerns have led to the formation of a group known as the Qadariyya. The emergence of the Qadariyya group in the eighth century was realized when the doctrine of predestination had been popularly taught by those who viewed the power of God as being reduced.

The Qadariyya school of theology held an opposite view from the traditional thought that man is responsible for his actions, and in this regard, they were branded by many traditional Muslim scholars as propagators of the human free will (Al-Salimi & Madelung, 2014, p. 5), a view that is seen to remove God's responsibility for the evil acts of man because he has

willed it before a person is born (Hoffman, 2012, p. 31). On the same argument, the Qadariyya held that men's actions are not dependent on anything and anybody, it is entirely on human free will (Nasr, 2013, p. 302). The Qur'an teaches that God knows the future and all that will happen to the entire life of man. The Qadariyya is also opposed to the above teaching and views it as implicating God to be a condoner of man's evil actions. Ibn Taymiyya went on to accuse the Qadari in his writings for denying God's ability to make someone to be obedient or disobedient (Hoover, 2007, p. 106). Mutazili Abu al-Husayn al-Basri became a famous proponent of the Qadariyya views on the creation of evil and good. The next section of this paper will explore the theology of the Jabriyya concerning the doctrine of predestination.

The Jabriyya

Contrary to the Qadariyya, the Jabriyya are opposed to the view that human beings have choices in their actions. This group emerged during the Umayyad Caliphate in the 7th century (Saeed, 2006, p. 158). On the view of choices and acts, the Jabrians defended the oneness of God and argued that advocating for human free will would mean that God is embattled in a competition with another being other than himself (Hoffman, 2012, p. 245). Kim in his lecture notes argues that the Jabrians opposed human free will and upheld the predestination of human actions (2020, p. 56). This is to say that a man has no power over his life or actions. The point of contention here is the omnipotence of God which many Jabrian Islamic scholars defend with vigour. They further assert that man has no power to make decisions; it is the will of God that dictates his behavior. The only person who has power over human acts is God alone; therefore, human beings have no choice concerning their future, including their eternity (Menchinger, 2016, p. 446).

The Mutazilites

In the early eighth century, a first theological school emerged in Iraq. This country was believed to be a ground for the groups that broke away or had divergent views on leadership and theological matters (Saeed, 2006, p. 63). In the middle of the seventh century, Wasil ibn Ata was dissatisfied by the way his mentor Hasan al-Basri was handling the question of the state of a man who commits a major sin. Instead, he broke away and became a *i'talaza* meaning "one who breaks away" (Saeed, 2006, pp. 63–64). The Mutazilites were rational in their arguments regarding their argument about the power of God and man's free will. The Mutazilites formed the first school of dogmatic theology. They believed in the unity of God, divine reward and punishment, and God's justice which allows human beings to use their own free will (Morgan, 2010, p. 178). The choice of good and bad acts should be aided by the principle of "commanding good and prohibiting evil" using their reasoning abilities which would help them to perceive what is good and evil (Saeed, 2006, p. 66). According to Menchinger, this group of Islamic theologians believed that God wills and creates human actions and these are the voluntary ones only (2016, p. 447). A further elaboration on this view is that the good that God has created is helpful to mankind while the Sunnites kept holding that both good and bad come from God, a view that would best keep someone away from a dualistic mind (Nagel, 1999, p. 242). If God is believed to be the genesis of both good and evil, then it means that man is busy with what has been unavoidable, something which alludes that their free will would help restrain them from sinning (Adamson, 2016, p. 13).

The Asharites

The Asharite school of theology was started by a ninth-century Islamic theologian Abu al Hasan Ali Ibn Isma'il al Ashari who had been holding the Mutazilites' views but separated from them and went on to teach principles that were against the views of Mutazilites. He

refuted the position held by the Mutazilites of free will and predestination and argued that the human acts are as a result of God's creation and that human beings can only attain them (Hoffman, 2012, p. 34). Al-Ashari went on to disregard any causality outside, a view that he saw would minimize the omnipotence of God over all things (Menchinger, 2016, p. 447). After breaking away from the Mutazilites' camp, al-Ashari went to teach against what he had held including the attacks he meted on his former theological school which included the views of free will (Saeed, 2006, p. 66). He continued to teach that a believer who has sinned may continue receiving God's mercy so long as that believer does not abandon his faith after sinning (Ibid., 68).

Al-Ashari also argued that human choice cannot give a person the power to act but God is the giver of such acts. By this, al-Ashari continued to teach that God has the absolute power concerning the acts of men except what men were able to do (Hoffman, 2012, p. 34). This argument does not absolve God from being the cause of evil based on the acts that men do which are regarded by any society as evil and are against the social norms and the wellbeing of a community; thus, these acts are unacceptable. The Asharites' position was regarded as a medial position which states that Allah is the causer of human acts, but it is upon man's experiences and his responsibility for the outcome of his acts (Kim, 2020, p. 56; Morgan, 2010, p. 7).

The Maturidi

The Maturidi school of theology was started by Abu Mansur al-Maturidi in the ninth century whereby his views were introduced in the eastern provinces of the Baghdad caliphate (Saeed, 2006, p. 70). Maturidi held ideas that were closely related to al-Ashari but as a follower of the Hanafi law school, he employed reason in some of his theological arguments. He was also of the view that God gave man the power to choose and act (Ibid.) so that his vile actions will not be as a result of God's goodwill (Bruckmayr, 2009, p. 75), a thought that the traditionalist was against. Maturidi used his reasoning capabilities to make conclusions in most of his theological arguments of the Qur'an, and his criticism to other Islamic scholars (Bruckmayr, 2009, p. 19). Maturidi differs from Mutazila and al-Ashari on the question of the attributes of God and his human control, a theological view that led him to part ways with them (Renard, 2011, p. 107).

Christians' Response to Islamic Views on Predestination

The doctrine of predestination from the Christian perspective has attracted diverse viewpoints starting from the time of the Church Fathers up to the 21st Century. The author does not intend to delve into this great theological discussion; however, a brief description of evangelical's view of predestination will be explored.

A brief description from the evangelical perspective of predestination

The doctrine of predestination finds its explanation in the order of salvation as argued by Christian theologians (Grudem, 1994, p. 670). This doctrine historically has had a lot of controversies from Augustine's and Pelagius' argument. The debate of predestination was further extended and became a great subject of discussion amongst theologians with various view-points during the Reformation period of the Church (Erickson, 1998, p. 920).

From the evangelical perspective, predestination coincides with God's eternal verdict, which he has ordained for every person. It is also God's act of causing people to choose what he wills for them (McGrath, 2016, p. 346). The Calvinistic five points of predestination seemed to have received a wide acceptance by many theologians. Such views are points of discussion together with other views that have shaped Christian theology (McGrath, 2016, p. 346–47).

Responses to the Islamic views of predestination

In this section, the author will use Biblical perspectives to respond to the Islamic views of the doctrine of predestination. The Qadariyya school of theology propagates the view that man is endowed with free will, and that he has the power to choose every action in his life, whether good or evil. They felt that God cannot be the cause of evil, and in this case does not allow human beings to use their reasoning ability. The above view resonates the Christian teaching of man's free will. Humanity was endowed with this ability in the Garden of Eden when God gave them the power to choose to obey his command or not. Eventually, the man succumbed to the trap of the devil and he finally ate from the forbidden tree, attracting the consequences of his choices (Genesis 2:15-17). Erickson argues that it would have been not genuine for human beings not to have been endowed with a choice (1998, p. 448).

The Jabriyya Islamic school of theology defended the unity of God. They opposed the Qadariyya view of man's free will. The Jabriyya defend the power of God over everything he has created on earth and that he cannot share his power with anyone or anything. The above views are also held by Christians, who believe that God is a jealous God, and he cannot share his power and glory with anyone (Isaiah 42:8). God is not weak that he needs a defense or to be helped by anyone; He is all in all.

The general and special revelation of God clearly shows that he is a strong and powerful God who does not require the aid of anyone to perform his divine purpose in the world. He can command for things to appear and to let them disappear by the pronouncement of his word and it will be done under his will (Genesis 17:1; 18:1-14).

The Mutazilites shared the same view with the Jabriyya school of theology about man's predestination. They both argued for the unity of God and his justice, but on matters regarding freedom of choice, the Mutazilites taught that man's reasoning abilities would help them to choose what is good as opposed to choosing what is evil. The Mutazilites are also of the view that God creates voluntary human acts which man should respond to by choosing good acts and not evil. The use of reasoning in human actions finds support from the Bible. God calls human beings to reason together with him and to consider his offer of forgiveness of sin as recorded in the Bible (Isaiah 1:18; 43:9, 26). From these verses, we can deduce that humans have been well-endowed with reasoning abilities which would help them to subject their acts to it before yielding to any of them that would either be interpreted and good or bad.

From the Biblical perspective, God does not create free will acts for man to either choose or not. His justice has given man the freedom of choice with the help of his reasoning abilities so that he would be guided according to God's will in his steps. A human being without reasoning abilities would mean that predestination would be a mechanistic act and that God would not have exercised his justice by allowing a man to freely use what he has given him. As Christians, we can conclude that the use of reason as held by the Mutazilites is in order so long as it does not go against the Biblical perspective (Grudem, 1994, p. 34).

Al-Ashari, as mentioned earlier, had been holding the Mutazilite view of free will and the use of reason on predestination. When he broke away from the group, he taught that human acts are God's acts and that there is no cause outside God. He further argued that man can only enact what God has created. This view faced a lot of opposition, for it portrays God as the cause of evil. In this case, man bears the consequence of choosing whatever action in his life, but could he have chosen whatever action if it had not been created by God? This is a question that both Christian and Islamic theologians wrestle with.

If we can go by the Asharite view that man can only enact what is predestined, whether good or bad, then it means that God has created a human being without the freedom of choice. It can be argued here that God will not be a good judge because he has not allowed

man to use his reasoning abilities and that the question of choice of acts can be used to convict him. God in the Bible gave man the power to choose and not the possibility to acquire the acts. Al-Ashari taught also that man has no power to act and this would also mean that man cannot yield to the call of salvation (Matthew 11:28-30). If a man is not able to choose for himself other than the aspect of acquisition, then it shows the extent of his desperation in trying to understand what he might have chosen.

From the Biblical perspective, God creates ways that man can use to yield to his calling of salvation (Luke 19:1-10). God takes the initiative in man's salvation as opposed to man's initiative of seeking God in ways that are ritualistic and based on meritorious acts instead of grace.

Maturidi held some theological views that were propagated by the Mutazilites and specifically the application of reason in the quest to know God. The application of reason in the quest to know God and the choice of acts is an interesting perspective that has got a greater percentage of the influence from philosophical thoughts that were present during the time of its emergence: however, reason cannot be used categorically for a person to understand the doctrine of predestination. The New Testament teaches that faith in God is very essential for someone to have hope for the things he cannot see in this present world, things that assure him of his eternal condition in the hereafter (Hebrews 11:1-6). A further Biblical response to Maturidi's use of reason to know God and choice of acts is that God knows the future of all humans and that his election or predestination works in accordance with his plan for man to conform to the likeness of Christ in the redemption process as indicated in Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 8:28-29; Boice, 1986, p. 139).

Implications for Christian Witness

From Erickson's definition of predestination, God has chosen people for eternal life and eternal damnation (Erickson, 1998, p. 926). The widely accepted position by the Islamic theological schools is that God has already destined the fate of all human beings. We can comfortably say that God holds the future of both the Christians and Muslims. The theological similarity on the question of predestination from both religions does not mean that there are no points of divergence that call for a further discussion. From the Biblical perspective, God has a clear plan for man's salvation which culminates in conforming to the likeness of Christ in readiness for the marriage between the Lamb and his bride.

The Islamic view on predestination presents to Christians opportunities for sharing the gospel with Muslims who are not sure about their future fate, or afterlife. The author of this paper will propose key points of engagement to be used by Christians and ministers of the gospel as they interact and dialogue with Muslims about their future lives and the hope in Christ Jesus.

The acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God by Muslims is a basis to initiate a conversation around the Bible's teaching on God's sovereignty. The Bible teaches that God is almighty (2 Corinthians 6:18), which means that he has the power and authority to do anything without consulting anyone. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians assured his audience that God can supply what they have asked and beyond their imagination (Ephesians 3:20). The latter verse presents God as one who can be reached by those he created; he is not too far to be reached or for them to reach. We can also deduce from this verse that God has given man the power to choose to seek or not to seek him. The 'asking' in the verse is the responsibility of the man. God has already supplied the opportunity for man to reach him. This does not mean that man is the one who started the plan of salvation, but it is God who did it first.

We find another connection with some Islamic theological schools that argued for man's free will. This is a point of connection which Christians can use to share the gospel. The

invitation to believe in Jesus as recorded in John 3:16 clearly shows that man is endowed with the freedom to choose eternal life, which is offered freely by Jesus, or to remain in one's sinful nature. God has already extended the offer for man to choose; for there is a reward for those who will heed his calling.

Paul's teaching on the assurance of salvation and the believer's guarantee of heaven (Ephesians 1:13-14) can be used to invite the Muslims to accept Jesus who has given the assurance of their future life and place unlike the Muslim's uncertainty of God's choice for them either to paradise or to condemnation in hell. A Christian has the assurance of his salvation in Jesus Christ; those who are hidden in Christ Jesus will never have a taste of hell which is contrary to what the Qur'an teaches.

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