



## Dimensions of Divine Freedom

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### Abstract

Divine freedom is reviewed with respect to three important themes: fate, revisions in divine decisions, and divine obligations. A study of the first theme yields the conclusion that God is free because He has absolute power and authority. In addition, God is free in relation to human beings in the sense that He can do what they do not expect. This theme is found under the heading of decree and measure, *qaḍā'* and *qadar*. Theologians have also grappled with the problem that the divine decrees appear to change, and on the tablet containing the divine decrees, there can be changes and erasures. This leads to the second topic, *badā'*, the apparent revision of divine decisions, which the theologians treat as abrogations of commands. God can be understood to foster a relationship with us in which He will appear to us as free to respond to our changing conditions, especially prayer and repentance. Finally, the obligations God sets for Himself and reveals to us through scripture are considered. This indicates a kind of divine freedom that only has meaning in the loving relationship between God and His servants that is cultivated through divine revelation. It is then suggested that these various dimensions of divine freedom can best be understood through complementing philosophical and scriptural approaches to the issues and that the understanding of this kind of synthetic hermeneutics can be deepened through comparative theology.

Research Article



### Keywords

*badā'*, comparative theology, divine decrees, divine obligations, fate, philosophical theology, *qaḍā'* and *qadar*, scripturalist theology.

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## Introduction: Freedom in the Islamic Sciences

If we want to investigate the topic of freedom in Islamic theology, we must first make clear the relevant concepts in the various Islamic sciences. We should not expect to find a single concept. Divine freedom is not a kind of political freedom, although divine freedom is often compared to the freedom of a powerful king. We could discuss the concepts of freedom employed by philosophers, jurists, mystics, exegetes, poets, and other Muslim authors. We can introduce freedom as a divine attribute, or as the opposite of fate, of slavery, of subjugation, imprisonment, or heteronomy. The topic to be treated in this paper is limited to some types of freedom that may be attributed to God. Muslim theologians have considered not only divine freedom and human freedom, but have also discussed questions about the freedom of Satan, the jinn, angels, and other creatures. The thesis I will defend here is that we can improve the conception of divine freedom in Islamic theology through comparative theology. In particular, I will consider a few of the main themes relevant to divine freedom that we find in Islamic theology, especially in relation to God's obligations to Himself. However, I will begin with two other issues: fate and changes of divine decision. In the background of all of these issues of divine freedom, as in many other issues of Islamic theology, is the key question of the relationship between the one and the many. Divine unity is atemporal, but God establishes a multiplicity of relations to His creatures that develop through the course of time.

## Three Themes of Divine Freedom in Shi'i Theology

### I. Decree and Measure

Three themes of Shi'i theology are especially important for the question of divine freedom: *qaḍā'* and *qadar, badā'*, and *wujūb 'alā Allah*, that is, fate, divine changes in decision, and the obligations God has to Himself.

Although there is no Arabic word for divine freedom, relevant ideas are not difficult to find in the Qur'ān. God does what He wills.

To Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. He creates whatever He wishes... (42:49).

Have you not regarded that whoever is in the heavens and whoever is on the earth prostrates to Allah, as well as the sun, the moon, and the stars, the mountains, the trees, and the animals and many humans? And many have come to deserve the punishment. Whomever Allah humiliates will find no one who may bring him honour. Indeed, Allah does whatever He wishes (22:18).

We also find this idea in the Psalms:

Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases (Ps. 115:3).  
 Whatever the Lord pleases He does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas  
 and all deeps (Ps 135:6).

This is our first clue about the concept of divine freedom. God can do what He wills. Thus, here we find freedom in the sense of power or ability, and also the relation between freedom and the will (*irādah*).

Second, we have to take a look into pre-Islamic history. The tribal system of the Arabs of the Hijāz is described in the ten-volume work of Jawād ‘Alī, *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī tāriḫ al-‘arab qabl al-Islām* (The Detailed History of the Arabs before Islam). Jawād ‘Alī claims that many of the pagan Arabs saw themselves as slaves of the gods. To be a slave (*‘abd*) of someone great, powerful and just was by no means a shameful status. Individuals, as well as clans, sometimes had theophorical names, for example, *‘Abd al-Lāt*, *‘Abd Manāf*, *‘Abd Shams*.<sup>1</sup> The gods were considered to be free because they were not slaves of anyone and others were slaves of the gods. After the conversion to Islam, it was natural for the people to consider themselves to be slaves of Allah. In English, too, the idea of subservience to God is prominent, as in calling worship “service”. In Arabic, the concepts of slavery, service, and worship are all called *‘ubūdiyyah*. Once again, God is free because he has power over all others and no one has power over him; but here the power is not just that he does what he will, but that he has sovereign authority. He gives the command; all others must obey.

These two concepts of divine freedom, God’s power and His sovereignty or authority, are closely related. It is because he has the power to bring forth or destroy whatever he will that all are obedient to him. It is because all things are obedient to him that he creates order. The stars and planets and even time (*dahr*) itself are not what determine our fates, as in the pre-Islamic fatalism, because they are obedient to God.

He disposed the night and the day for you, and the sun, the moon, and the stars are disposed by His command. There are indeed signs in that for people who exercise their reason (16:12)<sup>2</sup>.

Instead of the old fate, which was believed to be determined by the stars, the days, or the time, we find a new fate, one at the service of or commanded by God. While the old fatalism was seen as negating or at least curtailing

1. (‘Alī, 1993). This citation and the description is from (El Kaisy-Friemuth, 2019), p.102.

2. Also: (22:18), (7:54).

human freedom, the fate decided upon by God provides a framework within which human responsibility becomes possible. The Arabic terms *qaḍā'* and *qadar*, decree and measure, were used in connection with both the old fatalism and with its replacement by divine decree and measure. Gerhard Böwering has explained this as follows:

In the pre-Islamic era, Arab time was characterized by fatalism, *dahr*, which erases human works without hope for life beyond death. Also called the “days” or the “nights,” *dahr* is the cause of earthly happiness and misery; it is death’s doom and the measure of destiny; it changes everything, and nothing resists it. While *dahr* held sway like fate, it could be transcended by a moment marked out in tribal memory and often preserved in poetry. *Dahr* was thus punctuated by the Days of the Arabs, *ayyam al-‘Arab* the days of vengeance in combat and tribal prowess, when memorable events placed markers in the recollection of the course of events.

The Qur’an rejects the pre-Islamic fatalism of *dahr*. Instead, it explains time from the perspective of a transcendent monotheism promising paradise and threatening eternal damnation. Just as the pre-Islamic Arabs had their days of victory and vengeance, so Allah had His days of deliverance and punishment. God’s personal command, “‘Be!’ and it is, *kun fa yakūn*” obliterated the spell of fate (Böwering, 1997, p.57).

Time, like all other creatures, must obey the commands of God. Here we find a very important theological (as opposed to philosophical) reason for the doctrine that God cannot be temporal. Whatever is temporal cannot be completely free from the determinations of time. God is atemporal because He is not subject to time; rather, time is subject to Him.

*Qaḍā'* is used for a verdict, and also for the implementation or execution of a verdict, and edict or determination. It is often taken to be the last step before something happens.

It is He who gives life and brings death. When He decides (*qaḍā'*) on a matter, He just says to it, ‘Be!’ and it is (40:68)<sup>1</sup>.

*Qadar*, on the other hand, is a portion or measure. Among the early *āyāt* about the creation, we find:

And who [God] sets the measure (*qaddara*) and guides (87:3).

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1. Also: (19:35), (3:47), (2:117).

And somewhat later comes the revelation:

We have created all things according to measure (*biqadar*) (54:49).

In a Madinan Sura, we find:

Verily, Allah carries out His commands; Allah sets for everything a measure (*qadran*) (65:3).

God is therefore free because He determines what He wills, and guides whom He will; but His decisions are not arbitrary. Everything is according to measure.

The Muslim theologians raised the question: Must God do what is required by the measure? If so, then God would appear to have less power than the measure. The measure would be the deciding factor, not God Himself or the divine will. But if the measure does not put any constraint on God, then the divine will would be arbitrary, outside the bounds of any measure. He could have no reason for the things He does, for His reasons would constitute the measure. The Mu'tazilah and the Shi'ah proposed a solution: The measure or standard is God's own wisdom which is nothing other than the divine essence itself. How that is to be explained was also disputed among the theologians; but the idea became widespread that nothing God wills is arbitrary, because it accords with His wisdom.

The Ash'arites also found a solution to the problem: God does everything according to the proper measure or standard because it is His own will that determines what the measure or standard is. God always does what is best without any reason apart from the divine will. God created all things according to measure, but not while he first created the measure and then acted in accordance with it. He creates the things and their measure together.

The different directions the theologians took with respect to this question became quite complicated and hundreds of thinkers have defended their positions on these issues with skill and subtlety.

The problem is similar to the famous *Euthyphro Dilemma*. In Plato's dialog *Euthyphro*, Socrates and Euthyphro attempt to determine the essence of piety. Socrates says: "Consider this: Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (Plato, 1961, *Euthyphro* 10a). Likewise, we can also ask: Has God willed the measure for His creation because it is best so, or is the creation according to the measure just because God willed it? Defenders of the second alternative think that if God must do something, then it is clear that He is not free, for His power is then limited. Defenders of the first alternative respond: First, the will of God is unlimited because no one can force God's hand to make Him do anything He does not

want to; second, it is not a condition of freedom that one could will other than what one wills; and third, the measure is not a limitation on the power of God because it remains true that if He had willed otherwise, then it would have been otherwise, even if this were impossible.

For the Shi'a, the following narration from Imam 'Ali (peace be with him) is very important:

Truly, the Commander of the Faithful [Imam 'Ali], peace be with him, left a wall that was leaning for another wall. Then it was said to him: O Commander of the Faithful! Are you trying to escape from the decree (*qadā'*) of Allah? Then he said: I am escaping from the decree of Allah for the measure (*qadar*) of Allah, the Mighty and Magnificent (Ibn Babawayh, 2009, p.400).

Here most of the commentators try to show that although everything God wills comes to pass, human beings are nonetheless free, because their free will is necessary for what God wills in cases of the free actions of humans.<sup>1</sup> However, we also find a further dimension of *divine* freedom here. We cannot indicate some plan and say that it determines all details in advance regardless of what God wills. We can always leave a leaning wall for another. Fate is in our own hands, although our hands and everything else occurs in the framework that God has erected. What God has made manifest of His will in the past is not sufficient to determine how the divine will manifests itself in the future.

According to the doctrine of the Unity of God's Action (*tawhīd af'ālī*), everything that God does results from a single command. This command is issued not prior to what happens, but atemporally, from beyond time. For temporal creatures, the divine command appears as a multiplicity of commands over the course of time. In the difference between the atemporal and the temporal, there is room for both human and divine freedom. Not everything has been decided in time since pre-eternity. There is a general order and there are decrees. The decrees are also changeable. This allows for divine freedom as well as human freedom because it can appear in such a manner that, from our perspective, God does something that we could not have expected.

## II. Revised Divine Decisions

According to many narrations and in view of the Qur'ān, Muslim theologians say that without exception, everything that happens in all its details is written in a well-protected tablet (*lawḥ mahfūz*). This does not mean, however, that

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1. As is argued, for example, in (Mutahhari, 1357/1978), pp.112-115.

everything in it is predetermined. What is written can also be erased. The well-protected tablet is also sometimes termed *the mother of the book* (*umm ul-kitāb*):

Certainly We have sent apostles before you, and We appointed for them wives and descendants; and an apostle may not bring a sign except by Allah's leave. There is a written [ordinance] for every term: | Allah effaces and confirms whatever He wishes and with Him is the Mother Book (13: 38-39).

If something was previously written and then is erased or altered, one might be tempted to say that something new occurred to God, or that He changed His mind about what He had previously decided, although this cannot be so, since God is unchangeable. The Arabic verb for the appearance of something new to someone is *badā'*. This raises the question: How is it possible for something new to appear to God if God is beyond time and space and is omniscient?

Although the vast majority of Shi'i scholars say that the Imāms cannot make mistakes, many historians are of the opinion that the sixth Imam, Ja'far Ṣādiq (peace be with him), somehow indicated that the next Imam would be his son Ismā'īl; but then Ismā'īl passed away before his father. Our scholars say that there is no narration that the Imam actually named his successor. It was only a strong suspicion among the people who expected the Imam to be succeeded by his oldest son. In a narration, it is reported that after the death of his son, Imam Ṣādiq (peace be with him) said: "Nothing newly appeared (*badā'*) to Him like what newly appeared in the case of my son, Ismā'īl." The opponents of Imam Ṣādiq (peace be with him) accused him of thinking that God had regretted what He had decided and changed His mind. There are also narrations that Imam Ṣādiq (peace be with him) said that nothing is new for God and that for Him, regret and change of mind are impossible. Later discussions are mostly over the semantics of the narrations, especially over the differences between *badā'* and *naskh* (abrogation).

The doctrine of *badā'* offers hope. Although everything occurs in accordance with the single command of God, what we think is a sure thing might turn out otherwise. The late Mahmoud Ayoub quotes the great collector of hadiths, Majlisi, as follows:

An ancient prophet was commanded by God to announce to the king of the land his imminent death. The king prayed so fervently that he fell off his throne. He prayed saying, "O Lord, grant me respite until my infant son grows up and I am able to put my affairs in order." God relented and commanded the prophet to tell the king that God had heard his prayers and added fifteen years to his span of life. The prophet

protested, saying, “O Lord, you know that I never told a lie!” But God revealed to him, “You are no more than a commanded servant, so go and do as you are told; for ‘God will not be questioned about what He does’” (Q. 21: 23).<sup>1</sup>

If there is divine freedom in God’s incomprehensible essence, there are also dimensions of divine freedom that can only be found in the temporal relationships among the results of the divine command as we experience them in our lives and through which we find hope.

### III. Divine Obligations

Another important sign of divine freedom is to be found in the following *āyah*:

He will not be questioned about what He does, but they will be questioned (21: 23).

God is not *responsible*, in the literal sense of the word. Human beings will be questioned about what they have done on the Day of Judgment. Thus, God is free in the sense that there is no one to whom He is answerable. He is not *liable* for what He does. Nevertheless, there are two important exceptions to this: First, He is counterfactually accountable; and second, He is answerable to Himself. If God had not obtained recognition of His lordship over them before their corporeal creation, and had He not sent them any prophets, then humans would have had something to gripe about.

When your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants and made them bear witness over themselves, [He said to them,] ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘Yes indeed! We bear witness.’ [This,] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘Indeed we were unaware of this,’ | or lest you should say, ‘Our fathers ascribed partners [to Allah] before [us] and we were descendants after them. Will You then destroy us because of what the falsifiers have done?’ (7: 172-173).

apostles, as bearers of good news and warners, so that mankind may not have any argument against Allah, after the [sending of the] apostles; and Allah is all-mighty, all-wise (4: 165).

We could also understand the entire covenant theology as providing an example of divine obligation. If God were not faithful to His side of the

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1. (Majlisi, 1387-1392/1956-1972), vol.4, pp.95-96. Cited in (Ayoub, 1986), p.631, which also draws the connection between the indeterminacy that results from what appear to us to be changes in divine decrees and hope.



covenants He made, then the other party to the contract could justifiably object. God has revealed:

Allah has promised those who have faith and do righteous deeds forgiveness and a great reward (5:9).

When those who have faith in Our signs come to you, say, ‘Peace to you! *Your Lord has made mercy obligatory for Himself*: whoever of you commits an evil [deed] out of ignorance and then repents after that and reforms, then He is indeed all-forgiving, all-merciful’ (6:54)<sup>1</sup>.

Among the obligations that God has to Himself, there are also indications in the following *āyāt* (as with the above, all are from Meccan *suras*):

Then We will save Our messengers and those who believe. That is a right upon us, that We save the believers (10:103).

There is no animal on the earth, but that its sustenance is [an obligation] on Allah,... (11:6).

And upon Allah [is an obligation of] direction to the path; and of them some are deviating. Had He willed, He would have guided you all (16:9).

And indeed, before you We sent messengers to their people; then We took vengeance on the guilty. And it was a right against us to help the believers (30:47).

After the *hijrah* to Madina, further divine obligations were mentioned in the Qur’ān, for God obliged Himself to give compensation in the next life to those who died in the migration.

Whoever migrates in the way of Allah will find many havens and plenitude in the earth. And whoever leaves his home migrating toward Allah and His Apostle, and is then overtaken by death, his reward shall certainly fall on Allah, and Allah is all-forgiving, all-merciful (4:100).

Indeed Allah has bought from the faithful their souls and their possessions for paradise to be theirs: they fight in the way of Allah, kill, and are killed. A promise binding upon Him in the Torah and the Evangel and the Quran. And who is truer to his promise than Allah? So rejoice in the bargain you have made with Him, and that is the great

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1. My emphasis, of course. Cf. (6:12): Say, ‘To who belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth?’ Say, ‘To Allah. *He has made mercy obligatory for Himself*. He will surely gather you on the Day of Resurrection, in which there is no doubt. Those who have ruined their souls will not have faith’ (6:12).

success (9:111).

Allah will never break His covenant (promise, 'ahd)... (2:80).

Our Lord! You will indeed gather mankind on a day in which there is no doubt. Indeed Allah does not break His promise (*mī'ād*) (3:9).

According to a sermon from *Nahj al-Balāgha*, all rights are mutual or complementary, except for divine rights:

A right is very vast in description but very narrow in equitability of action. It does not accrue to any person unless it accrues against him also, and right does not accrue against a person unless it also accrues in his favour. If there is any right which is only in favour of a person with no (corresponding) right accruing against him it is solely for Allah, the Glorified, and not for His creatures by virtue of His might over His creatures and by virtue of the justice permeating all His decrees. Of course, He the Glorified, has created His right over creatures that they should worship Him and has laid upon Himself [the obligation of] their reward equal to several times the recompense as a mark of His bounty and the generosity of which He is capable.<sup>1</sup>

God gives Himself obligations in this *ḥadīth qudsī*:

و روى ان الله عزّ و جلّ يقول: "وجبت محبتي للمم تحابين في، و المتجالسين في، و المتزاورين في، و المتبازلين في"<sup>2</sup>

And it is narrated that Allah, the Mighty and Magnificent, says: "It has also been related that God says, "I have obligated (*wajabtu*) My love on those who love each other in Me, sit with each other in Me, visit each other in Me, and spend freely on each other in Me" (Maybudī, 2015, p.181).

In *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* there is a narration from Abū Dharr from the Prophet (ﷺ):

Allah, the Blessed and Exalted, says: My servants! I have forbidden Myself from doing injustice; and I have also forbidden this for you. So,

1. From Sermon 216, (al-Salih, 1412/1991),

<https://www.al-islam.org/nahjul-balagha-part-1-sermons/sermon-216-so-now-allah-glorified-has>:

فَالْحَقُّ أَوْسَعُ الْأَشْيَاءِ فِي التَّوَاضُعِ، وَأَضْيَقُهَا فِي التَّنَاضُفِ، لَا يَجْرِي لِأَحَدٍ إِلَّا جَرَى عَلَيْهِ، وَلَا يَجْرِي عَلَيْهِ إِلَّا جَرَى لَهُ وَلَوْ كَانَ لِأَحَدٍ أَنْ يَجْرِيَ لَهُ وَلَا يَجْرِيَ عَلَيْهِ، لَكَانَ ذَلِكَ خَالِصاً لَّهِ سُبْحَانَهُ دُونَ خَلْقِهِ، لِقُدْرَتِهِ عَلَى عِبَادِهِ، وَلِعَدْلِهِ فِي كُلِّ مَا جَرَتْ عَلَيْهِ ضُرُوفُ قَضَائِهِ، وَلِكَيْتُهُ جَعَلَ حَقَّهُ عَلَى الْعِبَادِ أَنْ يَطِيعُوهُ، وَجَعَلَ جَزَاءَهُمْ عَلَيْهِ مَضَاعِفَةَ التَّوَابِ تَفْضُلاً مِنْهُ، وَتَوَشَّعاً بِمَا هُوَ مِنَ الْعَزِيدِ أَهْلُهُ.

2. <https://ganjoor.net/meybodi/kashfol-asrar/s003/sh21/>

Also see: <https://abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2013/02/23/love-allah-assured-each-other/>

do not be unjust.<sup>1</sup>

Shahīd Mutahhari has written:

The philosophers believe that there is no existent that has any rights over God, so that we could speak of God being responsible for giving those rights to it; and then go on to call God “just” because He has performed all of His duties towards others to a tee. This is not the case and God’s justice is His graciousness and is identical with His being.<sup>2</sup>

Shahīd Mutahhari also quotes Sermon 216 of *Nahj al-Balaghah*, but he quotes only the first part and not that God sets obligations for Himself. I believe that this indicates a point in the tradition of Islamic theology that requires reconsideration, one that could benefit from the approach of comparative theology. The tradition fails to explain how God can have obligations when he sets these obligations Himself. Although there is a serious philosophical puzzle here similar to whether one can have duties to oneself<sup>3</sup> or make promises to oneself,<sup>4</sup> there remains a difference between what God simply does, and what he *has* to do as a matter of obligation, even if the obligation arises from His own commands. The problem is that the predominant metaphysical theology quickly identifies divine goodness, justice, and graciousness with God’s essence (*dhāt*) or being; in so doing, the relational character of divine freedom becomes obscured.

## Divine Freedom and Its Obligations: A Suggestion

In his *Philosophical Instructions*, ‘Alāmah Misbah explains that various divine attributes can be considered *both* as attributes of essence and as attributes of action, depending upon whether these attributes are considered as a power or capacity to enter into a relation with creatures or as the actualized power as found in the relation itself, in short, as power or performance. Since God has powers to enter into relationships whether or not they are actualized, such

1. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 2577:

عَنْ أَبِي ذَرٍّ عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: قَالَ اللَّهُ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى يَا عِبَادِي إِنِّي حَزَمْتُ الظُّلْمَ عَلَى نَفْسِي وَجَعَلْتُهُ بَيْنَكُمْ مُحَرَّمًا فَلَا تَظَالَمُوا.

2. Shahīd Mutahhari, *Divine Justice*, trans. Sulayman Hasan Abidi, Murtaza Alidina and Shuja Ali Mirza, Qom: International Center for Islamic Studies, 2004.

3. The general issues pertaining to the puzzle of how one can have duties to oneself are carefully reviewed in (Schmidt, 2022).

4. See: Rosati, 2011.

powers can be considered as attributes of essence. If, on the other hand, we consider these powers as actualized in relation to creatures, as performances, they will be attributes of action. For example, if “seeing” is interpreted as the power to see, then since God essentially has the power to see all things, “seeing” will be an attribute of essence. If, on the other hand, we interpret “seeing” as it is ordinarily understood, which involves a relationship to what is seen and is other than the one who sees, a performance of the action of seeing, then “seeing” will be an attribute of divine action.

The divine will, according to ‘Allāmah Misbah, can also be considered as an attribute of essence or as an attribute of action (Misbah Yazdi, 1999, Ch.67, pp.336-337). Here, the issue is further complicated since we may speak of the divine will in two senses, the generative (*tawkīnī*) and the legislative (*tashrī‘ī*). The difference between the generative and the legislative is reflected in two senses of “can”. Zayd *can* hit Amr in the generative sense given that he has the physical ability to perform the action and to take responsibility for it. But Zayd *cannot* hit Amr in the legislative sense when Zayd is forbidden from hitting Amr by an authority such as the moral law, or the order of a superior recognized by Zayd. Hence, a four-part division ensues:

1. The divine generative will as an attribute of essence;
2. The divine generative will as an attribute of action;
3. The divine legislative will as an attribute of essence;
4. The divine legislative will as an attribute of action.

The generative will is the will ascribed to God when He wills the existence of something, while the legislative will is ascribed to God when it is said that He wills obligations and permissions. Since our concern is with *obligations* that God gives to Himself, the divine will pertinent to this will be legislative. Since the obligation is one that God gives to Himself, if no other creature needs to be considered, the obligation would arise from the divine legislative will as an attribute of essence. If what God legislates for Himself is a certain kind of relationship with His creatures, for example, so that He is merciful toward them, this could be understood as the obligation to be merciful toward any creatures that might exist, so that the obligation is a conditional one that could be fulfilled even if there were no creatures, the obligation will remain at the level of the divine legislative will as an attribute of essence.

The obligation will arise from the divine will as an attribute of action only when the obligation can only occur in relation to actual creatures. There are two senses of the divine obligation of mercy that will arise in this manner from the divine will as an attribute of action. First, the obligation can be understood to occur only when there exist creatures to whom the obligation is owed.

Second, the obligation can be understood in the sense of what occurs only because it has been announced. If one announces that one will make a charitable donation, the announcement might be made in the sense of a mere prediction. Normally, though, such an announcement is taken to be an acceptance of obligation to make the gift.

When God reveals that he has taken upon Himself an obligation, he performs an entirely different speech act from that which would be performed if he had merely revealed that he would act in a certain manner. Saying that he has obliged Himself to be merciful is doing something other than just saying that he would be merciful, even if the two sorts of sayings would not result in any different divine behavior, even counterfactually. There is an important difference between saying that he will do no injustice and saying that he has made injustice forbidden for Himself. If God were merely to report that as a matter of fact, He would do no injustice, this could be understood in a purely descriptive way. When God reveals that He is obliged not to do injustice, God reveals an aspect of His freedom. He freely enters into a relation of obligation with those to whom the promise is made. He is not just describing Himself, He is holding Himself accountable in relation to those who are witness to the revelation.

When God announces through revelation that He has prescribed mercy for Himself, the obligation can occur as a result of the divine legislative will as an attribute of action because of the condition for someone to actually receive the announcement *or* because of the condition for the merciful treatment to be directed to actual creatures. In either case, there will be an attribute of action because of the essential reference to the relationships between God and His creatures. Furthermore, when God promises to be merciful or to guide the believers, or when He announces that He has made injustice forbidden for Himself, the fulfillment of the obligation unfolds in the course of time. Despite the atemporality of God, which I assume here from classical Islamic theology and philosophy, the actions of God are said to occur in time because of the temporality of their effects. Likewise, God's obligations can require a temporal relation between God and those to whom the obligations are announced who will form expectations on the basis of the divine promises.

Through the obligations that God imposes upon Himself, He invites those to whom the obligations are announced to enter into a trusting relationship with God. Such a relation is needed if we are to fully benefit from divine guidance. Exactly how we should understand trust in God (*tawakkul*) deserves extended study. Let it suffice for now to note that God cultivates the relations with human beings needed for Him to guide them through placing Himself under obligations that foster trust in Him and a loving relationship.

In announcing that He has taken on obligations, God manifests an aspect of divine freedom that is often overlooked in classical Islamic theology. It is the freedom to nurture relations of trust and love with His creatures.<sup>1</sup> God obligates Himself freely, in the sense that there is no coercive power or internal needs that could force Him to relate to us in this way. Furthermore, without revelation, there would be no way to know that God had obligated Himself. There can be no philosophical proof of the content of the divine revelation or of the self-given divine obligations. This is another dimension of God's freedom: the divine revelations could have had contents other than they did in the sense that independent of the revelations themselves, it would be impossible to determine their content, and in particular, it would be impossible to know what, if any, divine obligations God had assumed. This epistemic indeterminacy suffices for the context within which a relation believers have to God can be established wherein God expresses Himself as voluntarily taking on obligations.

## Divine Freedom and Comparative Theology

One of the prominent theological debates among the Shi'a in recent decades has been between theologians aligned with the tradition of Islamic philosophy, especially *ḥikmat al-muta'āliyah* (the philosophical system of Mulla Sadra) and those who are more skeptical of the influence of the Greek philosophical traditions in Islamic philosophy, most notably in, but by no means limited to, the *maktab al-tafkīk* (the school of separation, where the separation here is between theology and philosophy).<sup>2</sup> Some recent trends in Christian theology display a similar skepticism about the use of ancient Greek philosophy to understand theological issues.<sup>3</sup> For example, open and relational theologies seek to explicate a view of God and his relations to human beings that is more true to Biblical sources than what is found in classical medieval theologies.<sup>4</sup>

William Chittick points out that the conflict between the philosophical and

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1. The kinds of freedom that are made available through loving relationships are discussed independent of theological implications in (Bagnoli, *Emotions and the Dynamics of Reasons*, 2018; Bagnoli, *Love's Luck-Knot. Emotional vulnerability and symmetrical accountability*, 2020).

2. See: Rizvi, 2012.

3. (Rizvi, 2012, p.499), compares the Reformed Epistemology of Alvin Plantinga with the epistemology of the *maktab tafkīk*.

4. For articles taking a comparative approach to open theology from Muslim and Christian perspectives, see: Sanders & Von Stosch, 2022.

scripturalist approaches is by no means new:

Ibn al-Arabi... advises the Kalam experts to stop explaining away the apparent meaning of the verses and to open up their souls to God's disclosure of Himself in forms and symbols. He does not deny the necessity of the abstracting power of rationality (reason, in his view, is one of the two eyes of the heart), but he wants people to give equal time to imagination and symbolism.

Theologians who stressed the centrality of love in the human-divine relationship... tied the discussion back to Qur'anic symbolism and the everyday experience of the human soul... Ibn al-Arabi and others like him never forgot that it is God's very otherness, the fact that He utterly transcends every notion of transcendence, that puts Him in the midst of the human soul and opens it up to love (Chittick, 2013, pp.3-4).

Chittick goes on to quote a passage in which Ibn al-Arabi refers to "the Hadith of Gabriel, in which the Prophet defines *ihsān*, 'doing the beautiful,' as 'worshipping God *as if* you see Him'" (Chittick, 2013, pp.3-4). Although we cannot see God through sense perception, God sets up a relationship with us through divine revelation that requires us to consider Him *as if* He were standing before us. It is this relation of experiencing God's presence that is often neglected in philosophical theology.

The attitudes expressed in scripturalist tendencies among Christian and Muslim theologians are remarkably similar. They are characterized by a rejection of Greek philosophy, a call to reject or reform classical theologies, an emphasis on the need to turn to revealed sources, and attention to the ways in which the divine is experienced in a religious life. Instead of the "God of the philosophers", they boast of theologies of the "God of the scriptures". Scriptural theologies, as Ibn al-Arabi acknowledged, need not be seen as standing in opposition to philosophical theologies. The two tendencies can be complementary if the scriptural theologies are read as attempts to fill out the manner in which divinity appears in revelation independent of any philosophical analysis. With respect to the issue of divine freedom, for example, philosophical theologies are able to affirm that God is free insofar as there are no external factors that can constrain Him, and there are no conflicting internal motives or desires that could limit His will (Misbah Yazdi, 1999, Ch. 38, p.318). Without contradicting any of this, attention to the manner in which God reveals Himself in scripture and establishes loving relations with human beings that encourage trust in Him can lead us to an appreciation of relational dimensions of divine freedom, dimensions of freedom that are missed when attention is restricted to what can be supported by philosophical argumentation alone.

Sajjad Rizvi writes:

Out of these two methods [philosophical and scripturalist], a hybrid version will probably emerge that seeks to integrate philosophical inquiry about the nature of existence, selfhood, and knowledge with a deep contemplation of the texts transmitted from the Imams. The primary task of that hybrid will be to articulate a clear and coherent hermeneutics that can affect this reintegration (Rizvi, 2012, p.503).

The kind of hermeneutics that suggests itself in the examination of divine freedom sketched here is one that attempts to utilize classical philosophical theology as a framework that allows for elements emphasized in open and relational theologies to fill in an account of how God appears to believers through revelation. While a purely philosophical hermeneutics describes God as the source of all creation or as its ultimate end, a scriptural hermeneutics can focus on the content of God's manifestations of Himself to us through revelation. In this regard, we might also mention the need for the theological study of the aesthetics of revelation, which has been given careful and illuminating attention in the works of Angelika Neuwirth.<sup>1</sup> The study of the literary qualities of scripture does not displace philosophical theology; but it can make us aware that there are aspects of the relationship we develop with God through scripture that are ignored by philosophical theology. Here too, divine freedom presents itself for us as manifest in the fact that in God's revelations He offers us the free gift of something beautiful, His Books and signs, as an expression of divine love.

## **Nutshell**

Divine freedom has been reviewed here with respect to three important themes: fate, revisions in divine decisions, and divine obligations. A study of the first theme yields the conclusion that God is free from any constraints that could be imposed on Him by fate, and that He has absolute sovereignty. His power cannot be limited or thwarted. God does what He wills. Furthermore, God is the ultimate authority to Whom all must obey. The power aspect of divine freedom is typically analyzed in Islamic philosophical theology with attention to divine atemporality, the nature of the divine attributes, the divine will, and the nature of time. In addition, God is free in relation to us in the sense that He can do what we do not expect. Theologians have paid more attention than the philosophers to divine sovereignty, which is often taken to

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1. See: for example, the essays collected in (Neuwirth, 2014).



be modeled on ownership. Theologians have also grappled with the problem that the divine decrees appear to change, and on the tablet containing the divine decrees, there can be changes and erasures. Philosophical theology in the classical Islamic tradition teaches that God is timeless and that all His decrees and determinations are issued in a single divine command, although the command is carried out through time.

This leads into the second topic, *badā'*, the apparent revision of divine decisions, which the theologians treat as abrogations of commands. God does not change His mind, but His decisions appear to us in time in such a manner that a newly appearing command might cancel what had previously been commanded, which only means that God atemporally willed that His command would appear at a time in one way, and at a later time, it would appear to us differently. In this way, God can be understood to foster a relationship with us in which God will appear to us in different ways appropriate to our changing conditions.

Finally, we considered the obligations God sets for Himself and reveals to us through scripture. The divine freedom that is disclosed through such obligations has been largely neglected in theological literature. I have argued that this kind of divine freedom is of a sort that only has meaning in the loving relationship between God and His servants that is cultivated through divine revelation.

I then suggested that these various dimensions of divine freedom can best be understood through complementing philosophical and scriptural approaches to the issues and that the understanding of this kind of synthetic hermeneutics can be deepened through comparative theology.

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