

A Theological Gaze at the Human Condition

Considering Divine Action and Human Responsibility

Ebrahim Moosa



1. Introduction

For most religious traditions in the modern and postmodern era it is a challenging prospect to explain how an omnipotent and omniscient God can have absolute power as a divinity, without completely undermining human agency. In theory, at least, this is the concern. Theology tries to make sense of competing dimensions of the human condition: the relation of an all-powerful God to a finite and in our case, a ‘modern’ human, who values agency, who seeks a great deal of control over his or her self. I argue that unlike our predecessors centuries ago, we are now more acutely aware of our responsibility as humans on a global scale as a result of our role in global warming and environmental degradation. If our predecessors thought of divine action in particular, local and finite ways, then we are more predisposed to think of our responsibility and God’s actions in global, if not in more empirical ways by divining the laws of nature as disclosed by science.

Yet, to sustain human responsibility without detracting from divine sovereignty – unlimited omnipotence and omniscience – must result in a theological paradox. While the early Muslim theological schools erred in favor of human agency, they did so at the cost of depleting or limiting divine action, or always making it subservient to a human norm, be it on the grounds of reason or by making God behave like humans, anthropomorphism. What later becomes Sunnī Islam, derives from Ash‘arī theology a narrative that explains God’s actions and the performance of the divine will in the world without claiming to entirely coerce human beings or detract from their agency. Human beings are free to choose but always in relation to God’s absolute power. In sustaining this paradox Ash‘arism helps one to understand divine action and being-in-the world as inscrutable. In philosophical terms it brings us face-to-face with our “thrownness into the world” as Heidegger put it or to utterly rely on divine grace and mercy, as a spiritual, psychological and rational resource to deal with the contingencies and uncertainties of life.

Two narratives make us fully aware of our encounter with uncertainty and contingency. One is from science, and the story of climate change. The other

narrative is the one that poets and litterateurs/philosophers of old have brought to our attention, about the inscrutable nature of some aspects of being and life.

2. The Environment of Responsibility

By the twenty first century human beings have also taken responsibility for the restoration of the environment in order to deter the rigors of nature and human action from making the globe more uninhabitable. How does one explain God's actions in the world under these macro conditions? How do humans perform their fiduciary relationship to God in terms of their relationship with fellow humans, animals and nature? These are questions that are not easily explained.

What some would call the despoliation of nature and the natural habitat is a major issue that raises certain concerns about human responsibility. When talking about environmental degradation, a group of climate skeptics will immediately howl at the concept of human agency and human autonomy. They will mockingly point to the environmental disaster humans have wrought by their outsized claim of autonomy and agency both that were invoked to control the environment in the age of modernity, but eventually contributed to our habitation, the earth's destruction. Geologists have now confirmed our entry into the era of the Anthropocene, marking the central role of humankind in the geology and ecology of our habitat.¹ The Anthropocene by itself is not necessarily an age signaling another kind of human fallenness. Keep in mind that the preceding Holocene era, some 10-12 millennia ago, took place long before the industrial revolution when the globe was already entering a warm period compared to previous eras. Humans were less obsessed about agency and individual accumulation then compared to now. At present it is the immediate threat of rapid environmental degradation, the way we understand it, that warns about the way humans are irresponsibly consuming nature's (in) finite resources.² The correction could either come by way of an extraordinary cosmic event or by utilizing human agency and responsibility in more ecologically friendly ways.

A modern Muslim theology must, of course, take cognizance of the shifts in the conceptions of human autonomy and selfhood, but more importantly, it should take note of our interdependency with nature. Human engagement with nature has dramatically intensified over the past four centuries or more.

¹ See Chakrabarty 2009.

² Kenny 2005.

Needless to say, our relationship with nature might alter those very things we moderns take for granted as the moral goods of modernity namely autonomy, notions of selfhood, personhood and relationships with humans and animal species. Yet, as much as we have control over self and nature, much is also unknown. As a species we surprise ourselves on a daily basis, how our new experiences and discoveries of the mysteries of the cosmos reveal new understandings of our place in the cosmos. Self-revelations of our souls and bodies make us recognize our material plasticity and possibilities within ourselves and our ability to alter our habitat through technology. Human societies surprise us by periodically producing social turmoil or extraordinary stability and prosperity; our bodies reveal new possibilities at the same time as diseases afflict the human body and soul in conjunction with the natural habitat. What this highlights is not only complexity but our entanglement in a web of relationships and interests that constitute who we are as a species in the objective world. "These interests constitute, in the word's most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind between them together," writes Hannah Arendt.³

One way forward is to acknowledge the will of God and to view humans as the servants of this God. This master-slave relationship between the divine and human rankles certain twentieth century human sensibilities, even if it is meant metaphorically, since the history of slavery is still fresh in human memory. Yet, to make sense of the nature and meaning of God implies that humans must frame for themselves a concept of a deity who acts in the world with certain self-imposed restrictions. Such conceptions of the divine also binds God to a set of logical coordinates in order to escape an image of a capricious God. For instance, we are obliged to say God is just, even though we are cognizant of the fact that we cannot oblige God to behave in a particular manner purely because we as humans willed it to be so. That would be preposterous. The desire to believe in a just God who will not act capriciously might serve as a form of psychological reassurance to some people who foster a hyper-rational disposition with reference to the supernatural. In some ways we are imposing human modes of being and existence on the divine: anthropomorphism! Some versions of Muslim theology have energetically resisted these various shades of anthropomorphism and pursued a more theocentric approach.

Ash'arī theology circulates the idea that God 'intended' everything in the world, both good and evil, but did not 'will' evil for moral agents. God is the 'creator' of evil but God is not the 'doer' of evil, writes one modern interpreter.⁴

3 Arendt 1959, 162.

4 Al-Būṭī 1998, 42.

The Mu'tazila could not countenance a capricious divine will and hence put both God and all divine acts subject to the scrutiny of reason. Neither of these positions are satisfactory, for the simple reason that each creates a cardboard or artificial copy of a human being and then hopes to apply some formulaic thinking on the moral subject. A more helpful way would be to do theology based on human experience where some of the age-old questions can be ventilated in a new key.

3. Traditional Theology

Divine action in the world takes place without our request for such acts to occur. It happens without our knowledge of what God has planned for us and what plans are laid out for the future. Divine action is sovereign action. The best we can do is to try and understand the patterns of science as the handiwork of God in nature and to discern our role in the world as part of nature, but also as persons endowed with human nature (*fiṭra*). And the best we can do is to devise some narrative of how to use the cards this God deals out to us from time to time. One way the Islamic tradition attempts to know God's *modus operandi* in the world is by taking God's didactic work seriously. In other words, what we know of God through divine self-disclosure, from revelatory teachings to the Prophet Muhammad in the form of the Qur'an, and what persons who are inspired by God, like what saints tell us. We know about God's actions by making informed assessments of what happens to other inspired figures and what we can learn from the experiences of ordinary mortals, what we call the human condition.

Some people hold God to a standard by which the Divine is required to meet a criterion of justice. Simply put, God is and ought to be, a just God, as the Mu'tazila and the Shi'a would argue. Another group thinks of the Divine as a Compassionate and Merciful being. And a better way of explaining this, it is to think of God as a combination of justice and mercy. Despite these complex theological algorithms to make sense of the being of God, each religious tradition generates myriads of arguments about how to view God. When these perspectives about God are applied to real-life issues such as politics, life and death, truth and falsehood, civil wars and plagues then they elicit a range of responses ranging from surrendering to the will of God to questioning God's actions and God's justice (theodicy). Under these circumstances humans often fail to agree on a singular or a manageable diversity of their conditions and often provide reasons for the prevailing conditions. The Islamic tradition is no different. Hence, Sunnī, Shī'a and Ibāḍī sects as well as earlier sects like the

Mu'tazila, Qadarites and Jabarites, all formed modes of imagining the Divine according to their various conceptions of how God's justice and compassion reach the world and get etched on to human souls and bodies. We gain a sense of God through language. But with language comes the deficits and flaws resulting from the subjectivity produced between the sign and the signified, the subject and object, knower and known, and through the multiple philosophical riddles our species have produced over the ages. So how do we know God and where is God to be found?

Ghazālī drawing on a statement of the Prophet said that God “is found in the hearts of his believing servants.”⁵ Divinity and humanity are combined in the soul of a human being. For this reason, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191) radically altered our sense of self. For him self-awareness and self-ness are identical and is the most direct form of knowledge, called knowledge by presence. Perception and thinking with the self, with the soul and with the entirety of one's being, is knowledge by awareness and presence.⁶ There cannot be a better way of grasping the divine than through human experience helped by contemplation in the soul.

For the Ash'arīs, a school of thought generally followed by Sunnī Muslims, God's self-subsisting eternal attributes are neither identical to God, nor are they other than God.⁷ These divine qualities are also called predicates, such as “life, knowledge, power, hearing, seeing, willing, creation and speech that constitutes neither of letters and sounds.”⁸ They are also known as the eternal attributes of the divine essence. Classical Ash'arī thought and doctrine, in the words of a pre-eminent theologian Muḥammad Birkilī also called Birkawī (1523-1573) states his position as: “The world in its composition and features, actions of humans whether good or evil are all created (adventitious) (*ḥādith*) by the act of creation of God, the Sublime. There is no creator other than God, meaning we are bound to God's measurement/apportioning (*taqdīr*) and knowledge (*'ilm*) of things as well as God's will (*irāda*) [related to things in the world] and as the one whose eternal decree is inscribed on all things (*qaḍā'*).”⁹ Furthermore, Birkilī states, “Human beings possess choices (*ikhtiyārāt*) for their actions: they are rewarded according to the exercise of their choices and they are punished according to the poor choices they make: the good are the product of those choices that enjoy the favor (*riḍā*) of God, the Sublime, and

5 Al-Ghazālī 1421/2001, 1:14.

6 Ḥā'irī Yazdī 1992, 24.

7 Dawwānī 1879, 6.

8 Al-Birkawī (al-Birkilī) 1432/2011, 79.

9 Ibid.

God's love; and evil also stems from these choices, but it is not supported by these two qualities [favor and love]."¹⁰ In other words, the good enjoys both God's love and favor, while evil is not endorsed by God's love and favor.

The challenge for Ash'arī theology is how do human beings acquire agency and choice. The quick answer according to the late Syrian theologian Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (1929-2013) is to offer the authoritative view of Taftāzānī who puts the doctrine this way: "God is the creator of everything and human beings acquire the power to act. More specifically, the power and volition a servant expends in pursuit of an act is identical to one's acquisition (*kasb*). And the invention of the action by God after such willing is tantamount to creation (*khalq*)."¹¹ God wills certain things for humans and it is assumed that God wills freedom and choice in humans, writes Būṭī, for otherwise moral responsibility will be incomplete.¹²

It appears that generally Muslim theology thinks that nature is organized by a determining divine will of laws. But when it comes to human beings the laws are a different story. Human consciousness, it appears makes all the difference. No matter how elegantly we describe God, we do not really have adequate language of how God relates to us. According to the Ash'arī perspective God is pervasively involved and engrossed in human creation. The familiar theological language of this school talks about determinism (*jabr*) and choice (*ikhtiyār*), in a kind of binary. Yet, the reality is one of a gray area: humans are caught between determinism and choice, writes the twentieth century Indian theologian Manāzir Aḥsan Gīlānī. (d. 1956).¹³ Gīlānī explains:

"Of course, humans definitely possess choice, but the existence and continuation of choice is a chain of relations which in every moment is tied to the choice and will of God ... bear in mind that human choices at some point reach an end. For example, a human being can eat, but cannot eat everything, a human being can walk but cannot walk on every surface, can see but cannot see everything ... In those boundaries within which a human being finds oneself to be autonomous, is that person also not already [naturally] coerced to remain within those limitations? In reality the situation is exactly this: even if humans have a choice, a human being clearly does not have a discretionary choice to exercise a choice in addition to that choice. Rather, a human being's choice in terms of

10 Ibid., 79-80.

11 Al-Būṭī 1998, 73.

12 Ibid.

13 Gīlānī 2006, 122.

existence and subsistence, effect and consequence, in each moment is tied to divine choice and one is surely in need of divine attention and solicitude as well ... In short, a human being is not as absolutely predetermined as the cosmos is determined, where no concept of a power of choice applies between an actor and an act, nor is a human as absolutely autonomous as God is, where the Divine choice is absolutely unfettered by the choice of another ... The status of a human being is in-between coercion and choice; a human has choice and is also predetermined ...”¹⁴

Human sovereignty and human choice are aspects that are always subject to Divine sovereignty to modern followers of Ash‘arism. Preeminent nineteenth century scholar Shiblī Nu‘mānī (d.1914), and a younger contemporary of Gilānī, the long-serving head of the Deoband seminary in India, Qārī Muḥammad Ṭayyab (d.1983) held a similar position.¹⁵ For they all believed that without choice humans become automatons and robots, but that choice was always circumscribed by God’s sovereign power. Human beings have choice and freedom, but always under the canopy of all things divine.

Yet one of the challenges the modern mind encounters is this: How does one explain the choices made by rapists, murderers and villains that affect the bodies and lives of innocents? From a traditional Sunnī theological perspective, we know that the acts of evil performed come from the nature of humans who have allowed their nature to be deformed. And the answer will be that the evil committed during the two world wars of the twentieth century, the horrors of the partition of the Indian subcontinent, and the ongoing acts of evil in the world to mention but a few instances, do not enjoy God’s favor and love. But how could these things happen without the eternal decree (*qaḍā*) of God? If these are indeed the acts of Divine decree but *not* Divine will, then how does one make sense of the level of human suffering and the extinction of human life and nature? Here Ash‘arī theologians and the modern interpreters will say that perhaps we need to think of the Divine decree as actually embedded in the laws of nature, without nature being autonomous from the power of God; the rules of causation are triggered positively or negatively by acts of human will. If the effects of nature are negative, then from the Sunni-Ash‘arī perspective the divine will does not intend ill for us.

This is the explanation that the previously mentioned Būṭī provides. Būṭī says the “decree” of God is nothing other than God’s knowledge of events, the forms and details of these events in advance as part of God’s necessary

¹⁴ Ibid., 122-23.

¹⁵ Nu‘mānī 1999, 45-63. “Qaḍā va qadar awr Qur‘ān-i majīd”; Ṭayyab 2006, 1: 201-61.

foreknowledge. It is necessary, says Būṭī, for a God to know these things in advance in order to be the sovereign God. The “divine decree” is nothing but a “knowledge relationship” and a way of talking about the “disclosure of things before they occur,” which is essentially the traits of the *knowledge* of the divine. Decree in Būṭī’s view is not the imposition of God’s decree, but the unraveling of knowledge possessed and known only by God. Sheer divine knowledge of a thing does not mean the *existence* of a thing. Būṭī thinks of God’s decree as a set of potentialities. It is like a teacher who intuitively knows the capabilities of her students so that she can on the basis of past performance and intimate knowledge of a pupil’s talents and abilities be in a position to predict which student in her class will pass and which ones will fail the exams. The very idea of the decree-*qaḍā* of God is more analogous to God’s knowledge of human capacity.

The leading seventeenth and eighteenth-century Syrian scholar of his time, ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (1641-1731), writes in his commentary on a text by Birkilī that God loves those good acts that become manifest in humans. God’s favor (*riḍā*) follows good acts, therefore it is tantamount to a no-objection clause. Receiving God’s favor coincides with a form of divine will when human actions are good; but God’s favor does not coincide with the human will by way of the evil actions of humans. For him as a theologian whose thinking was deeply tinged by mysticism, God’s favor is synonymous with God’s love (*maḥabbā*).¹⁶ Love is of two kinds, eternal and temporal, he explains. Love is the inclination of the heart towards an object with the purpose of finding an element of perfection in it and hence the need of the lover to draw closer to that object. Clearly, God’s love for creation is subject to an allegorical interpretation. All the expressions humans possess have no equivalent when deployed with reference to the Divine. Our expressions with regard to God are merely lingual, for they defy proper signification, besides the states of awe, love and mystery. Surely the lover of God cannot relate to God’s heart, God’s soul or any of the causes God designed. In fact, all of God’s qualities of knowledge, power and will, even though they might verbally coincide with similar qualities in humans, their reality can never resemble the reality of the Creator. Neither does the Creator and the created share the same plane of existence (*wujūd*) since each possess qualitative differences.

Well, figures like Muḥī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d.1240) and Baruch Spinoza (d.1677) might have some views on how the relation between God, humans and nature are structured. For surely the existence of creation arises from non-being, whereas the existence of the Creator, in turn, self-exists by necessity.

¹⁶ Al-Nābulusī (n.d.), 1:263.

The existence of all creation derives from the existence of God. Since there is no existence except the existence of God, nothing in the world exists, except the acts of God. How? When God says in the Qur'ān: "God loves them and they love God," it means something along the explanation Nabalūsī offers. When artisans admire their handiwork, then they are in effect admiring their own selves. To put it differently, they are admiring extensions of their selves as manifest in their craft and production. So, when God declares to love humans, God is doing nothing but engaging in self-love. When a believer claims to love God then it is actually God who loves you back since you are so intertwined in the order of being. The analogy invoked goes back to the producer or craftsman admiring the product of his or her own handiwork. So, when God declares love for the acts of creation, with specific reference to certain persons among humans, then it is an actual display of love for God's accomplished and chosen species. There is thus technically speaking no *need* to love God, since the lover and the beloved are always-already two dimensions of the same substrate of being. Therefore, says Nabalūsī, in a gnomic figurative expression: love of God means an abundance of generosity.

4. Blended Theology

Humans relating to God means imagining and experiencing the Divine in two registers. First, that God is utterly transcendent or extremely different (*tanzīh*) from everything in the universe and the cosmos; and secondly, that God is immanent or similar (*tashbih*), in other words intensely grasped in terms of human experiences. This is one of those theological puzzles that are not easily resolved. Ghazālī famously explained this *aporia* as one of perplexity, thanks to the lack of clarity on how to mobilize each aspect of transcendence and immanence, simultaneously: how can God be so exceedingly accessible to the human experience and at the same time also be utterly and incomparably different from humans? Ghazālī struggles and laments the lack of clarity to these two critical aspects. To his mind each aspect of difference and similarity can be equated to the polarity and difference between masculinity and femininity. Our daily experiences of both divine transcendence and immanence, Ghazālī avers, are not polarized, but rather they are deeply interwoven. Ghazālī offers the intriguing image of when the two sexes become indistinct in one person, when there is often the need to identify this hybrid trait as what he calls the "effeminate-*mukhannath*." Needless to say, the metaphor Ghazālī deploys lends itself to a male normativity. However, if one follows his metaphor, then one sense of what it means to be feminized suggests that it signifies to be

possessed by another, or to make oneself available to another. This is premised on the image of a female making herself available to the male.¹⁷ In navigating the boundary between transcendence and immanence, says Ghazālī, one is caught between two dimensions. He expresses this interspace by saying one is “feminized between the masculinity of transcendence and the femininity of immanence.”¹⁸ Ghazālī, I sense, hopes that experientially these polarities can become more illuminated so that people can intelligibly appreciate both aspects but his metaphor does render the reader in a zone of ambiguity. However, Ghazālī’s commentator Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1732-1790) does not see the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of these conjoined aspects of transcendence and immanence as a problem the way it appears in Ghazālī’s own words.¹⁹ Zabīdī cites Ibn ‘Arabī and other authorities who argued that experientially one is often tied to both transcendence and immanence at once. In other words, being in the *dihlīz*, the in-between zone of things can be most productive in the view of Ibn ‘Arabī and Zabīdī.²⁰ God’s presence in the life of a believer and in the world is essentially experiential. One is drawn to God through reveries and exposing our souls to God’s being which are the essential metaphysical stirrings.

The modern condition of how we experience and relate to the divine might not be very different from what preceded us in the theologies of the premodern world, oscillating between transcendence and immanence. Philosopher Gilles Deleuze has taught us not to be dismissive and condescending of the past, but rather think of ourselves as “different.” It is a difference where the self recognizes its own experiences without negating the experiences of others in the past. This difference, he put it pithily, was a matter of a “difference without negation.”²¹ Pondering the complexity of the modern world, anthropologist Bruno Latour argues in turn, that humans have the capacity to conjoin multiple forms of transcendence and immanence. One challenge is that modernity renders this conjoining of transcendence-immanence invisible, unthinkable and un-representable. But it does not mean that the inability to represent these forms of conjoining suggest that such possibilities cease to exist. Rather it is a continuous blending, the very amalgamation that Ghazālī nuanced, and, Ibn ‘Arabī festively celebrated along with myriads of poets and literary figures with affiliations to the broad-gauged Islamic tradition. Rather the modern

17 Al-Kafawī 1419/1998, 872.s.v. “mukhannath”.

18 Al-Ghazālī 1421/2001, 4:220.

19 Al-Zabīdī 2002.

20 For more on *dihlīz* see Moosa 2005.

21 Deleuze 1994, xx.

world allows for the expanded proliferation of hybrids and complexities. Thus, Latour writes, “moderns can mobilize Nature, objectify the social, and feel the spiritual presence of God, even while firmly maintaining that Nature escapes us, that Society is our own work, and that God no longer intervenes.”²²

Modern theology is one of conjoining and performing a series of mediations, often in invisible ways. As humans, we have the mental capacity to fully think that we have autonomous agency in the world while we, at the same time, can also fully experience God’s presence in our embodied lives. This is how the Ash‘arīs of old thought of the world and God; in short this is how they thought about Being. But they invented some awkward theological language to explain how God acts in the world. One of these vocabularies was that human beings “acquire” the power to do things in the world, as opposed to those theologians who claimed that humans act on the basis of their potential or in terms of efficient causes. While not denying human agency the Ash‘arīs were reluctant to blot out God from the world-picture every instant of existent right into the microlevels of existence. Modern science has focused on the efficient cause of things and some modern Muslim theologians have obsessed about efficient causality instead of focusing on issues of formal or final causality, as Ghazālī did.

To me what the Ash‘arīs wrote centuries ago sounds compellingly similar to the way the novelist and writer Marilynne Robinson reads the theology of the American Congregationalist preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards (d.1758). Edwards, viewed Being, writes Robinson, “as emergent and the continuities we depend on not as intrinsic but as wholly sustained by God.”²³ The omnipresent master idea for the Ash‘arī theologians was not for human beings to invent existence by their own agency but rather by the counter intuitive idea that it is divine being that creates humans and sustains us at every instant in time. Any follower of Ash‘arī theology can reconcile herself with the idea of being sustained by God, for it is precisely what the concept of “acquisition” (*kasb*) was supposed to do: to demonstrate our ultimate dependence on God as the final and teleological Cause. “So reality is indeterminate within a very broad and arbitrary frame of probabilities and possibilities until it happens,” writes Robinson.²⁴ Ash‘arites are often accused of determinism. But if anything, Ash‘arite theology draws our attention that above science and nature is a higher order of determinism or modes of sustaining us. It resides in the sovereignty of God whose nature can only be approximated but never fully

22 Latour 1993, 34.

23 Robinson 2018, 183.

24 Ibid.

grasped by humans. God as a divine essence is entirely inscrutable save by way of the hints divine revelation provides and reason intuits.

How God relates to the world, nature and humans is first and foremost a question of cosmology: the way the cosmos is ordered. To know how the cosmos is ordered is dependent on our emerging and ever-growing understanding of the universe and our miniscule role in this awe-inspiring expanse filled with mystery. All theological explanations of our relationship with God or our conceptions of God are mediated by the specific cosmology at work at a particular time and place. It is only through our conceptions of the ordered nature of the universe that we can coherently and systematically grasp and attempt to explain divine action in the world and how humans relate to it. Theology was shaped by cosmology in the premodern world and today it is shaped by the cosmology of science. It requires an admission that scriptures and prophetic teachings as well as subsequent theological teachings rest on assumptions made by the specific cosmologies in play when the theological and religious knowledge of specific traditions were formed at their inception and the gradual and radical changes in cosmology that followed.

More immanent forms of cosmology in the modern period does not mean the dilemma of configuring divine action becomes easier. Rather, it becomes more acute. Against the background of a lifeworld determined by empirical rationality, an empirical scientific order of the natural world and its concomitant political-economy, the following question arises: how does one theologically account for the action of a just and caring God whose actions make little sense in terms of the cosmology of science and social science? The cosmology of modern science is marked by an element of perfectionism and it cannot tolerate the imperfections of the human condition. Hence, the modern period produces a different kind of problem: the problem of theodicy, as Peter L. Berger explains it.²⁵

Human beings produce a *nomos* or live by a *nomos* in order to keep at bay the anomic forces of disorder that are endemic to the human condition. The anomic phenomena must be explained in terms of the *nomos* established in the society in question. "As an explanation of these phenomena in terms of religious legitimations, of whatever degree of theoretical sophistication," says Berger, "may be called theodicy."²⁶ The religious legitimation of anomic forces is rooted in human social relations. In order to come to grips with these forces and requirements, the payoff for every society in one form or another involves actively denying an individual his or her untrammelled needs and refuses to

25 Berger 1967, 53.

26 Ibid.

fully address all the anxieties and problems of its members. One of the functions of *nomoi* is to facilitate this denial or lack, writes Berger, in individual consciousness. This intense self-denying tendency to surrender to society and its order is of particular interest to religion. “This is the attitude of masochism, that is, the attitude on which the individual reduces himself to an inert and thing-like object vis-à-vis his fellowmen, singly or in collectivities or in the *nomoi* established by them,” explained Berger.²⁷ “In this attitude, pain itself, physical or mental, serves to ratify the denial of the self to the point where it may be subjectively pleasurable.”²⁸ When fully accomplished, the masochistic self can announce “I am nothing – He is everything” or “I am the Truth” as the Muslim mystic Ḥallāj and other mystics exclaimed as an expression of ultimate bliss.

The important point I take from Berger is that masochism “by its radical self-denial, provides the means by which the individual’s suffering and even death can be radically transcended, to the point where the individual not only finds these experiences bearable but even welcomes them.”²⁹ Humans cannot accept aloneness and cannot accept meaninglessness and hence masochistic surrender “is an attempt to escape aloneness by absorption in another, who at the same time is posited as the only and absolute meaning ...,” Berger explained.³⁰

The excess gloom and doom that exist in modern life as experienced in the horrors of civil wars, refugees, famines and diseases prove to be a challenge. Sometimes it appears that the *nomoi* of self-denial we adopt in order to keep us sane, seem like an excuse for a massive injustice. It might appear that it furthers inequality, injustice, poverty and the maldistribution of resources abound in our world. The question of theodicy that many people raise seeks an answer in divine justice but it also sparks the chase to make our world more perfect. These might be admirable goals, but are hardly achievable by all. In the light of the environmental disaster and the conditions of the anthropocene, the search for perfection and justice might not be possible when an unknown and emergent nature is determining and imposing limits on our agency as humans. But humans have always lived with anomic conditions. By participating in religious communities and valuing such experiences, the individual might not find happiness or be contented within those frameworks. The idea of loving God or the consolation of a person being the object of divine love

27 Ibid., 55.

28 Ibid., 56.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

might not provide happiness. Love is no consolation to a cancer sufferer, to someone who lost a loved one and one whose experience of depression only deepens. In these conditions theodicy has a different role. “It is not happiness that theodicy primarily provides,” clarifies Berger, “but meaning.”³¹

One way that meaning is construed in grasping the rationality of history is an often-heard expression of human beings, writes the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, who when reaching the end of their tether, are fond of saying: “I am defeated, but in the long run history is on my side.”³² This well-known phrase used either as a consolation or deployed as a jeremiad in many cultures is what Gramsci describes as a double-edged concept of “mechanical determinism.”³³ When human beings face a dead-end with very little strategic possibilities or reasons for meaning-making they seek solace in a transcendent default psychological mindset. When one is repeatedly defeated in political struggle then “mechanical determinism” in Gramsci’s words “becomes a formidable force of moral resistance, of cohesion, of patient perseverance.”³⁴ This kind of resistance is, he writes, an “‘act of faith’ in the rationality of history transmuted into an impassioned teleology that is a substitute for the [concepts] ‘predestination,’ ‘providence,’ etc., of religion.”³⁵ Counterintuitively in Gramsci’s reading he detects that in invoking those often negatively viewed terms, there is a silver-ling: “the will is active” even in this mechanical determinism for it intervenes directly in what he calls the “force of circumstances” albeit in a more covert and veiled manner, which I would deem a psychological provision.³⁶ Since Gramsci writes about those defeated and downtrodden ones as the subaltern, he also notices something else. There comes a time when those who were at the bottom of society get the opportunity to rise to the top as leaders. Yet, in an ironic turn when the subaltern finally becomes a leader and in a position of responsibility, Gramsci recognizes he or she will revise the entire mode of thinking and abandon the once useful mode of mechanistic thinking – I am defeated but in the long run history is on my side – this way of thinking disappears from the discourse of the newly-installed former subaltern leaders. Why? Because now, he explains, for the newly empowered subaltern the “mode of existence will have changed.”³⁷ Something dramatic happened to the being of the subaltern – the poor, the weak and the

31 Ibid., 58.

32 Gramsci 2011, Eighth Notebook § 206, 353.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

dispossessed of yesterday. Now the subaltern of yesterday is no longer a 'thing' but a 'historical person.' Gramsci demurs and questions whether one ever was a "thing"; the resister was always a person, he argues. Here Gramsci does two things: he explains the virtue of mechanistic thinking and how the empowered subaltern reclaims an agency that does not depend on mechanistic, if not fatalistic thinking, disappears and the subaltern becomes more forward-looking and perhaps buys into the narrative of progress!

Gramsci then switches sides and warns against mechanical determinism, and forms of passive and smug fatalism which should be exposed and avoided at all times. During the phase of political resistance, he explains, the subaltern as a part of the whole of the underlying philosophy of action was already in a position of leadership and responsibility. Recall for him the subaltern was not a thing but an historical person. "...[T]he philosophy of the part always precedes the philosophy of the whole as a theoretical anticipation."³⁸ One way of elaborating Gramsci's insight is to think of human beings as spatial beings who occupy multiple positionalities and that they also inhabit multiple imaginaries of time, a certain heterotemporality. For instance, one can occupy sacred space in a temple and minutes later step into space designated as secular by the state and carry the imprints of both the sacred and the secular on one's body and being as one walks down the street after a prayer event. Our bodies are marked by both sacred and cosmic time in terms of our understandings of the meaning and life and death as religious people and we operate in chronological and teleological time as actors in the world. One is always both a thing as a resister in a movement against injustice and a 'number' in the census data and as well be a 'person' who has agency. While Gramsci favors agentic forms of determinism, as a neo-Marxist he was compelled to admit that the unknowns of life also shapes us as 'things' as part of an unavoidable mechanistic determinism. Gramsci's thinking in this instance has an uncanny resemblance to Ash'arism's complex dance between divine determinism and human agency. There are times when humans take every effort at self-determination with sophisticated diets and health precautions only to become a 'thing' as a statistic – a survivor or victim of cancer or a person with agency for self-transformation and affecting the lives of others. The truth is that these are not very predictable outcomes despite our best efforts. Ash'arī theology is appealing in its bare-bones theoretical contingency, just as the archives of literature modern and premodern, help us to grapple with the poetics of the human condition.

38 Ibid.

5. The Poetics of the Human Condition: Irony, Parody and Enchantment

A complex topic like the one at hand defies easy summation or a meaningful conclusion. I see this contribution as a modest instalment in a complex and open-ended debate because the fate of our home, the earth, is constantly altering and our understanding of our cosmos is rapidly expanding. Hence, I will turn to poetry and literature to identify my preferences for the poetics of existence and the human condition. Accepting suffering with irony and paradox, humor and a sense of belonging, are features that become manifest in the life of the pre-partition Indian poet of Mirzā Asadullah Ghālib (1797-1869). Ghālib's life was filled with misery but it does not mean he did not also have moments of laughter and joy, happiness and fulfillment. He lost all his children in infancy and he had no direct heirs, which must have been a cause of great heartbreak for him and his wife. In his career he had to wait in line to become poet laureate of late Mughal India and only held the title when his predecessor died. For a good part of his life, Ghālib sought a pension from the British rulers of India, a search which gave him little personal satisfaction.

Ghālib's sense of suffering is captured in one his many extraordinary poems that speaks of a self, a life and a lifeworld that he experienced. Here Ghālib points to the existential condition which humans experience, but these themes could also be found elsewhere in his oeuvre. He writes:

Here in my cage I mourn; and even if my plaint displeases them
Yet, does my being harm the chirpers in the garden who fill the air with
their song?

If friendship is not easy, then let it not be; is it any less enviable
If you, O God, had not given the desire for friendship, to the enemy?

Not a single tear left your eye despite my wounded heart
Yet sewing the wound left the needle-like eyebrows drenched in blood

Let shame rest on my conflicted hands, oh God
Sometimes these hands reach for the collar, sometimes they reach for
the skirt

Witnessing the slaughter-house is easy for now
For your war-horse has yet to swim in the river of blood

The rumor spread abroad they will fit fetters for my feet.
Yet deep in the mine the iron-ore stirred restlessly.

I felt no joy, though dark clouds amass a hundred times above my fields
All I see is that lightning already targets my crops

Loyalty, strong and constant to the end, is the foundation of faith
A priest [with such qualities] who dies in the temple, let the precincts of
the Ka'ba be his burial-place

My destiny was martyrdom, for God had made my nature so
That every time I saw the sword I bowed my neck to take its blow.

If I was not robbed in the day, how could I have slept so soundly at night?
I feel no more the fear of theft; my blessings to the highway robbers!

Can I not then write poetry, that I should go in quest of jewels?
Have I not a heart within to excavate, that I should go and dig in mines?

My Sultān Sulaymān has no relation, Oh Ghālib!
To Farīdūn, Jamshīd, Khosrow, Dārius and the Persian month of Bahmān³⁹

In this poem Ghālib meditates on the human predicament. In my view the paradox and dilemmas experienced in life set a more productive stage for humans to grapple with than the postulates of theoretical theological discussions on this topic. It is a preference not a normative claim. I also take recourse to theoretical discussions but the experiences of human life offer better illustrations of the human condition. Ghālib shows how humans need friendship and company to combat their loneliness. When one is affected by the loss of love and companionship, the destruction of your fields, in his case it was his loss of offspring, he declares and announces his suffering. He expects more suffering to come, hence the reference to the slaughter-house is a tolerable image. He is so patient with the action of the divine that he is prepared to wait until he is knee-deep in the figurative rivers of blood in which war-horses can swim. Ghālib recognizes, almost like a perplexed Ash'arī theologian, that life has finite possibilities and therefore he is resigned to the fact that not everything

39 Ralph Russell only translated 7 selected couplets of this 14 couplet poem, I translated the remainder and in the order of the original. Ghalib 1989, 115-16; Russell 2003, 364-65.

will go his way and the way he had planned it. Yet, he also finds it necessary to protest as a product of his perplexity.

Ghālib slips between pathos and bathos, between qualities of evoking pity and an anticlimactic sensibility. Life torments him at every stage. Contrary to what Stoic teachings would expect, Ghālib indulges in self-pity, a familiar human trait and then he surrenders to the vicissitudes of life, almost as a martyr, ready to receive the blow of the sword of life (bathos). The losses he suffered in life, paradoxically gave him a certain perverse comfort, since he resigned himself to the lack of investment in life. This resignation allows him to rationalize that psychologically he is freed from material dependency. Ghālib's suffering and endurance are real, yet they pale when compared to the more harrowing accounts about the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) was an extraordinary pre-partition fiction writer who settled in the new state of Pakistan. His short stories come close to an eyewitnesses' documentation of the horrors produced by the partition of the subcontinent. The arc of a short-story titled "Dutiful Daughter" speaks of both the horrors and hell of human life.⁴⁰ A mother is in search of her adult daughter in the madness of the movement of millions of people, the consequent human suffering, death and destruction. When she eventually does see her daughter, the daughter for an unfathomable reason turns away from the wretched mother. Manto's account turns between the twists of the unpredictable phases of life, our faith in the laws of nature that preserve us, but at some point they run out of steam followed by the laws of degradation, causing illness, destruction and death. And, one learns that part of human responsibility is to anticipate setbacks in planned events. The certainty of impediments is an ineradicable part of one's moral formation, an indelible aspect of the human condition. In a surprising way it is the human condition itself that allows us to grasp moral responsibility.

The story of redemption then is the story of religion. Practicing religion means encountering theology and metaphysics in their multiple forms. To grapple with divine action in the world through the prism of Ghālib's poetry and Manto's fiction brings us face to face with the nature of God and the actions of God in the world. Muslim theologians in the ancient past disagreed among each other about the nature of God, primarily about how God was knowable and how much of the divine was knowable, but no one doubted our intuitions about God. Whatever conclusions each group of theologians reached about

40 Manto 1997, 73-77; Manto 2012, 454-59.

knowledge of God, they did provide a reading and a meaning of God's work. But throughout this I am questioning to what extent this kind of theoretical theology really matters. To what extent does theoretical and normative theology shape our experience of God in the world? Very little, I suspect. Normative theology is not the lived theology of ordinary people although theologians would insist their normative accounts keep us within the realm of acceptable dogma. If the latter is to be true, then in the end it is about mere dogmatic authority, but it is doubtful if such theology is informed by the experience drawn from the human condition.

How is God knowable? This is hardly a meaningful question without context. Perhaps the portrait of the pitiful, homeless, wandering and rapidly deteriorating old woman in Manto's short story who is in search of her daughter in the maddening chaos of partition signals something. She holds out hope. "... [F]or the overcrowded," writes John Berger, "for those who have little or nothing except, sometimes, courage and love, hope works differently. Hope is then something to bite on, to put between the teeth."⁴¹ Can we or, should we ask this woman how she thought of God in her wretched state? If she channels an Ash'arī-inspired theology she will most likely say that God is testing her in her search for her daughter: her test is if she tenaciously bites on to the hope between her teeth. She will explain her loss of home, and loss of self, while hovering on the doorstep of death as a form of mechanistic determination or a paradoxical hope. And can we say she is wrong? If she throws herself at God's mercy, then all she experiences is an endless loss. When she finally sees her daughter, the object of her search flees from her, a spectacle of tragedy upon tragedy. It would be a miracle if after such a fate the wretched mother does not lose her thread of faith in humanity, leave alone her faith in the God of humanity. But there is no indication of the nameless elderly woman rebelling against God, rather she bites harder into hope.

Was the point of the elderly woman in Manto's story not to show that a person was reduced to a 'thing' despite all the features of her personhood? Of course, individuals experiencing misfortunes desire relief from their torments. But do people or at least some people not often desire to know and require an explanation *why* these misfortunes reached them? If theodicy provides *meaning* to human suffering, as Peter Berger reminded us, then it serves an unparalleled purpose for the individual. But I want to emphasize the point that a theodicy that provides *meaning* does not exclude suffering.

41 Berger 2007, 39.

Clearly the question of human destiny, the link between human and divine agency are foremost questions on Manto's mind. He ponders the resources humans command in order to quantify violence, death and destruction in all its forms. But do humans really quantify the cost of suffering or do we instead offer quantification as a simple and well-worn scapegoat? Excuses like colonialism, religion, human nature, greed, bloodlust, free-will and fate are often among the excuses proffered, but often we give it respectability and call it modalities of reason. Every reason is offered, in Manto's view, save the banality of the human condition. Manto's agnosticism is clear when he enters a blasphemous domain, at least in the eyes of some of his more devout readers, when he says: "Will all these atrocities be posted to the ledger of an oppressive human nature or the ledger of Divine Majesty? In fact, are there still any empty ledger pages left to fill?"⁴²

The last word in this reflection will come from the writings of the litterateur, a proponent of mysticism and philosopher Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d.1023) who has been unjustifiably maligned by some religious scholars in the past. Tawḥīdī was the protégé, if not the 'Boswell,' meaning an amanuensis of Abū Sulaymān al-Mantiqī al-Sijistānī (d.c.985) his mentor.⁴³ It captures the messiness of the human condition especially our earnest efforts to understand complex realities and mysteries. The citation comes from Tawḥīdī's meditations on coincidences and oddities. But the terms coincidence (*ittifāq*) and the unexpected (*falatāt*) do not do justice to the meditation. I think what was intended is that things are complex, imbricated, meshed and messy, yet also distinguishable. Tawḥīdī attributes the fulsome nugget of wisdom to Abū Sulaymān who says: "Things are distributed according to the limitations of nature, psychical powers, intellectually indivisible elements, and divine wonder. What exists here on earth is therefore necessarily either something familiar that is related to nature, or something rare related to the soul, or something unique that is related to the intellect, or something wonderful that is related to the divine being. The unexpected is among the last-mentioned kind; I mean it permeates these various classifications."⁴⁴ Theological realities might not be a series of unexpected events and coincidences as commonly understood. Surely from the perspective of the Divine things are not unexpected and unpredictable.

42 Manto 2012, 455, The English translator omitted some key conceptual ideas like human nature and God that are part of the Urdu original. The expression Manto uses is "zālim fitrat yā qudrat?".

43 For more on Sijistānī see Kraemer 1986).

44 Al-Tawḥīdī 1960, 2:160; With emendations the translation is from Gelder 2012, 216.

Contingency is how we as humans expect things, how realities are disclosed to us as humans and how they reach our world: this is a realm that is laden with the unexpected and the unimaginable. Surely, the laws of nature, the condition of the soul and the mystery of the divine cumulatively create a rich tapestry of clarity and ambiguity of the human condition; the latter is not free from these unavoidable surprises, coincidences and the unexpected.

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Contributors

Darius Asghar-Zadeh

(*1982), PhD in Comparative Theology, is researcher at the Center for Comparative Theology and Cultural Studies at Paderborn University/ Germany. Areas of research: comparative Theology / interreligious theology, peace and conflict studies, intercultural zeitgeist-hermeneutics, Christian-Muslim relations, Christian systematic theology and Muslim systematic theology (kalām), philosophical theology. Recent publications include: *Menschsein im Angesicht des Absoluten: Theologische Anthropologie in der Perspektive christlich-muslimischer Komparativer Theologie* (Being Human in the Face of the Absolute: Theological Anthropology in the Perspective of Christian-Muslim Comparative Theology), Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh 2017; “Zur Möglichkeit eines gemeinsamen theologischen Sprechens von Christen und Muslimen: Konturen interreligiöser Theoriebildung (On the Possibility of a Joint Theological Talk of Christians and Muslims: Contours of Interreligious Theory-Construction),” in: *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 3 (2019), 128-135; “Interreligious Peacebuilding through Comparative Theology,” in: *International Journal on World Peace* 36.3 (2019), 57-82.

Aaron Langenfeld

(*1985) is acting Professor for Dogmatics, History of Dogma and Fundamental Theology at the University of Vechta. Areas of research: Theological anthropology, esp. the concept of freedom, theological hermeneutics and epistemology, communication of religion in secular contexts. Recent publications include: *Frei im Geist. Studien zum Begriff direkter Proportionalität in pneumatologischer Absicht*, Innsbruck 2021 (Innsbrucker Theologische Studien; 98), in prep.; Together with Sarah Rosenhauer/ Stephan Steiner (ed.): *Menschlicher Geist – Göttlicher Geist? Beiträge zur Philosophie und Theologie des Geistes*, Münster 2021 (STEP; 22); Together with Magnus Lerch, *Theologische Anthropologie*, Paderborn u.a. 2018 (Grundwissen Theologie).

Muhammad Legenhausen

is Professor of Philosophy at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, Iran and Professor of Ethics at the University of Qom. Areas of research: the philosophy of religion, metaethics, and epistemology. Recent publications include: “Leo Strauss and the Threat of Moral Relativism” *The Journal of Ethical Reflections*, 2020; “Religious Epistemology and Dialectic”

in *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research*, 2019; and “Truthfulness in Religious Discourse” *Hermeneutische Blätter*, 2018.

Vahid Mahdavi Mehr

(*1988) is Ph.D. student of comparative theology at the University of Paderborn/Germany. Areas of research: comparative theology, Quranic studies, Islamic theology.

Saida Mirsadri

(*1984) is postdoc researcher at the Center of Comparative Theology and Cultural Studies at the University of Paderborn/ Germany. Areas of research: problem of evil (in the light of the moral critiques to the theodicy discourse), concepts of God, modern and postmodern readings of the Islamic theology and philosophy. Recent publications include: “The Encounter with the Theory of Evolution in Islam”, mit Reinhold Bernhardt, *Religionen Unterwegs*, 24. Jg. Nr. 2 Mai 2018, S. 10-15 (German), “A Comparative Study of the Idea of Openness and Bada’ in the Christian and Shiite Theologies”, co-authored with Mansour Nasiri, *Jostarha-ye Falsafe-ye Din* (2019), pp. 129-149 (Persian). “Reading Iqbal in the Light of Kierkegaard; towards an Existentialist Approach to Islam”, co-authored with Mansour Nasiri (*Philosophy East and West*, to be published on April 2021).

The PhD dissertation defended in December 2020 under the title “A New Islamic Response to the Problem of Evil, based on Muhammad Iqbal’s Metaphysics”.

Ebrahim Moosa

(*1957) is Mirza Family Professor of Islamic Thought and Muslim Societies at the University of Notre Dame, USA. Areas of research: historical studies; Islamic thought; ethics, theology and modern Islamic thought, Muslim intellectual traditions and education in South Asia-especially madrasas. Recent publications: *What is a Madrasa?* University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015; together with Charles Villa-Vicencio, Erik Doxtader, *The African Renaissance and the Afro-Arab Spring: A Season of Rebirth?* (Georgetown University Press, 2015); together with Jeffrey T. Kenney, *Islam in the Modern World*, (London & New York, Routledge, 2013).

Karlheinz Ruhstorfer

(*1963) is Professor of Dogmatics at the Theological Faculty, University of Freiburg, Germany. Areas of research: Christology and Doctrine of Trinity, Theory of Revelation, Theological Topology and Diagnosis of Time (kairology),

Relationship between Philosophy and Theology resp. Politics and Religion. Recent Publications: *Freiheit – Würde – Glauben. Christliche Religion und westliche Kultur*, Paderborn u.a. 2015; *Befreiung des “Katholischen”. An der Schwelle zu globaler Identität*, Freiburg u.a. 2019; *Christologie* (Ed.), Paderborn-München-Wien-Zürich (UTB) 2018; *Unwandelbar? Ein umstrittenes Gottesprädikat in der Diskussion* (Ed.), (Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau) Leipzig 2018; together with Martin Kirscher: *Die gegenwärtige Krise Europas. Theologische Antwortversuche*, (Quaestiones disputatae 291) Freiburg u.a. 2018; together with Ralf Rothenbusch (Ed.): *Eingegeben von Gott. Zur Inspiration der Bibel und ihre Geltung heute*, (Quaestiones disputatae 296), Freiburg u.a. 2019; *Zwischen Progression und Regression. Streit um den Weg der katholischen Kirche* (Ed.), Freiburg 2019.

John E. Sanders

is Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies, Hendrix College. Areas of research: values in American Christianity, cognitive linguistics and divine providence. Recent publications include: *Embracing Prodigals: Overcoming Authoritative Religion by Embodying Jesus’ Nurturing Grace* (Cascade 2020), *Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think About Truth, Morality, and God* (Fortress, 2016), *The God Who Risks* (IVP 2007).

Klaus von Stosch

(*1971) is Schlegel-Professor of Systematic Theology at Bonn University. Areas of research: comparative theology, faith and reason, problem of evil, Christian theology responsive to Islam, esp. Christology, theology of the Trinity. Recent publications include: Together with Muna Tatari: *Prophetin – Jungfrau – Mutter. Maria im Koran*, Freiburg: Herder 2021 (English translation with Gingko will be published by november 2021); Together with Saskia Wendel/ Aaron Langenfeld/ Martin Breul (ed.): *Streit um die Freiheit. Philosophische und theologische Perspektiven*, Paderborn: Brill Germany 2019; Together with Francis X. Clooney (ed.), *How to do Comparative Theology*, New York: Fordham University Press 2018.

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