

A Polemic with Kenneth Cragg on 'Divine Responsibility' and Theodicy in Islam

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Abstract

This article critically examines Kenneth Cragg's concept of 'divine responsibility' in relation to the problem of theodicy in Islamic theology. Cragg argues that Islam lacks a genuine theodicy because its understanding of God emphasises divine transcendence and sovereignty but lacks a corresponding sense of divine participation in the human condition. In response, this study contends that such a critique reflects the projection of Christian soteriological and Christological assumptions onto a fundamentally different theological framework.

Focusing particularly on the Qur'ānic concept of *ẓulm* (wrongdoing, injustice), the article analyses Cragg's interpretation in dialogue with Christopher Lamb's critique and the major currents of classical Islamic theology. Drawing on the works of Daud Rahbar, Eric Ormsby, Sophia Vasalou, and Frank Griffel, it examines Mu'tazilite, Ash'arite, Māturīdite, and Ghazālīan approaches to divine justice, human freedom, and the existence of evil. The study argues that Islamic theology does not deny the problem of evil but formulates it within a predominantly moral rather than ontological paradigm. Particular attention is given to al-Ghazālī, whose theological synthesis seeks to uphold both divine omnipotence and meaningful human moral agency.

The article further argues that Cragg's notion of 'divine responsibility' introduces a category derived from Christian doctrines of divine participation, kenosis, and redemption that cannot readily be applied to the Islamic conception of God. Whereas Christianity often interprets divine goodness through God's solidarity with human suffering, classical Islamic theology typically understands divine goodness in terms of God's justice, wisdom, mercy, and absolute sovereignty.

The study concludes that Cragg's claim that Islam lacks a theodicy results from applying Christian theological categories to an Islamic framework. Rather than lacking a theodicy, Islamic thought has developed a distinct practical and moral theodicy centred on divine justice (*ʿadl*), human accountability, the concept of *ẓulm* as injustice directed against oneself, and trust in God's wisdom.

Keywords

Kenneth Cragg, theodicy, Islam, *ẓulm*, divine responsibility, divine justice, Islamic theology, Christopher Lamb, al-Ghazālī, Mu'tazila

At the heart of the problem of theodicy is the tension between the three claims of classical monotheism: God is omnipotent, God is perfectly good, and there is evil and suffering in the world. Theodicy, in its own way, tries to explain how these claims do not contradict each other despite the experience of evil. The fundamental question is, then, how to defend God's justice and goodness in the face of evil.

The problem of theodicy – the justification of God in the face of the existence of evil – takes on different contours in Islamic thought than in the Christian tradition. Kenneth Cragg attempts to interpret the Islamic concept of God as ‘not fully theistic’,¹ lacking a sense of ‘divine responsibility’ for human sin. He explains this by saying that in Islam ‘God is not in a salvific relationship with man, nor is man in need of God for salvation. Just as Islam is intellectually a faith without theodicy, it is also a religion without a radical critique of life.’² He believes that Muslims still lack a full understanding of the Quranic texts that concern the human situation. Christopher Lamb believes that Cragg's criticism stems from a misunderstanding of the inner dynamics of the Islamic concept of evil – especially the concept of *ẓulm* (ظلم) – and from the excessive Christian emphasis on the reciprocity of God and man. According to Lamb, ‘for his Muslim partners in dialogue such a reciprocity of God and man would be unthinkable’.³ Cragg presents the Christian concept, where God understands his ‘divine responsibility’ and fights Evil as a spiritual entity. This study compares both approaches. Islamic theology understands evil as a consequence of free choice, which God inserted into the creative order through his wisdom. Islamic theodicy emphasises God's unconditional omnipotence and absolute limitlessness, which fundamentally complicates – and in some systems actually excludes – the possibility of synthesising both classical approaches to the problem of evil.

Definition of the Term

The topic of *Unde malum*⁴ was already addressed by Epicurus (†270 BC). The term ‘theodicy’ comes from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *dike* (justice). It was first used systematically by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) in his work *Essais de Théodicée* from 1710.⁵ It originally referred to the effort to show that God's justice remains intact despite the existence of evil in the world – that is, an attempt to explain ‘why God permits evil’, while remaining good and just. In this sense, it is an effort that John Milton aptly summarised in the words: ‘to justify God's ways to men’. In the philosophical tradition, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) defined the term more precisely: ‘Theodicy is understood as the defence of the supreme wisdom of the Creator of the world against the accusations that reason raises against it on the basis of the

¹ Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 46.

² Kenneth Cragg, *Islam in the Twentieth Century*, unpublished PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1950, pt. 1, 92.

³ Christopher Lamb, *A Policy of Hope: Kenneth Cragg and Islam* (London: Melisende, 2014), 68.

⁴ ‘Si Deus est, unde mala?

Si non est, unde bona?

Aut enim vult tollere mala et non potest;

aut potest et non vult;

aut nec vult nec potest;

aut et vult et potest:

si vult et non potest, impotens est, quod in Deum cadere non potest;

si potest et non vult, invidus est, quod pariter alienum est a Deo;

si nec vult nec potest, invidus et impotens est, ideoque nec Deus;

si et vult et potest, quod unum est proprium Dei, unde sunt mala, aut cur illa non tollit?’

quotation from Reinhold Gleis, ‘Et invidus et inbecillus: Das angebliche Epikurfragment bei Laktanz, *De ira Dei* 13,20–21’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 42, no. 1 (1988): 47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1584470>.

⁵ Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazālī's ‘Best of All Possible Worlds’* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3.

purposelessness of the world.’⁶ In later times, however, the term acquired a broader meaning. It denotes not only an intellectual defence of God against the problem of evil, but also a general belief in God’s management of the world and his care for creation – something close to the concept of providence.

Cragg’s Concept of ‘Divine Responsibility’

Cragg discusses the topic of *ẓulm* most extensively in his book *The Mind of the Qur’an*,⁷ drawing on Rahbar’s study *God of Justice*.⁸ Cragg points out that in the Qur’anic vision the world is ‘charged with the greatness of God’.⁹ For Muslims, however, this divine presence is not only manifested in nature, but also in ‘the submission of humanity to the authority, government, and final judgment of God’. While God’s mercy is manifested in good people, his justice is vindicated in those who do evil. The two poles – mercy and retribution – form a single unity of God’s sovereignty. Cragg’s analysis centres on two key concepts: *ẓulm*, which he translates as ‘wrong, oppression, evil’ and *nifāq*, or ‘hypocrisy’. According to him, man’s problem lies in the situations that these two terms describe. The consequences of sin are most convincingly described in Surahs 2:57 and 10:44, which repeat: ‘They wronged themselves’.¹⁰ Cragg writes: ‘Sometimes the emphasis here is clearly on the contrast: they wronged not God, but themselves. It is a matter of divine immunity rather than a human diagnosis.’¹¹ The emphasis on divine transcendence and inviolability nevertheless admits the existence of a power that leads God to human rebuke. Cragg sets himself the task of emancipating the divine realm from human measures that Muslim theology presents to him. The Qur’an describes the commission of evil as an injustice to the perpetrator himself, and designates it by the term *ẓulm al-naḥs* (wrong, injustice towards one’s own soul). Evil distorts his being, so that he finds himself condemned and betrayed by himself. Therefore, Cragg asks a penetrating question: ‘If on *ẓulm al-naḥs* matters and if it happens, as we have seen, in a world where the person cannot be isolated, can it be so entirely finalized in the solitariness of judgement and in the total hopelessness of hell?’¹² One cannot exchange one’s own soul ‘for anything in the world’ (Surahs 10:54; 13:18; 39:47). The meaning of *ẓulm* is not merely an individual matter, it extends to the social plane:

Zulm has frequently a collective character. It obtains in solidarity. Individual guilt, in its personal entail for the self, arises within the pressures of a whole society and from the forces at work in what we may call the larger dealers in *zulm*-nations, races, systems, structures, ideologies and other establishments, social and political.¹³

⁶ Immanuel Kant, ‘Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee’, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8, *Abhandlungen nach 1781*, ed. Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1912), 253–271. (Quoted passage on p. 255 = AA VIII, 255.)

⁷ Kenneth Cragg, *The Mind of the Qur’ān: Chapters in Reflection* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), 98–100.

⁸ Daud Rahbar, *God of Justice: A Study in the Ethical Doctrine of the Qur’ān*, Studies in the History of Religions 8 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), 5.

⁹ Cragg, *The Mind of the Qur’ān*, 99.

¹⁰ Kenneth Cragg’s commentary (see fn 15) in: Kamil Husayn, ‘The Meaning of *Zulm* in the Qur’ān’, *The Muslim World* 49, no. 3 (July 1959): 208. https://archive.org/details/muslim-world_1959-07_49_3/page/208/mode/1up Cragg notes that the Jesuit Arabic translation of Proverbs 8:36 employs the expression *ẓalama naḥsahu* (‘he wronged his own soul’), rendering the verse, ‘He who sins against me wrongs his own soul’, In Proverbs 6: 32, the adulterer is deccribed as “the destroyer of himself”.

¹¹ Cragg, *The Mind of the Qur’ān*, 99.

¹² Ibid., 101.

¹³ Ibid., 100.

In conclusion, Cragg states that the final judgment (*yawm ad-dīn*) represents the absolute consummation of this inner process: 'To counter *ẓulm al-nafs* is not, therefore, a simple search for private rectitude or personal acquittal. It requires also a will to righteousness within the wider whole. If there is no diagnosis that can rightly isolate the individual, there is no merely individual escape from *ẓulm*.'¹⁴ If there is a real and in-depth analysis of the impact of *ẓulm al-nafs*, then hope, according to Cragg, will bring the opposite of *ẓulm*, which is active goodness.

In response to Husayn's article 'The Meaning of Zulm in the Qur'an', Cragg discusses¹⁵ the presence of *ẓulm* in the soul *al-nafs* based on the verse of Surah *Yusuf* (Joseph) 12:53, 'Truly the soul of man is prone to evil.' Cragg claims: 'This verse probably comes closer than anything else in the Qur'ān to the Christian view of sin.'¹⁶ Husayn argues: 'Islam is firmly of the opinion that the human soul is essentially good and that the transgressor is he who wrongs his own soul. If evil were the nature of man, it would not be possible to say to the one who commits an evil deed, "You have wronged your own soul."¹⁷ Husayn does not accept that Surah Yusuf in any way suggests that the human soul is burdened with a tendency to evil. Cragg views the verse from a different perspective and believes that 'The phrase *la ammaratun bi-sui* is very illustrative and suggests bias, an inner tendency to deviate from the truth by some inner law.'¹⁸ Joseph does not regard it as his own merit that he resisted lust, in contrast to the women who attempted to seduce him. He attributes his resistance to God's mercy. Cragg shows that temptation comes from the inner disposition of the soul, but the authority of the decision ultimately lies in the soul itself. The consequences do not fall only on the soul of Joseph, but, like in the story of the Prodigal Son, also on the father, for whom the son's departure caused anxiety, regret, and loneliness. Temptation does not come from outside, but from the soul itself in the form of thoughts. The notion of 'dangerous thoughts' is not unique to Christian theology but also finds parallels in Greek tragedy and Jewish tradition. The term denotes inner impulses, desires, and self-deceptions that often remain partially hidden from conscious awareness, echoing the psalmist's recognition that human beings may be unable to discern their own "hidden faults" (Ps 19:13).¹⁹ The Greek solution is to change and control thinking. Cragg suggests that 'biblically speaking, "saved thoughts," thoughts that accept the nature of man's creation and recognize that freedom comes only in right obedience, in ordered desire, in the worship of God as Lord.'²⁰ The mere realisation that one wrongs oneself through *ẓulm* will not bring greater power or effectiveness if one is determined to resist. 'Nor can we suppose that the root of human evil is simply intellectual ignorance, which mere education will remedy. For reason itself can become morally depraved when placed in the total context of the whole personality.'²¹

According to Cragg, the solution is based on soteriological logic: God the Creator must participate in the consequences of human evil, otherwise his creation would remain without redemption. That is why he speaks of 'obligatory divinity' – of God's 'inner necessity' to be faithful to his own love. However, Lamb points out that in Islam such a necessity would compromise God's sovereignty: 'For Islam, such a view compromises the greatness of God, who cannot be understood as having obligations towards humanity.'²² Cragg, however, argues

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Cragg, as joint editor of *The Muslim World*, published a translation of Husayn's article with his own commentary inserted both in the article's footnotes and after it.

¹⁶ Cragg in footnote n.9 in Husayn, 'The Meaning of Zulm', 205.

¹⁷ Husayn, 'The Meaning of Zulm', 204.

¹⁸ Cragg in footnote n. 9 in Husayn, 'The Meaning of Zulm', 205.

¹⁹ Psalm 19:13 Who can discern errors? Forgive me even the hidden sins of my heart.

²⁰ Cragg in Husayn, 'The Meaning of Zulm', 208.

²¹ Ibid., 211.

²² Lamb, *A Policy of Hope*, 68.

that this position reflects what he calls a Muslim ‘reluctance to be fully theist’.²³ In his view, classical Muslim theology resists the idea that God is voluntarily and personally involved in the human predicament. He therefore insists that the act of creation entails a form of divine responsibility. As he states: ‘You cannot create and be as if you hadn’t. You cannot have law and be indifferent to what happens to it. You cannot educate and be indifferent to what is happening in education... God is involved in wrong that jahiliyyah does to him.’²⁴ For this reason, Cragg rejects the notion of an ‘unobligated deity’, describing it as ‘a terribly desolating and finally contradictory concept’. The refusal to attribute such divine involvement to God therefore appears, in Cragg’s interpretation, as a failure to follow the implications of theism to their fullest extent.

In this context, Cragg responds sharply to Husayn’s claim that human wrongdoing affects only humanity and not God:

However, this concept is clearly incompatible with any serious faith, with *Islam* as such, if it suggests that our wickedness is indifferent to Him. Our evil harms Him at least in the sense that every legislator must take the violation of the law seriously. The very divine requirement of *Islam* (conscious conformity) from man requires that the deficiency (in *zulm*) matters to Him and in this sense afflicts Him unpleasantly.²⁵

In Cragg’s view, God’s act of creation also implies responsibility for the restoration and correction of fallen creation – a fact that can be summed up in the word ‘redemption’. As will be shown below, in the Islamic context of mainstream theology, such a conception could be understood as a weakening of God’s majesty, since it would suggest that God is bound by some obligation to man. However, in unorthodox fringe currents, the activity of a ‘descending’ benevolent God can be found. The fundamental criticism remains that Cragg essentially confuses two levels – the ontological and the moral. The Islamic tradition has never delved deeply into the question of why God permits evil, but rather how one can be righteous in God’s eyes, as will be pointed out below.

Islamic Theodicy as an Answer: Justice, Trial, Freedom

A Study by Daud Rahbar

According to Daud Rahbar, the central ethical principle of the Qur’an is God’s justice (‘*adl Allāh*’), especially as manifested in the final judgment. In contrast to Christianity, where love of God functions as the primary motive of moral conduct, Rahbar argues that Qur’ānic ethics is fundamentally rooted in reverence for God’s stern justice and fear of divine judgment.²⁶ Rahbar argues that the Qur’anic concept of God is primarily judicial in character.²⁷ The dominant theme of the Qur’an is God’s stern justice, manifested in his role as the final judge who rewards and punishes human actions. In this respect, Qur’an 10:44 illustrates a fundamental principle of divine justice: ‘God does not wrong people in anything, but people wrong themselves.’ From this divine justice, then, the fundamental motive of human virtue arises – fear (*taqwā*) and responsibility (*mas’ūliyya*). Man is obliged to act justly, because God’s justice is perfect and inexorable. Rahbar points out that the Quran does not command love of God in this regard in a universal sense, because the relationship between God and man is asymmetrical: Surah 3:76 states: ‘Indeed, God loves the righteous’ (*innā Allāha yuḥibbu al-muttaqīn*). Love is therefore not a universal moral imperative, but a reward for those who

²³ Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 46: ‘reluctance to be fully theist characterise the classical Muslim theologians’.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Cragg in Husayn, ‘The Meaning of Zulm in the Qur’ān’, 198–199.

²⁶ Daud Rahbar, *God of Justice: A Study in the Ethical Doctrine of the Qur’ān*, Studies in the History of Religions, 4–5 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), 5.

²⁷ Ibid., 22: ‘the consistent dominance of the idea of God’s stern justice, the real basis of Qur’ānic morality.’

already live in a state of piety. 'The relationship of love, as we have already said, is reciprocal. The Quran never commands love of God. This is because God Himself loves only those who are strictly pious.'²⁸ In contrast, fear of God's justice is the initial and permanent motor of moral life. Rahbar writes that 'in Quranic thought, fear of God becomes the fundamental principle of virtuous action.'²⁹ However, this fear is not irrational anxiety, but the awareness of God's justice, which judges everything according to deeds. Because God in the Quran is just and 'never commits *ẓulm*', human responsibility is entirely individual; evil and injustice only exist as a consequence of human free choice, not God's will.

In Islam, *ẓulm* is usually translated as 'oppression', 'injustice', or 'tyranny', and *ẓulm* as 'darkness', 'gloom'. In the Sunni tradition, *ẓulm* distinguishes between sinful actions against the law of God, human rights, and neglect of duties. A person who commits *ẓulm* must correct it. He asks for forgiveness from God and seeks compensation for the injured. The Islamic concept of *ẓulm* appears as a moral problem of man, not in an ontological sense.

In the Islamic intellectual tradition, the 'problem of evil' is primarily associated with the questions of God's justice (*ʿadl*), power (*qudra*), and human responsibility (*taklīf*). The dispute over how to reconcile God's omnipotence with the existence of evil has, from an early period, been concentrated in different theological 'schools' and currents that developed distinctive theodicies. Although the term theodicy is unknown to Islamic theology, it does address the problem of 'unde malum' and the problem of responsibility for Evil. First, it assumes that God is absolutely just (*al-ʿadl*). Second, the world is a place of trial (*ibtilāʾ*) and third, man has a responsibility that, from God's perspective, gives evil a moral, not a metaphysical, weight.

The basic Quranic principle is expressed in Surah 4:79: 'Whatever good befalls you is from God, and whatever evil befalls you is from yourself.' This verse places evil within the moral framework, not within cosmic injustice. The idea that man could harm God is alien to Islamic theology. However, what it does address is the issue of causality, divine omnipotence, and human freedom.

Muʿtazila – the Rational Basis of Ethics

Around the middle of the Umayyad reign, opponents of determinism, the early Qadarites, appeared. They emphasised human responsibility and *qadar* (freedom of action). From this they concluded that God could not be the author of evil. Opposing them were the advocates of *jabr* (determinism), who claimed that man had no real freedom and that everything was from God. However, both extremes were gradually surpassed by the emergence of the rational kalam of the Muʿtazila. The doctrine of 'optimum' – God's obligation to do what is most beneficial to his creation (*al-aṣḥaḥ*) – appears as early as al-Nazzam († 835 – 845). Subsequently, the idea was elaborated by the schools in Basra and Baghdad. Muʿtazilite theology fundamentally rejects the possibility that God could be the author of evil, since this would deny his own justice (*ʿadl*). Evil was therefore understood as the result of human freedom and God's rejection of evil as its moral necessity. In the introduction to his monumental ethical encyclopaedia, the representative of the late Basra Muʿtazila ʿAbd al-Džabbār († 1025) explicitly states: 'God does only what is good, and He does without reservation what is obligatory...'³⁰ This clearly excludes the possibility that a good God could have any part in evil.

All Muʿtazilites were based on the belief in divine justice and the rational knowability of moral values, which is summarised by the thesis that 'God and humans are bound by the same moral code'. This implies that some actions are necessary for God (*wājib*) – for example, to

²⁸ Ibid., 180.

²⁹ Ibid., 179.

³⁰ Sophia Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Muʿtazilite Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 19, citing ʿAbd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad, *al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-ʿadl wa-l-tawḥīd*, vol. 6, pt. 1 (*al-Taʿdīl wa-l-tajwīr*), ed. ʿAbd al-Karīm ʿUthmān (Cairo: al-Dār al-Miṣrīya li-l-Taʿlīf wa-al-Tarjama, 1960).

reward the efforts of the righteous, because ‘doing good deeds was seen as necessarily involving hardship (*mašaqqa*) and hardship suffered in fulfilling the Law must be rewarded with an equivalent (*muqābil*)’.³¹ This logic of reciprocity is crucial to Mu‘tazilite ethics.

On this basis, the Mu‘tazilites formulate the principle of *aṣlah*, based on the assumption that God, as the absolute good, will always do ‘the best / most beneficial’ for his creatures. In theology, the question of whether and to what extent God is bound by an obligation to do what is most beneficial for people has become a contentious issue. Vasalou summarises the debate between the two main schools as follows: the Baghdadi Mu‘tazilites argued that the moral value of human good deeds is in fact the repayment of an infinite debt for God’s previous beneficence, and therefore cannot constitute real merit – which would in turn lead to a new ‘debt’ on God’s part. The Basra school reversed this asymmetry, understanding the power of reward as stronger than the power of punishment. Vasalou comments on this: ‘They adopted a position of weak retributivism; positive treatment—praise and reward—was considered a duty (*wājib*). God was therefore obliged to reward, but not to punish.’³²

While the Basra Mu‘tazilites limited God’s duty to the afterlife – God, according to them, is ‘obliged to provide the highest degree of *lutf* (help) so that people may fulfill the Law and attain bliss’ – the Baghdad school extended God’s duty to do *aṣlah* to the realm of earthly good. In their view, God is obliged to choose the most beneficial not only in eschatological matters (*āchira*), but also in the ordinary order of this world (*dunyā*). According to critics, the Mu‘tazilites, with their rationalist theodicy, limited God’s omnipotence by attributing to him duties analogous to those of humans.

Sunni Orthodoxy – Good as a Command from God

The Ash‘arī reaction of the 10th–11th centuries could be summarised by the verse of Surah 2:20: ‘God is over all things omnipotent’ (*wa-Allāhu ‘alā kulli šay’in qadīr*). God’s omnipotence and will are absolute, good and evil have no objective rational basis, but are determined from above by God’s command (divine fiat). The Ash‘arīs underestimated the intellect’s ability to judge good and evil. Al-Ijī unequivocally states: ‘We declare its judgment null and void’ (*ab ṭ aln ā ḥ ukmahu*), because ‘God is the judge’ (*ḥ akim*) and ‘He decides what He wills’ (Surah 5:1).³³ God is above everything, including the good and evil that He establishes in the Law. Ash‘arīya insists that God is the author of good and evil, but is not morally limited by this. God is the creator of deeds; man only ‘acquires’ deeds (*kasb*), but does not create them. By ‘acquiring’ (*kasb*), man assumes responsibility for them. It is unthinkable to attribute to God any ‘obligation’ that would limit His dominion. Yet this very ‘voluntarism’ opens up new questions about power, necessity, and justice. An accurate summary of Ash‘arī is offered by the scholar of early Ash‘arī theology Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Baqillani (†1013): ‘We emphatically deny that reason alone can know whether an action is evil or good, whether it is legally forbidden, permitted or obligatory. These judgments can be established about actions only through divine law, not by any determination of reason.’³⁴ What appears to humans as Evil may be, from God’s perspective, a test, a cause for the emergence of a greater good, which

³¹ Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts*, 79–80.

³² For discussions of *aṣlah*, *lutf*, asymmetries of reward and punishment, and the differences between the Baṣran and Baghdadi Mu‘tazila, see Sophia Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Mu‘tazilite Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), esp. 79–80 and chaps. 2–4.

³³ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 234, citing ‘Abd al-Qādir ibn Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Jazā’irī, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif fī al-Taṣawwuf wa-al-Wa’z wa-al-Irshād*, 3 vols. (Damascus, 1966–67).

³⁴ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 25, quoting al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*, 105.

is part of God's wisdom beyond human comprehension.³⁵ Ash'arī theodicy insists that God creates all events, good and evil, but precisely because God's will is the absolute standard of justice, God's actions are never unjust; man bears responsibility through the appropriation of actions (*kashb*), and evil is only a relative aspect of God's perfectly wise order.

The Maturidiyya, associated with Abu Mansur al-Maturidiyya (†944), together with the Ash'ariyya, represent the 'second orthodox school' of Sunni kalam.³⁶ They differ mainly in that the Maturidiyya emphasises the rational knowability of good and evil. Human reason has the ability to grasp basic moral qualities. Actions are 'acquired by choice' (*ikhtiyār*). Their epistemology therefore allows for a wider autonomy of reason in the field of ethics than Ash'arism. Ormsby describes how the Ash'ariyya consistently rejected the idea of God's obligation to provide the best possible state of the world. This framework also applies to the Maturidiyya: God is not bound by anything, but acts wisely and justly, his attributes do not change. The Maturidiyya theodicy is therefore more balanced: it recognises God's sovereignty, but at the same time attributes to human reason sufficient ability to understand the order of the world so that human responsibility is real.

Al-Ghazali – a Compromise between Reason and Revelation

The debate between the 12th and 19th centuries often centred on a single sentence attributed to al-Ghazali, according to which there is nothing more wonderful than this world in its wisely ordered form. Al-Ghazali himself, however, put this formulation in the context of the classic dilemma of theodicy, when he emphasised that if there were a better possible world and

If, however, there were (a possible better world) and God were to deny it, although He had the power (*qudrah*) to do it, but did not deign to do it, that would be stinginess (*bukhl*) contrary to divine generosity (*jud*) and injustice (*zulm*) contrary to divine justice ('*adl*). But if He were not able, that would be inability ('*aj*) contrary to divinity.³⁷

This argument serves al-Ghazali to rule out the assumption that God could create imperfectly or in a limited way.

Ormsby shows that al-Ghazali explicitly rejects the Mu'tazilite notion of *the optimum*, that is, the obligation of God to do 'the best'³⁸ independently of His will. This is not because of a hypothetical 'debt' of God to creatures, but from the premise that everything God actually does is best, since God's actions are necessarily a manifestation of His perfect wisdom and free will. Al-Ghazali thus rejects Mu'tazilite rationalism: 'al-Ghazali explicitly rejected the Mu'tazilite concept of objective good and evil, but he accepted that the human intellect is itself capable of perceiving good and evil from an aesthetic point of view.'³⁹

It follows that al-Ghazali is not a rationalist optimist, but a theologian who holds the Ash'arite position: the world is the best possible not according to the criteria of human reason, but because it was created by the will of God, which does not err and does nothing without a purpose. Although God is therefore an absolute agent and 'can do with man whatever He wills',⁴⁰ he always remains wise, just, and good. Ormsby emphasises that al-Ghazali builds on two premises: the absolute nature of God's power and His immeasurable wisdom (*hikma*), from which it follows that every aspect of creation has its function, even if it is often hidden from

³⁵ Qur'an 18:60–82 presents a notable episode in which Moses is guided through a series of actions that appear unjust, yet are later revealed to belong to God's far-reaching wisdom. His repeated protests, despite a prior commitment to refrain, make this a significant illustration of Islamic theodicy.

³⁶ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 25.

³⁷ Ibid., 62, quoting al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 4:223–24.

³⁸ Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, 237.

³⁹ Ibid., 238.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

man. Understanding this wisdom therefore requires spiritual purification and *tawakkul*, that is, complete surrender to God, which consists in the trust that everything is governed by His perfect wisdom and will (*irāda*).

This framework is closely related to the question of human responsibility. Although God creates all actions, man ‘acquires’ them (*kasb*) and is responsible for them – a classic Ash‘arite position that al-Ghazali affirms. He mitigates the paradox of God’s omnipotence and human responsibility by emphasising inner spiritual discipline and the practice of trust in God’s guidance. Al-Ghazali thus formulates a theodicy that rests not on philosophical necessity but on the theological premise of God’s perfection: the world is not best by rational standards, but because *God*, whose wisdom does not tolerate imperfection, created it that way. Evil, then, does not represent a gap in God’s wisdom, but an aspect of a larger order that human intellect cannot fully grasp.

Closely related to al-Ghazali’s theodicy is his concept of causality. His critique of necessary causalism and his emphasis on God’s immediate action became defining for Sunni theology. Frank Griffel shows that al-Ghazali created a framework in which God’s freedom, wisdom, and at the same time the possibility of natural explanation can be combined, without God being ‘subordinated’ to necessity. ‘Voluntary human actions are caused by the will and its basic motives. Motives are caused by human knowledge and its desires; and human knowledge is the result of various causes... Redemption or reward in the afterlife is the causal consequence of our actions in this world.’⁴¹ For al-Ghazali, acquiring the right kind of knowledge is crucial, becoming one of the most important human tasks in this world.

Controversy: Why Cragg’s Model Does Not Correspond to the Islamic Logic of Evil

Regarding God’s relationship to man, al-Ghazali writes in his *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm ad-dīn*: ‘God the Most High is not obliged in his perfect attributes to consult [have regard for] the benefit of his creatures.’⁴² This statement is not a manifestation of deism, as Cragg fears, but a consequence of the Islamic emphasis on God’s *ghinā’* – independence. God does not need man, but man needs God; this is the meaning of *ibād*, worship. Lamb argues with Cragg: ‘In fact, there is a denial in later classical Muslim thought that the fact of creation has any special significance in pointing to some truth about God, which contradicts the very basis of Cragg’s argument.’⁴³ Cragg’s statement ‘You cannot create and be as if you hadn’t’⁴⁴ has a strong existential charge, but theologically it suggests a necessity that Islam rejects on principle. Islam distinguishes between God’s *irada kauniyah*⁴⁵ (general will – what happens) and *irada shar‘iyah*⁴⁶ (moral will – what should be). God can allow evil without approving it; his sovereignty therefore also includes the mystery of allowing it. In this framework, the concept of ‘divine responsibility’ is logically redundant: God is just precisely because he allows evil only within the framework of wisdom, not because he ‘associates’ with it.

Cragg’s thesis of ‘divine responsibility’ is based on the assumption that God *must* respond to human failure, otherwise he would be immoral. In doing so, he projects into the Islamic

⁴¹ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195331622.001.0001>.

⁴² Richard J. McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of al-Ghazālī’s al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl and Other Relevant Works of al-Ghazālī* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 241.

⁴³ Lamb, *A Policy of Hope*, 68.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Cragg, *Islam and the Muslim* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1978), 407, cited in Lamb, *The Call to Retrieval*, 43.

⁴⁵ The concept of the cosmic will (al-irāda al-kawniyya; الإرادة الكونية) occupies a central place in Sunni theology (Ash‘arī, Māturīdī, and Atharī). It denotes God’s universal creative and determining will, by which all events in the created order occur, including good and evil, belief and unbelief, life and death.

⁴⁶ Irāda shar‘iyya (الإرادة الشرعية) refers to God’s legislative or religious will, that is, what God loves, approves of, and commands, even though it may not always be realized in human actions.

framework the Christian logic of kenosis (divine limitation) and incarnation (the incarnation of God in man). That is, what Christian theology understands by the word redemption of the world in that God (Christ) took upon himself the punishment for the sins of the world. Islam, on the other hand, understands God as absolutely transcendent and at the same time immanent through management (*tadbīr*), not through engagement in the defeat of Evil.

Cragg understands the Mu'tazilite concept of 'divine obligation' to do *aṣlah* as the closest to the Christian idea of divine salvific intervention. This brings him closer to the Mu'tazilite concept, but without its logical support: the Mu'tazilites argued that God must do what is best for people (*aṣlah*), while Cragg moves towards a moral *necessity* for God to act redemptively. However, both run into a fundamental problem: necessity in God means the loss of his freedom, as understood by the Sunni traditional school.

The fundamental difference lies in the fact that, in Islam, *ẓulm* is never merely a social or legal category but always possesses a moral and spiritual dimension. But it is rarely understood as a personal, demonic entity that stems from the evil nature of man, as understood by Jesus⁴⁷ or, for example, in the Epistle to the Romans.⁴⁸ However, metaphysical interpretations of the term do appear – especially in Sufism and from the mouths of philosophers. They sometimes speak of *ẓulm* almost as a force of darkness that opposes the light of God (*nūr*).

From the perspective of Islamic theology, then, Cragg's 'divine responsibility' identifies God's goodness with His connection to the human world, while Islam identifies it with His independence and wisdom. Evil reflects humanity's fallen condition rather than any culpability on God's part. Therefore, Lamb persuasively notes that 'given the political character of all theological disputes in Islam, the charge of non-existent theodicy cannot stand.'⁴⁹ The discussion of God's justice in Islam has always been conducted, but in a different language – that of law and power, not of the philosophy of evil.

Theological Implications for Islam-Christian Dialogue

Cragg's attempt to 'open the suffering of the world to God' is essentially a Christian response to the problem of theodicy in the post-Holocaust era. His 'God's responsibility' seeks to prevent images of a non-participating God, but in an Islamic context it becomes theologically untenable because it abolishes God's *transcendence* (*tanzih*).

From an Islamic perspective, God is not indifferent but sovereign. His compassion is expressed not in sharing suffering but in guidance (*hudah*). The Quran does not allow God to 'suffer with us' – because that would deny His divinity – but it promises again and again that 'God is with those who are patient' (2:153). This is a form of immanence that does not violate transcendence.

Cragg's conception would mean, in Islamic terms, that God has an 'intrinsic duty' to redeem the world. But Islamic belief says that God's *rahma* – mercy – is nonbinding and yet unlimited. God makes himself known through mercy, not necessity. This is a theologically more subtle concept than Cragg's moral projection.

Cragg himself asks: 'How great is God?' The Islamic answer is: God is so great that he is free from all obligations, but so merciful that he always acts for good. The Christian answer is: He is so great that he humbles himself in Christ. These statements are not mutually exclusive, but stem from different anthropologies. Nevertheless, Cragg's polemic should be seen as valuable in that it forces Islamic theology to think more deeply about the meaning of God's

⁴⁷ 'But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts...' (Mt. 15:18–19, NKJV).

⁴⁸ 'So then, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find' (Rom 7:17–18, NKJV).

⁴⁹ Lamb, *A Policy of Hope*, 65.

concern for man, but his ‘divine responsibility’ would, in Islamic epistemology, mean a limitation of God rather than a glorification of him.

Conclusion

Cragg’s attempt to introduce the motif of ‘involvement’ into the Islamic image of God is based on Christian revelation, not on the Quranic concept of sovereignty. His criticism that ‘Islam is a faith without theodicy’ is in fact a misunderstanding: Islam has a practical, not a speculative, theodicy. Every dispute over God’s justice in Islamic history – from the Kharijites to the Mu‘tazites – has been a way of wrestling with God’s *how*, not *whether*. God in Islam is not passive or uninvolved, but wise (*ḥakīm*). Evil makes sense in his order of testing and education. To claim that God is responsible for Evil is to a Muslim the same as to claim that a doctor is to blame for the bitterness of medicine. Cragg’s God is ethically sensitive; the Islamic God is ontologically perfect – and it is in this perfection that his compassion and justice lie. Therefore, one can conclude with Lamb: Islam is not a ‘faith without theodicy’,⁵⁰ but a faith that refuses to defend God because it knows that God does not need defending. This is the highest form of theodicy – the theodicy of silence and trust.

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⁵⁰ Lamb, *A Policy of Hope*, 65.

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