Predestination: The Contrast between Islamic and Christian Views

Those who have newly come to faith need help to discern the radical differences between what they have been taught about this subject and a Biblical view. This new understanding will help to liberate them from various forms of "legalism".

For over 4000 years, throughout the Middle East, there has been a belief that gods and goddesses (cosmic powers) take an active part in all human affairs. There is a further belief in a greater power controlling the destiny of the life of all human beings. Even behind the triad of primary Hindu gods, there is the great "Impersonal Unknowable". The same idea is behind the dualism of Zoroastrianism. This power and destiny was the unifying element of the system of thought built up around the concepts of two gods – one struggling for the supremacy of goodness and the other struggling for the supremacy of evil.

For the Arabs "Allah" is also a power of this kind. He is behind the tribal gods and goddesses worshipped in the Kaaba of pre-Islamic Arabia. Pre-Islamic Arabs believed that people's lives were controlled by this power. It was named Ad-Dahr (see sura 45:24). Pre-Islamic Arabs also rejected any suggestion of a divine law or any future life after death or any retribution for misdeeds done.

In some ways the idea of Ad-Dahr became merged with the concept of "Allah". The Sahih Al Bakhari relates a hadith saying, *"I am the Ad-Dahr. I am the creator of time and I manage the affairs of all."*

Predestination is an entirely different thing. In predestination the power of destiny isn't blind. There is a super-intelligent 'predestinator' – Allah. In theory this is true of the God of the Jews, the God of the Christians and the God of the Muslims. There is one who predestines the affairs of all people everywhere in all time. In the early part of the Islamic era, when the question of the freedom of the will was discussed, two Arabic words played a significant role: *"qadar"* (divine pre-ordainment) and the *"takbier"* (saying 'Allah is the most great'). The actual words mean "acting with care" and "pre-mediation" – i.e. the exercising of thought in planning something for the future. When God is the subject of the sentence, it can mean the accomplishment of something in the future or the pre-ordination of a decree or the pre-determination of something.

The word *"qadar"* is used especially for divine power. It means that everything is under the control of God's absolute power. This implies there is no such thing as "misfortune" for it is written in "the book" in eternity before God brings it about in a specific time. See the Quran sura 57:22, *"No calamity occurs on earth or to yourselves but is in a decree before we created it."*

In several Quranic verses it is plainly said that even the daily provision of our needs – food housing etc. – the provisions for our lives and the circumstances of the end of our lives are all mentioned as being pre-ordained by Allah. So all human acts are decided, created and governed by God. It is true that people somehow participate in decision-making, but what is stressed is the importance of divine power over our "freewill" and our rational abilities. Reason is to be used only to determine the meanings of the Quran and the Hadith in order to defend religious truth and persuade others of the validity of Islam. [This view is held by **the Ashari School of Islam**. It is the moderate view.]

There are two other schools – **The Hanbali School of Law** is the official school of Saudi Arabia and Qatar with many adherents in a number of other Arab countries. It is also the school of radical Islamic groups such as I.S. It recognises as sources of law the Quran, the Hadith, the fatwas of Muhammad's companions and also reasoning by analogy (*Qiyas*). Basically it advocates a literal interpretation of the textual sources.

The other school is an 8th century legal/theological school – **The Mutazilis**. This school emphasises God's absolute uniqueness, unity and justice. They teach that the Quran was created rather than eternal. They preach freewill as a rational depiction of good and evil. They teach that there is harmony between reason and revelation. For them, rational logical arguments and rational ethics are a major contribution to the way we should live. (See the Quran sura 6:30-40).

The Quran speaks at one point of man's freewill and also of the clear responsibility of the Allah of the Quran for all that man does, but it also encourages the idea of freewill in what we do – hence the divergent views of Muslim scholars. There are Quranic verses that suggest that man's unbelief is determined by Allah in such a way that he may guide us in a "straight path" or he may lead us astray. See sura 6:12, *"So whomever Allah wishes to guide, Allah opens his heart to surrender and whomever Allah wishes to delude, Allah makes his heart narrow, congested, as if he was trying to climb to the sky. Thus does Allah place penalty on those who will not believe."*

In other verses in the Quran a man's will is guided by a man's good and bad acts. Two examples are sura 16:106-119 and sura 3:85-87, *"If anyone seeks other than submission to God as a religion, it will not be accepted from him and he will be a loser in the hereafter. How does God guide people who have scoffed after they have believed and witnessed that the messenger is genuine and proofs have come to them? God does not guide unjust people. Their reward is that on them is the curse of God and the angels and all humankind."*

Ultimately Allah is allowed by his own accord to further the cause of a man or to be against him. But Allah may respond to the intercession of some privileged person.

Some Views of Predestination in the Hadith

The "Book" of God's plan for every individual has written in it what will be and what is currently happening until "the hour". Some things – such as when a child is in the womb of his mother – are controlled by his destiny or, in Islamic terms, by the child's "book". There is no one who has been destined to go to heaven or to hell who will fail to arrive at the appointed place that was written in the "book of God" before the child's birth. This implies that a person could be punished legally for an act that he did not commit. It is also why car insurance is illegal in some Muslim countries.

As you will be aware, early on in Islamic history there was a split between the Umayyads who moved the capital of Islam to Damascus and the Hashemites who moved their capital from Medina to Iraq and became what is called the Abbasid Caliphate.

In the matter of predestination, two notions emerged as crucial in the debate. The Umayyad rulers in Damascus were greatly disliked by ordinary common Muslims because they were loose, immoral Muslims. Many had the idea that the Umayyads had no right to rule over the Islamic World. But the Umayyads claimed that they must be ruling because it was the will of Allah – i.e. it was "written in the book". Allah had appointed them to rule. Their opponents claimed that many of their acts were clearly morally wrong, so that these acts could not have been decreed by Allah. In effect, they said that the general principle is that good acts are from Allah and bad acts come from a man's evil heart.

This resulted in an intellectual war between numerous theologians. Each side sought to prove predestination or freewill as their true and only basis of faith. Both sides were able to quote many ayats from the Quran indicating that their position was the right one. Man is either predestined absolutely in every thought and action or he has freewill and free action. Both can be proved from Quranic statements. This has been one of the most serious controversies in the whole course of Islamic history.

The doctrine of predestination has taught many Muslims to be satisfied in all situations and conditions – i.e. to have a high degree of fatalism. But it also teaches Muslims to be courageous and fearless in the face of danger and if there is victory in battle clearly it is the purpose of God.

The most remarkable implication of this belief of the character of Allah with a sovereign freewill and a completely free and independent will is Muhammad's doctrine of election by grace!

Ultimately, a man's belief or unbelief doesn't depend on his own desire or choice. It is Allah who either grants or withholds the gift of faith. It is Allah who makes the heart receptive to warnings and renewal or hardens the senses and veils the eyes of the soul.

In Islam, the great and only significant and decisive thing that matters is God's majesty and unconditional will that cannot be forced or broken or influenced by the rebellion or opposition of man. Man is not able to rebel against God and His plan for mankind. So the rebellion of a rebellious person is a pathetic attempt at self-affliction.

If we look at the Christian view of predestination, we see that this Muslim view is not at all like even extreme Calvinism. Fundamentally this is because the Lord Jesus in the New Testament is not at all like Allah in Islam. In the area of **faith** there is no dogma or doctrine that can contradict the revelation of God that we have in the person and life of the Lord Jesus. It is true in Christian theology that we talk about predestination and election, but this is always in relation to our personal faith.

If a doctrine is isolated from its context, the question is, "Who is the one who predestinates?" In one case it is Muhammad's Allah and in our case it is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and this is in the realm of faith. So **our issue** is how are we to understand our Father God as the One who predestines all things and contrast this with Muhammad's Allah in the same role? The answer to this question will show how radically different are the attitudes that we each have to life and to knowing and loving God even though in Arabic we may use the same name in the case of Allah.

The Quranic word *"qadara"* means measure, value, decree. From this comes the measurement of life and the events in that life – i.e. decrees of predestination which are thought of in terms of absolute power. Everything in Islam leads us back to the 'almightiness' of God – the final and the ultimate. This implies that even predestination itself is subject to change, cancellation or abrogation. The course of action that Allah chooses to adopt at any moment is so powerful that the truth itself is not true! It is true **only** as long as the absolute power is pleased to make it a truth.

Actually, there is nothing left in the universe but **power**, because Allah is not bound by anything that he has been doing or that is being done or even those things predestined to be done. No one can call Allah to account for his actions. A strange characteristic of the irrational nature of the divine will is that Allah often makes misleading statements to prove or test man or to stir up unbelievers to contradict the revealed word – the Quran. For example, sura 17:46, *"And we put a cover over their hearts, lest they understand it, and deafness in their ears. And when you mention God in the recital, as one they turn their backs in aversion."* See also sura 74:31, *"And we have made only angels commanders of hell and we have only made their number a trial for those who scoffed, so those to whom Scripture was given* (that is us the believers) *may become certain and those who believe may increase in faith and those given Scripture and believers may have no misgivings and so those with sickness in their hearts and scoffers may say, 'What does God mean by this example?' Thus God leads anyone astray at will and guides anyone at will and no one knows the forces of your Lord but God."*

Allah's decision can never be changed by an outside power. Allah's word has no limits and no obstacles. This implies that he never binds himself to a decision which he made previously. This is one of the mysteries of the Allah of Islam. Any idea of predestination based on the condition of absolute power will end where Islam is! So what most Muslims understand about Allah is primarily "power" and very little emphasis is placed on any other attributes. It is true that there is a relatively small number of modernised, secular Muslims in the Muslim World or in other secularised countries who meet the buffeting of their lives with a degree of idealistic fatalism – not much better than various sorts of atheists. But because of their belief in Allah who controls their destiny, the result is an attitude of fatalism.

Predestination from the Viewpoint of Biblical Christianity

What does the Bible have to teach about predestination? The salvation of mankind by the Lord Jesus was planned by the Godhead before the universe was created so that every individual everywhere and over all time may rightly say, "I have been predestined to have eternal life". In Christianity this is the ultimate purpose of God. It is not God's will that anyone should perish. ***"In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish."*** (Mt. 18:14)

We need to look at a number of issues – all rather briefly. At least this will help you prepare for future discussions with your BMB brothers and sisters.

- The origin of evil
- The nature of the bondage we are in
- The consequences of sin
- The nature and perpetuation of sin

- The nature of guilt and our consciences
- The justice of retribution
- The purpose of God in giving us freewill
- The Father God's electing grace and covenant
- Some cautions
- A brief history of the development of this view

The Origin of Evil

The ultimate mystery of the origin of evil is not open to explanation by man either through philosophy or through Biblical revelation. There are a few scattered hints from the remote past that suggest Satan's hostility to the Lord Jesus was persistent before time – i.e. before Creation. But the Bible does not encourage any philosophical speculation. Its focus is on the acts of human responsibility. This should also be our focus.

From Biblical revelation it is clear that:

- ✓ God is not the author of sin in any circumstance at all.
- ✓ God has no need of sin to enhance His glory and He did not permit it to demonstrate His moral grandeur.
- ✓ The subsequent responsibility of all people in response to their own personal sins is in no way lessened on the grounds that we weren't living in the Garden of Eden and so had no choice and therefore are not guilty.
- ✓ God is not a 'party' to our repeated acts of sin because He has not withdrawn His sustaining power from the universe. If we choose to misuse our abilities and talents for sinful ends, we can't blame God for giving us a degree of freedom. We are not pre-programmed robots.

The Nature of what we lost in the Fall

Much of what makes us human beings – our minds, our emotions and our wills that were originally given to Adam and Eve – remains intact. But our powers have diminished although their main characteristics are perpetuated. The Bible concentrates on what we lost before and this was our great spiritual loss. The most valuable thing we lost was our right of free communion with God.

It appears from Genesis 3 (the Garden of Eden) that God in heaven had a close relationship with man. But our human rebellion against God broke our ability to communicate with Him and a huge barrier was erected between God and mankind. Only the Lord Jesus can remove this barrier. A consequence of the loss of this upward 'pull' is that we are now prey to a downward 'pull' of the "law of sin" pulling us down. This is a spiritual force which is comparable to the physical law of gravity. We are incapable of escaping its continuous operation **until** we are made free of its operation by **a much stronger law** controlled by the Holy Spirit.

There are other disabilities that have as their object to restrain man from further evil. Here are a few of these:

- the continuous **hard work** we have to maintain the uncompromising laws of nature
- the difficulties of childbirth
- the limitation of our lifespan – usually to 70-80 years
- physical disintegration and death

Then in our **thought life** – in our minds – we have issues like:

- the accusations of conscience
- a sense of shame
- fear of retribution if we do an evil deed

So we have lost our "original righteousness" where we "naturally" conformed to the will and purpose of God so that we easily and naturally obeyed God's laws.

We can regain this position of being in a right relationship with God **only** through the operation and power of the Holy Spirit.

Several objections have been raised to this view including:

1. God would not be righteous if He gave man a hopeless start in the race through life and then condemned him to failure.
2. This concept makes God the author of sin since He created human nature and therefore sinful nature.
3. It conflicts with our "freedom" to decide and implies that we are mere robots.
4. It implies that all of us are subject to an unchangeable law and we will never ever be righteous.

But we need to remember that God cannot ever be said to be the **author** of all the perversions in mankind. Angels can act "freely", but most voluntarily act under the law of righteousness. If they had not been free, none of them would have fallen. But the Bible puts a great emphasis on man's will and on our freedom to choose to be a follower of the Lord Jesus. ***"This is the condemnation, that light*** (the Lord Jesus) ***has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light."*** (Jn. 3:19)

So nothing can excuse a person who deliberately refuses the Lord Jesus. Rom. 1:19-25 says that there is a similar moral choice given to people who have never heard about the Lord Jesus.

Don't be too hasty to make generalisations about "freewill". What about a heroin addict? He may know it is killing him, but he can't stop. A man can only be said to be free, when he can, with comparative ease, disregard any inner craving. We are all rational beings even though no one of us always behaves in a rational manner. Psychological analysis explains our irrational actions as subconscious obsessions. Our environment often controls our behaviour. All this is very complex and it suggests very strongly that we are not "free". It begs the question, "Can we isolate an act from its context and make it voluntary in the sense of being unrelated – i.e. **not 'conditioned'** in any way by heredity, environment, education etc.?"

The common experience of men and women is that we know we should obey God and love Him. We want to do what is right, but habitually we fail in both! We know that our moral nature is most often revealed in our thought life and that this is the chief source of our trouble. We are victims of jealousy, hatred, malice and pride over which we can gain no control. We experience that we do have the freedom and the ability to do what we should, but we don't do it!

Why is this so? The Bible says there is an evil principle in mankind that no power in human nature can eradicate. The grace of God alone can save mankind from this desire to sin.

Modern psychology, which is practised by some, tries to explain away man's tendency to sin continually. It is explained away as an endocrine imbalance or on the grounds of sex etc. Such an explanation fails to realise the fact that human sin is the **root cause** of all abnormalities and disturbances.

Some Scriptures

The nature of man's bondage

Gen. 3:1-7, 14-19; Ps. 90; Is. 14:12, 15; Ezek. 28:12-19; Jn. 8:44; Rom. 3:10-21, 7:5-24, 8:10; 1 Tim. 2:13-15; James 4:14

The consequences of sin

Gen. 6:5, 12; Ps. 14:2-3, 51:5, 149:2; Jer. 17:9; Mt. 7:11; Rom. 1:18-3:23, 8:7-8; Gal. 3:10; Eph. 2:1-3, 4:18; Titus 3:3; 1 Jn. 3:8-10

The Biblical view of sin is that of wilful disobedience to God's will. It is an act or attitude of deliberate rebellion. It is an act of self-will or neglect to do a prescribed action. It assumes that we have the psychological ability to understand what God requires of us and that we are free to do it or not to do it. It is connected to our volition. In its nature sin is unholy. It is direct disobedience to God's laws.

We are responsible to obey and our conscience constantly witnesses that it is our duty to obey. Sin is ultimately our refusal to obey God's requirements for a good and productive life.

The nature of guilt

It has been argued that it isn't just for God to impute guilt to an individual born involuntarily into the world without the power to resist and who started life with a strong bias towards sin to which guilt is attached. Some others have argued that it is grossly unfair for a God of justice to make all mankind guilty just because of one man's (Adam's) sin.

But we need to remember that although "original sin" is part of our make-up, through the atonement of the death of the Lord Jesus on the Cross we have "a new nature" and "original guilt" is gone as forgiveness and righteousness become ours.

Then we need to remember that no one is eternally condemned for sins other than his own. We human beings, by ourselves, deliberately choose to sin.

The nature of conscience

Conscience is our inward assessor witnessing to the extent we are living in conformity to God's law. (Rom. 2:15) It is a definite principle that seeks to enforce constant obedience to God's will. But conscience needs to be educated by the Holy Spirit through what the Bible teaches. So our conscience is capable of development.

The justice of punishment

Punishment is the inevitable consequence of sin. There is nothing vindictive in God's dealings with us. The Bible speaks of God's punishment in terms of "discipline" or "chastening" with the object of bringing about repentance and restoration.

Then there is the issue of God's eternal purpose and human freewill

Nothing stabilises our faith more than the great discovery that God is working to a plan. As believers, we are responsible for doing our utmost to extend the knowledge of the Gospel, but we are not finally responsible for the results. See Eph. 1:11, ***"According to the purposes of Him*** (God) ***who works all things after the counsel of His own will"***.

So God has a deliberate plan that will be enforced. The ultimate purpose of God is that His Son should be supreme in the universe – ***"That in all things He might have the pre-eminence"***.

Never in Scripture is it stated that God decides the absolute destruction and the eternal loss of any man. The clear statement is that there is a plan for the salvation of the individual. Rom. 8:29-30 tells us that God has fore-ordained that those who receive the Lord Jesus into their lives as Lord will be made like Him.

Predestination

We are predestined **not** to return to an earthly paradise, but to be elevated to a far more glorious place – heaven the dwelling place of God. This opens a much wider issue with words like "foreknowledge" and "election". Neither Biblical revelation nor Christian philosophy gives us a complete understanding (explanation) of how predestination works. There isn't any "water tight" scheme.

What we can say is that before human history, as revealed in the Bible, there existed in the triune nature of God a counsel of redemption. We have no idea about this other than what is revealed in Scripture. Clearly "the Father's will" was accepted by the Son and the details were put into operation by the Holy Spirit. Each of the persons of the Godhead took a distinct part in the salvation of mankind. The clear purpose was the redemption of fallen mankind in enabling each person to choose the atoning sacrifice of Calvary as the necessary means of salvation.

Different words are used in Scripture such as "foreknowledge" and "election". These imply a relation to an individual who "believes" and some divine control of all the steps leading to him/her welcoming the Lord Jesus into his/her life to take control. These words suggest prior "predestination" carried into effect in time so that he/she becomes a believer.

The problem arises over a disagreement about the grounds of God's choice. All sorts of suggestions have been made:

- ✓ Salvation results because God has foreseen their potential faith knowing that when they hear the Gospel they will believe it and respond.
- ✓ Before time God chose "the elect" and in time He disposes their wills to respond to His call.

We need to remember to be cautious. Scripture doesn't give any suggestion that God forces His will on anyone. Men and women are always regarded as free. The question of God's choice – wonderful as it is – is only a part of our salvation. It is never an excuse for negligence or a moment of wilful sin. As believers, we are always ignorant of God's choices, but we are still responsible for pleading with everyone to be reconciled to God. Every believer who has wholeheartedly accepted the Lord Jesus into his/her life needs to study the Bible to discover the many warnings against presumption and playing with sin.

Over the centuries different emphases have developed concerning these Scriptures and some are still around today in evangelical circles. There are two that are prominent:

- **Calvinism** derived from John Calvin of Geneva in the 16th century. He placed an emphasis on divine sovereignty in the Bible. Part of this was that we human beings have no innate ability to bring about our own salvation, therefore since people are being saved, it must be predestined by God. So our experience is the result of God's grace and this must be accepted by faith. But our understanding of predestination isn't so much to extol the omniscience and omnipotence of God, but rather to emphasize **His love** for mankind and His desire that all should be saved. So predestination is focused on the Lord Jesus – His birth, His faith, His teaching, His miracles and primarily His death on the Cross to pay the penalty of our sin together with His resurrection, His ascension and His promise to return to this earth. All this was ordained in eternity.
- **Arminianism**: In the 1600s a Dutchman named Arminius stated that he believed in the necessity of God's grace for us to be saved, but John Calvin had taken this to extreme. This was largely the view of John Wesley and the early Methodists.

Who is right? It might save much well-meant discussion if both sides could understand that the Calvinist starts with **God's** relation to the problem and then works down to us. The Arminian starts with **man's** viewpoint and works up to God's.

So our experience is the result of God grace and His great love for us that we have accepted by faith. Predestination in Christianity is not only to extol the omniscience and omnipotence of God, but also His love for mankind and His desire that all people should be saved. So whether you are a Calvinist or an Arminian, your focus must be on the Lord Jesus – His birth, love, faith, teaching and miracles, but primarily on His death on the Cross paying the penalty for our sins, His resurrection and His promise to return to this earth. All this was ordained in eternity.

Going on from there, we can say that whatever has to do with the Lord Jesus was predestined. So we understand predestination in terms of His relationship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. So Biblical predestination tells us that God, in His eternal counsel and wisdom, has bound Himself to covenants He has made and to His many unfailing promises. In other words, the faithfulness of God towards His creation, which is at the very heart of the Gospel, derives from the Biblical doctrine of predestination. The almightiness of God through His determined purpose, revealed through His promises, is in the context of our human weakness and frailty. So His head was crowned with thorns plaited together by sinful men and yet, without fighting back <u>at those men</u>, that infinite power was "fighting back" towards its goal at Creation. The Cross of the Lord Jesus became the symbol of God's mighty power to complete His unalterable purpose – namely to rescue mankind from destruction.

We run up against an apparent contradiction that although everything concerning the Lord Jesus is predestined from eternity, yet His personal obedience to His predestined role was an actual factor. **It was His choice**. If, as a man, He had removed His dependence on God, then we would not be saved at all. None of us could be saved.

This Biblical view of predestination is in great contrast to the Islamic view. You can easily see why the vast majority of Muslims have a fatalistic attitude to life. On the other hand we, as believers in the Lord Jesus, are concerned about our attitudes, our moral actions and our responsibilities inside the broad scope of predestination. As believers, we find we have an alternative view as we think and meditate on the Scriptures about God's sovereignty and man's will. See Jn. 6:37, ***"All that the Father gives Me will come to Me and whoever comes to Me, I will never drive away"***. See again Jn. 6:44, ***"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him and I will raise him up at the last day."***

God's invitation is offered to all. God has given man the gifts and the privileges that allow him individually to have the freedom to choose. Man's misuse of this gift led to disobedience and the Fall. Innocence is the correct word to use of man's original moral state that wasn't built on an unalterable characteristic. Man was never programmed to obey his master.

In our day, computers can only function as they have been programmed to function. Man was never created to be like a machine. He was created as a person with a free relationship with God. Man's freedom gave him the power of choice and his choice gave him true responsibility. So whose fault is it when we sin? Satan's? God's for having given man free choice? Is it the fault of our fallen nature?

The Bible teaches us that sin and death are linked with each other and God's judgement is on sin. As such it can never be abolished except by the action of God. So man is continually torn between the revelation of God through the Lord Jesus showing us what God is like and numerous attempts to make a path of our own back to God.

God's work of salvation, centred on what the Lord Jesus accomplished on the Cross, has been planned from eternity. While the whole Bible is against the idea of fatalism, it teaches that God's plan is much more than a call to do good things. It shows us that, as disciples of the Lord Jesus, we are called to live holy lives, called to do good works, called to preach the Gospel and to prepare ourselves for future glory in heaven. We are called to see a transformation in the society in which we live. As we share the Gospel and demonstrate the power of God, there should be transformation in lives both individually and collectively into **"vibrant communities of Jesus followers"**. The result will be that God's people in every people group everywhere will begin to see radical changes in society as more and more people become disciples of the Lord Jesus and see Him begin to transform their society.