

## Chapter 4

# Justice and Mercy: Two Islamic Views on the Nature and Possibility of Divine Forgiveness

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### Introduction

One of the most important and interesting questions that is likely to arise when we consider forgiveness in the context of religious belief is what it means for *God* to forgive human beings. Another is the significance of religious belief for human forgiveness, that is, the possibility of *human beings* granting forgiveness to other human beings. How these two concerns are related, strongly or not, are questions that cannot be dealt with without prior understanding of divine forgiveness on its own.

The present chapter focuses on the concept of the *forgiving God* in Islamic religion and theology and claims that Islamic thinking about divine forgiveness accommodates two different views that emphasize two different attributes of God: justice and mercy.

First, I explore the *grounds* for the notion of divine forgiveness in Islam. Concepts such as being *wronged*, desert, and forgoing punishment need to be brought together, along with the notion of justice, in order to determine how the notion of divine forgiveness can be viewed in Islamic terms. Next, I examine the possibility of divine forgiveness from the standpoint of justice, one of the divine attributes that has dominated much thinking about the Islamic view of God. This will be accomplished by an examination of Mu'tazilite<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mu'tazilism is a school of theology which flourished between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. in what is now Iraq. The Mu'tazilites are known for their rationalism, belief in the objectivity of right and wrong, and freedom of the will (this last being a consequence of their belief in the God's justice). No longer a living tradition, Mu'tazilism nevertheless continues to inspire many present-day Islamic thinkers.

views about desert, divine punishment, and the possibility of extending forgiveness to grave sinners and unbelievers. Finally, I consider an alternative Islamic view of divine forgiveness. This view is to be found in the writings of Islamic, mainly Ash'arite<sup>2</sup>, thinkers who took the idea of divine mercy more seriously than the Mu'tazilites seem to have been able to do. I conclude with some reflections on the relative merits of these two rival Islamic views.

### Grounds for the Notion of Divine Forgiveness in Islam

In this secular age of ours, we have become accustomed to thinking of forgiveness as a relation that holds between human beings. It is no longer customary to think in terms of *God* granting forgiveness, except in religious contexts, which have become more and more circumscribed. Thus, in order to discuss divine forgiveness in Islam, we have to think anew about the logic of a forgiveness relation that can hold between God and humans, for the concepts that come into play in present-day (non-religious) understandings of forgiveness include some which become problematic when God is brought into the discussion.

Take the notion of *wrong*, for example. We typically think that forgiveness comes into play only when someone has committed a culpable wrong against another. There is always a wronged party who may, or may not, forgive. Thus, if God is to forgive humans, a human must be in a position to wrong God. It is here that considerations of divine nature impinge on the discussion of forgiveness. How can God be wronged? Can this be reconciled with His omnipotence and self-sufficiency?

Then again, take the notion of "retributive emotion." We tend to believe that when one is wronged, harmed, or unjustly treated, one resents and acquires motivations to exact retribution. Many authors insist that forgiveness entails *overcoming* retributive emotions, as well as forbearance with regard to punishment (Hieronimi 2001, 529-55; Murphy and Hampton 1988). Here again, considerations of divine nature seem to stand in the way of comparing divine forgiveness to familiar human forgiveness, for according to a philosophically considered view of divine nature, God is not only omnipotent, but He is also impassible and unchangeable. How can He overcome retributive emotions or change from rejection to acceptance of wrongdoers?

Ideas of divine omnipotence and impassibility are bound to make the discussion of forgiveness harder than it already is, as we can see in the writings

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<sup>2</sup> Ash'arism is the main school of traditional Islamic orthodoxy (*Sunnism*). Unlike Mu'tazilism, it is a living tradition that has continued to flourish until the present. Ash'arism tends to emphasize Revelation over Reason, and offers a (divine-) positivist view of law, obligation, and morality as will be explained later.

of many philosophers (Pettigrove 2008, 457-464; Geuras 1992, 65-77; Londey 1986, 4-10; Minas 1975, 138-150).<sup>3</sup> However, they also serve to remind us of an old, and still unresolved, question about the God of Jacob and Abraham and the God of the Philosophers. The God of Jacob and Abraham, just like the God of Muhammad (or Islam) is a person, not a philosophical abstract principle. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians have struggled for centuries to formulate conceptions of God that are true to their canonical religious writings while at the same time addressing centuries-old philosophical scruples.

In order to discuss forgiveness in Islam (or Judaism and Christianity, for that matter) in the space of a short chapter, we cannot afford to dwell on the problem of anthropomorphism vs. "the true description of God." It is best and fairer to the religious point of view to take religious beliefs at their face value and not bother (at least not greatly) about what (some) philosophers have said about the proper conception of God.

If we do this, that is, if we listen to what Muslim scripture (the Qur'an) says about God in matters considered relevant to forgiveness, we find that God does have some kind of affective life. For example, it is stated that on Judgment Day, God will be "well-pleased" with the faithful and that the faithful will also be well-pleased with God<sup>4</sup> (5:119). God is "compassionate and merciful," as Muslims regularly recite in the Opening (*al-Fatihah*) Chapter of the Qur'an, often viewed as the Lord's prayer of Muslims. In one verse God describes Himself as *turning towards* the Prophet and his companions and says that He is *gentle* to them, and *all-compassionate* (9:117). And while Muslim scripture does not ascribe resentment to God, there are many verses which speak of divine anger (2:61; 16:106; 20:81; 48:6). All of these considerations suggest some kind of divine affective life even though it may not resemble human affective life when it comes to base emotions such as envy or jealousy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pettigrove (2008, 457), in particular, enumerates 4 challenges that the Judeo-Christian conception of divine forgiveness faces. All of these challenges are faced by the Islamic conception as well.

<sup>4</sup> One translation of the Qur'an speaks of "Allah taking pleasure in them and they in Him" (Pickthall, 1930, 135).

<sup>5</sup> In the Old Testament it is said: "[T]he Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (*Exodus* 34:14).

Ascribing to God a kind of affective life goes some way towards making the idea of divine forgiveness intelligible, especially in the context of divine *mercy* (which may turn out to be closely related to divine forgiveness), but it does not provide us with an answer to the question of how God acquires a *standing to forgive*. In the case of human forgiveness, being wronged is a necessary condition for acquiring a standing to forgive, but how can this apply to God?

To make matters more complicated, it seems that even when wrongdoing affects an entity other than God (e.g., a human being), God still remains in a position to forgive. However, if we follow Glen Pettigrove (and common sense, it could be claimed) in thinking that only victims of wrongdoing can acquire a standing to forgive, then we face a dilemma: "Either God cannot forgive the wrongs that usually concern us, viz. those done to human victims, or wrongdoing must always and only be seen as an offence against God" (Pettigrove 2008, 457-8).

Of course, there is no choice but to take the second horn of the dilemma. In fact, not only has God been assumed to have a standing to forgive in *all* cases, it has sometimes been claimed that, strictly speaking, *only* God can forgive. The Qur'an explicitly poses a rhetorical question saying "Who but God can forgive sins?" (3:135) while the Psalmist declares, addressing God, "Against you, you alone, have I sinned." (Psalm 51:4). So, the question remains for Islam (and other Abrahamic religions) to answer: how do humans succeed in wronging God, when, for example, they tell lies or commit murder?

There is a verse in the Qur'an, semi-mystical and hard to clarify, which some authors make much of in the present connection (Nasr 2007, 45; Khalil 2012, 27). The verse hints at some kind of primordial covenant between God and human beings, when all humans, before they were born, freely confessed (testified) that God is their (only) God and Creator, thereby (it could be inferred) binding themselves to live in accordance with His will.

And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify touching themselves, 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we testify'-- lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, 'As for us, we were heedless of this,' or lest you say, 'Our fathers were idolaters aforesaid, and we were seed after them. (7:170)

Following a line of thought suggested by this verse, it may be thought that God acquires rights in the context of this agreement and that subsequent moral violations (including ones that make forgiveness possible) could be viewed as violations of God's right to obedience.

Other (Islamic) explanations which have been entertained refer to the gratitude which we owe God, who created us in his image, endowed us with reason,

and placed nature at our service. Such gifts may be thought to give God rights. On this view, the obligation to obey God is a debt of gratitude we owe Him.<sup>6</sup>

Still, a third explanation can be found in the Asha'rite theory of the semantics of "right" and "obligation." According to this theory, obligations and rights can be understood only in terms of laws laid down by a recognized authority. To do wrong is to transgress set boundaries. As God is the supreme authority in the entire universe (human and material), He has drawn boundaries and set limits to what His human subjects can do.<sup>7</sup> According to the famous theologian Ghazali (d. 1111),

To do injustice is simply to undertake actions in a dominion which is ruled over by another, without first obtaining permission from the master. This, of course, is impossible in the case of God, for there is no dominion which does not belong to Him. (Ghazali 1975, 3)

According to this line of thought, everything in the world, including human beings, belongs to God. He is the "owner" of His creation. If we undertake to do what He does not permit, we act unjustly, and thereby wrong Him. This does not mean that we injure Him or otherwise cause Him harm, but we do violate that which is His and His alone – and this is a kind of wrong.<sup>8</sup>

There is then a way for God to acquire a standing to forgive. Firstly, He is "wronged" by humans who act in His dominion in ways which He does not permit. Furthermore, it does not please God to see humans acting unjustly towards Him and/or His creation. On the contrary, it moves God to anger, and it merits chastisement. Thus, it seems that all, or most, of what is needed in order to talk about divine forgiveness is present in the Islamic faith. We can, therefore, proceed to discuss the questions which it is the object of this chapter to discuss: how, to what extent, and under what circumstances does God forgive? What is the nature of His forgiveness?

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<sup>6</sup> This seems to have been the view of certain Mu'tazilite thinkers of the Baghdad branch of the school, such as Abu al-Qasim al-Balkhi. See Vasalou (2008, 186).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of this and other related matters such as the "legal positivism" of much classical Islamic thought about law and morality, see Bahlul (2016, 245-66).

<sup>8</sup> For similar and/or related ideas, see Pettigrove: "If God stands in something like a parental relationship to A, then the scope of A's wrongdoing may include letting God down as well as harming [another human being]." (Pettigrove 2008, 460). See also Geuras: "for the orthodox, traditional Christian, most moral offences, if not all of them, are offences against God. It is, if nothing else, an act of human disobedience against him." (Geuras 1992, 75)

### A God of Justice: Mu'tazilism and Divine Forgiveness

Modern Arabic usage offers *maghfira* as the equivalent of "forgiveness."<sup>9</sup> The abstract noun, along with the verb from which it is derived (*ghafara*), occurs more than 200 times in the Qur'an (McCullough 2000, 21). The term is never explicitly defined, but, of course, one does not expect explicit definitions in a book of holy scripture. At best, one can hope that contexts of use will clarify meaning insofar as this is possible.

Initially, it may be noted that (divine) forgiveness does not appear to be granted unconditionally. Many of the following verses (taken from different part of the Qur'an) seem to suggest this. In one verse God praises those "who, when they commit an indecency ... pray forgiveness for their sins ... *and do not persevere in the things they did.*" (3:129) (Emphasis added). In another, we read that: "God is not likely to forgive those who believe, and then disbelieve, and then believe, and then disbelieve" (4:135). In still another, repentance and reparation are stipulated for forgiveness: "Whosoever of you does evil in ignorance, and thereafter repents and makes amends, God is all-forgiving, all-compassionate" (6:54). Other verses seem to make forgiveness conditional on fear of God, having goodness in one's heart, or performance of religious duties:

O believers, if you fear God, He will assign you a salvation, and acquit you of your evil deeds, and forgive you (8:29); 'If God knows of any good in your hearts He will give you better than what has been taken from you, and He will forgive you ( 8:70); But if they repent, and perform the prayer, and pay the alms, then let them go their way; God is All-forgiving. (9:5)

Aside from conditionality, forgiveness seems to go along with the annulment of punishment. There is no Qur'anic statement which explicitly states that divine forgiveness entails this, but this is suggested by many verses where the Qur'an speaks of forgiveness and protection from hellfire in one and the same breath:

And God sees His servants who say, "Our Lord, we believe; forgive us our sins, and guard us against the chastisement of the Fire" (3:14); [The Prophet pleads] Therefore forgive those who have repented, and follow Thy way, and guard them against the chastisement of Hell (40:7); O, our people, answer God's summoner, and believe in Him, and He will

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<sup>9</sup> The reason for being concerned with Arabic usage is the fact that Arabic is the language for most, or all of the primary religious texts of Islam. Concepts framed in Arabic have played (and continue to play) the primary role in discussions relevant to Islam.

forgive you some of your sins, and protect you from a painful chastisement. (46:30)

There are also other verses that hold out a contrast, offering a reminder of polar opposites which lie in God's power: on the one hand there is suffering in Hell; on the other, there is forgiveness. This suggests an incompatibility whereby one side entails the negation of the other.

Those are they that have bought error at the price of guidance, and chastisement at the price of pardon; how patiently they shall endure the Fire! (2:175); Surely thy Lord is a Lord of forgiveness and of painful retribution (41:40); Thy Lord is forgiving to men, for all their evil-doing, and thy Lord is terrible in retribution (13:6); God would never chastise them as long as they begged for forgiveness. (8:30)

The fact that forgiveness is conditional and that subsequent withholding of punishment is not free suggests that God holds people accountable for their deeds. He chastises for evil actions as justice requires, and he forgives when sinners repent and make amends, again as justice requires. The impression is corroborated by many other verses in the Qur'an, which are not concerned with forgiveness as such but which nonetheless can have implications for forgiveness. The Qur'an describes the Day of Judgment as a day of reckoning. Human beings show up before God with a complete record of their deeds: "And the Book shall be set in place; and thou wilt see the sinners fearful at what is in it, and saying, 'Alas for us! How is it with this Book, that it leaves nothing behind, small or great, but it has numbered it?' And they shall find all they wrought present, and thy Lord shall not wrong anyone" (18:45). All deeds will be justly judged: "Whoso has done an iota of good shall see it, and whoso has done an iota of evil shall see it" (99:5). Good and evil deeds are placed on a scale: "The weighing on that Day is true. Those whose scale is heavy, they shall prosper. Those whose scale is light are the ones who have lost their souls because they disbelieved Our signs" (7:8-9).

Statements of this type abound in the Qur'an, leading to the wide-spread perception within Islam and without that God is an absolute ruler "whose justice swallows up his holiness" (Knietschke 1912, 64) and that He is a God of strict justice, One "[whose] mercy and forgiveness are strictly for the virtuous ones" (Rahbar 1960, 213).

It remains to be seen whether this is the only possible way to view the Qur'anic message. Nevertheless, it is a possible point of view, and it seems to have been espoused wholeheartedly by the Mu'tazilites, to whose views on forgiveness we now turn.

Among all Islamic schools of theology, Mu'tazilism seems to have been the one to take the notion of divine justice most seriously. However, their apparently uncompromising insistence on divine justice in the context of desert (deserved punishments and rewards) led them to construct a general theoretical scheme which left the concept of forgiveness with little or no substantive role to play. There are also doubts as to the ultimate coherence of their concept of forgiveness.

To begin with what is obvious, the Mu'tazilites offer (or accept) a fairly clear definition of forgiveness: *the annulment or remission or deserved punishment*. ('Abd al-Jabbar 1996, 677). Furthermore, they claim that there are three and only three ways of annulling deserved punishment. The first is for the sinner to repent and (we may assume) make amends when this is feasible. The second is to perform greater good deeds so as to expiate for (*yukaffir*) the deserved punishment (and thus annul it). These two methods of annulment are summarized thus:

As for punishment deserved from God, it can be annulled through one's regretting the acts of disobedience one has committed, or by an act of obedience that is greater than it [i.e., the punishment deserved]. The ground here is the same as in reward.<sup>10</sup> (Vasalou 2008, 189-190)

The third method is for God to grant pardon (*'afwu*) for the sinner out of sheer beneficence (*tafaddul*), independent of deserved merit:

[T]here is a further ground that is such as to effect the annulment of punishment deserved from God, and that is God's decision to annul it and forgive one's sins -- a ground that does not apply in the case of reward, as we have already explained. (Vasalou 2008, 190; 'Abd al-Jabbar 1996, 644)

The Mu'tazilites elaborate further on these and other related ideas. To begin with, they distinguish between grave sins (*kaba'ir*) and minor sins [*sagha'ir*]. Grave sins include murder, adultery, witchcraft, and the slandering of believing women. The deserved punishment for a grave sin is eternal—in accordance with the Qur'an-- "[W]hoso slays a believer willfully, his recompense is Hellfire, therein dwelling forever" (4:93). Minor sins include sins for which Scripture has not prescribed a punishment—such as taking a second glance at "foreign women," failing to keep an appointment, not returning a greeting, being impatient,

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<sup>10</sup>As to the annulment of reward: "... reward is annulled in either of two ways: through one's regretting [*nadam*] the acts of obedience one has performed, or one's commission of a sin that is greater than [the reward deserved] (Vasalou 2008, 190).



and the like. No number of good deeds is sufficient to expiate for an *unrepented* grave sin, which has the effect of “frustrating” (*yuhbit* = cancel, annul) *all* one’s good deeds. Minor sins, however, are automatically expiated by being outnumbered by good deeds. According to ‘Abd al-Jabbar, “In the case of minor sins [*sagha’ir*], acts of obedience will bring about the annulment of deserved punishment. For grave sins [*kaba’ir*] however, this will not be the case-- deserved punishment will not be annulled on account of however many acts of obedience in lives as short as ours” (‘Abd al-Jabbar 1996, 644).

Further elaboration on the relation between good and evil deeds (grave or not) is provided by the concept of aggregation. Good deeds expiate (*yukaffir*) for evil deeds, and the latter ‘frustrate’ (*yuhbit*, annul) the former. Here the Mu’tazilites rely on Qura’nic verses such as: “Good deeds annul (*yuthhibu*) evil ones” (literally “make them go away”) (11:112). Thus, we find ‘Abd al-Jabbar saying:

Either one lives a life of complete obedience to God, or one of complete disobedience, or a mixed kind of life. If it is a mixed kind of life, then it is impossible that acts of obedience will be equal to those of disobedience. Either the good will be greater than the evil, or the evil than the good. In such cases, the lesser of the two will be annulled by the greater part, and this is what we mean by expiation and frustration. (‘Abd al-Jabbar 1996, 625)

Thus, if one does an evil deed for which one deserves 20 “parts” (units) of punishment and a good deed for which one deserves only 10 “parts” of reward, then one will be punished to the extent of 10 units only. The remaining 10 will have been annulled by the deserved reward. This is all, Abd al-Jabbar claims, in accordance with the Qur’anic verse which says, “Whoso has done an iota of good shall see it, and whoso has done an iota of evil shall see it (99:5)” (Abd al-Jabbar 1996, 629).

Aggregation, of course, presupposes that good and evil deeds are countable and *commensurable*. Modern philosophers do not pass over such assumptions lightly, but we can afford to ignore them in the present context. Of more interest to us is the *outcome* of the comparison: it is impossible for good and evil deeds to turn out to be equal in weight! The reason for this (harking back to the idea of *strict* justice), is that equality would make it impossible for God to consign the person either to Hell or Heaven (these being the *only* two abodes in the afterlife). God cannot consign the sinner to Hell because this would be *unjust*, but He cannot consign him to Heaven either, on account of not having a surplus of good deeds (credit) through which he will deserve to go to Heaven. In the words of ‘Abd al-Jabbar:

If acts of obedience were to be equal to sin, then the subject of Law (*mukallaf*) would go either to Hell (which would be unjust) or he would go to Heaven. If he were to go to Heaven, this would have to be either as a reward, or as act of beneficence (*tafaddul*). It could not be the former, for it is wrong to reward one who does not deserve to be rewarded ... [And] it could not be an act of beneficence, because (as the community of Muslims have agreed), only children, [and] the insane... are the object of such beneficence. **Therefore, it is impossible that acts of obedience and sinful acts should be equal.** ('Abd al-Jabbar 1996, 623-4)

It is remarkable that the concept of beneficence (*tafaddul*) is denied a possible and useful role here. *Tafaddul* (literally, *acting generously towards*) often plays a role akin to that of *mercy* and *pardon* and thus approximates our concept of forgiveness. Apart from repentance and greater good works, *tafaddul* is the third way in which deserved punishment can be annulled, and it is totally in God's hands. It is also the only divine act which is recognizably unconditional. Repentance and greater good deeds *must be* rewarded by God, but *tafaddul* is not obligatory. It is more like a free gift, should God be willing to dispense it.

The Mu'tazilite denial that adult, sane humans can enter Heaven in an act of *tafaddul* is tantamount to saying that a person cannot enter Heaven by being forgiven. The implication, all but explicit, is that entry into Heaven has to be *earned* by actions for which the person is solely responsible (repentance and greater good deeds).

The weakness of the Mu'tazilite position here is further highlighted by reference to a disagreement between two factions within the school. Theologians of the Basra branch of Mu'tazilism, to which 'Abd al-Jabbar belonged, said that it would be *good* for God to pardon those who deserve to be punished.

It is our creed that it is good for God to pardon and not punish unbelievers and grave sinners, but He did tell us in the Qur'an that He will do to them what they deserve. ('Abd al-Jabbar, 1996, 644)

Theologians of the Baghdad branch, however, appear to have espoused the opposite view, saying that "God is *obliged* to punish evil doers; it is not right for Him to pardon them" ('Abd al-Jabbar 1996, 644-45).

It can be argued that the Mu'tazilites of Baghdad were on stronger grounds here. For when their Basran colleagues came to provide justification for the view that the punishment of grave sinners and unbelievers would last *forever*, they found themselves arguing for the *eternity* of punishment on the basis of the *impossibility* of pardon. Their argument went like this:

Either the sinner will be forgiven or he will not be. If the latter, then he will reside in Hell forever (which is what we claim). If the former, then he cannot but enter Heaven (there being no intermediate abode between Heaven and Hell). If He enters Heaven, he will either enter it as someone who is rewarded, or as an act of beneficence. He cannot enter Heaven as an act of beneficence, for as the community of Muslims have agreed, those who enter Heaven must have attributes which distinguish them from ...children and the insane [who are not subject to the Law]. Nor can such a sinner enter Heaven as a reward, for he does not deserve to be rewarded. [Therefore it will not be possible for the sinner to leave Hell ever.] ('Abd al-Jabbar 1996, 666)

According to this argument, grave sinners cannot enter Heaven, because they have no positive desert. Yet to say that *it would good for God to pardon* them implies (via steps used in the above argument) that it would be good for God to allow them into Heaven (for this is what pardoning them will lead to, given that the only abode outside of Hell is Heaven). So how can it possibly be *good* for God to pardon them, given that it is *impossible* for them to enter Heaven? This is tantamount to an admission of the incoherence of the concept of forgiveness. On the one hand, one maintains that something cannot be done, on the other hand, that it would be good to do it.

Matters can be worse if we assume that *repentant* grave sinners, and even some non-grave sinners, may not succeed in accumulating a surplus of good works that will outweigh their cumulative burden of minor sins. Such people cannot enter Heaven because to do so requires having accumulated greater good than evil. Once in Hell for their due punishment, how are they ever going to exit and join others in Heaven?

Suppose they are punished for their surplus of evil till this is wiped out. Their stock of good deeds has already been "frustrated" (*yuhbit*) by their minor sins (which is what landed them in Hell in the first place). They cannot go to Heaven because nobody enters Heaven except by good works, and these (in the present) case have been "frustrated" by their cumulative minor sins. But if they were to stay in Hell indefinitely, will not this place them on the same footing with the unrepentant grave sinner and outright unbelievers?<sup>11</sup> If God's

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<sup>11</sup> According their adversaries, the Mu'tazilites are committed to the view that whoever enters Hell remains there. 'Abd al-Jabbar himself says something to this effect— "it is the consensus of the community that whoever departs from this world deserving punishment will never witness peace or ease afterwards" ('Abd al-Jabbar 1996, 626).

mercy, beneficence, or (simply) his forgiveness does not tip the scales here, what is left for it to do? Very little, it seems.

At a later point in his discussion, 'Abd al-Jabbar raises the question of intercession for grave sinners by referencing a generally accepted tradition which has the Prophet saying the following: "My intercession shall be reserved for the grave-sinning members of my community" (Abu Dawud 1997, Bk. 40, #4739). 'Abd al-Jabbar quickly reinterprets this tradition by appending an if-clause to it—"if they repent"—making success conditional on repentance ('Abd al-Jabbar 1996, 691). However, this can hardly be needed for the annulment of the grave sin, given that the Mu'tazilite have always said that God is obliged to annul punishment once repentance has taken place. 'Abd al-Jabbar finds a modest role for intercession in that God may, by way of *tafaddul* (beneficence), *elevate* the status of one who is already in Heaven (691). This may be of value to a *repentant* grave sinner who manages to enter Heaven with a modest surplus of good deeds, having blown out most of his credit with his grave sin.

In vain one looks for a sign of substantive forgiveness in Mu'tazilite thought. It seems that their thinking was dominated by conditionality and obligation and a strict calculus of rewards and punishments. With them, God ends up being nothing more than a master book-keeper who maintains records, scales and balances, never swerving from what justice dictates. Forgiveness is not so much something that God does. It reduces to God allowing the calculus of good and evil deeds to produce a positive result. A process of expiation and frustration operates almost mechanically, with God merely keeping record of outcomes. Entry into Heaven must be earned. Having failed to earn the needed credit, the human is not picked up by the grace of God who, exercising mercy and/or offering a free gift of forgiveness, takes humans back into the divine fold.

### **The God of Mercy: An Alternative Perspective**

According to Mohammad Khalil, the Islamic project of salvation (*najat*, deliverance, redemption) has two pillars: self-rectification and divine forgiveness (Khalil 2012, 11). In light of our discussion in the last section, it could be said that the Mu'tazilites seem to have recognized only the first. Self-rectification, which involves doing good works and earning credit on your own, fits well with the picture of a perfectly just God. In this framework of a just calculus of deserts, divine forgiveness seems out of place.

The Ash'arites, who in opposition to Mu'tazilism traditionally represented the party of orthodoxy, were no less aware of the notion of divine justice, but they tended to place more emphasis on the utter independence of God, his infinite power and transcendence, and the fact that all humans, in the final analysis,

were at his mercy. Thus, for them, the right thing to do was to have piety and put one's faith in God rather than engage in a rational calculus of deserts.

The Qur'an itself is very emphatic about the need to have faith in divine mercy. In fact, despair of God's mercy is often equated with unbelief:

And who despairs of the mercy of his Lord, excepting those that are astray?' (15:55); Do not despair of God's mercy; of God's mercy no man despairs, excepting [...] the unbelievers (12:85); Say: 'O my people who have been prodigal against yourselves, do not despair of God's mercy; surely God forgives sins altogether; surely He is the All-forgiving, the All-compassionate.' (39:54)

An exploration of what successive generations of (mainly) Ash'arite thinkers said about the notion of mercy reveals different, seemingly unrelated conceptualizations. These may be conceived of as concentric circles of ever-widening inclusiveness, up to a point where all humanity is encompassed in God's mercy. The first circle can be identified with the widely held belief that on Judgment Day, the Prophet would intercede on behalf of *the grave sinners of his (Muslim) community*. A wider circle of inclusiveness brings in people who, for a variety of reasons *were not properly exposed to the message of Islam*. Finally, there is a doctrine entertained by many well-known later thinkers in the Ash'arite tradition, according to which, one day, Hell would be annihilated after being emptied of all its inhabitants.

It will by degrees become clear how intercession, the pardoning of uninformed non-believers, and the final annihilation of Hell, can all be viewed as manifestations of divine mercy. The first two can be dealt with rather briefly. It is the last which affords a deeper look at the logic of divine mercy.

As we saw in the last section, (unrepented) grave sin, for the Mu'tazilites, merits eternal punishment. However, while there are indeed verses which seem to suggest this (4:93; 4:169; 33:65), there is a well-known verse according to which *God grants forgiveness to whomever He wills except for unbelievers* (4:48). Grave sinners are not indicated for eternal punishment in this fairly clear and categorical verse. Apparent inconsistencies of this kind led to endless debates among theologians belonging to different schools, including Ash'arism and Mu'tazilism. To all appearances, however, the Ash'arites seem to have achieved a lasting victory, when they succeeded in elevating to canonical status a well-known saying of the Prophet: "My intercession is reserved for the grave sinners of my community" (Abu Dawud 2009, Bk. 40 #4739).

Of course, successful intercession is a measure of the Prophet's standing before God, but there are numerous places in the Qur'an where it is made clear that nobody is able to intercede without God's permission. (2:255; 21:28); more-

over, it has never been claimed that the Prophet had inherent powers to forgive or make any difference to his or other people's fate. We must thus believe that what the Prophet delivers is no more than what God Himself has willed in the first place and that the role of Prophet is simply to be an instrument of God's will. In other words, intercession must be viewed as an act of *divine* mercy.

How do grave sinners become eligible for mercy? Not on the strength of their good works, for had these sufficed, there would have been no need for divine mercy. Nor would they go to Heaven on account of having received their deserved punishment to the full extent. For punishment does not change evil deeds into good ones; at most it redresses (or restores) a balance so that one neither deserves *further* punishment nor *yet* deserves a reward. Obviously, something else is needed to tip the balance. This cannot be other than divine mercy, beneficence, or grace – free and undeserved.

A similar logic comes into play for uninformed (or misinformed) non-believers. A crucial Qur'anic verse which is often used to lay the ground for divine mercy in such cases is "We do not punish until we have sent a Messenger" (17:15). It is permissible, of course, to view this as an implication of divine justice: God rewards for acts of obedience and punishes for acts of disobedience, *as revealed in the Qur'an* (and previous revelations). If no revelation is available for one to learn from, then it seems unfair to punish, for one can disobey only when there are laws to be obeyed.

All the same, some theologians, no doubt imbued with a sense of divine justice, could not think that uninformed non-believers were in a position to harvest any rewards either—for there could be no rewards without acts of obedience (known through revelation). Thus, a situation of "no punishment, no reward," an impasse of sorts, ensues. What kind of ultimate destiny could await individuals?

According to al-Baghdadi, an Ash'arite theologian (d. 1037), such people should not have any expectations one way or the other. Their fate is in the hands of God "who does as He wills" (11:107):

If God were to cause them to suffer in the afterlife, that would be just (without this being a case of just punishment); if God were to be gracious to them [thus allowing them to enter Paradise] that would be an act of beneficence on the part of God, not an act of rewarding. (al-Baghdadi 1928, 263)

Al-Baghdadi is unwilling to judge on behalf of God. However, Ghazali, who lived one generation after al-Baghdadi, was more decisive: God's all-encompassing mercy includes such people.

I would say that ... most of the Christians of Byzantium and the Turks of this age will be covered by God's mercy. I am referring here to those who reside in the far regions of Byzantium and Anatolia who have not come in contact with the message of Islam. (Jackson 2002, 126)

Yet despite his deep convictions about divine mercy, Ghazali could not bring himself to believe that God could forgive those who, despite adequate exposure, fail to believe – a “group that will dwell in Hellfire forever” (Jackson 2002, 127). Ghazali, like many theologians before him and after, thought that unbelief was unforgivable. What he did, without this being a small achievement, was to qualify this for the benefit of those whose unbelief can be excused by reference to inadequate knowledge of Islam.

It remained for subsequent thinkers to define a final scope of divine mercy from which no one would be excluded. On the surface, these theologians debated over Qur'anic verses thought by some to imply that chastisement is eternal (or not) (e.g., 4:169; 9:93; 23:103; 40:93) – matters seemingly unrelated to mercy. Some said that Hell does not last forever, thus implying that punishment of sinners would not last forever either. However, as there is only one ultimate abode other than Hell, namely Paradise, the conclusion must be that, one day, all people will be in Paradise, God having forgiven, pardoned, or extended his mercy to them.

Supporters and opponents of the notion of eternal punishment offered rival interpretations of relevant Qur'anic texts and Prophetic traditions, but it is not here that the most interesting and compelling arguments are to be found. At a level higher than that of grammatical and semantic analysis of texts, the discussion becomes philosophical, touching on ultimate questions about the nature and attributes of God – His wisdom, justice, mercy, anger – as well as the philosophy of punishment.

One of the most interesting arguments that was employed in favour of a non-eternal Hell is based on a distinction between the unchanging eternal nature on the one hand, and actions and creations that are not part of God's nature, on the other. Divine nature is wise, just, merciful, knowing, beneficent, and forgiving. Actions and creations that are not part of His nature include chastisement and Fire. In the words of Ibn Qayyim (d. 1350):

Paradise and reward are implied by God's mercy, forgiveness, and beneficence, and for this reason He attributes these to Himself. As to suffering and punishment, these are created by God, and for this reason He does not call Himself “chastiser” or “cause of suffering”. On the contrary, it is made clear that mercy is one of his attributes, whereas chastisement is one of his actions; this is made clear in one the same verse: “Know that God punishes severely, but that He is also forgiving

and merciful.” (5:98)... What is implied by his Names and attributes lasts as long as these last... It is not among God’s attributes to be eternally punishing, or angry.”<sup>12</sup> (Ibn Qayyim 1997, 262)

Here it must be noted that Ibn Qayyim, in line with Islam’s (and Abrahamic religion’s) conception of itself, does not balk at saying that God changes from being angry to being pleased or satisfied, once sinners have been purified by their temporary chastisement. According to the same author:

As to His anger and displeasure... these are not intrinsic attributes which it is impossible for God to do without, as if we were to say that God is has always and will be always angry... the suffering of chastisement arises from the quality of his anger—fire burns by virtue of God’s anger. ... Should God’s anger come to an end, being replaced by his good pleasure, his chastisement comes to an end and is replaced by his mercy. (Ibn Qayyim 1997, 259)

God’s mercy, however, does not operate in isolation from his wisdom and his justice. In the matter of eternal punishment at least, justice opens the door for mercy to operate in that justice requires that chastisement should have a finite, rather than an infinite, duration. It is as if justice requires that God’s response to sin be proportional:

It is an implication of God’s justice that He does not increase chastisement beyond what is deserved. ... But the duration of unbelief and polytheism is finite; therefore, how can chastisement be eternal, lasting forever without interruption? (Ibn Qayyim, 2004, 656)

Again, as before, when chastisement has come to an end, the question arises as to the sinner’s final abode. Given that there is only Heaven outside of Hell, it follows that the sinner will join the believers in Heaven after a finite punishment. However, this will not be on account of any deserved reward, for deserved rewards have already been lost in the aggregation of good and evil deeds (which is what led to meriting punishment in the first place). Nothing other than God’s mercy will accomplish the transition to Heaven.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibn Qayyim’s meaning may be clarified by saying that punishing is what God *does* (hence the *verbal* form of expression— ‘punishes severely’), whereas ‘merciful’ is what God *is* (hence the *adjectival* form.) Adjectives (in Arabic) denote attributes, but they can be used as common nouns also. The ‘most beautiful names of God’ are derived from adjectives by the simple addition of “the”. Thus, God is “The Merciful [one],” “The Compassionate,” “The Forgiving,” “The First,” “The Last,” etc.



Whereas God's justice opens the door for His mercy to operate, God's wisdom serves to make His mercy intelligible in the light of reason. God did not institute chastisement in vain, with no purpose to serve. Once the purpose has been served, there is no call for punishment to continue. By default, God is merciful, compassionate, and beneficent, and this is what he resorts to being after the objective of chastisement has been accomplished:

Fire was created in order to make the faithful fearful of sin, and in order to purify the sinners and criminals (through suffering in Hell). Should sinners succeed in achieving purity in this world by means of repentance and good works which expiate for sin, no after-life purification will be required of them. ... God has no reason to chastise His servants without cause, for He has said: "What use would God have for your suffering, if you are thankful and believing?" ... (4:147) God the Exalted does not take pleasure in the suffering of his creatures ... chastisement is just mercy and purification for the sinner, even though it is painful to him. (Ibn Qayyim 1997, 257-8)

Once chastised to the extent necessary for purifying the soul, the sinner is restored to the primordial state of pure nature when the soul readily attested to the unity and justice of God (in accordance with 7:170). Once again, the matter lies before God: what is to be done with restored original nature, which is now God's unsoiled creation? God is merciful by nature. What other destiny can await such a soul except Paradise?

Having reached this point, one might think that we have re-entered the realm of "obligatory for God to do" which the Mu'tazilites dryly invoked at many points in their enduring argument with the Ash'arites. If this is the case, there is a new twist here: what is 'obligatory' is *mercy*, not so much dry and soul-less *justice*, based on arithmetic calculation.

The Ash'arites, however, were not fond of attributing obligations to God, but they do not need to employ this term in order to express a meaning whose purpose is to assure believers that God is unchangeable on the score of mercy. In the Qur'an, God states, "Your Lord hath prescribed for Himself mercy" (6:54). This is not a light commitment for God to take upon Himself. Taken to the limit, it means that ultimately, all humanity will be reconciled with God.

### Concluding Remarks

It must not be thought that the Ash'arites were indifferent to the notion of divine justice, or that they were less cognizant of it than the Mu'tazilites. They certainly would have had little understanding or sympathy for "religious ideologies as have put their whole emphasis on God's love...of His

children" (Rahman 1980, 6). Nevertheless, the two schools tended to emphasize different aspects of divine being. The Mu'tazilite God is a God of justice; that of the Ash'arites is a just but merciful God. He punishes sinners but, in the end, takes mercy on them. On some interpretations tolerated by the Ash'arites, no one should take it for granted that he will go to Heaven or that he will not be touched by fire for a long or short period of time. However, amid fear of God and the uncertainty about ultimate fate, the Ash'arite believer remembers not to despair of God's mercy.

Such a believer has what is essential to religion: Faith. Ibn Qayyim (re)tells a story of two sinners who succeeded in drawing God attention by their loud crying in Hell. "Why are you crying so loudly?" the Lord asks. "We do this so that You will have mercy on us," was the reply. To this God responds: "My mercy is for you to go back where you came from." According to the story, one of the two sinners does as told, only to find, upon arriving there, that Fire is no more a place of suffering—it is cool, and peaceful. The Lord asks the other sinner why he did not follow the example of his friend. "I have hope You will not send me back," says the sinner. Upon hearing this, God allows both to enter Heaven by His mercy (Ibn Qayyim 1997, 261).

On the face of it, this is a story of Faith and Hope. The first fellow had Faith—he did God's bidding without questioning God's ways. The second one lingered behind, hoping that God would not insist on sending him back.

In this story justice does not disappear, but it does not take center stage. Sinners are punished for their sin (perhaps a little too severely for our modern tastes), but in the end, God takes them back, even those who had not done any good in all their life. This is probably why we, human beings, sinners and regular wrongdoers, find forgiveness desirable. What we are primarily after is mercy and compassion, even though we may accept due punishment in accordance with justice.

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