Arianism and Mu'tazilism: Parallels between the Early Christological Debates and the Medieval Islamic Debate on the Nature of God

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During the ninth century CE, one of the greatest theological controversies in Islamic history took place, pertaining to the attributes of God as they relate to his nature. This debate encompassed such important topics as the relation of free will to predestination, how anthropomorphic language in the Qur'an was to be interpreted, and whether divine attributes, such as God's speech, are eternal. The last of these issues proved to be the most divisive, and led to polemics and inquisitions over whether or not the Qur'an was eternally pre-existent.

It is interesting that many of these theological debates find parallels in earlier disputes among Christians over the nature of Christ in the fourth century CE. Those familiar with church history are aware that, beginning in the fourth century, the Arian controversy raged throughout Christendom as various groups debated about how to understand the person of Christ, and whether he is to be seen as a creature or as sharing the same substance as God the Father. Many of the arguments and concepts put forward by Christians during the Arian controversy closely mirrored the arguments and concepts that would arise five centuries later in the Islamic context.

The goal of this paper is to look at the debates regarding the nature of God during the Islamic middle ages (eighth-thir-

teenth centuries CE), and the positions taken by two important parties in this debate, the Mu'tazilis (who rejected the eternity of God's attributes) and Ash'aris (who accepted their eternity). We will look at the arguments and issues that were raised during the debate, and at parallels with early Christian controversies regarding Christology, showing how similar theological issues arose in both traditions and were resolved in surprisingly similar ways.

Precursors to the Debate: Qadariyya and Jabariyya

The debate over the Islamic doctrine of God does not begin with the rise of the Mu'tazilis or Ash'aris. The precursor to this debate occurs during the Umayyad period (661–750 CE), with the controversy over the relation between free-will and predestination (in Arabic, *qadar*). Two groups emerged, one arguing that the absolute authority of God over all events in history required a strict doctrine of predetermination, and the other denying this in favour of a continued role for human free will. Rather confusingly, both sides referred to the other as "Qadaris;" eventually (and ironically), the appellation came to be used exclusively for the side that denied *qadar* in favour of free will.[1] The side that favoured *qadar* came to be known as the Jabariyya, or Mujbira, and eventually came to represent the position of the Sunni Muslim world.[2] The fate of Qadarism in the first century-and-a-half of Islam came to be bound up with the later Mu'tazili movement, which expanded upon its tenets; when the Mu'tazili movement fizzled out, its ideas survived in Shi'i circles.

One of the main features of this initial debate on predestination and free will, which would play a major role in the later debates over God's attributes, is the method of reasoning employed by the two sides. The Qur'an contains verses that speak explicitly of predestination: for example, Qur'an 57:22 states: "No disaster ever happens on earth nor to yourselves unless it is [contained] in a Book even before We brought it

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[1] W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: An Extended Survey* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 1985), 25.
[2] Ibid., 29.

into existence. That is easy for God [to do]."[3] The position of the Jabariyya relied upon a literal interpretation of this and other similar Qur'anic passages. This, combined with various *hadith* (narrations of episodes in the life and teachings of the prophet Muhammad and his companions) that speak of certain individuals being predestined for salvation or damnation, form the *traditionalist* impulse – a method of reasoning that bases its theology primarily on teaching traditions that go back to the life of the prophet, and favours a predestinarian approach to divine providence.

The Qadaris, on the other hand, relied on an inferential method of exegesis. For example, they took Qur'anic passages that speak of God's commands and argued based on these passages that the responsibility to act a certain way entails that one has the ability to act accordingly (the command to act a certain way implies the ability to freely obey such a command). Thus, their approach can be said to be more *"rationalistic"* – basing their theology more on human reason and philosophical speculation. Passages that speak of predestination, such as the one quoted above, were re-interpreted in light of this presumption of the priority of human responsibility over divine sovereignty.

This debate was further complicated by the fact that some passages in the Qur'an speak of the final destiny of individuals, such as the damnation of Abu Lahab and his wife in Surat al-Masad (Qur'an 111). Were these passages pre-existent? If so, then the fate of those individuals has been fixed from all eternity; this would inextricably connect the nature of God's word with predestination. Later on, Mu'tazilism would absorb these Qadari ideas regarding free will and rationalism, taking them in a direction that would question more basic assumptions regarding God's essence and attributes.

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[3] The English translation of the Qur'an used throughout this essay is from Thomas Ballantine Irving, trans., *The Noble Qur'an: The First American Translation and Commentary* (Brattleboro, VT: Amana Books, 1992).