

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE UNDERSTANDING OF CREATION IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT: A RESPONSE TO KEITH WARD

M.B. ALTAIE

*Prof Altaie has already been introduced to readers, in the pre-amble to Chapter Two. In his second Islamic response, he challenges Prof Ward's contention that the essentials of Thomas Aquinas's view of the God-world relation are truly common to the three Abrahamic faiths. In counterweight to this claim, he sketches a modern, scientific interpretation of the Kalām – the over-arching philosophical-theological standpoint of early Qur'anic thinkers. In particular, he is sympathetic to the Mutakallimūn, who strove almost from the outset of the Muslim era, and crucially before the assimilation of Greek ideas, for a rational formulation of Qur'anic concepts.*

Prof Ward considers two interpretations of the concept of creation in the Abrahamic faiths. (By the term "creation" I take him to mean the existence of this intelligible world). The first is what he calls the "classical" view, formulated most completely by Thomas Aquinas, but originally based on Greek philosophies, mainly those of Plato and Aristotle. The second is the modern "relational" view, which is based on the Idealistic philosophy of Hegel and the Process philosophy of Whitehead.

One of the main points of my response to Ward is his claim that the classical Thomistic view was shared between all the Abrahamic faiths. I will try to show that, as far as Islam is concerned, this claim is inaccurate. I will present the dominant Islamic view of creation and the existence of this intelligible world. My second point of response will be concerned with the general understanding in the Abrahamic faiths of the creator God as a personal entity. Due to the limited space here I will only briefly criticize

this concept of a personal God and I will try to show that this type of understanding is no longer compatible with modern scientific understanding of the cosmos and the laws that govern it.

### **The “Classical” view**

The Bible did not provide a clear basis for philosophical contemplation, enabling one to define an original view of creation, other than saying that the cosmos was created in six days by a perfect spiritual being, from whom all things issue and to whom all things return. For this reason, Christianity found no alternative but to resort to Greek philosophies in its search for guidance in understanding creation and life. Considering the environment of its early growth, adoption of Greek philosophy by the Christian Church was inevitable.

The thesis of this classical view is based on the assumption of the existence of God, the being with maximal knowledge, power, and happiness. Essentially, God was taken as a personal entity with some superior attributes. The basis on which the divine attributes are deduced in the Thomistic view stems from the Aristotelian differentiation between the perfect and the corrupt. This originally goes back to the literature of Mesopotamia in which heaven was regarded as the place for the Gods and considered to be the perfect. However, the almost mystical way in which we view what we designate as perfect influences our deductions so as to make us feel that some results are reasonable when they are not logically necessary. In this respect I would point to the concepts “goodness” and “happiness” which are used by Prof Ward. These two terms are not found in the Qur'an, probably because they are relative concepts which cannot be ascribed an absolute meaning.

The view presented in the first part of Prof Ward's paper is actually the Christian belief as formulated by Thomas Aquinas. I question whether we can say that this view is representative of the Abrahamic faiths in general. The Islamic view differs from that presented in several fundamental respects. The first is the way Muslims understand God and the divine attributes. The second is the way Muslims understand the doctrine of the creation and its connections with other properties of the world.

### **The attributes of God**

In Ward's account, the consciousness of God plays a central role in our understanding of creation and conception of the relationship between God and the world. By contrast, the Qur'an does not say that Allah is conscious,

but rather that he is living or alive and is powerful enough to sustain all the creation (*Qayuum*). The attributes of God are some aspects that have been designated in the Qur'an as pertaining to God and as resembling the analogous aspects of humans.<sup>1</sup> However, it is widely agreed among Muslims that these attributes are not to be taken literally but metaphorically. The Qur'an clearly states that nothing resembles God "Naught is as His likeness; and He is the Hearer, the Seer" (Q: 43, 11). Nevertheless, the description of God given in the Holy Scriptures of all the three Abrahamic faiths is essentially personal.

This description has restricted the understanding of God and his actions and provokes some questions regarding the feelings of God toward the events that take place in our world. For example we ask whether God suffers or whether he gets sad or happy as a result of human actions. Then we puzzle whether God experiences suffering and whether he is to be considered responsible for the sufferings of humans since, in his omnipotence, he could prevent them ... and so on. I regard this kind of understanding of God as outdated: it is an understanding which may have been suitable until the end of the nineteenth century, but never after. To know that there is neither absolute space nor absolute time – that instead space and time are actually interwoven into one entity called spacetime – and hence to discover the relation between mass and energy; to know that physical measurement involves an inherent uncertainty, so that laws of nature are not necessarily deterministic but are probabilistic; and to know that countless other worlds might possibly exist beyond our perception and comprehension ... All this is surely something that ought to enhance our understanding of God? I do not understand why we should limit ourselves to an understanding of God which assumes personal character. A personal God may be necessary for the iconic vision of religion, rather than this more abstract self-transcendent understanding, but surely the latter is a more developed concept?

Part of what is called the classical view of creation was already criticized in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE by al-Ghazālī, in his famous book, *The incoherence of the philosophers*.<sup>2</sup> He showed that philosophers who adopted Greek views were unsuccessful in achieving a coherent theory of divine attributes and divine action.

Before al-Ghazālī the defense of religious Islamic doctrines was undertaken by the Mutakallimūn. These were groups of Muslim thinkers with theological backgrounds who appeared during the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE and remained active until around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when they were abandoned by the then Caliph for socio-political reasons. Mutakallimūn were interested in constructing an Islamic understanding of God, humanity and

the world through rational interpretation drawn from the original Islamic sources, mainly the Qur'an. Kalām was a main-stream line of thought that was practised by Mutakallimūn and originally devised to defend Islamic religious beliefs. In fact, Muslim religious belief never came into full agreement with Greek philosophy, despite the efforts of philosophers like al-Farabi in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Avicenna (11<sup>th</sup>) and Averroes (12<sup>th</sup>) to reconcile philosophy and Islam. The works of these philosophers were received with caution by contemporary Muslim clerics and later strongly refuted by al-Ghazālī. The true Islamic view is actually expressed in the views of the Mutakallimūn, whose thinking was not influenced by Greece. Recent works on Kalām have supported the contention that this phase of Islamic thought contains the most genuine Islamic views of God, humanity, and nature.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Greek philosophy was only employed by the Christian Church in defence of its beliefs, and was then adopted to stand for the Christian worldview. Jews, like mainstream Muslims, do not seem to have taken much from the Greeks.

In my view the real conflict between theistic and atheistic views stems from the atheist's difficulty in accepting a personal God. This is a legitimate objection; it is reasonable to say that the notion of a personal God is to some extent an influence of our own existence and character. However, this influence is unavoidable, and has to some extent forced us to characterize God as a person, otherwise his character would be difficult to conceive. Nevertheless, I think the time has come to realize that God is not a strictly personal being despite his personal attributes. In the same sense what we term "perfect" is actually a product of our own extrapolations. I think we ought to redefine the terms we use in ways that would enable us to use them in multi-contextual places. The personalized attributes of God make him limited and temporal and this may make the very concept of God seem incoherent.

To say that the physical cosmos is one actualization of a set of possible states that exist in the mind of God, that the actualization takes place because of an evaluation of those possible states by God, and that they are actualized for the sake of their value or goodness, is mostly a Christian theological view of the situation. The Qur'an clearly indicates that creation is realized for a purpose; this purpose is to actualize a high-ranking state of consciousness through development from a primitive state. To my understanding, creation seems to be an exercise by which a reasonably high-ranking creature is developed with some primary capabilities that enable him to comprehend the universe in which he lives. Through such comprehension and through long struggle and wrestling with nature he may get to the state where he can fully comprehend God and then unite

with him. For this purpose the universe is deemed to be comprehensible, evil becomes a necessity to provoke good deeds and avoid bad ones, and punishment and reward are required in order to develop the self-competence of this creature. Through the ages we get to know God better and more accurately until we attain union with him. Such a goal might be approached through evolutionary progress. However it cannot be fully realized within our physical existence, but only when we become part of him.

This may not be, in all its details, the classical Islamic view, but I find in it no contradictions with the approach of the Mutakallimūn or the stipulations of the Qur'an.

### **Does God suffer?**

To say that God is unaware of the suffering of the cosmos would be incompatible with his omniscience. To say that God is transcendent, so does not participate in the imperfect material world, is completely unjustified since he has already created this imperfect material world in the first place. So should he not participate in the development of the world or should we say that once he created the world he retired, leaving the world to develop on its own? I think that Aristotle was consistent when he assumed God to be a "prime mover" but then the question arises as to who sustains the world? The development of the world needs the operation and coordination of the laws of nature. Modern quantum theory indicates the necessity for a controller and a coordinator to make this world possible; I mean the necessity for an agent who would put fire into the equations and choose between the contingencies. Who can do such a job other than God? I think we should agree that modern science has surpassed all the arguments put forward by Aristotle and Plato; we need to consider a new logic and a new vision of the world. Below I will show that this serious problem of having the perfect being influencing the imperfect material world was solved already within Islamic Kalām through the principle of re-creation.

God is not an ordinary person so he does not need to have empathetic knowledge. God is in no need of simulations; he is the all-knowing omniscient and omnipotent that exists outside and inside our world, and he is an entity which no longer can be pointed to in a naive personal way.

True God cannot be altered by things that happen in the universe, but we should note that it is not necessary for God to experience a change in order to know what is happening in the universe. Rather, the divine power

is wholly creative and, to actualize this, the world has to be re-created every moment, as I will explain below.

It is clear through direct observation that this universe is built to follow nearly fixed algorithms and has been established as such in order to be comprehensible. The intelligibility of the universe is necessary for us to comprehend God. We do this by realizing the beauty of the design and consequently perceive the purpose behind creation. Divine action in the world need not comply with our hopes and wishes for the good reason that our wishes and preferences may well contradict established algorithms that are necessary for the existence and development of the world. If the established algorithms were to disappear this would make the universe unintelligible, so that it looked completely random.

### **The multiverse proposal**

The proposal of a multiverse is only a theoretical suggestion; it has nothing necessarily to do with reality. In a proper quantum vision, I think the components of a multiverse may have to be mutually orthogonal in order to be consistent with the framework of quantum theory. In this case only one state of the universe could actualize. However, the question still remains as to who has decided that this possible universe should exist rather than another, or nothing at all. One may argue that life has developed here on planet Earth, whereas there are many other planets that cannot accommodate life. The very existence of the many lifeless planets is suggestive of the existence of many lifeless universes. However, a counter argument will say that the non-existence of life on other planets is actually due to the fact that the conditions for life to exist are very subtle and sensitive. Having all other planets abiding by the same laws of physics would cause the planet on which life exists to be distinctive. But should different planets obey different laws of physics we could not then justify the non-existence of life on those planets. Similarly, a multiverse theory should require all other hypothetical universes to abide by the same laws that apply in our universe; otherwise we could not say why life should not exist in them. However, no strong scientific argument exists which can confirm that the other hypothetical universes do follow the same laws of physics as ours; to the contrary the hypothesis of a multiverse is often used to justify the accurate selection of a set of laws that have made life possible on Earth.

### **The Islamic views of Atomism and Re-Creation**

In its most simple and direct form the Islamic view of creation is what the Qur'an says about it. To some extent this is what is basically shared with Judaism and Christianity. However the Qur'an contains some details concerning the development and fate of the universe, and the heavenly bodies like sun, moon, and stars, which cannot be found in the Bible.<sup>4</sup> In its most sophisticated form, the Islamic view of creation is best represented by the works of Mutakallimūn.<sup>5</sup> Mutakallimūn presented a comprehensive theory of God, humanity and the world that can very well stand as representing the trends of genuine Islamic thought. By contrast, the works of philosophers like al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes cannot be judged in these terms since they followed the approaches of the Greeks and adopted most of their arguments.

The most prominent of the principles of Kalām were atomism and re-creation. By adopting the principle of atomism, taken in a very broad sense, Mutakallimūn identified the building blocks of the creation; then, by the principle of re-creation, they justified all the foreseen and the unforeseen properties of this creation. Indeed, the most elegant proposal of Kalām was this principle of re-creation, by which the world is assumed to be in a state of sustained re-creation at every single moment of time. This principle was devised as an essential part of the Kalām theory of atomism, according to which every body (or every entity like the soul) is assumed to be composed of “atoms” and “accidents”. The Islamic atom is an abstract entity that acts as a substrate for the accidents. The accidents define the properties of the body and whatever attributes that body may acquire. The majority of Mutakallimūn assumed that the accidents were not fixed but ever-changing, in a continual process of re-creation. They proposed this in order to preserve the involvement of God in the world and to perform his essential role, which they saw as necessary (but not always sufficient) to sustain the existence of the world. Mutakallimūn couldn't see any chance for the existence of the world without the continued involvement of and sustaining by God. The reason was that nature in their view cannot act on its own because it has no will, no mind, and no ability to discern and coordinate different contingencies. This assumption led Mutakallimūn to conclude that nature must be indeterminate, and consequently led them to deny the existence of a natural deterministic causality. This principle of the Kalām sets the concept of creation in its operational meaning.

When we revisit the assumption of continual re-creation we find it to be a very profound description of a basic law that is needed to explain some findings of modern physics and, at the same time, is capable of

resolving some basic theological paradoxes such as the one concerning how the absolute perfect being can influence the imperfect material world. The direct answer to this is that if the perfect being has created the imperfect world once, the continued re-creation of the world will establish continued contact and influence in much the same way as when it was first created.

Time, according to Mutakallimūn, is discrete (i.e. it, too, is atomized, like matter). It is a renewable entity and is a measure or indicator of change.<sup>6</sup> The timelessness of God in his frame of reference is reflected as a temporality of our world through re-creation. Through this process the timeless being God can be in continual contact with the temporal world.

The Kalām principle of re-creation has some profound physical implications too. It can explain why we should have many possible states for a physical object, why we have probability values of quantum states rather than one single instantaneous measured value, and why the world should be indeterministic. Re-creation of a physical measurable, say the position of a body  $x$ , will entail a change of the system with respect to this  $x$ . This change will affect the value of  $x$  itself and consequently will make us unable to determine the exact position of the body. Viewed in its mathematical form this can be represented by acting on the system with an operator  $x$  and then acting immediately with the derivative operator with respect to  $x$  (i.e., with the generator of a translation) which is known to represent the momentum of the body. The continued re-creation will then establish an inherent uncertainty in measuring variables of this sort, which are called "complementary variables". Again in the mathematical description the existence of the uncertainty in the measured values stems from the non-commutability of the variable and the change of the system with respect to that variable. Should there be no change there will be no uncertainty. This is why quantum indeterminacy is a dynamical characteristic in which the process of re-creation plays the most profound role. In formal quantum theory all of this is presented by the wave-mechanical description of the physical systems which I find to be compatible with the re-creation description.

### Notes and References

1. In the Qur'an, divine attributes are called the "Good Names of Allah". Terming these attributes "names" is a very accurate way to describe the fact that their meanings are intended to designate a quality rather than expressing the true content of the attributes.
2. Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, English translation by Michael Marmura (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000).



3. H. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalām* (Harvard: University Press, 1976). H.M. Al-Alousī, *The Problem of Creation in Islamic Thought: Qur'an, Hadith, Commentaries and Kalām* (Baghdad: National Printing and Publishing Co., 1968). Also see his Ph.D. thesis submitted to Cambridge University, 1965; W.L. Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1979); A. Dhanani, *The Physical Theory of Kalām: Atoms, Space, and time in Basrian Mu'tazili Cosmology* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); M.B. Altaie, "The Scientific value of Daqiq al-Kalām", *Journal of Islamic Thought and Scientific Creativity* 4 (1994) pp. 7-18.
4. See my response to David Wilkinson's paper, Ch. 2 of this volume.
5. Wolfson, ref.3, Chapter V.
6. M. B. Altaie, *Time in Islamic Kalām*, short paper delivered at the conference on "Einstein, God and Time" at the Ian Ramsey Centre, Oxford, Sept. 12-15, 2005.