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Providence and Predestination in Al-Ghazali

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Abstract

This essay seeks to show that contemporary interreligious dialogue, like contemporary theology, best proceeds by way of philosophically erudite *ressourcement*. As regards Christian-Muslim dialogue, this requires tapping into the major classical exponents of Muslim philosophy and theology, as exemplified in the work of David Burrell. Inspired by Burrell, the present essay focuses on the contribution of al-Ghazali to Muslim thinking about predestination, a central theme in the Qur'an and arguably in the Bible as well. In order to set the stage for the engagement with al-Ghazali, the essay begins by comparing Joseph Ratzinger's concerns that predestination as commonly understood implies a ready-made web according to which God saves some and damns others, with 'Umar al-Ashqar's interpretation of the Qur'an along these lines. Al-Ghazali's view, while advocating a strong version of predestination, is more philosophically and theologically nuanced, and it provides a basis for Christian and Muslim dialogue about how to characterize the relationships between divine and human agency, faith and reason, and divine wisdom and will. This ongoing dialogue will find in classical Christian theology valuable ways of addressing, with contemporary import, the same problems that concern al-Ghazali.

Keywords

predestination, interreligious dialogue, agency, *kalam*, freedom, Buddhism

I. Introduction

In a recent essay David Burrell describes how the period that he spent living and working in Jerusalem changed the course of his scholarship, specifically by leading him 'to trace the exchange among philosophical theologians—notably, Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali, Maimonides

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and Aquinas—from the twelfth- and thirteenth-centuries.'[1] The works of these Muslim, Jewish, and Christian theologians inspire Burrell's contributions to the contemporary theology of creation.[2] As Burrell points out, contemporary scholars possess many more resources for interreligious dialogue than were available in the medieval period. Yet he is concerned that our contemporary dialogue will not be as fruitful as it should be.[3]

Although Burrell suggests that future work should focus on extending interreligious dialogue into areas of doctrinal divergence (for example, whether the Qur'an is 'divine revelation' and whether Jesus is 'God's revealing word'), it seems to me that Burrell's longstanding approach—interreligious philosophical theology in conversation both with the classical sources and with contemporary theologians—remains the most promising path. I begin by comparing some remarks on predestination by Joseph Ratzinger (before he became pope) and by the contemporary Muslim theologian 'Umar al-Ashqar. In hopes of deepening and broadening contemporary Christian and Muslim reflection on the topic, I then turn to al-Ghazali's theology of providence and predestination. Following in Burrell's footsteps, I seek to show that contemporary interreligious dialogue, like contemporary theology, proceeds most fruitfully by way of philosophically knowledgeable *ressourcement*.[4]

II. Some Contemporary Remarks on Predestination

Reflecting on the Book of Life (Rev 3:5; Psalm 69:28) in an interview with the journalist Peter Seewald, Joseph Ratzinger—prior to

[1] David B. Burrell, C.S.C., 'Some Requisites for Interfaith Dialogue,' *New Blackfriars* 89 (2008): 300–10, at 300.

[2] See, e.g., David B. Burrell, C.S.C., *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1993); idem, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 92–108.

[3] Burrell, 'Some Requisites for Interfaith Dialogue,' 301.

[4] With contemporary theological and philosophical goals in mind, Burrell has inquired into the relationship of human freedom and divine sovereignty in al-Ghazali: see Burrell, 'Al-Ghazali on Created Freedom,' in his *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 156–75. In this essay Burrell aims 'to mine al-Ghazali's preoccupations to display an alternative view of freedom to that which tends to occupy center-stage in current discussions, and thereby to show up the inadequacies of (1) current standing polarities of *libertarian* versus *compatibilist* accounts of human freedom, especially in the face of the creator/creature relation, as well as challenge (2) a style of philosophical inquiry which pretends to set out from 'our intuitions' about such matters—as though these were not already structured by philosophical positions internalized in *our* culture' (ibid., 156). In 'Aquinas and Scotus: Contrary Patterns for Philosophical Theology,' also included in *Faith and Freedom*, Burrell warns against misunderstanding Aquinas's use of the word 'predestination', since the 'pre' might seem to indicate a temporal beforehand or to constrict the freedom of rational creatures. See Burrell, 'Aquinas and Scotus,' 110, especially fn 64; cf. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 123–24.

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his election as pope—raises some concerns about Muslim theology of predestination: 'Islam seems to proceed from a strict notion of predestination; everything is predestined, and I live in a ready-woven web. As against that, Christian faith always reckons with the freedom factor.'[5] For Ratzinger, the term 'predestination' evokes God managing events beforehand in a way inevitably constrictive of human freedom. Ratzinger acknowledges that 'God embraces everything. He knows everything. He guides the course of history.'[6] But God guides history in such a way that rational creatures, being free, can overturn God's plans. As an example, Ratzinger points to the sin of Adam, to which God responds in Christ Jesus. For Ratzinger, the main point is that 'God has not absolutely programmed me but has built in those possibilities for variation that we call freedom.'[7] Ratzinger defines predestination as the doctrine that 'it is already settled that those for whom it is planned will go to hell, and the others to heaven; it has been decided from all eternity.'[8]

By contrast, the contemporary Muslim theologian 'Umar al-Ashqar argues that predestination is a spiritually nourishing doctrine. In his view, 'When a person believes that everything that happens is decreed, and that provision and lifespans are in the hand of Allah, then he can confront difficulties and ordeals with a strong heart and with his head held high.'[9] He goes on to connect the doctrine of predestination with willingness to die in battle for the cause of Allah: 'This belief was one of the greatest motives which spurred the *mujaahideen* (warriors in the way of Allah) to acts of courage on the battlefield without feeling scared.... Then you would find one of them later on, dying in his own bed (of natural causes); he would weep for not having fallen in battle as a *shaheed* (martyr) even though he exposed himself to dangers.'[10] Such willingness to die in battle includes the strength to speak truth to tyrants at home. Al-Ashqar comments that believers in predestination were not afraid to risk their lives by speaking truth, precisely because they knew that God, not the human tyrant, is the one who truly governs. The wickedness

[5] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God and the World: Believing and Living in Our Time: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. Henry Taylor (German 2000; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 57, 58. Ratzinger approved the text of the interview, but did not remove its conversational tone. Thomas Aquinas writes on the Book of Life: '[A]ll the predestined are chosen by God to possess eternal life. This conscription, therefore, of the predestined is called the book of life,' insofar as God knows those whom he has chosen from eternity (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 24, a. 1).

[6] Ratzinger, *God and the World*, 58.

[7] Ibid., 59.

[8] Ibid.

[9] 'Umar S. al-Ashqar, *Divine Will and Predestination: In the Light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Arabic 1990; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: International Islamic Publishing House, 2003), 143.

[10] Ibid., 143–44.

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of tyrants cannot frustrate Allah's governance: 'Whatever provision Allah has decreed for His slave cannot be withheld from anyone, and whatever Allah withholds from His slave, none can cause it to reach him.'[11]

Al-Ashqar holds that predestination means that God, in creating rational creatures, decrees who will be damned and assists them in the wickedness for which they are damned. On the basis of numerous verses from the Qur'an, he concludes, 'Those, whom Allah has decreed will be blessed, will be guided, and those whom Allah has decreed will be doomed will go astray. Allah knows the people of Paradise and facilitates and assists them to the deeds of the people of Paradise, and He knows the people of Hell and facilitates them to the actions of the people of Hell.'[12] For al-Ashqar, God's foreknowledge of what human beings would do by their free will grounds the justice of God's decrees. Regarding those who die in childhood, for example, 'Allah knows who among them would have believed, and who would have disbelieved, if they had reached full maturity.'[13]

Do Ratzinger's concerns apply in the same way to classical expressions of Muslim understanding of predestination?

III. Al-Ghazali on Providence and Predestination

What might contemporary Christian and Muslim theologians, seeking a deeper dialogue, learn from the approach to providence and predestination of the classical Muslim theologian Abu Hamid Muhammad

[11] Ibid., 144.

[12] Ibid., 48–49. See also 38, where al-Ashqar affirms that Allah knows 'whether they are doomed or blessed. He knows who among them are the people of Paradise and who are the people of Hell, from before the time when He created them, and created the heavens and the earth.' See 34 for a definition of 'predestination' or *qadar*. Al-Ashqar affirms that sins happen by the will of Allah (25). Compare al-Ashqar's position with John Calvin's argument regarding predestination: 'That men do nothing save at the secret instigation of God, and do not discuss and deliberate on anything but what he has previously decreed with himself, and brings to pass by his secret direction, is proved by numberless clear passages of Scripture' (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge [reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989], Book I, ch. xviii, 199). Calvin makes clear that by God's 'righteous impulse man does what he ought not to do' (ibid., 205). He emphasizes that 'when we cannot comprehend how God can will that to be done which he forbids us to do, let us call to mind our imbecility, and remember that the light in which he dwells is not without cause termed inaccessible (1 Tim. vi. 16), because shrouded in darkness' (ibid., 203).

[13] Al-Ashqar, *Divine Will and Predestination*, 41. This view resonates not with Calvin but with William of Ockham or Luis de Molina. See William of Ockham, *Predestination, God's Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents*, trans. Marilyn McCord Adams and Norman Kretzmann (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983); Luis de Molina, S.J., *On Divine Foreknowledge*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

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al-Ghazali?[14] Al-Ghazali (1058–1111) first rose to prominence as a teacher of *kalam*, an Aristotelian approach to metaphysical and theological knowledge.[15] At the outset of his career, he belonged the school of *kalam* founded by al-Ashari (d. 936) in reaction to the dominant Mu'talizite emphasis on reason.[16] In this early stage of his career he wrote *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, where he argues against al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) that philosophy cannot reach beyond the natural sphere to attain metaphysical wisdom.[17]

As Marshall Hodgson observes, 'in the act of perfecting its own tradition, the [eleventh-century] Ash'ari kalam was near losing sight of its very purpose: the rational defence of a non-rationalistic kerygmatic position.'[18] During a period of political turmoil, al-Ghazali underwent a personal crisis in which he felt overwhelmed by doubts, which were resolved only by an influx of divine light.[19] After this experience he left his position at Baghdad's Nizamiyyah madrasah and sought a deeper spiritual appropriation of Islam through the practice of Sufism (interpreted through the lens of Avicenna's psychology). Eventually he resumed his teaching and writing.

[14] For background in early Islam, see W. M. Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London: Luzac, 1948).

[15] For discussion of *kalam*, which means 'speech' or 'conversation', see Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10–13.

[16] Ibid., 13.

[17] Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000). See Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 2, 182. In his introduction to his translation, Michael E. Marmura points out al-Ghazali's clear explanations of philosophical positions in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* paradoxically 'helped spread philosophical ideas, as it also set a new tradition in *kalam*. After al-Ghazali, no Islamic theologian worth his salt avoided detailed discussion of the philosophical theories al-Ghazali had criticized' (Marmura, 'Translator's Introduction,' xv–xvi). See also the dialogic refutation of *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* written by Ibn Rushd (Averroës, 1126–1198), in English translation as *Averroës' Tahafut Al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, trans. Simon Van Den Bergh (Cambridge: E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1987 [1954]).

[18] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, vol. 2: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 178.

[19] Knowledge of al-Ghazali's life comes largely from his account of his intellectual path, *Deliverance from Error (al-Munqidh min al-dalal)*, translated by R. J. McCarthy as *Freedom and Fulfillment* (Boston: 1980). See also W. M. Watt, *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of al-Ghazali* (Edinburgh: 1963); Marmura, 'Al-Ghazali,' 138–40; Farouk Mitha, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis: A Debate on Reason and Authority in Medieval Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2001), 1–27. Mitha's book focuses on al-Ghazali's *Kitab al-Mustazhiri*, written against the doctrines of the (Shi'ite) Ismailis prior to his departure from Baghdad. Even at this early stage in his career al-Ghazali is concerned with the place of reason in Sunni law and theology (in contrast to 'the Shi'i Imam's claim to infallible authority' [Mitha, *Al-Ghazali and the Ismailis*, 21]). Mitha describes al-Ghazali's effort as one 'of integration, avoiding the excesses, hitherto expressed in Islamic history, of a literalist rejection of, or a philosophical subservience to, reason' (ibid., 90).

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Al-Ghazali's most important theological work from his mature period, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, contains an extensive treatment of providence and predestination in Book XXXV.[20] After an opening exhortation, al-Ghazali argues that while philosophy cannot be the final stage of religious devotion (which is mystical union), neither can the final stage be appreciated without sound philosophy. Summarizing the argument of Book XXXV, he explains at the outset that philosophical attention to the many leads back to the One: the book's task 'will consist in showing you that there is no agent but God the Most High: of all that exists in creation—sustenance given or withheld, life or death, riches or poverty, and everything else that can be named—the sole one who initiated and originated it all is God Most High.'[21] Once believers have learned this, they will be able to focus entirely on God, by seeing through the many to the One.

What does al-Ghazali mean in stating that God is the sole agent? Following Richard Frank, Burrell argues that al-Ghazali means that God is the creator of all the acts that humans perform, so that the distinction between 'create' and 'perform' expresses 'an *analogy* for the relation of creator to creature.'[22] In other words, al-Ghazali is looking for a way to express the difference between God's causality and ours.[23] As al-Ghazali affirms, nothing can move itself without

[20] In his introduction to his translation of Book XXXV of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, a translation which appears as Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2001), David B. Burrell, C.S.C. comments that al-Ghazali's intention in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* was to make the philosophers' writings usable by 'purify[ing] them of their pretensions to offer an access to truth independent of and superior to that of divine revelation' (xi).

[21] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 15. For discussion of the meaning of 'agent' in al-Ghazali, see Burrell, 'Al-Ghazali on Created Freedom,' 159.

[22] Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions*, 80. Burrell draws here upon Richard Frank, 'Moral Obligation in Classical Muslim Theology,' *Journal of Religious Ethics* 11 (1983): 210, 228 fn 19, and Daniel Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'ari* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 371. For discussion of al-Ghazali's relationship to Ash'arite doctrine, see also Michael E. Marmura, 'Al-Ghazali,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 137–54, at 141–53; Richard M. Frank, in *Al-Ghazali and the Asharite School* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994). Frank holds that al-Ghazali strongly repudiates his early Ash'arite positions; Marmura argues to the contrary.

[23] On Averroes's treatment of this problem, see Ismail Mohamed, 'Concept of Predestination in Islam and Christianity: Special Reference to Averroes and Aquinas,' *The Islamic Quarterly* 44 (2000): 393–413. After affirming that 'all Muslims are completely in agreement that there is no agent (*fa'il*) except Allāh,' Mohamed states, 'To clarify the statement that 'there is no agent except Allāh', Averroes gives two answers. First, this statement can be taken to mean that there is no agent but Allāh, and that causes other than Him cannot be called agents except only metaphorically. This is because the existence of those causes depends on Him. The second answer is that Averroes distinguishes between two terms—creator and agent . . . . Averroes states that an agent in the empirical world (*al-shahid*) does not create anything, but its action is only to change one quality into another; it does not change non-existence into existence' (398). Mohamed concludes that 'Averroes'

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God moving it: 'not even the smallest atom in the worlds of heaven and earth is independent of Him for its movement.'[24] He is aware, however, that two problems arise at this juncture, both of which he suggests are sown by the devil so as to prevent mystical union. The two problems are whether God truly governs all inanimate things, and whether God governs living things, especially those that appear to have free choice. Regarding inanimate things, such as wind, he points out that the causal chain is not difficult for the natural philosopher to understand. As he remarks, 'whoever is given to understand the state of the world as it is in itself knows that the wind is part of the surrounding air, and that the air would not move itself were a mover not to move it, and another mover to move [that mover], and so on until one arrives at the Prime Mover which has no mover nor is it moved in itself—the Great and Glorious.'[25] This recognition of the Prime Mover's causality in any moved mover follows from Aristotle's metaphysics of act and potency. It is not a favorable wind that saves the ship, but rather it is God himself. Recognizing the human tendency to ascribe our blessings to secondary causes rather than to God, al-Ghazali points out the absurdity of the person who, saved from execution by a stroke of the king's pen, gives thanks to the pen.

Granted that the pen does not deserve thanks, what about the king? Al-Ghazali emphasizes that neither the pen nor the king deserve the credit, which should go only to God. But he knows that it is harder to understand why the king should not be the focus of our thanks. Clearly the pen is a mere instrument, whereas the king exercises free choice. The king can either behead you or not. Begging God to have mercy seems superfluous when it is the king who has charge over whether or not one will be beheaded. As al-Ghazali says, 'Many stumble over this' and choose to serve the master whom they see rather than the unseen God.[26] He compares such people to ants who only see the tip of the pen, and do not imagine that anything exists beyond what they see. In al-Ghazali's view, appeal to natural philosophy does not fully solve the problem in this regard. In order for us to see God's agency in human agency, we must depend

answer does not contradict that which is held by all Muslims, namely there is no agent except Allāh' (ibid.).

[24] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 16. See Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions*, 52, 54, 80–81, 121. Burrell comments that in reaction to the emanationist philosophy of Ibn Sina and others, al-Ghazali and the Ash'arites take care that 'God alone will properly be called *agent*, and what we take to be causal activity will be explained as customary connections established by the divine will' (ibid., 52). The key is 'to restore to the One the freedom to create or to refrain from creating a universe' (ibid., 54).

[25] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 16.

[26] Ibid., 18.

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upon the light given by obedience to divine revelation. Al-Ghazali explains that 'those whose hearts are not illuminated by the light of God Most High bringing them to Islam (surrender or submission to God), will find their power of sight foreshortened from the vision of the Sovereign of heaven and earth, and from seeing how He is the One who dominates over all and sees all.'[27] By contrast, God's illumination makes clear how all things reveal God's own praiseworthy providence.

Natural philosophers cannot penetrate, of their own resources, to this deeper level. For how could natural philosophers perceive, in each and every atom, God's action? In mystical union with God, believers 'know that every atom in heaven and earth holds secret conversation with those who possess their hearts, and that it is without boundary or limit.'[28] In other words, believers discover the secret divine decrees, which al-Ghazali does not consider it permissible to reveal. However, he offers a parable to describe more clearly what he means. Returning to the image of the pen, he imagines that the paper credits the ink, the ink credits the pen, the pen the hand and fingers, the hand the body's powers, the body's powers the will, and the will the knowledge and reason. For its part, the knowledge/reason argues that it is a blank slate, and it credits the pen which inscribes knowledge upon it. The inquirer thus ends up in a state of confusion as regards the cause of the paper becoming darkened with lines, and the only way to clear up this confusion is to ascend from the sensible world to the intelligible world, via the 'world of compulsion.'[29] What is this 'world of compulsion'? It is a middle-world where one loses touch with empirical knowledge: one has to 'surpass one's own power.'[30] Al-Ghazali explains that at this level one must have complete trust, just as one would if one were sailing on a ship rather than moving on one's own power. The next stage is to move from depending on

[27] Ibid. As Khalidi points out, in *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* Ibn Rushd (Averroës) offers an 'implicit criticism of Ghazali's conception of God. He hints that the view of causation put forward by Ghazali would lead ultimately to an unsatisfactory conception of God, who would be seen to rule over the universe like a despotic tyrant (as opposed, perhaps, to a law-abiding authoritarian)' (Khalidi, 'Introduction,' xxxix). For his part, Ibn Rushd argues for the necessity of the universal causal chain, thus imperiling the theology of miracles. Richard M. Frank associates al-Ghazali with the same necessitarian view: see Frank, *Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arite School*, 4, summarizing the fruits of Frank, *Creation and the Cosmic System: al-Ghazali and Avicenna* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1992). By contrast, Oliver Leaman sharply differentiates al-Ghazali from Avicenna and Averroës: Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*, 23–24, 55–77. In Leaman's view, 'Al-Ghazali is trying to re-establish the role of a personal, powerful and omniscient God' (77). See also Marmura, 'Al-Ghazali,' 141–53, for support of Leaman's position.

[28] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 19.

[29] Ibid., 24.

[30] Ibid. See Salman Bahier, *Ibn al-'Arabi's Barzakh: Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004).

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the ship, to depending entirely on God. This is the intelligible world, where the inquirer is like the person who can mystically walk on water.

How can one access this intelligible world? Al-Ghazali advises entering into oneself and contemplating one's own act of knowing; if one sees knowledge in the process of being inscribed, one has entered into the intelligible world and has begun to glimpse the meaning of divine transcendence. At this point, however, one has to ascend beyond even the intelligible world, so at to 'take leave of knowledge' and enter into the 'world of power.'[31] The unsearchable power of the One is beyond everything that the inquirer can know. Thus, turning his mind away, the inquirer hears the divine word proclaiming 'from behind the veil of the pavilions of the divine presence: *He is not to be questioned as to what He does; it is they who are to be questioned* [21:23].'[32] Confronted with the world of power, the inquirer is shaken to his core. Only at this stage does the inquirer recognize with perfect clarity the supremacy of God's providence over creatures. The inquirer lifts up his voice in praise, 'Glory be to You! How exalted is Your estate! I am perishing before You; I put all my trust in You, I believe You to be King, Unique, Compelling, Dominator. I am not afraid of anything other than You, nor do I return to anyone other than You.'[33]

Al-Ghazali pictures the inquirer standing before the veil and expressing the desire to know God more closely. In answer, the inquirer

[31] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 27, 28.

[32] Ibid., 28. As Leaman observes, 'The very notion of God being compelled to behave in a certain way is repugnant to al-Ghazali. Some theologians argued that, given the sorts of creatures God created, he is morally obliged to provide a revelation that sets out specific instructions and rewards designed to apply to the natures of the creatures on which they are imposed. The imposition of this obligation is not really something that God can do anything about, he is morally obliged to impose it given his nature, the nature of the creatures in the world, and the world itself. Al-Ghazali objected to the idea of God being confronted with notions of human good and evil which had the status of an extrinsic and independent law' (Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*, 156). The Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites parted ways over this issue of divine freedom, among other issues (see ibid., 25).

[33] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 29. For al-Ghazali's discussion of the divine name 'the Dominator' (al-Qahhar), see al-Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God (al-Maqsad al-asna fi sharh asma Allah al-husna)*, trans. David B. Burrell, C.S.C. and Nazih Daher (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 74. Marmura comments with regard to al-Ghazali's Ash'arite theology of the divine attributes: 'The cornerstone of Ash'arite theology is its doctrine of the divine attributes. Al-Ghazali endorses and expands on this doctrine. For the Ash'arites, the divine attributes of life, knowledge, will, power, speech, hearing, and seeing are co-eternal with the divine essence and intimately related to it, but are not identical with it. They are attributes 'additional' (*za'ida*) to the divine essence' (Marmura, 'Al-Ghazali,' 141). For medieval Christian discussion of God's power, see the texts collected in *La puissance et son ombre. De Pierre Lombard à Luther*, ed. Olivier Boulnois (Paris: Aubier, 1994), focusing on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* and its commentatorial tradition.

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learns that his sharing in God's presence is precisely the experience of knowing that he is not God and therefore cannot see God's glory. Only the true followers of Muhammad attain to such an encounter with God's presence that they are able to fully recognize themselves as creatures, entirely and utterly under the power of God. This recognition—that God is God, and the inquirer is not God—is the blessing for which the inquirer seeks. It is also the answer, attained not in natural philosophy but in mystical ascent, to queries regarding the extent of God's providence over the free choice of creatures.

Interestingly, the ascent through the intelligible world to the world of power is contrasted by al-Ghazali to Buddhism. He observes that Buddhists deny the existence of the world of power. They never encounter the awe-inspiring presence of the all-powerful God who acts from behind the veil. Since they have not been illumined by revelation, all their knowledge comes from natural philosophy, from knowledge acquired through the senses. Eyes require purification in order to ascend from natural philosophy to the intelligible world and the world of power. Once one catches a glimpse of the true divine unity, divine providence will unveil itself in its absolute and all-reaching power. Yet, as al-Ghazali recognizes, in order for this unveiling to occur, many believers need to have their faith shored up by *kalam*, which shows natural philosophy its limitations.

Here al-Ghazali articulates an objection. What about human beings, who 'initiate movement as they will or remain at rest as they will'?[34] How can it be right to argue that humans, like wind and rocks, are absolutely under the control of God's power? In response, he points to human lack of control over their will. Humans may intend not to will something, but in the actual situation they often will it anyway. Furthermore, if the human will were independent, from where would it obtain its motion? Exploring the objection more deeply, he asks whether his own position denies freedom to choose. In answer, he notes that he certainly affirms freedom to choose, but he affirms as well that God governs our freedom to choose, so that we choose what God wills for us to choose. He explains that 'if the covering were unveiled, you would recognize that there is constraint in the course of freedom of choice, in such a way that it is itself constrained to choose.'[35]

[34] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 33.

[35] Ibid., 34. For historical and speculative reflections on divine agency and human freedom from Christian perspectives, see also, e.g., Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, vol. II (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), chapters 24–31, pp. 1033–1347, treating an array of issues in the work of Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham (as well as Peter Lombard, Henry of Ghent, and others); Jacob Schmutz, 'The Medieval Doctrine of Causality and the Theology of Pure Nature (13th to 17th Centuries),' in *Surnaturel: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-Century Thomistic Thought*, ed. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., trans. Robert Williams (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009),

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This point leads him into a philosophical discourse on freedom of choice. He compares natural actions (displacing water by sitting in a tub), voluntary actions (breathing), and freely chosen actions (writing). As he defines this last, 'freedom of choice consists in a specific willing which is aroused by a counsel of reason which also, once perceived, brings it to its term.'[36] Since freedom of choice depends upon reason's judgment, freedom of choice is itself already somewhat determined, just as when an eyelid blinks in response to an approaching pin. In the face of the various alternatives that present themselves to the will, the reason identifies what is the good to be pursued or the evil to be avoided. The will also has to respond to the senses and the imagination, which make a particular good attractive or unattractive to the will. As an example of how freedom does not exclude submission, al-Ghazali gives the difficulty of slitting one's own throat: 'the will is not present because it is not aroused by the movement of reason or the evident advantage of doing the appropriate action.'[37] The only way that one can deliberately kill oneself is if one's reason judges that doing so would be the lesser evil; one could thereby overcome one's natural revulsion to killing oneself. As this example shows, the will follows both the reason and the senses. Al-Ghazali's conclusion is that the human will stands between God's will, which is perfectly free, and a natural action (such as fire burning), which is perfectly constrained.[38]

If will follows upon knowledge, however, has not al-Ghazali thereby proven that God does not cause the will? It would seem that reason and the senses, not God, constrain or cause the will. Commenting on this objection, he observes that the causes that we observe 'must be aligned with the intention [*ma'na*] expressed by the

203–50; Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Harm J. M. J. Goris, *Free Creatures of an Eternal God: Thomas Aquinas on God's Infallible Foreknowledge and Irresistible Will* (Leuven: Peeters, 1996); Steven A. Long, 'Providence, Freedom, and Natural Law," *Nova et Vetera* 4 (2006): 557–605.

[36] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 37.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Al-Ghazali here describes how the Ash'arite school called God's action '"freedom of choice," on condition that freedom of choice is not understood as willing after confusion and indecision, for that would be absurd in His case' (ibid., 38–39). He then points out that because of God's transcendence, all names of God only apply to God in a metaphorical fashion. Burrell explains that al-Ghazali holds that between the Creator and creatures there is 'affinity or similarity, yet no palpable resemblance. Ghazali may not have had the semantic tools available to him which Aquinas used so adroitly, in distinguishing *manner of signifying* from the *reality signified* in certain privileged expressions whose use proves to be inherently analogous, yet he arrives at a similar conclusion regarding human language pressed into service *in divinis*' (Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions*, 136, cf. 45 and 125 on freedom of choice).

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divine decree.'[39] Behind what we can observe empirically lies the divine power, as faith teaches. God necessitates the order of reason and will, just as God necessitates the order by which everything comes to be. Al-Ghazali comments, 'There is no room for play or chance in any of this; everything has its rationale and order.'[40] To make God's presence clearer to the believer, he compares God's ordering of everything to how God takes away ritual uncleanness through an ordering that requires the whole body to be immersed in water. A liturgical imagination, he thus suggests, better understands the metaphysical truth about God's causal presence in the mundane world. The eternal God ordains all temporal things, but not in a way that this ordering appears on the surface; divine illumination unveils it to believers. As al-Ghazali points out, it is easy to say and believe that '"there is no god but God,"' but 'how difficult its true reality and its inner kernel even for those *endowed with real perception* [3:7]—so how much more must it be for others!'[41]

At this point in his discussion, he explores a common objection: does not a robust account of predestination, especially one that holds that 'there is no agent but God Most High,' do away with the purpose of God's commanding a law (in the case of Islam, *shari'a*)? If the only agent is God, then why worry about what human agents do, since what appears to be their agency is really God's? Al-Ghazali recognizes the urgent need for him to clarify what he means by 'agent'. God is not an agent in the same sense that human agents are. Rather, God is 'the originator of existing things,' whereas humans depend on God's causality for the temporal exercise of their agency.[42] Humans relate to God as effect to cause, and therefore their causality is a caused causality, depending as it does upon God. Al-Ghazali compares this relationship to that between an Emir who commands the execution, and the executioner who does the deed; both 'kill' the criminal, but in different senses. Every action of the executioner (qua executioner) is also, in a real sense, that of the Emir, but the Emir does not act on the same level as the executioner. For this reason, 'God Most High in the Qur'an sometimes attributes actions to angels and sometimes to human beings, and at other times applies the very

[39] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 39. Marmura comments that for al-Ghazali, 'Whatever we believe to have been "acquired" by our own power is in reality acquired on our behalf by divine power. Al-Ghazali insists that the created power in us exists only with the acquisition the divine power creates for us. Created power does not temporally precede the human act. It and the act are created simultaneously' (Marmura, 'Al-Ghazali,' 143). See however Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions*, 80.

[40] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 40.

[41] Ibid., 42.

[42] Ibid., 43.

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same attributions to Himself.'[43] He offers a number of examples from the Qur'an of such attribution.

The point is that humans are certainly agents, but only in a limited sense, as dependent upon God's all-embracing agency. The human tendency is to assume that the real agents are the visible ones, whereas in fact the true meaning of agency belongs to God, and humans are only agents in a dependent and secondary sense. Only God truly originates, and in this sense only God causes as an 'agent'.[44] Drawing upon a saying of Muhammad to the effect that only God is, al-Ghazali explains the saying in Aristotelian terms that dovetail with the Qur'an's affirmations about God: 'That is, everything which does not subsist in itself, but has its subsistence from another, from the point of view of itself, is nothing. For its truth and its reality comes from another and not from itself, so it is not true essentially . . . outside *the Living and the Subsisting* [2:255, 3:2], to Whom *there is no likeness* [42:11].'[45]

Having distinguished divine and created causality, he returns to the objection regarding predestination, namely that it takes away the merit of following *shari'a*: why reward someone for something predestined, or punish someone for what had to be? As al-Ghazali puts it, 'How can He be angry at His own deed?'[46] At the bottom of this question, he recognizes, is the question of whether the priority of God's agency—the fact that God, from eternity, knows and wills the end—negates the value of all created causality, even that of free creatures? Even if God knows and wills my free causality in a transcendent way, the fact that he knows and wills the plan for me means that I am not, in an absolute sense, self-determining. Absolutely speaking, my life is not my own. How can I accept that my actions, which depend upon God's eternal decree, deserve reward or punishment? Al-Ghazali identifies the only possible answer: believers must attain to a faith that 'brings about the state of trust in divine providence, and is only perfected by faith in the benevolence and wisdom [of God].'[47] From his earlier emphasis on God's absolute power, al-Ghazali here turns to emphasize the divine goodness and wisdom. Unless we believe in the goodness and wisdom of God, we will not be able to stomach the radical priority of God's agency.

To believe with certitude in God's infinite goodness and wisdom requires, for al-Ghazali, God's unveiling to the seeker. This unveiling occurs through God's gifts in creation and in revelation, which make

[43] Ibid., 43.
[44] Ibid., 46. Recall that an 'agent' is 'one who originates' (*mukhtari'*).
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 47.
[47] Ibid. For further discussion see Burrell, 'Al-Ghazali on Created Freedom,' 164–65; Marmura, 'Al-Ghazali,' 143, 150–53.

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it possible for those who inquire to recognize the unity and perfection (rather than 'diversity and discontinuity') of God's justice.[48] In this regard al-Ghazali argues that, were we able to see as God sees, we would know that the temporal distributions of blessings and sufferings are entirely just and wise, 'nor is there anything more fitting, more perfect, and more attractive within the realm of possibility.'[49] Yet the perfect justice and wisdom of this temporal order depends upon, as one would expect, its ordering to the life to come. Al-Ghazali states that 'all need and harm in the world, while it represents a deficiency in this world, nonetheless spells an enhancement in the next, and everything which amounts to a deficiency in the next world for one person spells a benefice for another.'[50] Here he appeals to the idea that the existence of Hell instructs the blessed in 'the extent of their blessing,' just as sickness teaches us to appreciate the blessing of good health.[51] His point is that the enhanced perfection of the universe allows for the diminishment of some of its members, a diminishment that is just because of freely committed sins. In this respect he employs the analogy of cutting off a diseased limb to enhance the whole body's perfection.

Having provided these analogies regarding the wisdom and justice of the divine decree, he takes care to indicate their limitations. He warns that 'this is another sea immensely deep, with vast extremities and chaotic swells . . . and the boats of those whose capacity is limited flounder in it, for they do not know that this is something hidden, not to be grasped except by those who know.'[52] Only those who have received God's unveiling can know it, and they cannot disclose the secret conceptually. The key is to learn trust in divine providence. Al-Ghazali therefore devotes a final lengthy section of Book XXXV to describing the practices and beliefs required for acquiring and nourishing trust in divine providence.[53]

[48] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 48.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., 49.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 49–50.

[53] Burrell argues here for the priority of practical reason in al-Ghazali's approach: 'by trying our best to act according to the conviction that the divine decree expresses the truth in events as they unfold, we are *shown* how things truly lie. So faith [*tawhîd*] and practice [*tawakkul*] are reciprocal; neither is foundational' (Burrell, 'Al-Ghazali on Created Freedom,' 165). Burrell's description evokes cultural-linguistic approaches to Christian faith, and he goes on to show (through a superb comparison of Aquinas and Scotus) the necessity of appreciating 'the unique founding relation, creation, which seems best elucidated by a metaphysics which can understand *act* analogously, and so indicate how the originating activity of the creator continues to make the creature to be an agent in its own right' (ibid., 171).

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IV. Concluding Reflections

Two elements stand out in al-Ghazali's approach to providence and predestination. The first is his emphasis on the need for the illumination of faith in order to apprehend adequately the mystery of providence. As we have seen, al-Ghazali holds that philosophy of itself cannot ascend sufficiently away from the empirical realm. Empirically, the argument for a divine providence that governs all things has to face massive disorder. In the case of human beings, providence also requires positing life after death in order to account for a just ordering of blessings and sufferings.

The second element is the preeminence that al-Ghazali gives to divine power. He highlights the Qur'anic verse 'He is not to be questioned as to what He does; it is they who are to be questioned,' and he praises God as 'King, Unique, Compelling, Dominator.'[54] Al-Ghazali experiences awe in the realization of God's compelling power. He structures his discourse with the aim of teaching that 'there is no agent but God the Most High: of all that exists in creation—sustenance given or withheld, life or death, riches or poverty, and everything else that can be named—the sole one who initiated and originated it all is God Most High.'[55] The purpose of this emphasis on God's power is, according to Burrell, to underscore God's love: 'Ghazali can be said to offer an entire philosophy structured on the relationship of love between creator and human creatures,' insofar as God's power operates to bestow 'existence where there is no reason to do so, with the result that created beings will move towards what possesses the plenitude of perfection with a desire which is the expression of their very being.'[56] Yet even mystical experience is for al-Ghazali fundamentally a recognition of our infinite incapacity for union with God. Recall the words that al-Ghazali receives in his mystical experience: '"It is enough for you to share in Our presence to know that you are excluded from Our presence, incapable of glancing at Our beauty and Our glory."'[57] Al-Ghazali's praise of God as 'Dominator' and 'Compelling', therefore, remains troubling, much like William of Ockham's view that God's power is fundamentally arbitrary.[58]

[54] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 29.

[55] Ibid., 15.

[56] Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions*, 135.

[57] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, 5, 29.

[58] Describing Ockham's position, Marilyn McCord Adams observes, 'To sin is to act contrary to one's obligations. But according to Ockham's ethics, God does not have any obligations to anyone and so cannot act contrary to His obligations no matter what He does . . . . As Ockham sees it, the fact that God cannot will anything maliciously or command anything unjustly—like the fact that He cannot sin—is merely a reflection of the fact that God has no moral obligations to anyone and so cannot act contrary to his

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For this reason, a Christian-Muslim dialogue instructed by al-Ghazali might direct attention to the history of Christian reflection on God's power, in which God's omnipotence has been affirmed in more nuanced and arguably more fitting ways—thereby addressing the concerns of Joseph Ratzinger without negating the emphasis of al-Ashqar. Al-Ghazali's effort to articulate the transcendence of God's causality, by means of the analogy of the Emir and the executioner, would in itself already enrich al-Ashqar's position. At the same time, Christian-Muslim dialogue would gain from al-Ghazali's (and al-Ashqar's) awe for God's power, even while seeing the fullest expression of this power in Christ's cruciform love. Christians likewise gain from al-Ghazali's recognition of the value of faith for affirming the good and wise providence of God. When al-Ghazali defends the justice of God's decrees, whether by appealing to the life to come (as regards the suffering of the innocent) or by offering analogies that he knows to be limited and weak (as regards the predestination of some but not all rational creatures), he rightly places the eyes of faith at the center of his presentation. As Burrell puts it in commenting on al-Ghazali, 'certain domains quite outstrip human conceptualizing.'[59] The key is to recognize the limits of human conceptualizing without abandoning the insights gained by conceptual labor. This task, I hope to have shown, provides an important avenue for future Christian-Muslim dialogue.

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obligations, no matter what He does. Yet this is no restriction on God's power to will or command, but rather on the descriptions that His volitions and commands could fit' (Adams, *William Ockham*, 1160, 1162).

[59] Burrell, 'Al-Ghazali on Created Freedom,' 166.

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