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# Evil and Suffering

*Tim Winter*

Evil and suffering are understood within the framework of divine wisdom and human will. The empirical fact of suffering in God's world provides a significant and indicative theme for Islamic thought. Already forming part of the Qur'an's diagnosis of the human condition as exemplified with particular amplitude in the lives of the prophets, a consideration of suffering features in all major schools of theology and mysticism, as well as providing grounds for a dramatic complaint literature. However, although thinkers have worked to determine the reasons for suffering and to identify the due human response, they have seldom understood it as a challenge to God's existence. Much of this article will consider the cosmological and metaphysical reasons for *kalām's* distinctive adoption of forms of antitheodicy, which will be followed by a conspectus of the very different treatments of evil presented in Sufi and literary traditions.

**Keywords:** Suffering, Evil, Theodicy, Antitheodicy, Justice, Mercy, Eschatology, Determinism, *kasb*

# Table of contents

## 1 Scripture

1.1 Responding to suffering

1.2 Revisions to biblical narratives

1.3 Anthropomorphism

## 2 Theology

2.1 Mu'tazilism

2.2 Shī'ism

2.3 Ash'arism

2.3.1 God's purposes

2.3.2 Causality

2.3.3 Deontology

2.4 Māturīdism

## 3 Two Arab philosophers

## 4 Sufi approaches

## 5 Literature (*adab*)

## 6 Conclusion

6.1 The premodern coexistence of *kalām* and a Sufi magisterium

6.2 Recent trends and prospects

# 1 Scripture

Humanity is created not in sin but 'in suffering' (Q. 90:4), in a world abounding in forms of evil and misfortune (*ḍurr, faḥshā', fasād, muṣība, sayyi'a, sharr, sū'*), which are typically to be experienced as chastisements (sing. *'iqāb*) or as trials (sing. *balā', ibtilā'*). These are characteristically linked to a final end: 'We try you with evil and good as a testing, and then unto Us you shall be returned' (Q. 21:35). Suffering can refine the character of its victims: 'We shall certainly guide to Our ways those who struggle for Our sake' (Q. 29:69). A soul-making process is thus a major theme: 'We shall certainly try you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives and crops; but give good news to those who have forbearing patience (*ṣabr*)!' (Q. 2:155). God's wisdom in the moment, and the 'evil' of which He asserts His authorship, may often be mysterious, for human beings frequently fail to understand their own interests (Q. 3:180), and it is only at the judgment that 'We lift the veil from you, so that your sight this day is keen' (Q. 50:22). Humans must trust in the wisdom of God's omniscient decree (*qadar*), translated literally as 'measuring-out' by Chittick and Murata (1994: 104–105), 'both its good and its evil'. *Balā'* in its Qur'anic sense happens not so that God may see what humans can do, but exists to allow humans to better appreciate outcomes (Chittick and Murata 1994: 111).

Moral evil is to be understood as a result of human forgetfulness of God (Q. 9:67; 7:53; 20:126), prefigured but not caused by Adam's original forgetfulness (Q. 20:115), which it is the task of divinely sent prophets to remedy. Against dialectical biblical and also Hegelian conceptions of history, in which the numberless misfortunes of the world seem to trigger an antithesis and then a synthetic step on a road of progress, the Qur'an offers a cyclical narrative in which suffering, particularly of a moral and spiritual type, is counteracted by a prophetic intervention in a community which later falls away from truth, necessitating a new cycle. It is prophecy, understood as the transformative disclosure of an exemplary veridical human, which overcomes humanity's inner and societal travails, while also providing forms of wisdom valuable for success in such trials. The Qur'an advances an anthropology in which the memory of the suffering and ultimate vindication of sainted humans (who include women, such as the Virgin Mary [or Maryam, Q. 19:1–39] and the mother of Moses [or Mūsā, Q. 28:7–10]) consoles, inspires, and allows believers to make sense of the tragedies which beset their lives, so that a prophet does not only challenge moral evil, but provides a lived example of the proper human response to misfortune. Each Qur'anic ideal type is portrayed as a personality confronted with a particular form of tribulation: the scorn of his people (Noah/Nūḥ) or their stiff-necked recidivism (Moses), defamation (Mary), physical sickness (Job/Ayyūb), a traumatizing Divine command (Abraham/Ibrāhīm), exile from their homeland (Abraham and Ishmael/Ismā'īl), enslavement (Joseph/Yūsuf), bereavement (Jacob/Ya'qūb), misunderstanding by one's followers (Jesus/'Īsā), and so on. Each is vindicated as a model of *ṣabr*, which is presented as the secret of

human contentment (*riḍā*) and the context for sudden or eventual Divine relief and reward (Rouzati 2015: 61–94), with the Prophet Muḥammad bringing together the aspects of perfection represented by the earlier prophets.

The scriptural archetypes thus extend the resigned logic of the biblical Job, in his ‘Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?’ (Job 2:10). But now there are no cries of dereliction, but instead from the outset there is the manifestation of *ṣabr*, as in the Qur’anic Job’s close juxtaposition of sorrow and love: ‘Lord, suffering has touched me, and You are the most merciful of the merciful’ (Q. 21:83). Whereas ‘the canonical Christian gospels portray the life and teaching of Jesus as full of lamentation’ (Davison 2022: 41), lamentation of the biblical type is muted or non-existent in the Qur’an. Mary’s cry, ‘Would that I had died before this, and become a thing forgotten and forgetting’ (Q. 19:23), is understood as an involuntary locution forced by the pain of parturition, while Christ’s accusation of God on the cross is naturally absent. The Final Prophet, who suffers ‘more than anyone’ (al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb al-zuhd*, 57), experiences rejection, humiliation, physical torment, sickness, the loss of his home, and the death of his children, and he grieves when witnessing the suffering of others (Q. 9:128). Although he prays, ‘I complain to God of my weakness’ (Ibn Ishāq 1955: 193), this is not an interrogation, for he is seen as exemplary in not questioning God; when his infant son Ibrāhīm dies he says: ‘We are stricken indeed with sorrow for you, O Ibrāhīm. The eye weepeth, and the heart grieveth, nor say we aught which will anger the Lord’ (Lings 1983: 327).

The only significant interrogation of God comes from the angels, who in a prologue in heaven appear to object to Adam’s appointment as God’s vicegerent (*khalīfa*) on earth. ‘Shall you appoint therein someone who will work corruption and shed blood?’ (Q. 2:30), they ask, to which God again replies with reference to His fuller knowledge: ‘I know that which you know not.’ The prophets, being higher than the angels and more suitable as models for human emulation, do not object to divine edicts, for they are fully *muslim*, submitting to the perfect though frequently inexpressible wisdom of God. ‘He is not asked about what He does,’ the Qur’an insists, ‘but they are asked’ (Q. 21:23). Evil, and its ascription to God in the Qur’an, and also in well-known hadith narratives, such as the Hadith of Gabriel (al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-īmān*, 37), often came to be understood by those who reflected on the scriptures as a matter of limited creaturely assessment, not as a simple imputation of intrinsic evil to the Divine will (Chittick and Murata 1994: 108; Kemalpaşazade 2022).

## 1.1 Responding to suffering

For the scriptures, the certainty that ‘good and evil are by God’s *qadar*’ (al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-īmān*, 37) does not reduce humanity’s responsibility to serve the former and alleviate the latter. Moral evil is to be challenged through exemplary patience and forgiveness: ‘Push

back against evil with what is better; then he between whom and you was enmity shall become like a warm friend. This is granted only to those who have patience (*ṣabr*); it is granted only to people of great good fortune' (Q. 41:35). A hadith commands: 'Be joined to those who cut you off, give to those who withhold from you, forgive those who wrong you' (Ibn Ḥanbal 1313AH: 148 [vol. 4]). Those oppressed by structural evil must also be succoured, which is one liberative purpose of *jihād*: 'And We wished to bless those who were made low in the earth, and to make them leaders, and to make them inheritors' (Q. 28:5). The Prophet's poverty, dwelt on frequently by his biographers, is in part attributed to indifference to worldly goods, but also to a desire to 'be resurrected among the poor' (al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb al-zuhd*, 37). For some contemporary Muslim revolutionaries, this Islamic 'theology of liberation' is evidently a confirmation of the religion's Ishmaelite identity: as with Hagar (Hājar) and Ishmael, the ethnically doubtful who were banished because they were '*de trop*, unnecessary' (Stump 2010: 291), one must side with the margins, the colonized and the exiled, for although God will finally vindicate them, if only chiliastically, the message of Hagar and Ishmael is that one must struggle in solidarity with the oppressed and the miserable of the earth (Shariati 1977: 24).

## 1.2 Revisions to biblical narratives

This Qur'anic commitment to an ethical deity is highlighted by the new monotheism's evident wish to reduce or eliminate moral scandals identified in the biblical text. Original sin of the Augustinian type, with its suggestion of Divine vengefulness and disproportionality, is not believed to be present in the Qur'an, which records God's pardon of a forgetful Adam (Q. 2:38) as a prototypal confirmation that a loving God is quick to forgive. There is no inherited deficiency of sanctifying grace. This in turn led many Muslim theologians, including Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), to accept that unbelievers could be saved, on condition that they had not wilfully and knowingly rejected the teachings of Islam (Winter 1999; Chowdhury 2021: 155–169). This proposed solution of the scandal of particularity is believed to be temporal as well as geographical: since the final Prophetic dispensation is not held to offer a new and categorically superior form of salvation, the long hiatus between Adam and the founding of Islam does not present a difficulty; again the principles of Divine justice and love are deemed paramount.

The revealed text is likewise held to negate the allegedly disordered ethics of previous monotheistic narratives, in which 'the moral character of Yahweh is chaotic' (Fales 2011: 311). As Lodahl puts it, 'the Qur'an cleans up God's image' (Lodahl 2010: 17). Notably, the *herem* exterminations attributed to Moses, Joshua (Yūsha') and other protagonists are absent from the Qur'anic text. For instance, the massacre of Amalek, 'child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey' (1 Sam 15:3), or the Psalmist's blessing on those who smash the skulls of Babylonian children (Ps 137:9), and the command to slay all the Canaanites (Deut 7:2) vanish. God's covenant with the Jews is portrayed as

manifestly ethical, for Abraham is told: 'My covenant shall not embrace wrongdoers' (Q. 2:124). Major sins attributed to biblical heroes also disappear: Lot (Lūṭ) does not sleep with his daughters, David (Dāwūd) does not seduce Bathsheba, Solomon (Sulaymān) does not commit idolatry, and the story of Abraham's sacrifice is made more ethical, if still enigmatic, by his consulting of his son before preparing to end his life (Q. 37:102). God does not punish children for the sins of their parents (Exod 20:6; cf. Q. 6:164). Christ is not disrespectful to his mother or presented as anti-family (Q. 19:32). God's anger is substantially replaced by forgiveness, so that 'Allah is positively eager to forgive, while Yahweh has to be talked into it' (Miles 2018: 169). This insistence that Israel's prophetic history was ethical has allowed Muslim theologians to construct a salvation history that was not progressist, but which assumed that Divine love and justice made full salvation, preached by prophets who were recognizable exemplars, available during multiple prophetic cycles in a universal history in which 'every nation has been sent a guide' (Q. 13:7).

The Qur'anic rewriting of the sacred past thus shows its audience a God whose morality is clearly discernible in prophetic history. Most characteristically, He is not complicit in the transfer of moral responsibility to an innocent victim, nor is He capricious in His support of a single people. Hence 'Islam combined Judaism's criticism of Christianity with Christianity's criticism of Judaism' (Miles 2018: 213). This version of Abraham's God justified *īmān*, trusting acceptance, and *islām*, resigned surrender, opening the way to later treatments of the problem of suffering that could claim a strong foundation in scripture. The new revelatory disclosure of God's moral consistency, coupled with a general optimism about reason (Walbridge 2011) and the absence of a teaching of total depravity, seemed to urge theologians to develop decisive rationalizations of God's ways.

### **1.3 Anthropomorphism**

The appearance of a scripture in the seventh century that portrayed Abraham's God as morally stable thus naturally underlined the problem of suffering and evil. Insisting on the One God's omnificence in its polemic against its initial pagan milieu, the Qur'an also recurrently and pointedly described God as 'Compassionate and Merciful', recording that 'He has prescribed mercy upon His own self' (Q. 6:12) in a world in which 'you shall behold no defect in the All-Merciful's creation' (Q. 67:3). By using Arabic locutions to refute Arab religion, the text appeared to suggest that the often very human-like characteristics of the pagan gods could in some way allow the Arabs to make sense of many of the true God's predicates, although arbitrariness and moral vagary, which had been common among the gods of the Meccan pantheon, were ruled out. A number of hadith texts seemed to emphasize this, stating that God is 'more compassionate than is a mother towards her child' (al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-adab*, 18), and that He has created Adam in His image (Muslim, *Kitāb al-birr*, 115; see Melchert 2011). Some scriptural texts even state that God has

a 'hand' (Q. 48:10) and a 'face' (Q. 55:27), and that He will 'come' at the Last Day (Q. 89:22). There are anthropopathic locutions which speak of God's anger (Q. 4:93) and satisfaction (Q. 5:119).

Some literalists (a broad category which included forms of Ḥanbalism, Zāhirism, and the 'Ḥashwiyya') insisted that an allegorical or amodal exegesis of such locutions risked distorting their plain sense. They therefore faced particular problems when seeking to interpret the presence of suffering and evil in the world: a true analogy between us and a father-figure God risked creating an anthropoid deity who would require justification, as would human agents confronted by suffering attributed to their actions (Chowdhury 2021: 20–21). The result, for some Ḥanbalī scripture readers in particular, was a greater-good theodicy, which to many seemed to beg too many questions about unmerited and natural evil (Chowdhury 2021: 92–97; Zeni 2020). The same could apply to mystical extremists convinced that God could be incarnated in a human saint, a belief which often led to pessimistic martyr-theodicies and an almost dualistic sense of a world gone awry (Amir-Moezzi 1994: 54).

The first chapter of the Qur'an indicates the scripture's intention to juxtapose the 'affirming of the similarity' (*tashbīh*) of God with the 'affirming of His transcendence' (*tanzīh*) by beginning in the third person (the 'pronoun of absence'), listing a set of Divine predicates, and then abruptly shifting to the second person in the form of a prayer. This dyad is impressed on the Muslim mind likewise by the twofold testimony of faith (*shahāda*): 'No god but God', and 'Muḥammad is God's messenger'. The former phrase reiterates the 'I am that I am' of the Burning Bush: in His aseity only He knows His nature; while the latter phrase implies that true propositions about the deity are being conveyed by a human envoy. Islam is to be strongly aniconic and apophatic, but must also use human language and presence to point humanity towards the Divine. The ontological distance is maintained, but the register of *tashbīh* is abundantly deployed by scripture to imply a paradoxical analogy. Juxtaposed with the 'Naught is as His likeness' (Q. 42:11) are the Most Beautiful Names (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*), by which humanity is commanded to 'call upon Him' (Q. 7:180). The Names point to moral qualities without straightforwardly describing God as a moral agent in the conventional human sense. His moral language is true, but cannot be the same as ours. God's predicates as well as His existence place Him in a category of His own.

The non-anthropocentric quality of the Names may be inferred from the evident analogical inapplicability of many of them to human agents. 'He is the First and the Last, the Apparent and the Hidden' (Q. 57:3) would be a characteristic verse; and al-Ghazālī's *al-Maqṣad al-asnā' fī sharḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā* (The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God), which explores ways of drawing the Names within range of human comprehension and emulation, readily concedes that some Divine Names are remote from any possible

anthropic analogue (al-Ghazālī [Abū Ḥāmid] 1992: 72). The Names are regarded, particularly in the *kalām* tradition, as indicative rather than descriptive, just as cosmic phenomena are not a proof of God but, in the Qur’anic language, a gesture or ‘sign’ (*āya*) towards Him. To describe scriptural anthropomorphisms as metaphorical (*majāz*) in the fashion of the Mu‘tazilites could not do justice to this, for it would continue to imply the existence of some ontic commonalty between the creator and the created world.

A further prompt towards apophasis emerges within the apparent antinomies evident between Qur’anic names. Not only are some of them ‘names of Beauty’ (*jamāl*) and others ‘names of Majesty’ (*jalāl*), but a number are scripturally paired as antitheses. So, for example, the Source of Benefit (*al-Nāfi‘*) and the Source of Harm (*al-Dārr*), the Empowerer (*al-Mu‘izz*) and the Abaser (*al-Mudhill*), and the Guider (*al-Hādī*) and the Misguider (*al-Muḍill*). These could be interpreted as predominant aspects of Divine agency in certain human situations, but the evident ethical paradox entailed by their close juxtaposition facilitated a strong turn away from anthropomorphism and anthropathy in mainstream thought. The apparent contradiction between such incommensurables was not resolved by a Hegelian synthesis, but seemed to indicate the existence of a higher plane on which truth subsisted as mystery *in divinis*, so that the Unknowable is indicatively suggested by the antinomies in God’s naming of Himself.

Understood to be derived from scripture, this tradition takes its cue from the Divine quality of *mukhālafat al-ḥawādith*, His radical transcendence above contingency, which militates against serious attempts to create a ‘justification of the ways of God to men.’ This in turn supports a form of the sceptical theist defence: because of our epistemic limitations we cannot know that gratuitous evils exist.

## **2 Theology**

The apophaticism characteristic of *kalām* thus predates and partly anticipates its absorption of Hellenistic language in characterizing the Good, and might partially account for Islamic civilization’s ready adoption and adaptation of much of the Greek heritage during the ‘Abbāsīd age. A key problem for the *kalām* writers was to demonstrate how one might mobilize Greek logic and cosmology in defence of the rather distinctive Qur’anic strategy of maintaining strict aporia while supplying abundant predication.

### **2.1 Mu‘tazilism**

At the origins of *kalām* itself, the *jamāl/jalāl* polarity became articulated in the form of the Mu‘tazilite school’s conviction that the moral and ‘beautiful’ (*ḥasan*) Divine predicates, as referenced in the powerfully ethicizing Qur’anic prophetic sagas, must carry strict implications for God’s agency and nature. For Mu‘tazilites of all types, God was under an obligation (*wājib*) to implement that which, as the ‘most beneficial’ (*al-aṣlah*), maximizes

human utility (Chowdhury 2021: 18; Vasalou 2008: 28–29). They held that although the Divine-human relation is that of the necessary and the contingent, it is genuinely analogous to the human-human relation (Farahat 2019: 72). The Qur’anic appeals to reason must mean that humans are capable of achieving certainty in ethics through their own intuition and inference, for the Prophetic narratives show that there is an evident natural law, and human beings, who are addressed equally by revelation, share essentially the same definitions of utility. So intrinsic are the qualities we detect through self-scrutiny and social observation that we can validly project them onto God (see Farahat 2019: 83 for al-Ghazālī’s challenge to this). For these Mu‘tazilite moral realists, Divine justice is hence a detectable omnibenevolence, and to be worthy of Him His acts must comply with an evident universal wisdom (*ḥikma*). Further, God’s justice and mercy entail that humans must be invested with free will and can create their own acts through a capacity which does not infringe upon God’s omnipotence. In this Mu‘tazilite defence of free will, moral evil is thus to be explained as a concomitant of human freedom, while natural evil is reduced to the status of a kind of metaphor. Any human or animal suffering which appears unwarranted and, thus, in conflict with God’s justice will receive compensation (*‘iwaḍ*) in the next world; again, this represents a constraint upon what God can do, and this is to be expected, for ‘He has prescribed mercy upon His own self’ (Q. 6:12) (Heemskerk 2000).

## 2.2 Shī‘ism

Such Mu‘tazilite theodicies and conceptions of human responsibility subsequently influenced Zaydī and Twelver Shī‘ī theologians (Ansari 2014; Ansari and Schmidtke 2014). These, however, maintained a distinctive tragicomic focus on the unmerited suffering of the Imāms, who are to be vindicated in a final chiliastic restoration of the right order of the world. Mu‘tazilite ideas of the mutability (*badā’*: McDermott 1978: 329–239) of God’s decisions and the reality of human agency underline the personal responsibility of the participants in the struggles for and against the Prophetic family. This interpretation of the cosmos as a theodrama, perhaps sometimes intersecting with older Iranian dualistic ideas, has engendered forms of mass piety such as passion plays (*ta‘ziya*) and commemorations of the martyrdom of the Prophet’s grandson al-Ḥusayn during the month of Muḥarram. The rich literature thus generated offers consolation to the pious and a reassurance that God’s justice, which has been outraged, will one day be satisfied, with worldly tyrants punished in a distinctive compensation theodicy (McDermott 1978: 181–187). The major contribution to Islamic literature here has been the *Rawḍat al-Shuhadā’* (Garden of the Martyrs) of Ḥusayn Vā‘iz Kāshifī (d. 910/1504 or 1505), a lengthy reflection on the sufferings of the prophets and of the family of the Prophet Muḥammad designed to be recited over the first ten days of Muḥarram. Although the text is largely used by the Shī‘ī faithful, Kāshifī was a Sunnī Naqshbandī, a reminder that sombre meditations on the exemplary suffering of the

Prophetic family were by no means an exclusively denominational genre (Arjomand 2016: 121–129).

## 2.3 Ash‘arism

Proto-Sunnī thought emerged in the aftermath of the early *fitna* wars of the seventh century, among pietists who declined to attribute blame to their key participants. By postponing (*irjā’*) an assessment of their actions to the judgment of God, Who alone knew their intentions, these early authors opened the way to what became the normal sceptical antitheodicy of Sunnism: much that seemed evil might turn out to be otherwise in the perfect Divine knowledge, with human assessment tending to be radically inadequate and even hubristic. Finding a hadith which declared ‘The believers in free will [understood to be the Mu‘tazilites] are the Magians of this religious community’ (Abū Dāwūd, Sunna, 16), these thinkers accused Mu‘tazilism, including those Shī‘ī thinkers who were influenced by its deontology, of introducing a dualist cosmology in which God’s agency could be rivalled, defied, or augmented by that of human beings. Complex Mu‘tazilite strategies of compatibilism (Vasalou 2008) which purported to show that Divine power was not compromised by human agency, together with the idea of natural law, appeared to challenge the omniscience theology which seemed explicit in the Qur’an, with its claim that ‘God created you and what you do’ (Q. 37:96). These and related anti-Mu‘tazilite positions became characteristic features of what we may call Standard Kalām Theism (SKT), a raft of approved school positions which also included Māturīdī perspectives.

The founder of Ash‘arism, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/936), symbolized this disaffection with Mu‘tazilite theodicy in the narrative of his conversion from that tradition, which was apparently precipitated by a Mu‘tazilite failure to deal with the celebrated tale of the Three Brothers. In this thought experiment, three brothers die: one as an adult Muslim, another as an adult sinner, and another as a child. The Mu‘tazilite argument holds that the first will be saved, while the second will be punished in Hell, and the child, to whom no good works can be credited, will receive an inferior form of salvation. The innocent child then protests to God, asking why He had not granted him a longer life to allow him to mature and collect worthy deeds, to which God replies that He knew that he would grow up as a sinner, and thus He saved him by cutting his life short. Hearing this, the sinner then asks God why He didn’t also cause him to die as a child. The Mu‘tazilite God was confounded by this (Caspar 1998: 199–200). This founding legend of Ash‘arism persuaded Ash‘arīs that to force God to perform only acts with the greatest human utility would lead not only to a constrained deity but to contradiction and absurdity. The Mu‘tazilites were guilty of a reductionist anthropomorphism with their assumption of an analogy between human and Divine agency, for the actions of a timeless being are not associated with a cause.

### 2.3.1 God's purposes

This understanding of the causelessness of Divine acts provides the lynchpin of Ash'arite antitheodicy. God is not subject to time, and hence His 'decrees' are not preceded by a period of indecision or deliberation: 'Never does a misfortune befall in the earth or in yourselves but that it is in a book before We bring it about' (Q. 57:22). *Qadar*, God's 'measuring-out', is simply what happens; it bears no comparison to the decisions taken by contingent agents. Hence an Ash'arite principle became 'the denial of purposive cause in His actions' (*naḥy al-'illa al-ghā'īya 'an af'ālihi*). For humans, a prospective action is mentally existent before it exists, requiring the mobilization of means following the fixing of purpose. However, in God, will (*irāda*) is an essential attribute, complete and uncontaminated by any compulsion or possibility of reaching what He does not will; it is not analogous to human will, which depends on purposive reason. Like His power, His will is the sole cause of everything that exists, which has being not because its absence would represent a deficiency in Him.

The Mu'tazilite objection (echoed by some modernists) that this renders God's agency ethically barren and gratuitous (*'abath*) - something which would be unscriptural and unworthy of divinity - is rejected with the claim that the apparent outcomes of God's acts reflect wisdom and utility known to Him, but which are not the motivations for His action. God could have secured utility directly, since He can make crops grow without sending rain, but He wishes to indicate by apparent causal chains that the universe evinces a serial order which mercifully points less acute humans to His existence. Thanks to this hortatory aspect to actually illusory causal chains and Divine motivation, the charge of *'abath* is refuted. As the Turkish theologian Muṣṭafā Ṣabrī (d. 1954) expressed it, wisdom follows God's acts, not vice versa: His perfection consists in His lack of forethought, while our perfection is the opposite (al-Būṭī 2009: 148).

### 2.3.2 Causality

As the Ash'arites affirm, 'Faith in *qadar* is faith in God's knowledge being prior to the emergent acquisitions of acts by human and other creatures, and the appearance of them all by His decree, and He creates the good and the evil of them' (al-Bayhaqī 1983: 83). Human freedom is not freedom at all as folklorically understood, but something far stranger. A hadith states that 'the human heart exists between two of the Merciful God's fingers: He moves it as He will' (al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb al-qadar*, 7), so for Ash'arism, 'if He wishes He makes it go straight, and if He wishes He sends it astray' (al-Bayhaqī 1983: 98). Ash'arites cite a series of scriptural proof texts here, such as 'God inspired the soul's corruption and its piety' (Q. 91:8), and 'He misleads whom He will, and guides whom He will' (Q. 35:8). Contrary to Mu'tazilite convictions, in His freedom He may will human acts which are contrary to His command: 'He is not pleased with disbelief in His servants' (Q. 39:7), yet 'We guided him on the way, either grateful or unbelieving' (Q. 76:3). The famous

case was God's command to the pagan tyrant Abū Lahab, who was instructed to believe, although the Qur'an indicates clearly that he will be damned (Q. 111:1–5). God can, therefore, impose that which cannot be accomplished (*taklīf mā lā yuṭāq*) (al-Rāzī 1984: 91; Gimaret 1980: 151–152).

Sunnī *kalām*, by assuming that Divine power and freedom are most coherently affirmed by denying that God is subject to linear time, typically adopts an occasionalistic cosmology in which all particles are generated and located exclusively by the Divine will in every indivisible moment. Unlike their Mu'tazilite opponents, Sunnīs believe that atoms exist in space but not in time, facilitating an almost monistic cosmology in which nomic regularity is only probabilistic. Nonlinear time hence helps to resolve the question of how God 'responds'. Everything is 'crushed' together by occasionalism. This remains the position of SKT, although a few modern thinkers have sought to show that occasionalism is compatible with free will (Muhtaroglu 2011: 45–62).

Since Ash'arism considers our intuitions of a material causal nexus underlying the nomic regularity of the world to be fallacious (there is neither agent-causation nor event-causation), it proposes a quasi-determinism which occasionalistically denies causal chains so that God is not only the causer of causes (*musabbib al-asbāb*) but the direct and sole causal nexus of things, which are entirely replaced in every instant by mimetic successor entities, with the soul alone enduring. *Islām* thus becomes an *amor fati*, which for pietists readily supports the principle of love (*maḥabba*), which is held to be a pre-eminent attribute of the Prophet and of the religion generally (Chittick 2013: xi). The Muslim theist will combine a stoic satisfaction (*riḍā*) with fate with a sense that God's complete intervention indicates His immediate presence, and hence that the cosmos, whatever its vicissitudes, is intrinsically to be loved. This is not a mechanistic determinism of the type favoured by many modern physicalist deniers of free will, but a rooting of every quantum event in the immanent and unitive Divine mystery.

This apparent determinism is modulated further by the characteristic SKT doctrine of Acquisition (*kasb*), which allows a distinction between involuntary (*iḍṭirārī*) actions (such as sneezing or falling in love) and voluntary (*ikhtiyārī*) actions, which occur as the human 'act' naturally rooted in the beneficial illusion of free will coinciding with God's will for an event (Gimaret 1980: 83–88). Although illusory causal chains in the physical world are in fact sequenced supernatural Divine acts with no material causal nexus, the mystery of the human soul (*rūḥ*) can identify with certain Divine acts conventionally attributed to the human and not with others; it can 'acquire' the acts which are determined by God's eternal will; hence, for instance, the distinction between manslaughter and murder. The mental sensations associated with a 'choice', which is in reality the acceptance of identification through an intention, are immaterial qualia which exist even though the physical processes of the brain are unchanged. So, a non-mechanistic determinism

coexists with psychological libertarianism, or at least with a cognitive freedom in the order of the ethical. This coheres approximately with the 'source incompatibilism' of some modern philosophers, who hold that:

an agent's moral responsibility for an action is not explained by the availability to her of alternative possibilities, for example by the ability to refrain from doing what she has actually done. Rather, responsibility is to be explained by the agent's being the actual source of her action in a specific way,

so that 'even though the agent could not have avoided the action she performs, she is still intuitively morally responsible for this action' (Pereboom 2014: 9). Like the Ash'arīs, these modern free-will sceptics deny plural voluntary control and moral responsibility in the basic desert sense. The Ash'arīs, however, with their belief in the soul, feel able to attribute to the human subject a capacity to identify with some of its deeds and not with others.

The jurisprudential maxim that the rules of Sharī'a exist to serve human utility is nonetheless strongly maintained by Ash'arī thinkers on the assumption that scholarly consideration of the patterns of God's law will converge on a Divinely guided consensual intuition of their moral nature. Just as physical phenomena are described scripturally not as proofs but as 'signs', so too do God's moral laws, together with the ethical indicativity of the prophetic sagas, deliver an accumulation of nondiscursive but performative indicants. Revelation is thus not arbitrary, even though God is free to institute whatever laws and values He wishes. There remains a governing conviction that God is 'Compassionate and Merciful', in the sense intuited by repeated scriptural reading and cantillation. But this certainty about Divine ethics is combined with a radical scepticism about the coherence of talk about God's 'purposes', and incredulity towards the Mu'tazilite attempt to show that God's omnipotence is compatible with the human generation of actions and choices, so that moral evil may be explained by free human agency.

Seen by earlier Orientalist writers as a fideist retreat from Mu'tazilite 'rationalism', this Ash'arī move is in fact simply an alternative rationalism, one which recognizes that a strong natural law theory, with its assumption of universal ethical maxims existing outside Divine fiat, is by no means intrinsically rationalistic, while 'Ash'arī theories of divine revelation, frequently labeled as traditionalist or textualist by contemporary scholars of Islam, were in fact anchored in elaborate epistemological, metaphysical, and meta-ethical theories' (Farahat 2019: 28).

### **2.3.3 Deontology**

God's aseity and liberty entailed the denial, as we have seen, of natural law as normally defined. Nothing can be incumbent upon God, for there is no higher or more intrinsic value set to which He must conform. Good and evil, or, in the preferred *kalām* language, beauty

and ugliness, are not properties inextricably imbued in the essence of an entity or an event, they are *i'tibārī*, notional qualities, for God 'is the creator of the abstractions "beauty" and "ugliness"' (al-Būṭī 2009: 149), and He is the link between a phenomenon and such abstractions. His freedom ensures that He could reverse the two categories, so that while honesty is 'beautiful' according to outcomes we intuit in our world, this could be inverted; the instinctual love of honesty we experience is created by God, Who could change it. It is only habituation or emotion that inclines us to the belief that beauty and ugliness are intrinsic properties mysteriously inhering in certain acts and phenomena. The story of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son is only one scriptural argument against the cognitivist Mu'tazilite assurance that God cannot abrogate His own commands (Yazıcıoğlu 2014: 57–83).

Hence the 'mystery of evil' is the result of human limitation. God is subject to no logical obligation to supply the highest utility (*al-aṣlah*) to His creatures, as is empirically observable:

If supplying the most utility to His servants were obligatory He would not have created the unbelieving pauper who is tormented by poverty in this world and by eternal painful chastisement in the next, especially when in this world he is tested by sicknesses, tribulations and infirmities. (al-Amīr 1953: 102)

Sceptical theism thus dismisses nonchalant assumptions about the ability of the human mind to envisage what God may do and why. The same insight which, as for Hume, sees as fallacious our intuitions about causality also applies when interpreting the moral significance of God's decree.

In His freedom God could even decline to reward the righteous and send tyrants to Heaven. He is not subject to human moral categories, but is perfect in a unique Divine fashion which cannot be coherently analogized to human goodness without plunging into paradox. However, in scripture He has promised to reward virtue, and He will fulfil this promise, for He speaks truly. Therefore He may bind Himself to certain habitual 'consequences', but 'before revelation there is no moral obligation' (an assurance that facilitated the discussions about the possible salvation of unbelievers) (Reinhart 1995). And as an Ash'arite classic observed, subjecting God to the kind of calculative axiology favoured by Mu'tazilites would make it impossible for Him to bless His creatures with more than they deserve (al-Amīr 1953: 102).

In its emphasis on declaring God's transcendence (*tanzīh*), Ash'arism may commend but is not bound by soul-making theodicies, since it does not need to distinguish between beneficial and dysteleological evil. Objective evil, after all, does not exist, except as a category grasped by the limited human mind and usefully referred to in revelation, and God is not a prisoner of human values. In fact, Sunnī *kalām* favours a version of Divine

command theory: the beautiful is what God commands, since He is not subject to an imagined natural law which directs what He may create and instruct (some later Ash‘arīs modified this, see Shihadeh 2014: 384–407). This non-cognitivism does not, however, render scripturally based morality arbitrary, since the claimed arbitrariness is intrinsically an optimal harmony, whose nature, in this sceptical-theistic system, is unlikely to be clearly visible to the naked eye. Divine command theory is in fact seen as ethical because of the belief that God’s freedom from prior norms does not impair Divine perfection and beauty but confirms them. This perfection also permits major human intellectual and evaluative input (Farahat 2019: 162). The Sharī‘a remains an intensely ethical enterprise. But whatever the human evaluation, the moral anti-realism of command theory on the metaphysical level tends to disconnect human from Divine moral values and, thus, denies the coherence of any theodicy or notions of gratuitous evil.

The non-theistic subjectivism of modern logical positivism might seem convergent with this austere teaching. A. J. Ayer held that murder is not wrong in any intrinsic sense, but that when a person commits it, that person is ‘engaged in an emotive and an autobiographical exercise’ (Clack 1999: 30). This was precisely the worry of the Mu‘tazilites. And yet when translated into a cosmos of Divine omniscience, a theistic subjectivism may dismiss the agonistic topoi of theodicy while allowing the discernability of what God has determined as beauty and ugliness through the miracle of the soul’s cumulative intuitions inspired by indicants in scripture and nature. Wittgenstein was perhaps pointing toward the Ash‘arite view when he remarked: ‘I think [the following] conception [of the essence of the good] is the deeper one: Good is what God orders. For this cuts off the path to any and every explanation of ‘why’ it is good’ (Wittgenstein 1965: 15). Nonetheless, some modern theologians rooted in the *kalām* tradition have made serious attempts to generate soul-making theodicies in the discursive cosmological environment of *tanzīh* (Ahmad and Ahmad 2014).

## 2.4 Māturīdism

The theological tradition inspired by the writings of Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) also emphasizes *tanzīh*, while simultaneously following many Ash‘arī positions, with which it syncretized considerably, particularly in the Ottoman world. The mutual acknowledgement of these schools, and their agreement concerning most key tenets and the use of dialectic method, allows us to speak of them collectively as the major constituent schools of SKT. Like the Ash‘arīs, the Māturīdīs deny that God must bring about the best (*aṣṣlah*) for His creatures, with Māturīdī’s Qur’anic commentary making this very explicit in his exegesis of the Job story (Chowdhury 2021: 89). The doctrine of *kasb* is utilized and they also agree that evil actually exists as a creation of God. God has no goals, although He may be said to have a purpose (*qaṣd*), if this is simply deemed equivalent to His wisdom. However, goals are not identical with wisdom, and it

was in their assurance of the human discernability of Divine wisdom that the Māturīdīs principally diverged from their Ash‘arite colleagues. While remaining anti-realist in their ethics, the Māturīdīs held that the beautiful and the ugly, as indicants of Divine wisdom, are intellectually discernable by humans in a way which conveys moral obligation, even in the absence of specific revelation. Hence they accentuate the insistence that God’s establishment of events and values is not gratuitous (‘*abath*). God’s aseity does not make the nature of His perfection imperceptible to human reflection, but rather establishes His perfection as a lack of need, which ensures that He acts always according to perfect wisdom and not out of submission to exterior constraints. In this way the mind can know that the universe is not a disordered clash of antinomies, but rather displays structures of balance and harmony, which can be objectively witnessed. God’s wisdom is thus a ‘knowledgeable, purposeful competency’ (Pessagno 1984: 67), which is essentially equivalent to His justice. However, in keeping with the *tanzīh* priorities of *kalām*, the Māturīdīs insist that His justice may not be commensurate with shifting, relative, and culture-specific human conceptions of the just.

In an unusual argument, al-Māturīdī holds that the presence of evil in the world furnishes a strong proof of God’s existence. According to his Hellenistic understanding of eternal beings as characterized by perfection, the variable degrees of intensity in beauty and ugliness that human observers detect in the world furnish evidence of their non-eternal – and hence contingent – nature, and since the contingent, or originated (*muḥdath*), requires the existence of an originator, the impossibility of infinite regress leads us to conclude that these imperfection-qualified differentia of the world, and the world itself, are not eternal but require a perfect unoriginated (*qadīm*) being for their existence (Pessagno 1984: 73–74). Al-Māturīdī also holds that the presence of suffering in this world is a wise Divine disposition which enables humans to appreciate the scriptural accounts of the nature of God’s punishment in the next world, thus incentivizing them to do good works (Pessagno 1984: 74–75).

## 2.5 The distinctiveness of *kalām* antitheodicy

The above discussions of apophatic SKT metaphysics demonstrate the reasons for its strong convergence on a radical antitheodicy which obviates attempts at justifying moral and natural evil. Montgomery Watt asserts that ‘the main stream of Sunnite Islam completely avoided this topic of theodicy’ (Watt 1979: 8), while for Kenneth Cragg, Islam ‘does not find a theodicy necessary either for its theology or its worship’ (Cragg 1969: 16). These authors refer to theodicy in the Christian – or, more specifically, Leibnizean – sense of defending the viability of theism in a world of misery; as such one struggles to find it in premodern Islamic theology, despite the latter’s serious analysis of the source and ontology of evil. Even today few Muslims are said to lose their faith because of the problem of evil (Nasr 2023: 7), and it may be reasonable to claim that formal Muslim theology’s

success in maintaining an antitheodicy forms part of its larger role in salvation history, in which it is thought to be revealed by God to repair weaknesses in earlier dispensations (cf. Sinai 2017: 30).

### 3 Two Arab philosophers

Avicenna (Abū ‘Alī ibn Sīnā, d. 429/1037) seems less able to constructively transform Greek thought than the best of the *kalām* authors. His emanationist cosmology entails that the One only does what is best, that phenomena are predetermined, and that He is not a moral agent. SKT monotheism can acknowledge this, with nuances. But he denies the daring *kalām* conception of evil as a creation of God by characterizing it as a simple privation which has no existence in itself, so that the question of God’s purpose or wisdom in creating it cannot arise. The world is governed by the Order of the Good (*nizām al-khayr*), in which some privative evil is necessarily present in consequence of the vastness and diversity of the One’s emanation. Physical objects and processes necessarily partake in evil because they represent degrees of potentiality and of unfulfilled telos. But the total amount of evil in the cosmos is fairly small (Inati 2000; Ansari 2023).

This Avicennan optimism was not shared by all of the *falāsifa*: of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 313/925 or 323/935), notably, a Platonizing Muslim dissident, it is said that ‘there may be no other medieval philosopher, whether in the Islamic world or in Greek or Latin Christendom, who was so impressed by the imperfection of the universe’ (Adamson 2021: 28). Perhaps this severe judgment on creation was enabled by the misery he saw during his extensive medical practice. Al-Rāzī’s effectively dualistic theodicy did not, however, significantly attract followers.

### 4 Sufi approaches

Studies of theodicy in Islamic thought, which typically justify the general verdict issued by Watt and Cragg, frequently neglect the civilization’s widespread assumption that *kalām* apophaticism is to be juxtaposed, if not always perfectly harmonized, with the emphasis on *tashbīh* characteristic of most Sufi mysticism. Whereas SKT’s interpretation of scriptural transcendentalist texts generally leads to a comfortable antitheodicy based on its theistic subjectivism and a sceptical resistance to applying human moral categories to the Divine, Sufism’s interest in the apparently knowable God presented in a different register of Qur’anic locutions which speak of God as the Near (*al-Qarīb*), the Loving (*al-Wadūd*), and the Forgiving (*al-Ghafūr*) has engendered a parallel God-talk in which apparent scriptural anthropopathy demands a resolution of the paradox of suffering in the Compassionate God’s world. As a generalization one might say that Ash‘arism and Māturīdism focus on the controlling significance of God’s power, Mu‘tazilism on God’s justice, and Sufism on God’s mercy. This was suggested to the Sufis by the prologue in heaven in which

the angels refuse to bow to Adam (Q. 2:34): they were created to worship Him while he was created to love Him, and he is hence higher than the angels because he recognizes qualities of immanence and comparability as well as transcendence in the Divine (Murata 2017: 106). This is why Adam was created ‘by God’s two hands’ (Kemalpaşazade 2022: 219).

The Andalusian mystic Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), known as the ‘unlimited mercifier’, demonstrates this with particular nuance and intensity. For him, the scriptural ‘He has prescribed mercy upon His own self’ (Q. 6:12) supports a cosmology in which God’s loving mercy (*rahma*) is the ‘reason’ for creation, which is the ‘exhalation of the Merciful’, as God felt ‘sorrow’ (*kurba*) when contemplating the nonexistence of entities which would only experience their full entelechy when brought into being. Like some other Sufi-inclined thinkers, such as al-Ghazālī (Ormsby 1984), he believed that Divine mercy ensured that ours is the best of all possible worlds (Ibn ‘Arabī 1946: 172 [vol. 1]). In some modalities of Ibn ‘Arabī’s system a radical transcendentalism obviates theodicy in a way reminiscent of *kalām*; even in this world of immanence there is also a conviction that this life in the paradoxical realm of differentiated phenomena is a dream whose significance will only be clear in the grave and the life to come, a view which he frequently supports with the saying: ‘People are asleep, when they die, they wake up’ (Chittick 1989: 119). Because of this frail perception, human beings misinterpret some manifestations as ‘ugly’, although the Qur’an has said that God ‘has made beautiful everything He has created’ (Q. 32:7), so that every Divine Name is in fact beautiful, even though it may seem simply majestic or fearsome.

In this and allied systems, apparent ugliness is the hiddenness of God (Murata 2017: 42), but as the Sufi progresses this veil becomes diaphanous; even when full ‘witnessing’ (*mushāhada*) of the Divine beauty has not been achieved, the certainty of the beauty of all things provides a powerful consolation. Love of beauty, then, is the pre-eminent quality of the saint: Moses fainted when his Lord manifested Himself in an overwhelming theophany which broke the mountain (Q. 7:143), although this was only because as a spiritual adept he was overwhelmed by the theophany of beauty (Murata 2017: 40), while the Final Prophet was ‘the most passionate lover of beauty’ (Murata 2017: 125).

The synergetic flux of immanence and transcendence allowed the figure of the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) to offer a personal and empirical instantiation of the more abstract metaphysics of *kalām* and Sufism. Indeed, it was frequently in prophetology, hagiography, and the contemplation of the miracle of living saints that ordinary Muslims found the most valuable lessons for dealing with misfortune and the apparent distance of God. Seeing the Divine wisdom in life events, the saint welcomes affliction; for Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār (d. c. 618/1221): ‘O would that I had a thousand lives / that I could spread out all

of them before Your arrows!' (Schimmel 1982: 70). In Persian, 'man' (*mard*) rhymes with 'pain' (*dard*), and the *Balā*, 'Yes', of the witnessing assent to God by pre-creation humanity (Q. 7:171) is punningly identified with *balā*, tribulation: by accepting God human souls have already accepted the trials that He will send, so that 'affliction thus reminded them of the pre-eternal covenant' (Schimmel 1982: 71). Failing to welcome God's trials with *riḍā*, contentment, and *taslīm*, resignation, is simply an inability to remember their meaning and one's erstwhile acceptance of them when in the Divine presence, which is the human origin and ground.

For many Sufis, who could regard *kalām* as a somewhat dry and inhuman exercise that unconscionably neglects the central cosmic function of the religion's founder, the 'first of creation' whose suffering had been greater than that of any other prophetic figure, but who remained the supreme example of *riḍā* and Divine love, prophetology represented the crux of the lived response to perceived gratuitous suffering. In 'Aṭṭār's system, contemplation of the Prophet and his eschatological role as a compassionate and selfless intercessor decisively resolved the believer's sense of suffering and abandonment in a world of Divine rigour. This resolution originated in the representation by this ultimate perfect human of the highest and most primordial qualities of Adamic nobility. In a well-known event in the Prophet's biography, after his Medinan 'helpers' (*anṣār*) wept in realization that matters would not always go as they wished, their tears of acceptance of his guidance were grounded in their awareness that they have beheld 'a perfect man made in His image to be one of His messengers, and as such at the level of primordial man, the microcosmic equivalent of the great outer world of virgin nature, the world of plains, forests, hills, mountains, springs, rivers and lakes, the macrocosm of earth' (Lings 2005: 54). *Jalāl* and *jamāl* must both subsist in the perfect human, who accepts all God's determinations as the Beloved's wisdom, and who punishes and forgives justly, as he is a microcosm of God's larger creation. But the theomorphic quality of the holy man ensures that mercy prevails, in keeping with the hadith: 'My mercy preponderates over My wrath' (al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, 15).

In addition to this description of evil as a misunderstanding, most Sufis recognized the probative and educative value of suffering in the disciplining and transformation of the human will (*irāda*), generating various soul-making theodicies which were central to the discourse of 'wayfaring' (*sulūk*) and self-discipline (*riyāḍa*). Without suffering we would be incapable of regaining our pre-birth condition of directly perceiving God, of uttering the '*Balā*'. In a famous poem, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) compares God to a winemaker stamping upon grapes, which 'weep blood' and complain of his gratuitous cruelty. The Divine winemaker replies that He is acting with wisdom, and that although their complaint is understandable, He knows that the grapes will turn to wine, yielding the unlooked-for

intoxication of Divine knowledge (Chittick 1983: 239–240). This adds the soul-making trope to the sceptical theism defence common in Sufism and already central to *kalām*.

Particularly in the tradition of Ibn ‘Arabī, Sufi metaphysics also held to a version of the privative approach adopted by certain Arabic philosophers. The Qur’an (Q. 2:257) speaks of the Light (*al-Nūr*), a Divine Name which is always in the singular, contrasted with the plural ‘shadows’ (*ẓulumāt*), which Sufis understood to be the world of manifestation as differentiated by a hierarchy of levels of being (*marātib al-wujūd*) and concretizations of different permutations of Divine predicates. Entification of contingent beings, and thus creation itself, necessitates the ‘shadows’. A contemporary Sufi theologian expresses it thus:

God does not positively will evil, and He possesses the power to abolish any particular evil; however, in the nature of things He could not negate the existence of evil as such without annihilating creation itself, which only exists by virtue of the ontological level it occupies, where evil is an inescapable possibility, woven as it were into the fabric of things. If the universe did not contain the possibility of evil and privation, it would not be the universe but God Himself. (Upton 2022: 22)

## 5 Literature (*adab*)

SKT and characteristic forms of Sufi metaphysics stressed alternate registers of scriptural God-talk in a way which seldom generated a significant crisis in the overall coherence of Islam’s intellectual culture. Occasionalism, determinism, sceptical theism, and other *kalām* themes appeared to cohere well with a system such as that of Ibn ‘Arabī, despite its markedly different emphases. The interior lives of most educated Muslims before the modern period were shaped by both magisteria synergetically. Such Muslims were, however, also enthusiastic consumers of belle-lettrist prose and poetry in which particular religious assumptions underlay and commended the treatment of perennial tropes of love, separation, betrayal, and sorrow. This literature often adumbrated familiar Sufi themes, but to heighten the drama and tragedy of its subject-matter, it sometimes accentuated the existence and puzzle of tragedy in novel and emotive ways.

Given the nature of Islamic culture, the motif of love usually dominated this literature (Chittick 2013), with frequently repeated and re-embroidered tales of star-crossed lovers, such as Laylā and Majnūn, Farhād and Shīrīn, Vāmiq and ‘Azrā, and many others, featuring prominently. These allowed the poet, with a good deal of tolerated licence, to ask questions about Divine providence. A typical example is the book-length, versified retelling of the story of Joseph, a paradigm of Qur’anic steadfastness in the face of temptation, misadventure, and betrayal, authored by the Ottoman chief justice Kemalpaşazade (d. 940/1534). His *Joseph and Zuleiha* therefore edifies its readers, firstly by reproducing the standard ‘complaint about the times’ with a lament over the wickedness and evil of the

author's age (Levend 1969: 252), after which it lists the numerous misfortunes of Joseph's career. Some of these are resolved by miracles, and the ending is unexpectedly joyful, as the united hero and heroine recognize that every earthly phenomenon is a veil over a Divine wisdom. Characteristic is the poetic tension between fate, as represented by the 'spheres' (*eflāk*, sing. *felek*) which influence events in the sublunary realm, and God's irresistible decree (Levend 1969: 279). Frequently, where the poets wish to blame the cruelty of fate, they adopt this more secular-seeming and even astrological explanation of events, and this was regarded as an acceptable device (Levend 1980: 96). For instance, the exiled Ottoman prince Cem's fifteenth-century elegy for his murdered infant son Oğuz Hān uses the word *felek* as the rhyme-phrase (*redif*) of every line. He even acknowledges and tries to reduce the tension by telling 'the sphere/*felek*' that 'this is not from you, but from the power of God, for reason only later sees what is predestined' (Cem 1981: 61).

Long poetical works extending to thousands of lines very often begin with a complaint (*shakwā*) directed to God, but some can take the form of extended lamentations which furnish the reader with religious consolation. For instance, the *Makhzan al-Asrār* (Treasury of Secrets) of Nizāmī Ganjavī (d. 605/1209) concerns disappointments in the world, such as bereavement, disbelief, false friends, the pains of old age, stupidity, and of life in a decadent age. Nizāmī offers a range of responses which are typical of this literature. A soul-making theodicy is one of these: 'On the journey which leads to freedom, the guardian grief is the fore-runner of happiness' (Nezāmi 1945: 177). Spiritual progress allows glimpses of the Divine source: 'There is an artist behind this curtain; otherwise who could have shown these scenes on it? / Make the eye of thy heart familiar with this curtain to perceive that which comes from beyond this veil' (Nezāmi 1945: 174). A stoical approach to life is recommended: 'To weep much is not good for the eyes; too much laughter is not becoming' (Nezāmi 1945: 231). Particularly standard is his insistence that love is the solution to the mystery of suffering, for it is the wine which alone brings joy to 'these few moments of thy wretched life' (Nezāmi 1945: 241). As with 'Aṭṭār, the key to love is reverence for and attention to the Prophet, 'the centre of the circle of mercy, the destroyer of the dot of distress' (Nezāmi 1945: 106). The Prophet, master of this world and the next, offers his followers the chance to discover the love which overcomes the shadows: 'If thou [the Prophet] drawest back the veil, both worlds will come to ecstasy' (Nezāmi 1945: 109), while his form of life protects us from suffering caused by error: 'Reason guided the ship of the soul through the sea of blood to the shore by thy laws' (Nezāmi 1945: 112).

The literary resolution of the problem of suffering was thus found in the Prophetic presence. The great *Muṣṭibat-nāma* (Book of Misfortune) of 'Aṭṭār lyrically recounts tragedies and freely complains to God, but culminates with the triumphant discovery that through contemplating the Prophetic light, joy and acceptance must prevail (Ritter 2003: 645, 650). For Aḥmed Yesevī (d. 561/1166), in the 'year of sorrow' the Prophet 'saw God's

beauty on the Ascension and so was solicitous to the stranger and the pauper / and this is why he constantly cared for them' (Yesevi 2021: 16). 'The Messenger said: I too am an orphan / I grew up in orphanhood and estrangement' (Şeker 2017: 160), and so the poet writes: 'I am estranged, I have no-one, I am helpless and poor / Whom do I have apart from You? Show mercy, in the early dawn' (Şeker 2017: 162). The contemplation of the Prophet's life and inner state, in which outward sickness, exile, poverty, bereavement, and hunger accompany a life of love and worship thus forms a favoured theme for the poets.

## **6 Conclusion**

### **6.1 The premodern coexistence of *kalām* and a Sufi magisterium**

The most characteristically Islamic approaches to suffering and evil have been functions of a mutual tension between several of the religious currents that have flowed from the Qur'anic revelation, most notably the principles of transcendence and immanence, which the scripture simultaneously affirms. This entry has suggested that the medieval institutional and discursive separation between *kalām* and Sufism, which was a major consequence of this polarity, enabled the premodern Muslim mind to engage with a 'personal' deity in rich expressions of prayer and literature, while acknowledging on the theoretical level that such a God could be no more than an image or a 'knot', behind which was the absolutely Other. This formed part of the madrasa's respect for Sufism and the ability of religious elites to appreciate a literature of complaint, bafflement, and hope. The constancy of this gravitational influence upon the soul of academic Islam suggests that if a concept of Islamic 'orthodoxy' is ever to be valid, it must centrally recognize the synchronic absorption of *kalām* apophaticism and Sufi cataphasis by the educated believing soul, a relation of the gravitational fields of this binary star system, which for the cultured classes destabilized any absolutizing of the rational or of the affective. For this synergy al-Ghazālī is the best-known advocate, and his advocacy of a noumenal wisdom in relating the two, shaped and even imposed by the experience of holiness in the saints and of Sufi initiation, continued to be normative until the impact of modernity began to be significantly felt in the mid-nineteenth century.

### **6.2 Recent trends and prospects**

The fact that before modern times the existence of suffering and evil was hardly ever experienced as a challenge to God's existence suggests that through complexly negotiating this tension the tradition was broadly successful in fielding the 'problem of evil'. It recognized that transcendence and immanence must both be kept in play, despite the radical epistemological hiatus between SKT, with its rigorous antitheodicy, and the strong theodicies of many Sufi schools, so that the Prophet, who was understood as affirming both relations to the Divine in a perfect and lived fashion, answered the questions of the

limited intellect with his existential presence; as Niẓāmī tells him: ‘Reason seeks a cure, thou art its physician’ (Nezāmi 1945: 108), an experienced resolution which SKT could hardly doubt, although it lacked the methods for its analysis and incorporation.

Nonetheless, in recent decades this norm has been disrupted by a considerable stream of publications attempting to import theodical problematics into Islam. Perhaps Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s view of a preoccupation with theodicy as a sign of decadence carries weight here (Cancelliere 2023), as Muslims confront interrogations of religion by secular or Muslim subaltern minds shaped by certain sentimental anthropomorphizings of God present in Western cultures. A further explanation might be sought in the current sense of crisis and abandonment encountered in a Muslim world seeking to make sense of the dominance of materialism, destructive interventions against Muslim countries, and Western-led existential threats such as climate change and artificial intelligence research. For many modern Muslims, and Islamists in particular, the Muslim community is understood as the West’s Job, its agonistic victim, so that the almost Panglossian optimism and trust in providence which shaped the medieval theologies feels somewhat harder to sustain.

Examples of this recent turn to theodicy would include S. F. Ahmad and S. S. Ahmad’s *God, Islam and the Sceptic Mind* (2014), which attempts a free-will defence and a soul-making theodicy in the discursive cosmological environment of *tanzīh*. Some Arab Islamists have evolved a ‘jurisprudence of crisis’ rooted in a theology of the modern predicament as unprecedentedly extreme (Belhaj 2023). Navid Kermani (2011) recasts Sufi complaint literature as a sharp interrogation of Divine wisdom, an approach amplified by Amir Saemi (2024), whose theology insists on the priority of human over scriptural ethics. Bilal Kuşpınar (2010) and Tubanur Özkan (2015) have found value in the concordist and Qur’an-focused Turkish theologian Sait Nursi (d. 1960), while S. Chowdhury (2021) considers the challenge of Darwinian natural selection theory for Islam’s view of suffering. Indonesian Harun Nasution (d. 1998) attempted a revival of Mu‘tazilī approaches, considering them more scientific than Ash‘arism (Nasution 1997). Sherman Jackson (2014) adopts an Ash‘arite approach to issues of racial injustice in modern America. Muhammad al-Julaynid (2006) gives an exhaustive account of the Ash‘arī-Mu‘tazilī moral realism debate in the context of Islamic borrowing from ancient Greek thought. Salih Sayılğan (2023) develops a contemporary Islamic theodicy in conversation with other faith traditions.

In literature, the adoption of the Western genre of the novel has produced sombre reflections of an almost Kafkaesque quality in works by the Bosnian Meša Selimović (d. 1982; Selimović 1996), Turkish novelist and poet Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (d. 1983; Turna 2005), and Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfuz (d. 2006; Mahfuz 1981), although these writers meditate on the hiddenness of God rather than His nonexistence.

Such recently intensifying attempts at theodicy, rooted in contemporary contexts and a more personal conception of God, may suggest that the premodern settlement of the question which was grounded in a complex coexistence and mutual relativizing of *kalām* dialecticism and Sufism, with its pastoral and Dionysian emphases, against the background of a deeply inculcated literary culture focused on tragedy and love, is currently being strained. Omar Farahat speculates that

[t]heism today, it seems, attempts to find a place within a world dominated by secular thought. In this context, it becomes likely for theistic ethics to accede to the assumption that our own experiences and observations should be the primary, if not exclusive, means through which we formulate judgments. (Farahat 2019: 62)

As the cultivation of Islamic theology increasingly migrates to Western universities, this Occidentalized anthropocentrism is likely to persist, potentially reviving Muʿtazilite assurances that God is answerable under human moral categories, with all the paradoxes and antinomies that this throws up. It is thus not unreasonable to speculate that the future coherence of Muslim discussions of suffering and evil will depend on the tradition's capacity to maintain some form of balance between hard *kalām* apophasis and a regard for Sufi categories and praxis, while also allowing itself to again be affectively shaped by literature, with its focus on a Prophetic answer to the problem of human distress. The alternative might be a theodicy influenced by anthropomorphisms which, by implicitly seeking to humanize God, impose a veil of paradox which ultimately renders Him a distant alien enigma, opening new doors for atheistic challenge.

## **Attributions**

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