

# John of Damascus' Response to the Islamic View of Justification by Works

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## Part I: Theological Debates in Early Islam

### Introduction

First of all, it is essential to realize that theology in Islam developed in large part as a result of specific political debates.<sup>1</sup> On theological issues, there is evidence that it may also have developed, at least in part, as a reaction to early Christian-Muslim polemics.<sup>2</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, a respected Orientalist, reminds us that "Prophets are not theologians." Essentially Goldziher means that those who "receive" revelation may not have any idea about how to put it together consistently, nor are they always aware of the contradictions that later generations will have to reconcile.<sup>3</sup> The Qur'an has little to say in regard to actual theology and Muhammad did not have much to add outside of the later Hadith traditions. These traditions, moreover, deal more with actions rather than beliefs. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that there is a significant difference between Christianity and Islam in regard to their view of theology; Christianity is concerned with orthodoxy (right doctrine) and Islam stresses orthopraxy (right practice). John Esposito writes that "for Christianity, the appropriate question is, 'What do Christians believe?' In contrast, for Islam (as for Judaism), the correct question is, 'What do Muslims do?'"<sup>4</sup> Perhaps that is why even today there is such an emphasis on faith for many Christians and on obedience for most Muslims. Esposito refers to the Muslim belief that the "Book of deeds" will be used as a basis for their judgment,<sup>5</sup> while in Christianity the basis will be a person's faith in Christ and his atoning death – belief in what Christ has done for us rather than what we can do for him.<sup>6</sup>

Islamic theology most likely developed out of its sociopolitical context and its early confrontation with Christian polemics.<sup>7</sup> The earliest theological development was a form of dialectic theology or discourse called *kalām* ("speech" or discourse), which may have evolved, in

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<sup>1</sup> Majid Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 2, 11. See also John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 69.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 69. See also Majid Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism*, 2, as well as Shlomo Pines, "Some Traits of Christian Theological Writing In Relation To Moslem Kalām and To Jewish Thought," *Studies In The History of Arabic Philosophy*, Sarah Stroumsa, vol. 3 vols., 79-99 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 67.

<sup>4</sup> Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 68.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>6</sup> Works are important and are addressed in reference to a Christian's judgment, but they are secondary.

<sup>7</sup> Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 69. See also Daniel Sahas, "The Arab Character of The Christian Disputation with Islam: The Case of John of Damascus," in *Religionsgesprache Im Mittelalter*, Band 4, Wolfenbuttelner Mittelalter-Studien, Lewis, Bernard and Friedrich Niewohner (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 197; Caesar E. Farah, *Islam: Beliefs and Observances* (Barron's Educational Series, 2003), 209; Duncan B. Macdonald, *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and constitutional Theory* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1903, 132, 146; A.J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 51-53 and A.S. Tritton, *Muslim Theology* (Connecticut: Hyperion Press, 1947), 54; Richard Bell, the Gunning Lectures, *The Origin Of Islam in its Christian Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1925), 190-216. Note: The relevance of some of these perspectives will be taken up in the second half of this chapter.

part, as a reaction to the Christian and Jewish theology of the conquered people. In addition to the Christian influences, Islamic theology probably also developed through the early political struggles, such as the Kharajite rejection of Ali as a rightful caliph due to his capitulation to Mu'awiyah.<sup>8</sup> During the early part of the Abbasid rule there was also a series of theological developments based on Greek thought that at first energized the discussions and then all but asphyxiated Islamic theology as theologians first embraced Aristotle, Plato and others, and then finally rejected the Greek influence because of its ultimate inconsistency with Qur'anic revelation.<sup>9</sup>

### Early Development of Islamic Theology<sup>10</sup>

Caesar Farah illustrates how the different views in early Islamic theology made a standard belief system very difficult to establish:

Qadarites, for instance, stressed the doctrine of free will, while the Jabrites denied it; the Sifatites argued for the eternal nature of the attributes of God, while the Mu'tazilites denied they were eternal; the Murji'ites stressed that human actions must not be subject to human judgment, while their opponents, the Wa'dites, insisted on the condemnation of man in this life, before the Day of Judgment; the Kharijites played down the importance of the role of secular leadership, i.e., the caliphate which they considered merely a human institution, while the Shi'ites went so far as to consider their imam as divine.<sup>11</sup>

All of these controversies revolved around three early disputes. The first dispute involved the Murji'ites claiming that faith alone was sufficient for salvation while the Kharijites argued that faith without works signified that the person was also devoid of true faith and was therefore to be condemned as an infidel. The second dispute focused on the question of whether man had free will before God or whether his whole life was predestinated. The Qadarites, and later the Mu'tazilites, held fast against the traditionalists<sup>12</sup> and the Jabrites for almost 200 years, even though popular sentiment remained with the traditionalists, whose position won out in the end. The third major dispute involved the controversy over whether the Qur'an, as the Word of God, was uncreated, since it involved God's speech, or whether it was created, since an uncreated entity outside of God would imply that the unity of God could not be maintained.<sup>13</sup> In the end, the Ash'arites won popular favor by formulating a compromise position only to later reject the

<sup>8</sup> Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix: *Theological Development Chart* for an overview.

<sup>11</sup> Farah, *Islam: Beliefs and Observances*, 207.

<sup>12</sup> Traditionalism has to do with Muslims who follow the received traditions found in the Qur'an and in the life and words of Muhammad. In the early centuries of Islam, the traditionalists became associated with a school founded by Abū al-Hasan al-Ash'arī (early 10<sup>th</sup> century). The traditionalists used speculative theology (*kalām*) to defend their faith, but in time they rejected the more extreme rationalism of the Mu'tazilites and held to a belief in predestination and the uncreated nature of the Qur'an. In time traditionalism became associated with orthodox Islamic faith. In this way it is similar to the Traditionists (*ahl al-hadith*, literally "people of tradition") who typically hold revelation through the Qur'an and the actions and sayings of Muhammad as the final word in all disputes. Douglas Pratt writes that the Traditionists were "those who were keen to preserve and promote the Traditions of the Prophet of Islam and so Islam itself. The task of the Traditionists, collectively speaking, was to produce the parameters of Muslim orthodoxy, so far as it could then be determined." See Douglas Pratt, *The Challenge of Islam: Encounters in Interfaith Dialogue* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 45-48, 51, 149.

<sup>13</sup> Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 97.

very pathway of reason that brought about the compromise, and again everything was subordinated under the rigors of a revelation that could not be questioned.<sup>14</sup>

### Disputation One: Faith versus Works

The earliest theological issue facing Islam took place in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century and dealt with the relationship of faith to works. The Kharijites equated faith with works. They insisted that in regard to the relationship between faith and works, "there could be no compromise, no middle ground. A Muslim was either rigorously observant, a true believer, or not a Muslim at all."<sup>15</sup> True believers were those who did the right things and unbelievers were those who did not, or those who compromised. This view came to a head during the time of Uthman, Mu'awiyah and Ali, who compromised their beliefs, according to the Kharijites, and therefore were no longer believers and had to be resisted. During the battle of Siffin in 657, Mu'awiyah, a relative of Uthman, called for arbitration with Ali's forces. This was mainly employed as a delaying tactic, but Ali's acceptance was seen as weakness and his forces split into loyalists and mutineers, who became known as the Kharijites or Secessionists. The Kharijites believed that Uthman had acted wrongly because of his nepotism, that Mu'awiyah had sinned by rebelling against the rightful successor to Uthman, and that Ali had committed a grave sin (*kabirah*) by accepting the arbitration. Therefore, the Kharijites no longer supported Ali as caliph. In their developing theology, the Kharijites argued that a man who had committed a grave sin called into question his very status as a true Muslim. Thus, the strictness of the observance of this belief was such that if the caliph himself committed a grave sin or departed from the true path, then even he should be deposed or killed. (One Kharijite follower carried out this injunction by assassinating Ali in 661, paving the way for the Umayyad takeover through Mu'awiyah). This rigid definition of orthodoxy soon equated true belief in Islam with absolute obedience, and entrance into Paradise became dependent on actions rather than faith.<sup>16</sup>

The group that opposed the Kharijite position was known as the Murji'a, or Murji'ites, and they believed that faith alone saved a person. The name refers to "those who defer," and it was given to them because they deferred final judgment to God, who was the only one who could ultimately decide who would be saved on the Last Day.<sup>17</sup> They emphasized that right belief was entirely a matter of "inner assent," rather than "external performance or practice" and consisted of knowing, loving and submitting to God.<sup>18</sup> Thus, a true believer would be able to enter Paradise based on his faith in God rather than on whether he was obedient to the end. On the other hand, the Kharijites said that if a sinner died unrepentant then he would not be able to escape hell, even if he believed in God and the prophet. Of course, the Kharijites would say that this person could not be a believer "in the true sense" because otherwise he would not remain unrepentant.<sup>19</sup> Abu Hanifa, one of the Murji'ites, developed a middle way where he said that faith was with the tongue and heart and works needed to follow faith.<sup>20</sup> Due to the extremism of the Kharijites, the majority of the *ulama* were drawn to the more moderate position of the Murji'ites, and even the rulers were positively inclined toward the theology of the Murji'ites since these

<sup>14</sup> See Robert R. Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2010), 11-39.

<sup>15</sup> Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 69.

<sup>16</sup> Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, 11-13.

<sup>17</sup> Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Macdonald, *Development of Muslim Theology*, 126.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

theologians refused to condemn sinners and left the final judgment up to God. This theological openness also fit in well with a socio-political debate taking place at that time which involved whether man had the free will to act toward securing his salvation or whether all his thoughts and actions were already predestined by God. This spirit of inquiry began to develop into what Fakhry has called the "first articulate theological movement in Islam."<sup>21</sup>

### Disputation Two: Predestination versus Free Will

At the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century a very important theological question was being asked in regard to the rule of the Umayyads, which had a definite political overtone, and this was whether the Umayyad leaders were predestined by God to rule. The Qadarites were at the forefront of this discussion, and though their ideas were generally accepted at first, they began to cause quite a political stir. Goldziher notes that the theology of determinism (predestination) can be traced back to this time in Damascus, which was also the center of the debate on man's *qadar*, or power. Essentially, in the Qadarite position, man determines his own fate or *khalaq al-af'al*. This was set against the blind compulsion of the Jabriya, who followed the majority of the Kharijites and believed in *jabr*, or predestination.<sup>22</sup> The Qadarites believed that man must have free will and responsibility over his actions. Otherwise, if God were to determine everything that happens in a person's life, then he would also be responsible for the evil deeds that are committed and ultimately accountable for the fate of that person. If a man sins and it is pre-determined by God, how then can God hold him responsible for that action on Judgment Day?

### The Rise of the Mu'tazilites

Ignaz Goldziher writes that the Mu'tazila, or "those who separate themselves" were the first to apply reason to their view of God's justice in man's freedom of will. The founder is said to have been Wasil ibn Ata (d. 748), an ascetic and a disciple of al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), one of the leaders of the Qadarite movement, from which the Mu'tazilites originated.<sup>23</sup> Some have traced the origin of the Mu'tazilites back to Wasil's compromise view, which taught that the grave sinner was neither a believer nor a non-believer, but rather just a grave sinner "to whom the sanctions against apostates or infidels do not apply."<sup>24</sup> This led to a reaffirmation of the Qadarite position on free will and the Mu'tazilites soon found themselves entrenched against strong believers in predestination, such as Jahm Ibn Safwan (d. 745). Safwan taught that *jabr*, or strict predestination, would not allow men the capacity for power (*qadr*) to counter the absolute power of God, for, in their estimation, that would limit God's power and make Him less than all-powerful.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the Mu'tazilites believed that God's divine justice required human free will and responsibility, for otherwise God would be solely responsible for all acts of evil and injustice.<sup>26</sup> The Mu'tazilites further believed that reason demanded that God could not

<sup>21</sup> Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, 16. See also Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 82.

<sup>22</sup> Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 80-82.

<sup>23</sup> Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 86; see also Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Majid Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology: From the Eighth Century C.E. to the Present," in *The Oxford History of Islam*, Esposito, John L (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 279. See also Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, 15, and Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology: From the Eighth Century C.E. to the Present," 15.

<sup>26</sup> Macdonald, *Development of Muslim Theology*, 135.

be blamed for doing what is evil, and they claimed that God could only command what is right and prohibit what is wrong.<sup>27</sup>

Eventually this conflict split the theological camps into two diametrically opposed positions: free will, or *qadr*, on one side and predestination, or *jabr*, on the other. This division was so central that Fakhry even says that “almost all subsequent theological developments would take the form of variations on, or a synthesis of, these two antithetical positions.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Disputation Three: Created Word (Qur'an) versus Uncreated Word (Qur'an)**

From the early 8<sup>th</sup> century on into the Abbasid period, the Qur'an was popularly believed to be uncreated.<sup>29</sup> The rationale behind this was that God's speech is first of all as eternal as any of his other attributes, such as his power or his knowledge. Since the Qur'an is his revelation to man through the act of speaking, then the Qur'an itself must be eternal like God himself, and therefore uncreated. The Mu'tazilites, on the other hand, viewed the act of God “speaking” as another anthropomorphism that would ultimately destroy the unity of God. If the Qur'an existed apart from God, then there would be two eternal entities rather than one. The unity of God would be compromised and negated.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the 8<sup>th</sup> century the Mu'tazilites were persecuted as heretics for their belief in a created Qur'an.<sup>31</sup> In truth, however, the Mu'tazilites taught that the Qur'an is the “created word of God, who is its uncreated source.”<sup>32</sup> This meant, among other things, that the teaching of the Qur'an as the actual speech or Word of God resulted in a belief in two deities, which would itself be a heresy.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Fall of the Mu'tazilites and the Rise of the Ash'arites**

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, under the caliphate of al-Ma'mun, the Mu'tazilites finally “gained reprieve and official support.”<sup>34</sup> Over time, however, the Mu'tazilites pushed their rational consistency too far and sparked a violent theological battle by devising an explanation that the revelation given to a prophet was not the actual voice of God, but rather a “speech created by God” that corresponded to the Word and will of God.<sup>35</sup> Even the inquisition under the caliph al-Ma'mun could not suppress the rejection of this Mu'tazilite view, and the reaction of the people brought a strong reversal to this position. Proponents of the uncreated Qur'an began advocating that not only was the revelation given to Muhammad the uncreated Word of God, but that also the written word between the covers of a book and even the recited words of the Qur'an by Muslims in their daily prayers was to be regarded as God's speech and therefore eternal.<sup>36</sup> Taken to an extreme, the very Qur'an would be worshipped as another “god,” which, of course, would be heretical. Thus, in the end, it seemed that the most reasonable position was dismissed and replaced by one that rejected reason, and though some scholars would continue espousing the Mu'tazilite doctrine, it became marginalized and lost its appeal.

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<sup>27</sup> Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>29</sup> Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 69-70.

<sup>30</sup> Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 97.

<sup>31</sup> Farah, *Islam: Beliefs and Observances*, 209.

<sup>32</sup> Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>34</sup> Farah, *Islam: Beliefs and Observances*, 209.

<sup>35</sup> Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 98.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

The view that eventually asserted itself was the Ash'arite school of theology founded by Abu al-Hasan Ali al-Ash'ari (d. 935), who rose out of the Mu'tazilite camp. He emphasized that human reason was not enough to determine the role of God in man's affairs and taught that God's power and will transcended man's categories and therefore His nature could not be understood.<sup>37</sup> However, he did not give up fully on the ability of man to use reason. Instead Al-Ash'ari "undertook a synthesis of contending positions. He staked a middle ground between the extremes of ibn Hanbal's literalism and the Mu'tazilite's logical rationalism."<sup>38</sup> He reaffirmed God's role in creation as transcendent, and re-asserted the doctrines of God's omnipotence as well as the uncreatedness of the Qur'an, but he balanced this with the belief that God also decreed that people would be accountable for their own actions. The key idea that won over the masses was that while he promoted the use of reason and logic, he still held that they were subordinate to revelation. This middle view became quite popular, and by the eleventh century had attracted many followers<sup>39</sup> and became one of the predominant views for Muslims of that time, and later for the dominant school of Sunni theology.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

From the beginning, Islam had a deep distrust of anything having to do with reason, and in the end, any theology or philosophy that raised reason above the Qur'an was rejected.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, while some of the early Muslim theologians were prepared to apply the features of philosophy to the realm of religion through the means of reason, as time passed more Muslim thinkers turned away from the fruits of reason and held fast to the rigors of revelation.

## Part II: Salvation According to Islam

Today the Muslim concept of salvation is drastically different from the Christian view. Perhaps the best statement to frame the Islamic view of salvation is from Ron Rhodes: "A weak view of sin will always lead to a weak view of salvation."<sup>42</sup> What is meant by this statement is that Islam minimizes the reality of human sin to such an extent that for the Muslim there is no need of a savior. Each individual Muslim is said to have the ability to save himself. In his book, *One with God*, Kärkkäinen writes that when it comes to salvation issues, Islam and Christianity are at opposite poles. He says, "In Islam salvation is based on good works, whereas in Christianity salvation comes by faith in the righteousness of God."<sup>43</sup> However, as we have already seen with our overview of the early Islamic development of theology, this statement may be too simplistic.

These opposite beliefs can be seen in four areas: the view of sin, the need for atonement, the place for good works and the assurance of salvation.

### 1. View of Sin

<sup>37</sup> This deals with the doctrine of "bi-la kayf," or the teaching that since God was beyond understanding some things had to be accepted without "asking how."

<sup>38</sup> Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> Some of the most famous were al-Baghdadi (d. 1037), al-Juwayni (d. 1086), Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), al-Shahrastani (d. 1153), and Fakhr al-Razi (d. 1209) — Majid Fakhry, *Philosophy and Theology*, 281.

<sup>40</sup> Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 72-73.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Muslims* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2002), 233.

<sup>43</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as a Deification and Justification* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004), 135.

In Christianity, sin separates us from God and must be dealt with. However, man is incapable of redeeming himself from sins that are committed against God and therefore needs a divine savior who can atone for his sin and satisfy God's divine justice. Since this is beyond our ability, no amount of good works will be adequate to save us from eternal separation. Even the faith we need to accept Christ's atoning death is a gift from God through his grace, or unmerited favor. It is all the work of God. The Islamic view of humanity, however, does not acknowledge fallenness or depravity.<sup>44</sup> In Islam there is no conversion or regeneration, just remembering.<sup>45</sup>

In Islam there is nothing to be "saved from" since the forgiveness of sins comes from Allah and does not require a substitutionary death. In Islam there is no "original sin." Adam made a "mistake." He "forgot" the covenant he made with God, but he did not commit a sin that transformed his nature. Men are responsible for their own "sins,"<sup>46</sup> which are committed because they are weak and forgetful, but not depraved.<sup>47</sup> Allah's law keeps a person on the straight path and the reward is Paradise.<sup>48</sup> Thus, it would make more sense to say that salvation in an Islamic context really only refers to the afterlife.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps this is why Fazhur Rahman says that "For Islam, there is no particular "salvation": there is only "success [*falāh*]" or "failure [*khusrān*]" in the task of building the type of world order we are describing."<sup>50</sup> Faruqi even goes so far to say that, strictly speaking, salvation does not exist in Islam because it is not needed. Man has been endowed with all that is necessary to fulfill the divine will.<sup>51</sup>

## 2. An atonement is not necessary

In Islam, people are able to free themselves from the bondage of sin in their own strength. Atonement is also unnecessary because Allah makes arbitrary decisions. He says, "Let it be" and it is done. "He has no need to satisfy his own justice."<sup>52</sup> Thus, forgiveness is by Allah's will, not by justification. Thus, this is why Moucarry says, "Islam does not acknowledge our moral downfall and consequently the necessity of our redemption."<sup>53</sup>

## 3. Good works are enough

Salvation according to the Qur'an is through pleasing Allah by good works. Good works outweigh bad works; therefore, those whose good works outweigh their bad deeds will go to paradise (S. 23:102-3). Salvation is therefore dependent on good works. Moucarry states that in

<sup>44</sup> Norman Geisler, and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002)

<sup>45</sup> Geisler and Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 122. Quoted from Hasan Askar and Weibrecht Stanton.

<sup>46</sup> There are a number of Arabic words that would be considered "sins," but there is nothing that has the same sense of falling short of God's favor that you would find in the Christian view. See J.P. Edwards, note 2.

<sup>47</sup> J.D. Greear, *Breaking the Islam Code: Understanding the Soul Questions of Every Muslim* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest Hope, 2010), 61.

<sup>48</sup> Rhodes, Reasoning from the Scriptures, 233.

<sup>49</sup> Geisler and Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 122.

<sup>50</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam, 2nd Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 63.

<sup>51</sup> Chawkat Moucarry, *Faith To Faith: Christianity and Islam In Dialogue* (Leicester, England: IVP, 2001), 101.

<sup>52</sup> Rhodes, Reasoning from the Scriptures, 235.

<sup>53</sup> Moucarry, *Faith To Faith*, 110.

the end, salvation in Islam depends on two things: God's sovereignty and our natural capacity to do his will.<sup>54</sup> However, the problem is that even after a lifetime of good works there is still no assurance that your good works are enough to save you since your salvation is still up to Allah's arbitrary will.

#### 4. No assurance of salvation

Comparatively speaking, then, the differing diagnoses of humanity's conditions are met with different solution by each. As one Muslim puts it, "In Islam, humans are not seen as being in such a hopeless situation before God: we are seriously ill, but not spiritually dead."<sup>55</sup> However, as Edwards points out, "Islamic theology presents man with a more hopeful beginning, but a less assured end than Christianity, which robs men of all hope in themselves, but offers a guarantee of righteousness, peace, and paradise unmatched by Islam."<sup>56</sup> Thus, Christianity's solution for sin seems to both satisfy God's justice and bridge the gap between God's sovereignty and man's free will.

According to J.D. Greear, however, there are four reasons why Muslims reject the Christian's view of "divine justice." First of all, if Jesus' death on the cross is necessary to enable God to forgive, then God's power is limited. This implies that something must happen first before God can act, which limits God's actions and therefore, according to Islam, must be inaccurate. Second, it makes us more merciful than God since we can forgive without demanding a sacrifice, but God cannot. Third, Muslims do not believe that guilt can be transferred to someone else, even if Jesus were deity. Each person is responsible for his own destiny (S. 6:164 and S. 2:233). Fourth, Muslims do not believe that someone else can pay for sins. A person's sin must be weighed against one's good works. The individual must bear the weight of his own sins.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, salvation in Islam has four components: faith, obedience, repentance and the Prophet's intercession on the last day.<sup>58</sup>

#### 1. Faith is assent to the truths revealed in the Qur'an.

According to Muhammad Abul Quasem there are two means of salvation, faith (iman) and action/works (amal). Faith has three essential ingredients, "belief in the oneness of God, belief in the prophecy of Muhamad, and belief in life after death."<sup>59</sup> Others say there are five ingredients for faith, belief in "God and his attributes, the prophets and their virtues, the angels, the sacred books, and the day of resurrection."<sup>60</sup>

#### 2. Obedience is the observance of religious duties.

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<sup>54</sup> Moucarry, *Faith To Faith*, 104.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>56</sup> J.P. Edwards, "Sin And Its Solutions In Islam And Christianity," [www.ciu.edu](http://www.ciu.edu):Nov. 16, 2010, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Greear, *Breaking the Islam Code*, 61.

<sup>58</sup> Moucarry, *Faith To Faith*, 101. In Islam, similar terms regarding salvation are shared with Christianity, but the meaning is often quite different.

<sup>59</sup> Geisler and Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 123.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.



Without obedience, however, there would be no faith. In this sense faith is a function of obedience and is actualized through works. Works follow the five pillars of the confession of faith, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and hajj. This is why Quasem reminds us that, "Belief alone is not enough."<sup>61</sup>

3. Repentance means to turn away from sin and ask for forgiveness (S. 40:3).

J.P. Edwards explains that even in Islam sin will keep a person out of heaven. Sin must be atoned for, but this is required of individuals for their own sins.<sup>62</sup> In addition, "Atonement is not by sacrifice, but rather doing prescribed good deeds." (S. 7:8-9). The greater weight of good deeds cancels out a person's bad deeds. However, no one will know if they have enough good works until the final judgment.<sup>63</sup>

4. Therefore, intercession is not only important in Islam, but it is essential for salvation.

In a sense, without intercession (God's mercy) no one can be saved. (This is similar to Christianity, but only superficially). God simply pardons sin. No sacrifice for sin is required. Therefore, Christ's death on a cross is not needed.<sup>64</sup> Intercession by Muhammad is found only in the hadiths, not in the Qur'an. This is based on Muhammad being the last prophet of God.

In conclusion, salvation for Muslims is achieved by faith in Allah and his messenger, and ultimately by Allah's mercy (and perhaps the intercession of Muhammad or others). However, even faith in Allah and his mercy is measured by a person's good works outweighing their bad deeds to the extent that in a very real sense their salvation, or entrance into Paradise, is dependent on what they do or do not do. If God's mercy enters into the picture, it is mostly arbitrary. This often produces a fatalistic view of the future since Muslims neither know whether their good works will outweigh their bad works, (there is no "cosmic scorecard" they can refer to), nor are they assured that God's mercy will save them from hell. Perhaps this is why some choose the path of active jihad, clinging to Muhammad's promise that if they are killed while fighting the infidel they will gain instant entrance into Paradise (S. 3:195, 2:244, 4:95).

### **Part III: Salvation According to Eastern Orthodoxy**

While there are certainly differences between the Christian view of salvation and an Islamic one, there are also differences in content and emphasis between Eastern and Western churches. For example, Letham writes, "Broadly speaking, Orthodoxy views Christianity as mainly personal and mystical — centered in union with God — in contrast to the West's focus on the legal. Hence, since Athanasius the focus in the East's view of salvation is deification (union with God) rather than the West's stress on atonement for sin and, since the Reformation, justification."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Muhammad Quasem in Geisler and Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 123.

<sup>62</sup> Edwards, "Sin And Its Solutions In Islam and Christianity," 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Letham, *Through Western Eyes Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective* (UK: Christian Focus, 2007), 243.

As with Islam, a different view of salvation stems from a different understanding of Adam's sin. First of all, the East rejects the West's understanding of original sin. Both branches agree that "all people inherit the corrupt nature received from Adam," but in the Eastern Church "there is no inheritance of Adam's guilt. Guilt arises only from actual sins, which individuals commit. Participation in the guilt of Adam's sin (Rom. 5:12ff) is by imitation, not imputation."<sup>66</sup> This would allow man to view sin as a setback or impediment to his goal of divine perfection and escape from death rather than being rendered dead in his sin. Thus, "as a consequence, the main thrust of Orthodox soteriology is the conquest of death by Christ's resurrection rather than atonement for sin at the cross."<sup>67</sup>

According to Letham, "Whereas Reformed theology teaches that man was created in a state of uprightness from which he fell, the Orthodox teach that he was created in a state of innocence with the potential for moral perfection, which he was to achieve by his own efforts, assisted by God's grace."<sup>68</sup> In the Orthodox Church, then, sin is less severe: "Adam fell, not from perfection, but from a state of undeveloped simplicity."<sup>69</sup> Thus, "for the East, fallen man is diseased but not dead. Sin has harmed him but not killed him." Unfortunately, this leads to a weak view of sin. It is also very much how Islam views the result of Adam's sin. From a Reformed point of view, this is not only inadequate but theologically dangerous.<sup>70</sup>

According to the Reformed view, all people incurred objective moral guilt through the sin of Adam. The resultant corrupted nature rendered man incapable of responding to God's grace and therefore "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). In order to be saved, man must receive a regenerated heart and mind from the Holy Spirit before he can respond in faith to Christ's free gift of grace.

Moreover, the Orthodox view is a synergistic view in which both God and man play a part in the salvation process, rather than the Reformed monergistic one, though God's role is by far the more important one. This is possible, Letham says, because "the effects of sin are not so far-reaching as to prevent him responding to God in faith, although he needs some help to do this."<sup>71</sup>

Letham notes that John of Damascus also accepted synergism in his view of salvation. For example, in his *Orthodox Faith* Letham recounts that "he connects free will with reason: God knows all things in advance but he does not predetermine them."<sup>72</sup> First there is free will and then divine grace. Letham reminds us that this is opposite to Augustine's view that God's grace precedes and enables our response. However, when we explore what John actually argued in his dialogue with the Muslims, the synergism he advocates permits a balance between God's sovereignty and man's free will that Augustine would probably also accept. Thus, as we shall see, John's critique of Islamic theology in the 8<sup>th</sup> century can still help us understand not only the differences between the Islamic view of salvation and the Orthodox one, but it may also help us resolve some of the differences between Orthodox and Reformed theology today.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 266.

## Part IV: John's Critique of Islamic Theology

### Analysis of the Content

The following dialogue is excerpted from the *Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen* by John of Damascus. Comparisons between John of Damascus' *Orthodox Faith*, as well as contemporary Islamic theology, will be made with his dialogues in order to determine similar themes and possible connections. The speaker tags are in bold print in order to make their identification easier.

#### Section 1a: The omnipotence of God and the cause of evil<sup>73</sup> (Kotter 1)<sup>74</sup>

When the Christian was asked by the **Saracen**, "Who do you say is the cause of good as well as of evil?"

The **Christian**: "We say that God alone is the author of all that is good, but not of evil."

The **Saracen** asked in response: "Who do you say is the cause of evil?"

The **Christian**: "Obviously the devil, who has perverted the truth by choice, and we humans."

**Saracen**: "Because of what?"

**Christian**: "Because of our own free will."<sup>75</sup>

When the Saracen asks the Christian what causes good and evil, the Christian answers that it is the Devil and man following the negative aspects of free will. Le Coz writes that the response of the Christian in the dialogue is exactly what Byzantine Christians would say in regard to the dilemma the Saracens faced when they tried to reconcile God's absolute power with the free will of man.<sup>76</sup> For example, John wrote in his *Orthodox Faith* that "God is not the author of evil."<sup>77</sup> Indeed, John goes on to say that sin "is an invention of the free will of the Devil," and though the Devil was made good he became evil because he freely chose to follow what was evil instead of what was good.<sup>78</sup> These statements by John coincide with the response of the Christian in the dialogue, who agrees that evil comes from the Devil as well as from fallen humans.

The Christian in the *Disputation* is emphasizing to the Saracen that God gave men the ability to choose between good and evil. However, the choice is limited to the areas of morality and of faith. The Christian points out that while God is the source of all that is good, He cannot be blamed for that which is evil, for evil comes when men reject the morality of God and turn away from God in unbelief. The Kharijites in early Islam proposed that it was necessary that God was responsible for both good and evil, for otherwise man would have the power to counter

<sup>73</sup> The titles used in this analysis are gleaned from Sahas and Le Coz, with some of my own additions and clarifications.

<sup>74</sup> Bonifatius Kotter, *Die Schriften Des Johannes Von Damaskos*, IV (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1981) — *Disputation between a Christian and a Saracen* (DIS), 427-438.

<sup>75</sup> DIS, 1.1-6 (section 1, lines 1-6). The translation from Kotter's critical Greek text is by the author. The complete selected translation is found in Appendix J. The English translation for John of Damascus' *Orthodox Faith* (OF) is from Frederic H. Chase, trans., *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 37 (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958).

<sup>76</sup> Raymond Le Coz, *Jean Damascene: Ecrits sur L'Islam* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1992), 136.

<sup>77</sup> OF, Book 4: Chs. 19-23, esp. p.384.

<sup>78</sup> OF, 387.

God's will, and this was interpreted as limiting God's power. This *qadr*, or power, is addressed in the next section.

### Section 1b: Man's Power (Kotter 1)

**Saracen:** "What then? Do you have free will to do anything you wish?"

**Christian:** "God has created me free in regard to only two things."

**Saracen:** "What are they?"

**Christian:** "Doing what is evil and doing what is good. Accordingly, if I do wrong, the law of God punishes me, but if I do what is good, I do not fear the law. Instead, I am rewarded by God and by his mercy. In the same way, before the first man, the devil had been created with his own free will by God, but he sinned, and God expelled him from his proper state."<sup>79</sup>

Here the Saracen asks the Christian if he has power, or free will (□□□□□□□□□□□□),<sup>80</sup> to do whatever he wishes.<sup>81</sup> The Christian replies that he has free will to do two things, either power to do good, and please God, or power to do evil and be rejected by God. Here the Christian seems to be relating power to free will. The Qadarites of that time believed, like John, that man was responsible for his own evil, unlike the Jabarites who believed that since God is all powerful He must also be the author of evil.<sup>82</sup>

### Section 1c: Justice of God (Kotter 1)

**Christian:** "If, as you say, good and evil come from God, then God is unfair; but he is not. Indeed, if God had commanded the adulterer to fornicate, the thief to steal and the murderer to kill, as you say, then these men deserve honor for their obedience to his will."<sup>83</sup>

The Saracen, according to the Christian, wants to say that both good and evil are from God. The Christian argues that if evil, such as fornication, theft and murder, is by the will of God, then these actions should be praised rather than condemned. However, since the law of the Saracens condemns these acts, they do not believe that evil is from God, for otherwise they should not be condemned for the acts about which they had no choice. Many Saracens, such as the Jabarites, apparently believed that God had to be in control of everything, even of evil, otherwise He would not be all-powerful. John uses his argument to reveal a God who does not command his followers to do evil, but rather encourages them, through their own free will, to act in a praiseworthy manner.

We see this critique carried out further in an examination of God's justice involving the Qadarite opposition to the Jabarites, who argued that "God is the cause of everything, both good

<sup>79</sup> DIS, 1.7-15.

<sup>80</sup> It seems that □□□□□□□□□□□□ has more the sense of "power" in the New Testament, but in Patristic Greek it has more of the sense of "free will." See Lampe, 266.

<sup>81</sup> Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), 105. Sahas says that this term may have been borrowed from John by the Qadarites, though their emphasis was more on a counter to the absolute predestination of God espoused by the Jabarites, rather than on John's emphasis on the involvement of the deliberation of man in the act. This may demonstrate John's influence on the theology developing at that time.

<sup>82</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 105-106. See also Majid Fakhry, *A Short Introduction To Islamic Philosophy, Theology And Mysticism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 15-16.

<sup>83</sup> DIS, 1.20-24.

and evil.”<sup>84</sup> The Qadarites, on the other hand, tried to explain that man possessed power, or *qadr*, over his own actions and therefore man, rather than God, was responsible for evil in the world. In contra-distinction, John teaches that while God’s direct creative role is over, He still works His will through the lives of His followers and through the laws He set up in nature. This would allow for a belief in an omnipotent God (Jabarite emphasis) who also established true free will (Qadarite emphasis) for his followers. For example, in *De Fide Orthodoxa* John writes that “all things which God makes He makes good, but each one becomes good or evil by his own choice.”<sup>85</sup> In regard to God’s goodness and justice John states that He is not only “good” and “just,”<sup>86</sup> but that He is the “source of goodness and justice,”<sup>87</sup> and because of His justice He took on flesh and became man and died in our place to fulfill the justice required by God for our transgressions.<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, while the Qur’an refers to Allah as *Al-‘Adil*, or “the just God,” John argues that the Saracen God could not be very just if He pre-determines all actions of people, both good and evil, and then punishes people eternally for their transgressions. This was the core inconsistency of the Jabarite position that the Qadarites, and later the Mu’tazilites, tried to resolve.

In the dialogue, the Saracen is concerned with emphasizing the omnipotence of God and the Christian with emphasizing the justice of God. This latter position was taken up by the Mu’tazilites, who stressed the justice of God, and denied that He was responsible for evil. Evidence suggests that the Mu’tazilites further developed the earlier Qadarite concept of free will through the influence of Greek thought and Christian doctrine, as well as internal theological struggles.<sup>89</sup> In time the Mu’tazilites developed a position that sought to preserve God’s justice and unity in a way that would hold the individual person responsible for his own actions, but yet reserve the final judgment for an omnipotent God.

### Section 1d: “Creation” and/or “generation,” (Kotter 1)

And the **Saracen**: “Who,” he says, “forms the infants in the wombs of the women?” (The Saracens present this difficult objection because they want to prove that God is the cause of evil. For if I reply by saying, “God forms the infants in the wombs of the women,” the Saracen will say, “Behold, God is cooperating with the fornicator and the adulterer.”)

The **Christian** responds to this: “We find nowhere in Scripture where it says that God formed or created anything after the first week of the creation of the world... For God created the heavens and the earth and the universe in six days, and the seventh day he rested from all the work he had started doing, as the Scriptures witness to me.”<sup>90</sup>

The Saracen tries to trip up the Christian by asking who forms the infant in the womb; for if God creates the human fetus in the womb of a woman who has become pregnant due to infidelity, then God is complicit in the sin. The Christian, however, responds by explaining that God set the natural world in motion through creation, and from that point it is the responsibility

<sup>84</sup> Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 82.

<sup>85</sup> OF, 4.21, 387.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.2, 167.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.8, 176.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1, 268-269.

<sup>89</sup> Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, 1-5.

<sup>90</sup> DIS, 1.28-35; 1.61-63.

of man to live righteously so that the offspring of a man and a woman, born by natural means, can be a blessing rather than a curse.

The central question that is really being asked here by the Saracen is “Where does man come from?” It is very much related to the issue of God’s sovereignty because it not only deals with the capacity of free will in man, but it also defines the extent of God’s participation in the formation of each human born, from Adam and Eve to the present age. The Saracen view was that God is involved in every phase in the process of man’s origin, starting from the “drop of fluid” created by God,<sup>91</sup> through the formation of the “clot” or the embryo, which is fashioned by God,<sup>92</sup> to the final formation of the male or female infant.<sup>93</sup> It was very important for the early Muslims to demonstrate that God was sovereign over every aspect of a person’s life, from conception to death, for otherwise God’s sovereignty would be jeopardized.

### Section 1e: God’s foreknowledge of man’s destiny (Kotter 1)

And the **Saracen**: “How is it that God said to Jeremiah, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and while in the womb I sanctified you?’”

The **Christian**: “Since Adam onwards, God gave to every man the power to engender life in the womb. For Adam, having the power to engender life in the womb became the father of Seth, and Seth of Enosh, and every man engenders sons who in turn engender sons until this present time.”<sup>94</sup>

In this exchange, The Saracen brings up the issue of Jeremiah, who proclaimed that God “formed [him] in the womb.”<sup>95</sup> The intent is to imply that the Christian Scriptures also reveal that God predestines human actions, even from the womb. John acknowledges that God foreknows the birth of every man, but he denies that God necessarily predestines all things since God honors the freedom of action and will in man.

In Book II, chapter thirty of *De Fide Orthodoxa*, John notes that God’s foreknowledge is not the same as His predetermined will, for while “God foreknows all things He does not necessarily predestine them all.” John goes on to say,

Thus, He foreknows the things that depend upon us, but He does not predestine them – because neither does He will evil to be done nor does He force virtue. And so, predestination is the result of the divine command made with foreknowledge. Those things which do not depend upon us, however, He predestines in accordance with His foreknowledge. For, through His foreknowledge, He has already decided all things beforehand in accordance with His goodness and justice.<sup>96</sup>

Using a similar argument as the Christian in the *Disputation*, John denies that God’s foreknowledge is equivalent to his predestination simply because He has foreknowledge of the outcome, for God does not “force virtue” nor does He “will evil to be done.” In other words, God may know the outcome of every situation, but because He also honors the free agency of humans, He will not interfere in order to predetermine a person’s action or a choice even if it is

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<sup>91</sup> Q. 23:13,14

<sup>92</sup> Q. 22:5

<sup>93</sup> Q. 23:13,14

<sup>94</sup> DIS, 1.64-70.

<sup>95</sup> Jeremiah 1:5

<sup>96</sup> OF, 2.30, 263-264.

contrary to His divine will. God's will is fulfilled in spite of man's freedom to choose contrary to that will, because God's foreknowledge operates in "accordance with His goodness and justice." As Daniel Sahas frames it, though John "stressed the fact that God foreknows all things, he denied that He predestines all things. Predestination has to do only with those things which are not dependent upon man's power, and not with those which depend upon him."<sup>97</sup> This view demonstrated by John, as well as the Christian in the *Disputation*, allows for the sovereignty of God to work in such a way that God's will is always fulfilled, and yet man is able to exercise his own free will in such a way that he also retains his dignity as one who is made in the image of God. Such a concept, however, made little sense within a Saracen framework.

### Section 1f: Baptism and the will of God (Kotter 2)

And the **opponent**: "But was there baptism before Christ, for Jeremiah was born before Christ?"

The **Christian**: "There was, according to the testimony of the holy apostle, some who were baptized in the cloud and others in the sea. And the Lord said in the gospels, 'He who is not born of the water and the Spirit will not enter the kingdom of heaven.' Therefore, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the other saints who preceded Christ and have entered the kingdom of heaven have been baptized before, since, according to the testimony of Christ, if they had not been baptized, they would not have been saved.... Therefore, we proclaim that all who were and are saved through baptism, were or are saved by the grace of God."<sup>98</sup>

In one sense, it is strange for the Saracen to bring up Jeremiah in his questions since that particular prophet is not mentioned in the Qur'an. However, this may be a segment where John is fabricating the dialogue in order to teach Christians a deeper understanding of their faith in contrast to the Saracen beliefs. For example, in the previous section the Christian refers to John 1:12-13 to emphasize that a person is saved not by their own will or effort, but by the power of God. This affirms the sovereignty of God, but it also upholds the free will of man, for the verse begins with the words "to all those who received him," which implies a choice on the part of man.

In *De Fide Orthodoxa*,<sup>99</sup> John elaborates on what we find here in the *Disputation*. First of all, he assures Christians that there is "one baptism unto remission of sins and life everlasting. For baptism shows the death of the Lord."<sup>100</sup> He also alludes to John 3:5 in both *De Fide Orthodoxa* and the *Disputation*, which states that unless the Christian is "born of water and the Spirit, he will not enter the kingdom of God."<sup>101</sup> This seems to emphasize both man's part in salvation ("born of water" – the act of baptism), and God's part (by the Spirit). Again, this would counter the Saracen understanding of the place of man and God in Salvation. Indeed, without an understanding of the grace of God, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for Saracens to fathom the meaning of salvation.

<sup>97</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 111.

<sup>98</sup> DIS, 2.1-12.

<sup>99</sup> OF, 4. 9, 343.

<sup>100</sup> Romans 6:3

<sup>101</sup> OF, 4.9, 345.

**Section 1g: God's providential and permissive will (Kotter 3 and 4)**

The **Saracen**: "In your opinion, is the one who does the will of his God good or evil?"

The **Christian**, sensing a trap, said: "I know what you are getting at."

The **Saracen**: "Explain it to me."

The **Christian**: "You want to ask me: 'Did Christ suffer willingly or unwillingly?' So that if I say to you, 'He suffered willingly,' then you will say to me, 'go and bow down before the Jews, for they have done the will of your God.'"

The **Saracen** admits, "That is what I wanted to tell you. If you can answer me, do it."

The **Christian**: "What you call 'will,' I call 'tolerance' and 'patience.'"

The **Saracen**: "How can you demonstrate that?"<sup>102</sup>

This is where John seems to persuade the Saracen that it is because of God's tolerance and patience that He allows man to sin, rather than man sinning because God wills it. The Saracen says that man is bound to do the will of God. The Christian, however, in explaining his view, draws a distinction between God's "will" and His "tolerance," or perhaps better, His "permissive will." John establishes a distinction between what God wants and what he allows. He wants what is good, but he allows evil. John even makes the point in *De Fide Orthodoxa* that sometimes God uses evil in order to bring about "conversion and salvation," which is a greater good, but he refutes the idea that God is the "author of evil."<sup>103</sup> Sahas adds that "for John of Damascus, God wills only the good deeds while He tolerates the evil ones because of man's freedom of will and his own power."<sup>104</sup>

In this section of the dialogue the Saracen ends up agreeing with the Christian that God does not want man to "steal or commit adultery" because it is against His will; yet he also agrees that God will allow these evil acts to occur because of his "forbearance" or "patience," and because He respects man's free will. This view may suggest that the Saracen portrayed here followed the Qadarite position since the Qadarites were the ones who promoted a belief in the free will of man. It may also represent John's success in convincing some of the Saracens that reason dictated that man's free will within God's sovereignty was not only possible but desirable. On the other hand, the Jabarites held the extreme view of predestination that taught that all of man's actions, both good and evil, were under the compulsion of God. In the end, their position was the one that most Muslims accepted, and the one that became foundational to Sunni doctrine.

**Conclusion**

John's view of salvation did not emphasize the synergism between man's free will and God's sovereignty, but rather maintained a proper theological balance. He taught that God's sovereignty works in such a way that God's will is always fulfilled, and yet man is still able to exercise his own free will in such a way that he also retains his dignity as one who is made in the image of God. Man does have a part in salvation, John maintains, but he is saved not by his own will or effort, but by the power of God. As with Orthodox theology today, John taught that Adam was created in a state of innocence with the potential for moral perfection, but he differed with

<sup>102</sup> DIS, 3.1-9.

<sup>103</sup> OF, 4.19, 384.

<sup>104</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 112.



the modern Orthodox view in that he stated that Adam “was stripped of grace and deprived of that familiarity which he had enjoyed with God... And was condemned to death and made subject to corruption.”<sup>105</sup> John certainly did not accept the Muslim view that fallen man is diseased but not dead. Thus, with a strong view of sin, John was also able to maintain a strong view of salvation and taught that man was saved by the grace of God and not by any works that he himself could do.

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<sup>105</sup> OF, 3.1

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# Chart on Early Islamic Theology

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