

## **Transcript: Beliefs, Power, freedom and destiny**

A major challenge for all religions is to explain how we as human beings can be held responsible for what we do when God is all-powerful. On the one hand, we are free to choose what we do; on the other hand, God determines everything. If God determines everything, how can we be blamed or praised for what we do? Is not God to be blamed or praised for everything? Furthermore, if God punishes us for things that God made us do, how can that be just?

Again, God is all-knowing. That being the case, how can God allow a person to do something wicked? Why does God not step in to prevent it?

These are very deep questions which have been discussed by Muslim scholars down through the ages and they articulated different points of view. Some held that human beings have complete freewill and so they deserve whatever happens to them. To show mercy to a sinner, they argued, would be to act unjustly towards a righteous person. God is just and must act justly. But how can this be reconciled with the fact that God is all-merciful?

Another group said that God, being all-powerful, predestines everything. Human beings just act out the part that was written for them. The extreme of this position would be to say that God actually compels human actions. The majority of scholars regard both these positions as going too far, but there is a wide spectrum of acceptable positions in between.

If we take as our starting point the fact that the power behind every action, both good and bad, comes from God, we have to say that God 'wills' it - but that is not the same as saying that it pleases God or it is the way that God wanted that power to be used.

For instance, take the case where we teach a child to swim. At the same time we warn him that there are places where it is too dangerous to swim. We have clearly willed for him to become a swimmer. But if that child then drowns whilst swimming across a dangerous stretch of water, we cannot be held responsible. In fact, one of the reasons we taught him to swim was so that he would be safe in all but the most treacherous waters. It was not according to our wish that he drowned. If he had abandoned himself to our will and guidance, he would have been safe. He was responsible for the accident and one could call it an act of rebellion against our wishes.

In this way we can see that human beings are given the responsibility by God to use God's power even to the point of disobedience and even though God hates the evil that comes from such human actions.

Of course, no example we provide from the earthly context is going truly to match the circumstances of God. One crucial point in the example is that when we taught the child to swim, we didn't know what was going to happen. God, on the other hand, is

not limited by time. God knows everything that will happen before it does. God has foreknowledge of every act.

Why then did God not prevent the child from choosing to swim across that particularly dangerous river? If God had, the child would have been deprived of his freedom, which is an essential characteristic of being human. If God were to interfere in that way, then that would consign us to being no more than God's playthings.

The Qur'an tells us that human beings were not created for sport but to obey, serve, worship and love God [Q. 44:38, 51:56].<sup>1</sup> But God wants us to choose to obey, in that lies our human dignity. We therefore can choose to act even against the commands of God, to the point of ultimate rebellion and being condemned to hell.

Thus the human being can be held to account for the way that life has been lived on the Day of Judgement [Q. 2:286].<sup>2</sup>

Islam points the way out of all our logical mazes by teaching us that God is wise, compassionate and merciful. Once we accept this, we can accept freely that God knows what is best for us and surrender ourselves to the divine will. If we let God determine our lives, then we can rest assured that God does not will the loss of one of God's servants.

This may not be an easy message to understand in modern societies, which place much emphasis on the individual, where people are encouraged to have a high sense of their own importance! Instead of putting the freedom of the human individual centre stage, Islam places God there. God whose nature is to call, guide and be merciful towards human beings, God whose choices are always for the good. The only thing that can prevent that good reaching us is our individual rebellion.

Professor Michot explores the tension between predeterminism and freedom:

Reconciling the power and the justice of God has been a problem for every religion. In Sunni Islam, they both must be given the same importance and it has direct consequences for the human being. Of course, everything is created by God: our thoughts, our wills, our feelings, our actions and you could say;

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<sup>1</sup> Q. 44:38 We did not create the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them for play.

Q. 51:56 I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may worship Me.

<sup>2</sup> Q. 2:286 God does not place a burden on a soul greater than it can bear. To its benefit is whatever [good] he does and to its harm is whatever [evil] he does. "Our Lord! Do not take us to task if we forget or make a mistake. Our Lord! Do not lay a burden on us like that which you laid on those before us. Our Lord! Do not make us carry that for which we have no strength to bear. Blot out our sins, forgive us and have mercy on us. You are our Master. Make us victorious against those who reject faith."

how could God be just then, if he is creating everything? But on the other hand, God is also commanding and forbidding things through the revelations, and without freedom for the human being, these kinds of ethical demands from God, through the revelation, do not make sense. So human freedom becomes a requirement of ethics. During the classical period of Islam, people believed that they were determined by the planets. Today they might believe that they are determined by their genes or their social environment. Those are facts that cannot be denied. But they are not the most important [thing]. The most important [thing] is that they are also asked to behave properly and act ethically by the revelations and so they will have to be accountable. Ethics doesn't make sense without a degree of freedom and so Muslims will consider that predeterminism can never be used as an excuse: in some way, it must be fought. And we will leave the problem of this reconciliation between predeterminism and freedom: the important bit is the praxis, is the action. Don't ask how it works, make sure that until the last minute of your life, you indeed answer the commands and implement the prohibitions of God and act ethically in your life. Nothing is written of your future before you write it yourself following the invitations or the calls of God to walk on the path that he has sent a Messenger to guide us on.

Shaykh Bahmanpour stresses that there can be no human accountability without freedom:

Freedom is a very difficult concept to explain when we take into account our relationship with the will of God. Certainly our freedom is always limited to the context in which we are born, to the situations in which we are placed. However if there is no freedom there is no accountability and I think all religions would address their followers in a way that they take it for granted that they have some degree of freedom and that's why they are going to be accountable before the Lord. Of course this freedom is qualified, as I said, by many different factors. We are born in a particular culture, so we are not free in that sense. We are born either male or female, we are not free in that sense. We are born into a society, which might, for example, limit us to a great extent or give us great freedom. These are all particulars which surround us, depending on where we are born, where we live. However in all these constraints, we have a degree of freedom, so that we could react to different issues. And it is according to that degree of freedom, that we are accountable.