

# De fato mahometano: Leibniz and Muhammad Iqbal on Islamic fatalism

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## Introduction

Speaking of destiny, Indian poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) writes that it is ‘a word that has been so much misunderstood both in and outside the world of Islam’; meaning that, on the one hand, Muslims themselves have misconstrued the notion as a strong belief in absolute predestination while, on the other hand, non-Muslims have mischaracterized Islam as a religion based on blind fanaticism stemming from a faith in an already written fate. Such a characterization has been given philosophical dignity by Leibniz when, responding to the criticism that his philosophy inevitably led to necessity and fatalism, he insisted on establishing a distinction between what his doctrine did say about necessity and what it must not be mistaken for: Islamic fatalism for which he coined the phrase *fatum mahometanum*. The paper compares Leibniz’s statements about Islamic fatalism with the way in which the question has been debated in Islamic theology and philosophy, in particular by Indian philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938). It concludes on that author’s philosophy of time as duration (we must remember that Iqbal was a Bergsonian) as the condition for the *amor fati* without fatalism that Leibniz had been trying to propose.

## 1. Leibniz on Fatum mahometanum

In the Preface of the *Theodicy*, Leibniz wrote that ‘there are two famous labyrinths where our reason goes astray: one concerns the great question of the Free and the Necessary, above all in the production and the origin of Evil; the other consists in the discussion of continuity and of the indivisibles which appear to be the elements thereof, and where the consideration of the infinite must enter in. The first perplexes

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almost all the human race, the other exercises philosophers only' (Leibniz, 2008: 108). He then declared that because of the practical and not speculative nature of his enterprise, only the first 'labyrinth' would be explored: that of 'the freedom of man and the justice of God.' (Leibniz, 2008: 108).

The goal, as he stated it, was to assert as the sole object of true devotion a God who is to be 'imitated' and 'loved' and whose will we 'are resigned to [ . . . ], knowing that what he wills is best', not 'a despotic power' corresponding to a 'false conception of necessity' (Leibniz, 2008: 107–108). That false conception of necessity consists in the belief that 'the future [being] necessary, that which must happen will happen, whatever I may do' and therefore results in the 'lazy reason'. Necessity here is associated with (1) divine foreknowledge, God foreseeing everything or pre-establishing it; (2) with the determined 'concatenation of causes'; (3) with the assertion that a future event taking place is true or false 'even though we know not always which it is' (Leibniz, 2008: 108–109).

The phrase 'what [God] wills is best' is, for Leibniz, the key for understanding that divine power is not 'despotic' and is perfectly compatible with freedom. The freedom of a despot should be labeled 'whim'<sup>1</sup> while God exercises the true freedom of choosing, through his wisdom, among all possible worlds that his understanding envisions, to bring into existence the one that is the best. So the existing world is not the best because God willed it but has been willed by him because it is the best among all equally possible worlds. Then the questions to be raised are of course the following: doesn't that mean that the best possible world imposed its necessity, as it were, upon God? And if that is the case, isn't it simple fiction to state that other worlds were possible? Could they keep some existence-as-possible, if in fact they were never supposed to come into existence anyway? (We know that for Spinoza the notion of a simple possible is meaningless.) Leibniz does need a positive concept of the possible in order to maintain God's choice as a true one, and his choice of this world as obeying the principle of the best (which is a form of the principle of sufficient reason) not out of a 'metaphysical', 'geometrical' or 'absolute' necessity (all terms equivalent for Leibniz) but out of 'moral' or 'hypothetical' necessity. This distinction between metaphysical and moral necessity is crucial for Leibniz's defense of God's justice (θεοδικία) incompatible with absolute Necessity.

That is why he is somehow impatient with Samuel Clarke when in his *Fourth Reply* (June 26, 1716) the British philosopher writes that Leibniz's doctrine 'leads to universal necessity and fate by supposing that motives relate to the will of an intelligent agent in the same way that weights relate to a balance' (§ 1). In his response Leibniz wonders whether his interlocutor is actually 'willing to listen to reason and to show that he is a lover of truth' suspecting that he may be just willing to 'pick holes in what [he is] saying, without throwing light on anything' (§ 1). So in his *Fifth* and last *Response* (he is going to die in November after writing it in mid August 1716) Leibniz repeats the importance of the conceptual distinctions he had made in his *Theodicy*, 'perhaps better and more fully than anyone else', he insists (§ 2). In particular he repeats that 'we must distinguish between the necessity something has because its opposite implies a contradiction (called 'logical', 'metaphysical' or 'mathematical' necessity) and the moral necessity that is at work when a wise being chooses the best and when any mind follows its strongest inclination' (§ 4). So Leibniz's direct

argument to demonstrate that freedom 'exempt not only from constraint but also from real necessity' does have its place in his doctrine of the divine calculation and existentionation of the best possible world is to maintain that what makes a choice free is that another choice is *possible* (Leibniz, 2008: 119): God did choose the world where the chain of events was only compatible with Caesar crossing the Rubicon, nevertheless the infinitely many other worlds where he humbly conformed himself to the Roman tradition were possible; from the standpoint of Caesar himself, he did freely choose to cross the Rubicon because the choice not to do so was possible even though all the motivations in him (ambition, sense of his destiny, etc.) predisposed his choice. And Leibniz insists again and again that to predispose or to incline does not mean: to necessitate.

But besides this direct argument resting on the logical definition of the possible as that whose opposite does not imply contradiction, Leibniz offers the indirect argument which is to present an actual doctrine of fate resting on the 'false conception of necessity' in order to make manifest how radically different from his system that doctrine is. This *epitome* of absolute necessity is what he labels *fatum mahometanum* or 'fate after the Turkish [i.e. Islamic] fashion'. In his Response to Clarke he comes back to the distinction made in his *Theodicy* between *fatum mahometanum*, *fatum stoicum* and *fatum christianum*. Islamic fate, according to him 'implies that such-and-such *will happen* even if its cause is avoided, as though it were absolutely necessary' (§ 13). It amounts to mere *unconsciousness* for Leibniz (2008: 109) who cites as an example that 'the Turks [ . . . ] do not even abandon places infected with plague, owing to their use of [lazy reason]'. Then there is the progress represented by the Stoics' notion of fate which leads to *tranquility* and patience coming out of the realization that it is useless to balk at the course of events. Beyond that tranquility, there is finally the *contentment* associated with the Christian notion of fate as Providence, which is the 'pleasure taken in the understanding that divine perfections are such that what God has pre-established is for the greatest good in general and the greatest particular good of those who love him.' (*Fifth Response by Leibniz*, § 13) The fuller that understanding, the more we move from the 'forced patience' of the Stoics to the Christian *amor fati*, the confidence that it 'it is not even possible to wish for anything better than what [God] does' (*Th.* p. 55). One reason Leibniz establishes the distinction is because fatalism 'the Turkish fashion' continuously haunts 'most men and even Christians' as they are always under the threat of falling back into 'lazy reason', under circumstances when we want to cheat ourselves. For example, we may refuse to adopt the diet that we know is best for us because we do not really feel like disciplining ourselves by having recourse to the argument that we should not try to resist what God has kept in stock for us.

While his doctrine is thus defined against what he presents as Islamic fatalism on the one hand, on the other hand it is also defined against the exact opposite, at the other extreme, so to say, of *fatum mahometanum* which is the doctrine of the 'Socinians', the fore-runners of the Unitarians. The aspect of socinianism that Leibniz is aiming at here is the rejection, by the followers of Laelius Socinus (d. 1562, Zurich) and his nephew Faustus Socinus (d. 1604, Poland), of an understanding of God's omniscience that would make human free will simply impossible. Because if He knew every future event freedom would be contradictory, God's omniscience is limited to

necessary truths and does not apply to contingent truths (such as what might happen). In Leibniz's words, the 'God of the Socinians [ . . . ] takes each day as it comes' and 'doesn't foresee things going wrong'.<sup>2</sup> Between the Turkish/Muslim perdition and the Socinian heresy there stands, Leibniz wants to argue, the true understanding of God's Providence leading to *amor fati*.

I will come back to that notion of a 'god who takes each day as it comes' that the philosopher from Hanover associates with socinianism but first I would like now to oppose to Leibniz's construction of *fatum mahometanum* the way in which the question of fate is posed by the Muslim thinkers themselves, first in Islamic theology, then by the modern Indian philosopher Muhammad Iqbal.

## 2. The Question of Fatalism in Islamic Thought

In fact, Leibniz's example of the Turks not abandoning places infected with plague is not without some basis in the Islamic tradition. The philosopher from Hanover probably ignored when giving that illustration that he was actually repeating a truncated oral narrative which is presented in different versions among which the most consistent is the following account of what happened once when the second caliph of Islam, Umar, was on an expedition in Syria: 'On hearing that plague was raging in a particular town of Syria, Umar decided not to visit that place. In reply to Abu Ubaydah ibn Al-Jarrah, who had objected to his fleeing from a divinely ordained destiny, he said that Abd Al-Rahman ibn Awf had told him that the Holy Prophet had said; "If plague breaks out in a place, do not enter it, if you are not already inside it, but if you are, do not leave it".'

So, far from simply being a manifestation of the supposedly fatalistic Islamic attitude in life, the plague example is part of a discussion, in Islam, of the compatibility between God's pre-establishment and foreknowledge of everything and human free agency.<sup>3</sup> What is said in this particular instance is that patience in the face of God's Providence should mean staying in a place where plague breaks out probably in order not to spread out the epidemic any further, and of course not going there if warned in time. Here is a case when the force of stereotype (Islamic fanaticism stemming from its inherent fatalism) becomes a philosophical notion. So what do Muslim philosophers themselves say about universal necessity and fate?

It should be noted first that the question of predestination is the one which primarily gave birth to theological thought in Islam known as 'the science of the divine word' (علم الكلام or simply الكلام). To the question 'are we free to act the way we do?' the Quran would provide different answers. Verses could be found that seem to go in both directions, of free will and of determinism. So the case has to be decided by reflection. The school of theology known as the *mutazilites* was famously born out of the rationalist view that God's Justice could only make sense if human beings have absolute free will. They were opposed by the partisans of predestination who emphasized God's omnipotence and omniscience. This question of the true meaning of God's decree and sentence has been ceaselessly debated before it simply amounted, at a period of decadence in Islamic thought, to the popular notion of مكتوب 'what is [already] written' which conveyed resignation and irresponsibility.

In our times the philosopher who has renewed the question and brought to it a new light is the Indian philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938).

And the reason why I say that Muhammad Iqbal not only answered Leibniz's views about the so-called *fatum mahometanum* but also indicated an exit out of the 'labyrinth' is that he showed that the only way one could escape the alternative God's omniscience-omnipotence vs. free agency is through the understanding of the true nature of time, expressed, according to him in Koranic cosmology: time as Bergsonian duration. In *the Reconstruction of the Religious Thought of Islam* he writes: 'The truth is that the whole theological controversy relating to predestination is due to pure speculation with no eye on the spontaneity of life, which is a fact of actual experience' (Iqbal, 1986: 63.)

This reference to 'the spontaneity of life' is characteristic of Iqbal's philosophy as it has been profoundly influenced by Henri Bergson's thought of 'élan vital' (push of life), the vitalism and evolutionary thinking of the French philosopher. Of course that influence was possible because Iqbal found that such evolutionary thinking was present in Islamic tradition, in particular in the thought of Sufi poet Jalâl ud-Dîn Rûmî as expressed in the following verses from his *Mathnavî*:

First man appeared in the class of inorganic things  
Next he passed therefrom into that of plants.  
For years he lived as one of the plants,  
Remembering naught of his inorganic state so different;  
And when he passed from the vegetative to the animal state  
He had no remembrance of his state as a plant,  
Except the inclination he felt to the world of plants,  
Especially at the time of spring and sweet flowers.  
Like the inclination of infants towards their mothers,  
Which knows not the cause of their inclination to the breast . . .  
Again the great Creator, as you know,  
Drew man out of the animal into the human state.  
Thus man passed from one order of nature to another,  
Till he became wise and knowing and strong as he is now.  
Of his first souls he has now no remembrance.  
And he will be again changed from his present soul.

(Quoted in Iqbal, 1986: 97).

Ultimately, fatalism rests on a cosmology that considers the world to be a closed universe in which the future is determined as it is, so to say, stocked and ready to go according to a fixed and necessary order of events which appears to have bound God's activity itself. Such a universe, that of Descartes and Newton, is described by Iqbal (1986: 183) as 'a collection of finite things, [which] presents itself as a kind of island situated in a pure vacuity to which time, regarded as a series of mutually exclusive moments, is nothing and does nothing'. Why is time in that universe said to be 'nothing' and to do 'nothing'? To answer that question is precisely to understand the revolution that Henri Bergson (1859–1941) has accomplished in the history of Western philosophy. When he published, in 1889, what was his doctoral dissertation under the title *Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* Bergson was

fully conscious that he was breaking not only with Cartesianism but also with the entire orientation of philosophy since it endorsed the thought of a radical opposition between the path of being and the path of becoming. That which is always becoming, which is continuously in the process of being otherwise, cannot be an object of thought since to think is to fix, to immobilize. Therefore motion and time themselves will be understood under some sort of immobility. That is indeed what Aristotle's famous definition of time as measure does, when it is conceived as 'the number of motion in respect of before and after'. (*Physics*: 219b) We fix 'before' at instant and position  $t_n$ , 'after' at instant and position  $t_{n+1}$  and, consequently, what we call *motion* is reduced to the *trajectory* that goes from  $t_n$  to  $t_{n+1}$  while *time* is the interval separating these two immobile points. What we have done is think motion as a composition of immobilities and reduced time to space. As Bergson (1910: 115) writes about that thinking

[it] cannot deal with time and motion except on condition of first eliminating the essential and qualitative element – of time, duration, and motion, mobility. We may easily convince ourselves of this by examining the part played in astronomy and mechanics by considerations of time, motion, and velocity.

He also writes about such a spatialization of time, when it is reduced to being an 'interval':

Science may consider rearrangements that come closer and closer to each other; it may thus increase the number of moments that it isolates, but it always isolates moments. As to what happens in the interval between the moments, science is no more concerned with that than are our common intelligence, our senses and our language: it does not bear on the interval, but only on the extremities. So the cinematographical method forces itself upon our science, as it did already on that of the Ancients.' (Bergson, 1944: 358). Since the times of the Ancients, western philosophy has pursued the path of cinematography when it comes to motion and time, which corresponded to the language of our analytical intelligence. Such a path is what allowed the Eleatic paradoxes about a movement conceived as a composition of moments (the other Leibnizian labyrinth, that of the composition of the continuous) to continue to haunt the thought of time and motion. The Bergsonian break was to bring back becoming and to embrace *flux* and *change* rather than separate the positions of that which changes. While *analytical intelligence* understands serial, cinematic time, we grasp by *intuition* its dynamic nature as duration.

Now we understand what Iqbal meant: the time that is nothing and does nothing is the serial time that merely is the distance separating different events on a trajectory that connects the present to the past and could as well be prolonged into the future. That time, writes Iqbal (1986: 185) is 'deprived of its living historical character, and is reduced to a mere representation of space'. It is the time of mechanics and astronomy, as Bergson says; it is also the time of astrology and foresight: if time is a trajectory, a geometrical line or a frame that can always be continued or expanded, there is a possible point of view, that of God or of an astrologer, for which future events can be foreknown. More precisely, there is in fact no *event*, strictly speaking, the future like the past stretching out in a vision that could embrace everything, that

of the intelligence that Laplace has spoken of, that knows how to see the end in the beginning. Then there is the time that we intuit as *duration*, that we try to express through metaphors in a language shaped by and for serial time. That time is not a frame within which events are disposed *partes extra partes*. Rather the events are the unfolding of duration, or, to use a Bergsonian metaphor, its snowballing with itself. And what that means is that there is then no future to be foreseen or foreknown. As Iqbal (2006: 159) writes:

Most our theologians thought the doctrine of human freedom could not be reconciled with the fore-knowledge of God. They looked upon belief in freedom as veiled atheism. So thought Mahmud Shabistari. But the author of *The Secret Rose Garden* (گلشن راز) made the tacit assumption of an absolute and independent Time like Newton. He did not see that if his view of Time were true, then the freedom of God would also disappear. Shabistari's argument will not hold to-day; for God can be conceived as creating Time from moment to moment. If the Universe is an open one, there is no pre-existing future, and God does not know the future because there is nothing to know.

In order to understand the true cosmology of the Quran, Iqbal claims, one has to understand it in terms of Bergson's duration and emerging cosmology of 'creative evolution'.<sup>4</sup> Only then will certain of its verses be understood, those expressing the notion that God's creation is not the finished product of one single fiat but a work of continuous existentiatio. For example: 'He adds to His creation what He wills.' (Quran, Surah xxv: 1) or 'Say –go to the earth and see how God hath brought forth all creation: Hereafter will He give it another birth' (Surah xxix: 19); or, again: 'Everyday doth some new work employ Him' (Surah lv: 29) And, in addition to these quotes and others, Iqbal (1986: 14) often cites a prophetic saying: '[D]o not vilify time, for time is God.'

Now to the *fatum* deeply connected with the cinematographic conception of time, Iqbal gives the name *قسمة*, an Arabic word that means lot or share. It corresponds to the belief that every human being has her share in stock in the future which will be delivered according to a foreordained order of events. Such a conception, which is what Leibniz called the Turkish fashion, commands an attitude of passive resignation to an external divine will. For Iqbal, that is a perversion of the true meaning, expressed by the Arabic word *تقدير*, of the fatalism he characterizes as active. *قدر*, of which *تقدير* is a derivative, means power. It also means *destiny* and has to do not with serial but with 'pure' time:

Pure time [ . . . ] as revealed by a deeper analysis of our conscious experience is not a string of separate, reversible instants; it is an organic whole in which the past is not left behind, but is moving along with, and operating in, the present. And the future is given to it *not as lying before* (my emphasis), yet to be traversed; it is given only in the sense that it is present in its nature as an open possibility. It is time regarded as an organic whole that the Qur'an describes as *تقدير* or the destiny – a word that has been so much misunderstood both in and outside the world of Islam. (Iqbal, 1986: 40)<sup>5</sup>

We can then speak of *destiny* precisely in the sense in which one can say that one believes in one's destiny that is to say one's capacity to shape the course of events.

Active fatalism is the fatalism of people of action, Caesar declaring '*alea jacta est*' when crossing the Rubicon or Napoleon Bonaparte exclaiming 'I am a thing, not a person': he could see himself, from outside, as it were, as an instrument of the history he was making. Iqbal who recalls that saying by Napoleon also quotes Ali, the last of the four 'rightly guided' first caliphs of Islam, saying 'I am the speaking Quran' and Muawiya, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, proclaiming: 'I am destiny!'

In his poetry, the notion of active fatalism is expressed again and again. For example in the following verses from *Gabriel's Wings* (ghazal 21):

Your station, how can the astrologer know it?  
You are living clay, you do not depend on the stars.

Or, from the same collection of poems (ghazal 33):

Raise your ego to the point where before making your destiny, each time  
God first asks you, his creature: 'What do you think?'

### 3. Conclusion

For a brief conclusion, let me come back to the God of the Socinians who 'takes each day as it comes'. Leibniz denounces as contradictory a God who would be limited in his knowledge of future events and on that point he is right of course. The Socinians maintain, rightly, that a God who foreknows preordained events totally contradicts freedom, his own and his creatures'. Behind both statements there is the same Eleatic notion of a spatialized time. Leibniz is no stranger to vitalism. In fact evolutionary thinking is at the heart of his philosophy. But his thinking of time is connected to his mechanistic Cartesian outlook rather than his vitalist philosophy because he understands time by analogy with space. The association between space and time is never questioned. Time is not restituted to its dynamism and therein lies the problem that makes the question of fate an inescapable labyrinth. It takes the Bergsonian revolution to step out of it, that is out of serial time. And consequently, Iqbal adds, to understand what *fatum mahometanum* truly means.

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### Notes

1. In his response to the *Third Reply by Clarke*, on June 2, 1716, Leibniz writes that 'a mere will is a fiction not only contrary to God's perfection, but also chimerical, contradictory, incompatible with the definition of the will' and he indicates that he has 'refuted it enough in [his] *Theodicy*' (§ 2).
2. *Second Paper by Leibniz* § 9. Leibniz adds that the God of the 'Newtonians' he is arguing with would still foresee things going wrong but would not provide against them and would rather have 'to fix them as they occur'.
3. The version given in the collection of prophetic traditions compiled by Bukhari (known as the *Sahih* of Bukhari) shows clearly the nature of the debate: 'Narrated 'Abdullah bin 'Abbas: 'Umar bin Al-



Khattab departed for Sham and when he reached Sargh, the commanders of the (Muslim) army, Abu Ubaydah ibn Al-Jarrah and his companions met him and told him that an epidemic had broken out in Sham. 'Umar said, "Call for me the early emigrants." So 'Umar called them, consulted them and informed them that an epidemic had broken out in Sham. Those people differed in their opinions. Some of them said, "We have come out for a purpose and we do not think that it is proper to give it up," while others said (to 'Umar), "You have along with you other people and the companions of Allah's Apostle so do not advise that we take them to this epidemic." 'Umar said to them, "Leave me now." Then he said, "Call the Ansar for me." I called them and he consulted them and they followed the way of the emigrants and differed as they did. He then said to them, "Leave me now," and added, "Call for me the old people of Quraysh who emigrated in the year of the Conquest of Mecca." I called them and they gave a unanimous opinion saying, "We advise that you should return with the people and do not take them to that (place) of epidemic." So 'Umar made an announcement, "I will ride back to Medina in the morning, so you should do the same." Abu Ubaydah ibn Al-Jarrah said (to Umar), "Are you running away from what Allah had ordained?" Umar said, "Would that someone else had said such a thing, O Abu Ubaydah! Yes, we are running from what Allah had ordained to what Allah has ordained. Don't you agree that if you had camels that went down a valley having two places, one green and the other dry, you would graze them on the green one only if Allah had ordained that, and you would graze them on the dry one only if Allah had ordained that?" At that time Abdur-Rahman ibn Auf, who had been absent because of some job, came and said, "I have some knowledge about this. I have heard Allah's Apostle saying, 'If you hear about it (an outbreak of plague) in a land, do not go to it; but if plague breaks out in a country where you are staying, do not run away from it.'" Umar thanked Allah and returned to Medina.'

4. 'Bergson,' writes Iqbal (1986: 62), is 'the only thinker who has made a keen study of the phenomenon of duration in time.'
5. 'Reality is a free unpredictable, creative, vital impetus of the nature of volition which thought spatializes and views as a plurality of "things"' as Iqbal (1986: 41) summarizes Bergson's view.

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