Islamic Fatalism

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It has become a commonplace that Islam is a fatalistic religion which teaches that everything is determined in advance and that man is unable to do anything about it. But it is not as well known what this 'fatalistic' attitude really means, what place it occupies in the totality of Islamic religion, and how it originated and has developed in history. I shall try here to sketch briefly, first, the historical background, then the teaching of the Koran, and finally, the development of the typical Islamic fatalism.

Since we are dealing here with belief in fate in the general sense, i.e. the interpretation of what happens to man, we shall leave aside an otherwise very important aspect of the problem, namely the purely religious doctrine of predestination implying determination for belief and unbelief, or for Paradise and Hell.[1] It is admittedly hard to maintain a sharp distinction in this respect, but I think it is a useful limitation of our topic to concentrate on fate in the proper sense of the word.

The fatalism of Islam has to be viewed against the background of the ideas of pre-Islamic Arabia.[2] Unfortunately, there is no other evidence from this epoch that a few poems on a very restricted range of topics which have been able to survive Islamic censure. The conventional and stereotyped character of these poems makes it difficult to decide to what extent they reflect commonly accepted views or the ideas of a certain group. In any case, they present a picture of the pagan Arab which is extremely idealized and formed after a rigid pattern.

There is no formulated doctrine of fate in pre-Islamic poetry, but it is

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[1] See e.g. W. M. Watt, *Free will and predestination according to Islam*, London 1948.

[2] The reader is referred, once and for all, to my book *Studies in Arabian fatalism*, Uppsala 1955; for the pre-Islamic ideas, see Chs. 1 and 2.

perfectly clear, even from a relatively superficial inquiry, that it reflects a fatalistic outlook. It may be a consequence of the purely secular character of this poetry that Fate stands out much more clearly than theism, of which we catch only a few rare glimpses.

The poets mention Fate mainly in three different contexts, in each case following certain patterns of language and style: (1) in dirges lamenting the death of a relative or friend: he has succumbed to Fate; (2) in the opening lines of the classical *qaṣīdah*, the so-called *nasīb*, in which the poet presents himself as standing at the abandoned encampment and contemplating the changes of time and the transience of everything; and finally (3) in the *faḫr*, i.e. the passages in which the poet praises his and his tribesmen's excellent qualities: these include also the ability to endure the vicissitudes of fortune.

If we look at the verbal expression of fatalism, we also find three groups, which, however, do not correspond to the groups of motifs just mentioned. First there are some verbs expressing predetermination in general, and it is characteristic that as a rule they are used in the passive form: the poet does not want or is not able to state who has determined or assigned the lot of destiny. E.g. "When the fate of a man is determined, neither children nor property avail."[1] "My death is destined for a fixed time."[2] "Be patient; only what is just and reasonable was determined."[3] Of a man who was killed by panthers in his sleep a poet says: "They were destined for him in the hour of his destiny, and they seized him."[4] "Who seeks flight before her (war's) fear, his Doom (lit.: the predestined hour) stands and bars the road."[5] In these cases it is usually death that is the inescapable destiny, the hour of which is determined in advance. Two of the verbs of this group, *qaddara* and *qaḍā*, are comparatively rare and seem to belong properly to the religious language.

The second group of 'fatalistic' words are connected with the verb *manā*, 'to count, assign, allot'. The verb itself is used a few times in the passive form, but there are also instances of the active form, the subject being either Allah or a participle, 'the Allotter'. But the most common word of this group is the noun *manīyah*, plur. *manāyā*, which would mean literally 'portion, lot' but in reality is almost exclusively used with reference to the common lot of all

[1] *Op. cit.* p. 6 f.
[2] *Ib.* p. 7. [3] *Ib.* p. 7. [4] *Ib.* p. 8.
[5] *Ib.* p. 9; transl. Lyall.

human beings, that is, death. What is especially emphasized is its inescapability.

The days of a man are numbered, and through them all
the snares of death (*manāyā*) lurk by the warrior as he travels perilous ways.
His doom (*manīyah*) shall spring upon him at its appointed time,
and his way is towards that meeting though he makes no tryst therefore.
And he who dies not to-day, yet surely his fate it is
to-morrow to be ensnared in the nooses of Death's doom (*manīyah*).[1]

In addition the plural form is used in the phrase *ṣarf al-manāyā*, "the vicissitudes of fortune". It is also probable that the word *manūn* is derived from the same root, but it often occurs as a synonym of 'time', especially in contexts referring to destruction and death. "*Manūn* consumes (or, wears out) us, but we do not consume it."[2] The expression *raib al- manūn*, the "embarrassment" of *manūn*, is often used of unexpected calamities which have to be borne with patience.

The third group of 'fatalistic' words comprises some words for 'time'.[3] Time changes everything. Nothing resists time. Time brings death, time deprives us of our friends. It breaks down even the strongest. The contents of time are always shifting. The changes of time is a favourite motif, which covers all that human life contains of improvided and inescapable events.

The attitude toward destiny is characterized by two factors: it is impossible to avoid or escape destiny, and what it brings must be borne with unswerving patience (endurance, *ṣabr*).[4]

The relation between fatalism and theism is especially hard to judge.[5] There are a few verses that relate fate to an Allotter or expressly to Allah—who, as is well known, was not unknown in pre-Islamic Arabia. But some of them may be the result of later revision: variant forms of one and the same verse have sometimes *dahr*, Time, sometimes Allah, God. The subject matter of the poems is such as to make religious motifs utterly rare, which makes the evidence one-sided. However, it seems clear that the poets endea-

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[1] *Ib.* p. 22; transl. Lyall.
[2] *Ib.* p. 27.
[3] *Ib.* pp. 30 ff.
[4] See my paper on *ṣabr* in *Islamic Culture* 26, 1952, pp. 75 ff.
[5] See my discussion in *Studies* pp. 46 ff.

vour to reckon without Allah. But it is impossible to decide if this is characteristic of the Arab view of life in general—probably it is not.

With Muhammad and the Koran we enter an entirely new world.[1] Everything is dominated by the omnipotent God and his will. It is characteristic that most of the fatalistic verbs are entirely missing in the Koran. Two terms that do occur are used in contexts that indicate their absolute repudiation. For instance, 45: 23, 25 says:

> They say, "There is only our life in this world, we die and we live, and nothing destroys us but time". But they have no knowledge ..... Say, "God quickens you, then he kills you, then he will gather you unto the resurrection day".[2]

The meaning is entirely clear. It is the secular, irreligious interpretation of destiny that prevails in poetry and that regards Time as a manifestation of destructive Fate that is repudiated in order to make room for a purely religious interpretation of human destiny: it is God, Allah, who give life and death and makes man responsible for the way he lives.

In another Koranic passage (52:30 f.) the Prophet's opponents say of him, "A poet, we wait for him the afflictions of Fate".[3] In other words, Muhammad is taken to be one of those poets who use to sing of the vicissitudes of fate and it is suggested that these will hit him, too. The answer rejects this idea: "Wait ye then, for I, too, am of those who wait". Muhammad does not fear the issue; he is convinced of his divine mission and sure of God's protection.

These two passages show Muhammad's repudiation of secular fatalism as professed by the poets. What ha wants to substitute for this belief may be illustrated by two quotations.

> 53:44–49. That it is he who makes laugh and weep, and that it is he who kills and makes alive, and that it is he who has created pairs, male and female, from a clot when it is emitted, and that for him is the next production, and that he enriches and gives possession.[4]

Here Muhammad makes it clear that good and evil fortune, success and adversity, life and death, in other words man's destiny from beginning to end, is God's matter.

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[1] See Ch. 3 of my *Studies*.
[2] *Ib.* p. 86. [3] *Ib.* p. 86. [4] *Ib.* p. 116.

3:25. Thou givest the kingdom to whomsoever thou pleasest, and strippest the kingdom from whomsoever thou pleasest, thou honourest whom thou pleasest, and thou abasest whom thou pleasest; in thy hand is good. Verily thou art mighty over all.[1]

If these passages give the impression of the same arbitrariness as is found in fatalism, this is counterbalanced by the fact that the context speaks of the Creator's providence and omnipotence. The point is rather omnipotence than arbitrariness.

Thus man's destiny is in God's hands, and there is no place for an impersonal Fate. It is impossible to deal here in detail with the somewhat contradictory statements concerning predestination for belief or unbelief—as a matter of fact the Koran both teaches strict predestination and appeals to mans free choice—but this should probably not be classified as fatalism but rather as religious determinism, where the point is God's omnipotence, not predestination itself.

As for the terminology, it should be noticed that the two verbs *qaddara* and *qaḍā*, which were rare in poetry and seem to have had a religious colouring even before Muhammad, are fairly common in the Koran as an expression of God's predetermination, e.g.:

39:43. God calls in the souls at the time of their death, and those which have not died, in their sleep; those upon whom he has decreed (*qaḍā*) death, he retains, the others he sends back until a stated term ...[2]

In other words: When man sleeps it means that God has temporarily taken his soul away; to the one whom he has not decreed for death he sends the soul back each time and leaves it to him until the appointed time; if, on the other hand, he has destined a soul for death he keeps it and that man does not wake up. This is a good example of the idea of the allotted time and the predestined hour of death. But it is God who allots and predestines.

56:60. "We have decreed death for you, and we are not to be evaded."

This passage is explained by Baiḍāwi thus: "We distributed (death) to you and fixed the death of everyone to an appointed time."[3] In 25:2, where God is said to have created everything and "decreed it determinately" (*qaddarahu taqdīran*) Baiḍāwī comments, "He disposed and shaped it according to

[1] *Ib.* p. 116. [2] *Ib.* p. 94. [3] *Ib.* p. 101.

what he wanted it to be regarding properties and works, such as the shape of man in entellect, understanding, speculation, economy, invention of different arts, the perseveration in various deeds, etc. Or: He decreed it to remain till a fixed term."[1]

A new idea is that of the book in which destiny is written, e.g. 3: 139, "It is not for any soul to die, except by God's permission according to a fixed writing (*kitāb*, book)" or 9: 51, "Say: There will nothing befall us but what God has written down for us."[2]

God's omnipotence is emphasized over and over again, e.g. 6: 17, "If God touch you with distress, there is no remover of it but he, and if he touch you with good—he has power over everything."

In a way, then, the determinism of the Koran is more rigid and consistent than the fatalism of the poets, but the determining power is a God who is also merciful and compassionate and who has a goal for his rule of the world. Even if man has to leave the question of the meaning of fate to God's omnipotence, he is still a personal God who is also righteous.

It is hardly to be expected that Muhammad's preaching should change the Arabs' whole attitude towards destiny all at once. But the difference is clearly visible if we turn to the earliest Islamic poetry, even in spite of the overwhelming influence of traditional form and style. This is true, for instance, of Muhammad's own 'court poet', Ḥassān ibn Thābit, of Ka'b ibn Mālik, of a number of poems quoted in the traditional biography of the Prophet, and of the poetry of the Kharijites. We have to limit ourselves to a few essential observations.

The traditional terms 'Time' and *manīyah* are used, but *manīyah* never means anything but 'death', and it appears from time to time that death is determined or "written" by God. Time has retained more of its old meaning, but it can also be used in religious contexts. One poets ays, for instance, that some Jewish rabbis were put to shame for their faithlessness according to the vicissitudes of time because they did not believe in the Lord;[3] in other words, Time-Fate is a manifestation of divine retribution. One tradition even has the Prophet identify God and Time: "God said, 'Man insults me in blaming Time; I am Time; in my hands is the Command, and I cause the

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[1] *Ib.* p. 100. [2] *Ib.* p. 94. [3] *Ib.* p. 130.

alternation of day and night."[1] Consequently, when the Islamic poets ascribe the vicissitudes of fortune to Time, this is only a concession to traditional usage; in reality they refer to that which is sent by God.

The old 'fatalistic' verbs are still used, sometimes in the passive form but often in contexts where it is clear nevertheless that the reference is to God's decree. But in most cases the verb is now in the active form: it is God who has determined or decreed, and "a matter which God has ordained cannot be warded off" and "all that God has ordained comes upon man" and "an affair that God has preordained is firm."[2]

Later poetry returns to some extent to the traditional pattern, but sometimes it also breaks new ground. However, poetry can hardly be regarded as representative of a majority of the people. We have to turn therefore to other sources in order to follow the development of fatalism.

The tradition, or *ḥadīth*, literature originated in the first centuries of Islam in order to give the Prophet's authority to decisions in judicial and doctrinal questions that had arisen in various circumstances. Three of the six canonic collections of traditions have a special chapter on *qadar*, i.e., predestination. The development goes mainly in two directions: on one hand there is a tendency to making the idea of predestination more concrete, on the other hand the religious conviction of God's omnipotence is changed into a rigid fatalistic dogma.

Here we find the idea that God first created the Pen, which wrote God's decrees in a book. There is also the idea that an angel, while the embryo is still in the womb, writes down (or determines) four things: the child's sustenance (*rizq*), its works, its hour of death, and whether it is to be miserable or happy.[3] According to other traditions man's destiny is written on his forehead.[4]

A number of traditions want to show that God's decree is inevitably fulfilled. Each man receives what has been decreed for him. "To God belongs what he takes away, and to God belongs what he grants; everyone has a term; be you patient and consider."[5] "O God, there is no one to refuse that which thou bestowest, and no one to grant that which thou refusest, nor does striving avail anyone against thee."[6] "When God has decreed that as ervant

[1] *Ib.* p. 126. [2] *Ib.* p. 131. [3] *Ib.* pp 117 f. [4] *Ib.* p. 120.
[5] *Ib.* p. 121. [6] *Ib.* p. 122.

shall die in a country, he also gives him an errand there".[1] An exception is the tradition that says, "Nothing wards off the Decree but prayer, and nothing lengthens life but piety."[2] Several traditions illustrate the rule, "What reaches you could not possibly have missed you, and what misses you could not possibly have reached you."[3] God's decree is infallibly fulfilled and no human effort can ward it off or change it.

In the theological discussions of predestination, in which the Mu'tazilites maintained man's free will, there are often discussions that touch upon the question of destiny, i.e. the events of human life. It would carry us too far to go into details. We shall only cast a glance at the final stage, the theology that was accepted as orthodox, namely that of al-Ash'arī. In the question of predestination he took a compromising position: God creates the acts of a man, but the man 'acquires' them and makes them his own and becomes responsible for them. al-Ash'ari raised no objection to fatalistic ideas that had become traditional. He repeats the formula, "Whatever misses you could not possibly have reached you, etc.", and has something suggestive of the writing on the Preserved Tablet. He maintains that nothing happens without God's will and that man's appointed time and sustenance are determined by him. But in spite of these fatalistic traits "the outlook of al-Ash'arī is very much a God-centred one ... God is all in all; everything is in his hand; and since He is the Merciful and Compassionate, the proper attitude towards Him is patience (*ṣabr*) in the face of His judgments and loyal obedience to His commands".[4]

The mystics present a more practical solution of the problem of Destiny. They find it self-evident that God is the only active power in the universe. "There is no God but God and nobody can do what he does. Nobody can harm or profit, give or withhold, make ill or cure, exalt or abase, create and support, kill and give life, keep in rest or move, but he alone."[5]

The consequence of this must be a strict monistic determinism. "God is the creator of all the acts of his servants, even as he is the creator of their essences, all that they do, be it good or evil, is in accordance with God's decree, predestination, desire and will." But in the mystic this feeling of

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[1] *Ib.* p. 123. [2] *Ib.* p. 123. [3] *Ib.* p. 116.

[4] Watt, *Free will and predestination* (see note 1), pp. 146 f.

[5] Ringgren, *Studies* pp. 194 f.

absolute dependence does no create indifference and paralysing apathy. Dhū-n-Nūn said, "I am grace from thy grace, predestination from thy predestination. I run in thy grace, I wander freely in thy predestination. I increase according to thy foreknowledge and fail to decrease according to thy firm decision. From the place where thou hast put me, nobody will be able to push me away but thou thyself. I have no ability to avoid sin but that thy love awakens me." To him the idea of predestination is not paralysing but liberating.[1]

Also the mystic speaks of patience in face of that which God sends as a virtue. But his patience is coupled with trust in and love for the God who sends everything. Therefore there is a higher stage than patience, namely *riḍā*, satisfaction with God's will, acquiescence. It is not only acceptance of God's will but a positive and active assent to it.[2]

It is an irony of fate that precisely this deeply religious interpretation of destiny has obviously contributed much to the development of the fatalistic attitude in Islam. There are some good instances of this popular Muslim attitude in the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*.[3] Here it is neither theologians nor mystics who are speaking but ordinary people. But precisely here it appears how deeply rooted this typically Islamic "fatalism" has become in the people's consciousness. There is nowhere any contradiction between Fate and God, but everywhere we find the conviction that everything is predestined by God and that nothing can prevent or change God's decree.

In the story of Ḥasan of Baṣrah we are told that Ḥasan and his wife travelled night and day through the desert, "and God decreed them safety (*salām*) and they arrived safely at Baṣrah".[4] Similarly in the story of the humpback we read: "God decreed me safety until I entered this your city (Cairo)".[5] Thus it is God who grants that the traveller arrives safe and sound, but it is done through his "decree".

In the story of the porter and the ladies of Baghdad three mendicants tell

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[1] *Ib.* p. 195.

[2] *Ib.* pp. 196 f.

[3] Some instances are given in my *Studies*, pp. 201 ff. Cf. also L. Leo, *Riflessi religiosi dell'Islam in Mille e Una Notte*, Cairo 1955, pp. 73 f.

[4] *The Thousand and One Nights*, transl. by E. W. Lane, new ed. by A. S. Poole, London 1889, III p. 390.

[5] *Ib.* I p. 299.

their stories relating what fate has done to them. The third one begins his story, "As for my companions, the course of fate and destiny (*qadar* and *qaḍā'*) brought upon them events against which they could not guard", adding that in his own case he had himself provoked fate (*qaḍā'*).[1] A little later, however, he tells how "his foot slipped, as God had decreed", and he fell upon a young man and killed him.[2] This is an event that he could impossibly have avoided. Earlier in the same tale the first mendicant tells his story: "I aimed at the bird, but the bullet missed it and struck the eye of the vizier ... in accordance with the appointment of fate and destiny, as the poet has said:

We trod the steps appointed (lit.: written) for us, and the man whose steps are appointed must tread them.
He whose death is decreed to take place in one land will not die in any land but that."[3]

Thus death is predetermined by God, and nothing can change his decree. But it is also obvious that the decree concerns all that happens to man, and it is man's duty to resign himself to the decree and accept it with patience. There are also several references to the idea of man's carrying his destiny tied around his neck so that it is useless to try to evade it.

There is a good summary of the attitude of Islamic fatalism in the following words in the story of Khalīfah the fisherman: "I seek refuge with God the great, beside which there is no deity, the everlasting. I turn unto him, for there is no strength nor power but in God, the high, the great. What God wills comes to pass, and what he wills not does not come to pass. Subsistence is to be bestowed by God, and when God bestows upon a servant, no one prevents him, and when he prevents a servant, no one bestows upon him."[4] Here the religious aspect of belief in the great and good God is combined with the fatalistic aspect of God's unalterable decree.

Finally, an interesting observation can be made in the *Shāhnāmah* of Firdausi, the national epic of the Persians. Here we find a great number of instances where 'Destiny' plays the role of retributive power rewarding virtue and punishing evil. In this case we might, of course, think of an "order" or a

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[1] *Ib.* I p. 160.
[2] *Ib.* I p. 167.
[3] *Ib.* I p. 136.
[4] *Ib.* III p. 485.

kind of justice inherent in the nature of the world, but in the context it seems clear that Destiny is here simply a manifestation of God's justice.[1]

Historically speaking, Islamic 'fatalism' is the result of a combination of pre-Islamic fatalism and Muhammad's belief in God's omnipotence. From another point of view it is an interpretation of destiny that expresses man's feeling of total dependence, not on an impersonal power or universal order, but on an omnipotent God.

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[1] See Ringgren, *Fatalism in Persian epics*, Uppsala 1952, pp. 17 f., 61 ff.