

Research Article

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Almighty, Freedom, and Love: Toward an Islamic Open Theology

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Abstract: This article argues in favor of Open conception of divinity and theology in Islam. In Section 1, I explain the main textual difference between traditional transcendent conception of divinity and the open conception. Then, I will demonstrate the essential elements of this theology according to the various interpretations of the texts. I will then introduce a different meaning of God's power as freedom bestowment. Next, I will argue that open theology can be supported rationally through its capability to dissolve some philosophical concerns of theism. It will be concluded that since in the modern era, human beings have changed their position in the world consciously, this change in the position of the man-world state definitely affects our epistemic position toward God, which is our *theology*. Nowadays, after challenging the sociopolitical paternalistic hierarchy of the world, we become more ready to understand the immanence, nearness, and love of God instead of seeing Him as the almighty King who governs the world from an eternal and too transcendent position. In my view, Open theology could be a fruitful avenue for Islamic theology to pursue as it seeks to answer the emerging questions concerning Man–God relationship in our modern world.

Keywords: Islamic theology, open theism, omnipotence, love, freedom, Iqbal

1 Introduction: Two Conceptions of God

In the wake of the 22-year-old girl's death in morality police custody for allegedly breaching veiling rules for women, Iran has witnessed a protest against a conception of theology which has been dominant during the past several decades.¹ Embedded in the protest's slogan: "Woman, Life, Freedom," I think there is pressure for a reform in our theology according to which the new Iran can reestablish the Woman(Man)–God–World relation in order to rebuild an ethical free society. In this article, based on the demarcation between two conceptions of theology, namely, classical theism and open theology,² I shall try to illustrate how open theology

¹ For the news about this protest, see for example <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/01/women-life-liberty-iranian-civil-rights-protests-spread-worldwide>.

² Open theism or freewill theism is a modern theological movement against the dominance of classical theism and also is an alternative to process theology. Open theism and process theology share several ideas such as dynamic omniscience. However, the metaphysics are very different. Of course from historical point of view, we can see several theologians as early as Calcidius (fourth century) who believes in freedom of human beings and their moral responsibility and concerns that God's foreknowledge may be in conflict with human future free actions; but until modern time and contemporary attention to libertarian freewill of human agents the new theological doctrine as open theism has not been developed. In a modern world that the conception of human rights overturns human obedience to rules, and the morality bounds the religion, we need to reconstruct our classical conception of God in order to build a new relation with God. To see the best introduction to recent ideas about open theism, see Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*; See also Sanders, *The God Who Risks*; and also Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism*; and also Boyd, *God of the*

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can be interpreted as a suitable provider of background social norms which can regulate the Iranian struggle for justice and liberty.

It is well known that there are several different interpretations regarding the nature of God, His attributes and His existence to the extent that some mystics believe that there are as many different ways to understand and approach God as there are individuals. But in order to categorize this amalgam of views that prevail in the history of theistic religions, we can demarcate between two main sets of viewpoints, which we refer to as classical vs open theologies. Classical theology is supported traditionally by an understanding of God as infinitely sovereign who lives outside of time and space and independently of all His creatures. He is immutable, meaning that he never changes, and impassible, meaning that he is never affected by the changes of the material world. From too lofty a vantage point He has eternally foreknown all past and future, including actual and contingent events and facts. God as the most perfect possible being has created and realized the actual world as the best possible world. God is the ultimate master and the King of the world. As Rice explains,

In his infinite power, God brought the world into existence in order to fulfill his purposes and display his glory. Since his sovereign will is irresistible, whatever he dictates comes to pass and every event plays its role in his grand design. Nothing can thwart or hinder the accomplishment of his purposes. God's relation to the world is thus one of mastery and control. ... From his lofty vantage point, he apprehends the whole of created reality in one timeless perception: past, present and future alike appear before him. But though he fully knows and cares for the created world, he remains essentially unaffected by creaturely events and experiences. He is untouched by the disappointment, sorrow or suffering of his creatures.³

This classical view toward God is widely accepted in traditions of all monotheistic religions. In the Islamic world as well, the philosophers and exegetics try to answer the rising philosophical problems and to interpret the Sacred text and the Sunnah according to this theological viewpoint. The political order of the ancient world also supports this view, with kings of the time asserting their sovereignty as the *caliphs* of the sovereign God and calling themselves His shadow. The hierarchy of the social order from family relationships in nuclear families, to the relationship between lawmakers in an oppressive state, and the relation between ordinary people in the kingdom have been influenced by the theological views most highly developed by Jurisprudents and power-oriented clerics in the history of Islam. It is noteworthy that this hierarchy of social order finds exegetical and textual support as well. Many texts, in Abrahamic religions, of course, affirm the majesty and glory of God: "Who is he, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty – he is the King of glory" [Ps 24:10]; "I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple" [Is 6:1]; "God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see" [Tim 6:15-16]. God transcends all creaturely reality. He is unique and utterly incomparable: "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" [Ex 15:11]; "You shall have no other gods before me" [Ex 20:3]; "Who is God besides the Lord?" [Ps 18:31]; "You alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth" [Is 37:16]; "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me" [Is 46:9]. He is above all creatures and incomparable to them. The classical view also confirms the doctrine of divine immutability: "I the Lord do not change" [Mal 3:6]; "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" [Jas 1:17].

There are also several verses in the Qur'an that the proponents of this controlling view can rely on for support. "He is the Supreme above His creatures; and He is the Wise, the Aware" [Q 6:18]. "It is not for a believer, man or woman, when God and His Messenger have decreed a matter that they should have any option in their decision. And whoever disobeys God and His Messenger, he has indeed strayed in to a plain error" [Q 33: 36]. And your Lord creates whatsoever He wills and chooses, no choice have they (in any matter).

Possible. Swinburne also seems to have ideas very near to open theism in his books like *The Christian God*; and Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*. John Sanders, I think is the most activist of the open view. He has a very interesting website in which he gathers several articles and books about open theism including his own several writings: drjohnsanders.com. Open theism has serious opponents among eminent classical theists. To see the opponents' view about open theism, refer to *Philosophical Essays Against Open Theism*.

³ Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in: Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 11–2.

“Glorified is God, and exalted above all that they associate (as partners with Him)” [Q 28: 68]. “He to Whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and Who has begotten no son (children or offspring) and for Whom there is no partner in the dominion. He has created everything, and has measured it exactly according to its due measurements” [Q 25: 2].

All of these textual propositions can literally be seen as shaping a magnificent, glorified and prosperous almighty whose sovereign is the entire earth and heaven for whom there is no partner in the dominion. God is omnipotent and extremely powerful. From this point of view, the power of God is associated with and corresponds to His control over the world. Everything past or future, tiny or immense is in His control. The controlling conception of the almighty God introduces Him as the greatest King ever.

On the other hand, there are several verses in the Bible and in the Qur’an that support a different view, a more liberating one named the *open* view according to which God is open to the future decisions of free agents.⁴ According to open theology, the conception of divine *love* is the most central attribute of God upon which we ought to understand His nature and interpret His actions, words, and other attributes. In the open theological view, God does not control every event of the past and future but instead, because of the manifestation of His love through His power, He bestows freedom to all of His creatures to choose their path according to the degree of self-consciousness they partake. This change of centrality from God’s sovereignty to His love and mercy is crucial. Accordingly, divine *love* as beneficence toward all creatures in an agapeic form is the essential attribute of God based on which we ought to understand all of His other attributes including God’s power; Love is not something God happens to select, and it is the one divine activity that most fully and vividly discloses God’s inner reality. Love, therefore, is the very essence of divine nature. Love is what it means to be God. While in the classical conception of divine, God’s power and sovereignty are the essential and central attributes of God, the open conception instead emphasizes divine love as the central attribute.⁵ This change of focus and presumptive consideration is very important in understanding the divine–human relation and religious worldviews.

In the Islamic world, this conception of theology has been developed by Muhammad Iqbal.⁶ Although several commentators of his works label him as a proponent of process theology⁷ rather than open theology, I think we can fairly read him as a proponent of open theology as well. Iqbal’s theology despite his metaphysical affinity with Whitehead’s philosophy of organism is in a crucial way in contrast with process theological canonical doctrines. Iqbal supports an individualistic conception of God.⁸ Iqbal limits God’s foreknowledge in favor of His freedom.⁹ According to him, God limits Himself in order to make room for human beings to act freely.¹⁰ He says, “If history is regarded merely as a gradually revealed photo of a predetermined order of events, then there is no room in it for novelty and initiation.”¹¹ As Mir Sadri says, “According to Iqbal, God does

⁴ For a Persian language paper that illustrates the open theistic view, refer to Mir Sadri and Nasiri, “Barresi va Naqd-e Amouze Goshudegi,” (Studying and Assessing Openness View), Jostarhaye Falfafe-ye Din, (*Philosophy of Religion Essays Journal*), 2008.

⁵ Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*.

⁶ Shah, “Muhammad Iqbal.”

⁷ Process theology is based on the ideas expressed by process philosophy. Process theology flourished, primarily, as a Christian appropriation of Whiteheadian thought-system and ideas. Process theology applies the dynamic worldview of Whitehead’s philosophy of organism in interpreting and understanding of theism. For more details on process theology, see Viney, “Process Theism;” and Dombrowski, *A Platonic Philosophy of Religion*. For a recent contribution on Iqbal’s process theology and a very good overview of the relation between Islam and process theology, refer to Farhan Shah’s online essay “Islam and Process thought: some challenges and Possibilities,” accessible at: <https://ctr4process.org/article/islam-and-process-thought-some-challenges-and-possibilities/>, 2023.

⁸ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 51. In the interpretation of the Noor Ayah of the Quran, he says “No doubt, the opening sentence of the verse gives the impression of an escape from an individualistic conception of God. But when we follow the metaphor of light in the rest of the verse, it gives just the opposite impression” (p.51).

⁹ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 63. He criticized the traditional view of divine knowledge which leads to “a closed universe, a fixed futurity, a predetermined, unalterable order of specific events” (p.63). He argues “The future certainly pre-exists in the organic whole of God’s creative life, but it pre-exists as an open possibility, not as a fixed order of events with definite outlines.” (*Ibid*).

¹⁰ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 63.

¹¹ *Ibid*. Recently, some scholars pay attention to Muhammad Iqbal’s conception of divinity as Islamic process theology of Islamic open theology. Two state of the art works in this regard are Shah, “Muhammad Iqbal,” and his PhD dissertation titled “Muhammad

not have a future foreknowledge, not because he is limited by any outer factor(s) – as the process thinkers hold – but rather out of the rationale that the future is nothing but an ocean of possibilities, within and flowing from the divine reality, that are not yet actualities for God to have knowledge of them.”¹² So it seems that Iqbal is a thinker that in the project of developing Islamic Open Theology we ought to consider his thoughts seriously.

In this article, I shall argue in favor of the Open conception of divinity and theology. In the next section, I shall demonstrate the essential elements of this theology. Then I shall explain a different meaning of God’s power as freedom bestowment. Next, I will argue that open theology can be supported rationally by helping us to dissolve some philosophical concerns of theism. I shall conclude that in the modern era, human beings changed their position in the world consciously. This change in the position of the man-world state definitely affects our epistemic position toward God, which is our *theology*. It seems to me that Islamic theology has to follow the path toward being more *open* in order to answer the newly raised questions concerning (Wo)Man-God relation in the modern world.

2 Love and Mercy as the Essential Attributes of God

From the Open point of view, God’s revelation is His “self-revelation” through the personality and words of the prophets: God reveals Himself in the Bible and the Qur’an through the words articulated by the prophet and preserved by disciples as the text (Albeit there are several main differences between the nature of revelation in each of the Abrahamic books. The Quran from its first days of revelation was interpreted and expressed as direct words of God introduced to Prophet Muhammad, while the Bible contains different books written by different authors. However, I think that these different methodologies of explicating the revelation do not affect the common element among all revealed books in Abrahamic religions. All of them have been revealed by God who manifests Himself through the words, situations, narrations, and actions mentioned in the books.¹³) From the classical point of view, God’s revelation is understood as commands to be obeyed or sentences to be listened to, or orders that are declared, but based on the open view revelation tells us that God has manifested Himself in order to be known and beloved. As Karl Barth says, God is “He who, without having to do so, seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us.”¹⁴ God is not the center of infinite power who happens to be loving; He is loving above all else. Precisely, through love, we can know the divine attribute of omnipotence as caring as having sympathy and bestowing freedom to His creators. All creatures enjoy freedom according to their capacity to become free. Consider the material world. It has been theorized that the material world evolves according to indeterminate laws of physics. This indeterminacy exists on the most fundamental levels and can be interpreted as a sign of freedom in the material world. The randomness inherent in evolutionary processes is also a sign of freedom which the biological systems enjoy. Human beings are the result of billions of years of activity in the material world and biological evolution toward reaching self-consciousness and freedom. Of course, God the Almighty is the creator and designer of this freedom-oriented world. God as the most powerful bestows freedom to the entirety of His creatures based on their capacity to acquire consciousness and then freedom. This conception of power as freedom-bestowing is central to changing the social/political hierarchy of a world where people are oppressed by any sort of self-alienating system according to which the model of government and social order is copied from a theological order of sovereign divinity whose commands have to be obeyed without questioning. My aim in this article is to demonstrate that not only the open conception of divinity has some good support from the Bible as well as

Iqbal and the Openness of the Future. God, the Human Self and Eco-Theology in a Cosmos of Perpetual Becoming,” which recently (June 2023) defended in the Faculty of Theology, at University of Oslo.

¹² Mir Sadri, “Iqbal’s Process Worldview,” 128.

¹³ For a philosophical elaboration of the concept of revelation, refer to Swinburne, *Revelation*.

¹⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 275.

the Quran, but also we can redefine the role and the position of humanity in the world as responsive to God's announcement for love to the extent that every human being has the potency to be the caliph (successor) of God and in direct love-relationship with God through an I-Thou firm relation.

The essential conception of God in Christianity is definitely love. Eberhard Jüngel believes "God is love" [John 4:8] is the most influential expression of the Bible as Christian theology has always given it pride of place among the many descriptions of God.¹⁵ "Love" in this verse is a translation of "agape" which has the same root as "hobb" in Arabic and "אהבה" in Hebraic languages. Agape is a sort of love that is unlimited, immeasurable, incomparable, unconditional love toward all human and non-human beings. In contrast with Eros, as the love in Greek texts which is conditioned upon beauty, power or wealth of the object of love, *agape* in the bible is unconditional, a sort of rain of divine grace for all beings regardless of their faults, deficiencies or sins. On the other hand, God's anger is temporary: "In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love, I will have compassion on you" [Is 54:8]. But his love is permanent: "His anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime" [Ps 30:5]. This sort of divine permanent favor and agapeic love is a central conception that preserves and drives the open conception of God among mystical traditions in the Judo-Christian world and also for the Sufi mysticism in the Islamic world.¹⁶

Also, in the Qur'an, one can find several verses containing God's unlimited mercy and beneficence toward His creatures, especially human beings. Each Surah of the Quran begins with, "In the name of God the compassionate the merciful." "And ordain for us that which is good, in this life and in the Hereafter: for we have turned unto Thee." He said "with My punishment I visit whom I will; but My mercy extends to all things" [Q 7: 156]. "Those who sustain the Throne (of Allah) and those around it sing Glory and Praise to their Lord; believe in Him; and implore forgiveness for those who believe: 'Our Lord! Thy reach is over all things in Mercy, and Knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn in repentance, and follow Thy Path: and preserve them from the Penalty of the Blazing Fire'" [Q 40: 7]. In both of these verses, the Qur'an emphasizes God's through and global mercy that extends to everything. God introduces several names of Himself in the Quran such as forgiving, patient, guide, responsive to prayers, and near. Also in another verse, the Qur'an explains the purpose of sending a messenger to people so as to teach them wisdom and knowledge [Q 96: 1-4]. The prophet and the messenger of God are so lenient to people that they call him an "ear" who listens to the voice of all [Q 9: 61]. "And by the Mercy of God, you dealt with them gently. And had you been severe and harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about you; so pass over (their faults), and ask (God's) Forgiveness for them; and consult them in the affairs. Then when you have taken a decision, put your trust in God, certainly, God loves those who put their trust (in Him)" [Q 3: 159]. In this verse, also the Qur'an ascribes the messenger as a gentle, forgiving and noble man.

Now, we face the difficult question of how to interpret these two different attributes of God who loves and who wraths, who is merciful globally and who punishes people severely. Is God an authoritarian king or a freedom donator? Philosophers speak of God's "great making" properties. A God with compassion who forgives those who stray from the path and gives them enough freedom to choose their way and to build their future world is greater than the deity who tightly controls everything in order to achieve His own goals.

In the next section, I shall deal with the problem of how to evaluate these two distinct theologies, open vs classical theology both of which have textual supports.

¹⁵ Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 314.

¹⁶ We can find the same theme of centrality of divine love in interpreting His manifestation through creation of the world and through the existence (*wujud*) of whatever exists in Islamic mysticism and especially in Ibn Arabi's thoughts. In Islamic mysticism there is a famous hadith of the hidden treasure according to which God says that "I was a treasure that was not known, so I loved to be known, Hence, I created the creatures and I made Myself known to them, and thus, they came to Me." For a nice elaboration of this hadith in Ibn Arabi's writings, check Chittick, "The Divine Roots of Human Love."

3 God's Power as Freedom Bestowal

In this section, I shall argue from three different perspectives that in order to build a new social order free from oppressive and paternalistic hierarchies, in which the Muslim society can feel freedom and respect for human rights, we ought to prioritize and prefer the open theology rather than the classical one. But in order to reach a criterion for prioritizing between these two points of view, we ought to understand the nature of God's power and reinterpret the meaning of divine sovereignty and control. Almost all of the theists believe that God is the greatest and the most perfect possible being. The concept of power is associated with control. A most powerful being is one who has the most control over other people's lives and relations and actions. Most dictators try to dominate their own preferred lifestyle and thought in society and treat people as tools toward fulfilling their own desires, ambitions, and wills. This view about the nature of power penetrates the understanding of theologians regarding the nature of God's power. However, it should be noted that God's power is totally different from this sort of totalitarian conception. When we look closely at recent psychological studies, we find that the nature of dictatorship is not a sense of power but a need to accommodate one's weakness instead. Irvin Yalom in his famous novel, *The Schopenhauer Cure*, illustrated this point in a very nuanced manner.¹⁷ A dictator like Hitler is not a true symbol of power but rather embodies profound weakness when he exploits people's lives as mere instruments to further his own ambitions. This misunderstanding of the nature of real power in human beings may also affect our understanding of divine power. God is powerful not in the sense that we mistakenly see an oppressive dictator as powerful but truly as a nobleman who helps other people to live freely and flourish. The real power is, as Nietzsche finely explained, a force in the soul of the nobleman who has respect for the dignity and freedom of people.¹⁸ Surprisingly, Nietzsche's thoughts can help us to rebuild our Islamic theology. Power is associated with nobility and respect for freedom rather than control and dominance. The more powerful a person is, the more freedom she gives to other people in her territory to grow their own inner treasures. So, God's omnipotence is not like the superficial power of a sovereign king but rather resembles the compassionate influence of a noble teacher who guides and inspires her students to grow and flourish, winning their hearts through love and respect. So, the relation of the powerful God with his creature is a love relation, and the omnipotent is the most freedom bestower, a true Lover. John Sanders says:

Authoritatives believe that fear of punishment is necessary so that people follow the rules. Fear maintains order in society. Nurturers, on the other hand, believe that love empowers others to do what is right. 1 John says "God is love" (4:16) and that fear-based religion is contrary to who God is. John writes: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (4:18). In short, John says that Authoritative religion does not imitate the God of Jesus.¹⁹

¹⁷ Yalom, *The Schopenhauer Cure*.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of the Morals*.

¹⁹ Sanders, *Embracing Prodigals*, ch.4. In this book Sanders appeal to the story of a prodigal son whose father forgave him but his brother not. He distinguishes between three sorts of theologies: authoritative, permissive and nurturing. Nurturing God is forgiving, gracious, loving, accepting, not controlling, helping, caring, compassionate, generous, merciful, and tolerant. Authoritative God is critical, punishing, judging, stern, wrathful, damning, disapproving, controlling, rigid, strict, and unforgiving. Permissive God does not care about the goodness or badness of the people, He forgives all without reason or explanation, but the nurturing God care about the people and accepts the repentance of the sinners who come back to the right way and request for help in order to help them for *transformation* from immoral and bad life to good one. Sanders concludes from this story that Jesus prefers neither authoritative nor permissive reaction to the sinners but he just prioritizes forgiveness and family relationship over rule keeping (*ibid.* Introduction). Sanders provides several psychological and social sciences researches that support the claim that how "different types of Gods are going to produce different kinds of people." From these empirical researches he concludes that "A number of positive benefits of belief in a Benevolent God are the following. People exhibit higher degrees of prosocial behavior such as volunteering to help others. They are more cooperative, agreeable, and have better social relationships. They show greater concern for distributive justice – the goods and services of a community should benefit everyone in society. They are more willing to help people outside their tribe – those who are religiously or ethnically different from themselves. Those who believe that God loves them have significantly higher levels of conviction that their life has meaning and purpose. Those who feel secure in God's love have greater life satisfaction and have less loneliness. In addition, they are more humble and less dogmatic. Those with a Nurturing God have more positive views

Proponents of the authoritative conception of God according to the psychological and social scientific research which Sanders appealed are highly suspicious of others, more aggressive about their own religious ideas, less concerned with outsiders, supporters of a master–slave relation between believers and non-believers, and less tolerant to different views.²⁰ Unfortunately, we can see that this type of view about God is prevalent among various groups within the Muslim community, including common Muslims, politicians, and even scholars. In the Islamic world immediately after the death of the prophet, we see the struggle for power between Muslim different tribes and groups. The territory of the Islamic system dominated very soon from North Africa to Iran and to the boundary of China and the Roman Empire. The governance of such a great state in the name of Islam required enough support from Islamic theology. I think that the authoritative (classical) conception of God as a great king allowed the Islamic dynasties of Umayyad and Abbasid to rule their dictatorship form of governance in the name of Islam for hundred years. One might wonder why we do not refer to ancient Muslim theologians in support of an open view of God. The reason it seems to me that the dictatorship model of governance in the Islamic world supports the form of authoritative theology and except for some Mystics and Sufis who lived outside of and isolated from the system of power, most theologians and philosophers consciously or unconsciously graduated in the atmosphere of cooperation between tyranny and theology. Only in recent years, we can hear some different voices demanding change in our classical authoritative theology.²¹

As mentioned, one of the most influential philosophers and intellectuals in the contemporary Islamic world who is concerned with the relationship between classical theology and its influence on the situation of modern Muslim societies is Muhammad Iqbal. Iqbal in his seminal book titled *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* demonstrates his concern regarding the inferior position of the Islamic world in relation to the Western world as a result of forgetfulness of our Selfhood (*Khudi*) and our conscious understanding of our very situation in the world. But to come to this self-consciousness Islamic world requires changing its view toward God, man, and the world. According to Iqbal, our traditional Hellenistic conception of God who is immutable, impassible, timeless, impersonal, and exists completely out of the world and looks at our natural world from an eternal and aloof point of view, is problematic. This view subsequently reaches “the notion of a transcendent God, prior to the universe, and operating upon it from without.”²² Iqbal argues that our theology shapes the normative structure of our society to the extent that even our understanding of ourselves depends on our theological point of view.²³ As Mir Sadri explains:

During his intellectual endeavors in order to find the roots of the problem – of stagnation and backwardness – in the Islamic world, Iqbal found the theological conception of God – his nature and his relation to man and to the world – as the major and serious impediment to the Islamic speculative and, as a result, social progress. As Iqbal rightly detected, the static God of the traditional Islamic thought with a substance-based world of matter, established through a once-created and determined act of creation leaves no room for action and dynamism, in the world or for human persons.²⁴

Iqbal thinks that when our understanding of divinity has been changed then we can truly understand our role as human beings and His successors in the world. Our prayers and actions receive new meaning as the effective cause in the world which change the history of mankind and the path through which we pass on.²⁵

of significant others in their lives and have more secure and trusting attachments to family and teachers. In terms of mental health, those with a Benevolent God have higher self-esteem along with significantly less depression, general anxiety, and obsessive-compulsion. Those who collaborate with God to solve problems show greater sense of personal control in their lives. They have positive coping strategies for traumatic life events. Believers in a forgiving God are more willing to forgive people unconditionally without requiring acts of contrition.” (*ibid.*)

²⁰ Sanders, *Embracing Prodigals*, ch.9.

²¹ For historical evidence of this view, refer to Thaqaḥī, *Al-Ghārāt*. See also Abdul Maḥsūd, *Al-Seghāfah*. For further elaboration of some related historical points regarding the authoritative conception of Islam and its support among Muslim theologians, Pakravan, *Makhfi dar Tarikh [Hidden in the History]*.

²² Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 88.

²³ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁴ Mir Sadri, “Iqbal’s Process Worldview,” 120.

²⁵ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 73.

There is a central concept in Shiism that differentiates Shia theology from Sunni theology, which is unfortunately highly misunderstood even by Shia theologians and clerics. The doctrine of *walayah* that misunderstood mainly by some Shia exegetics as the doctrine about the mundane government. As I understand this concept which seems to be the central pillar of Shia Islam it refers not to a mode of government but to the power of the Imam to guide people through influencing their hearts and to show them the true way toward Truth. God, the prophet, and *imams* are *wali* not in the sense of a controller or governor but they are *wali* as lovers who help people to find their way freely and hearted-fully and in a kindly manner. *Wali* is our helper who has sympathy and empathy with us during our suffering. *Wali* heals our pains, listens to our prayers, and asks God to forgive us and accept our imploration. He helps us, not forces upon us. The meaning of *walayah* as Allameh Tabataba'ii explains:

Some of the exegetics of the Qur'an take the concept of *walayah* in the famous verse that mentioned Abraham's degree of *imamah* and *walayah* ('And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands, which he fulfilled; He said: "I will make thee an Imam to the nations.'" [Q 2:124]) as the caliphate or successorship, or king, or governor, or as political authority but none of these conceptions is the true interpretation of the verse since *imamah* and *walayah* points to the state of the man to the extent that people themselves want to follow him and his actions and accept his thoughts freely, otherwise it would be meaningless for a prophet like Abraham whose stance is so high to order people to follow him. People knew his high stance and when he reached the stance of *walayah* and *imamah* after his prophet-hood this new position means something more than a command to people to follow Abraham. Caliphate or successorship is a sort of beneficiary and this conception is far from the concept of *walayah* that is God's bestowment. But *imamah* or *walayah* does not mean "bossing" in this-worldly political matters or even religious matters that require obligatory subsuming. Accordingly, this phrase of the Qur'an that "I will make thee an Imam to the nations", is referring to an important position which Abraham has been appointed to by divine mercy. Here there is a point that requires serious attention. In the Qur'an whenever we see the word "imam" the notion of "guidance" is proceeding. For example, 'We made righteous men of every one (of them). And We made them leaders, guiding (men) by Our Command, and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers, and to practice regular charity; and they constantly served Us (and Us only)' [Q 21: 72-73] or, 'And We appointed, from among them, Leaders, giving guidance under Our command, so long as they persevered with patience and continued to have faith in Our Signs' [Q 32:24]. In both of these verses the description of imam associated with a guidance that constrained by God's command. It demonstrates that the guidance that undertaken by Imams is not a matter of defining the rules of *Shari'ah* or normal guidance but it is a guidance that firmly related to the concept of divine command referred to the command of creation: 'Verily, when He intends a thing, His command is "Be" and it is!' [Q 36:82]). So the guidance undertaken by Imams is a sort of guidance that metaphysically and existentially relates people's heart to their creator and Lord, it is the open guidance while the prophets' guidance is exoteric, they relate people with God through the rules of *Shari'ah*.²⁶

Allameh Tabataba'ii's view shows that we are totally mistaken if we think that the prophet and Imams are pursuing to establish a government in this world. The prophet pursues primarily to establish a government to remedy our hearts not to oppressively govern our mundane lives.²⁷ Our decisions for actions are motivated by our intentions which are ultimately influenced by our emotions. So by guiding our hearts, the *walis* may guide us to construct our lives here and hereafter according to the freely chosen laws which we ourselves are confirmed as the lawmakers. They teach us how to be a moral person, a free and responsible agent, who autonomously decides to act in accordance with and for the sake of the universal good of humanity. Instead of being the controller and oppressive ruler the *wali* in true Shia theology is a guide towards self-constitution and a teacher of freedom. Any misunderstanding of Shia main doctrine might lead some scholars to interpret the character of the prophet as an authoritarian,²⁸ while when we reform our theology and accept an open point of view we correct our understanding of God's power as a lover and then His prophet as the mercy toward all creatures. One can argue that this way of leading is more perfect than controlling others. God is the more perfect being who empowers and encourages others to follow the straight path, rather than a being who forces them to follow. Hence, successors who lead this way are superior to authoritarian rulers.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the follower of Allameh Tabataba'ii and renowned Shia scholar, confirms the same idea about the concept of *walayah*:

²⁶ Tabataba'ii, *Almizan*, [in Persian], 411. (English translation is mine).

²⁷ Kadivar, *Human Rights and Reformist Islam*.

²⁸ See for example Soroush, *Din va Ghodrat*, (in Persian), available at <http://www.zeitoons.com/83402> (date of access: 03.05.2021).

Actually, *walayah* in this context, which should not in the technical language of Islamic gnosis be considered identical to *walayah* in the ordinary sense having to do with the state of wall or saint, means the presence of this inner dimension within Islam which the Prophet inaugurated along with a new *Shari'ah* and which will continue to the end of time. Thanks to its presence, man is able to renew himself spiritually and gain contact with the Divine although a new revelation is no longer possible. It is due to this esoteric dimension of Islam and the grace or *barakah* contained in the organizations which are its preservers and propagators that the spiritual force of the original revelation has been renewed over the ages and the possibility of a spiritual life leading to the state of sainthood, that purifies human society and rejuvenates religious forces, has been preserved.²⁹

The role of the prophet as declared in the Qur'an is informing, mentoring, and helping people to find their true way toward flourishing, teach wisdom, and purify and sanctify them [Q 62:2]. To accomplish this crucial role, the prophet went toward freeing people from being hostages of mundane oppressions and vain inclinations. He bestows freedom upon us. But nowadays Islam has been diseased by Islamic foundationalism and totalitarianism which give support from some Islamic authorities. Islamic intellectuals try to demonstrate that Islam is a religion of mercy and it respects human rights not as a matter of chance but in its nature, according to the true understanding of the Qur'an and the prophet's Sunnah. Mustafa Ruzgar, following Iqbal argues that a Muslim intellectual's main mission nowadays is to liberate humanity from the clutches of both fundamentalist tradition and individualistic modernity, and from the superstitious mysticism of the East and the mundane reason of the West.³⁰ According to him, the sensationalistic, materialistic, and atheistic threads of modern science created irreconcilable dichotomies such as natural/supernatural, mundane/sacred, matter/mind, and science/religion that Iqbal tries to reconcile them and suggests that the Qur'anic conception of the universe does provide a better alternative. Following this line of thought, I think this intellectualist libertarian conception of Islam is preferable as the God of Islam introduced Himself essentially and primarily as the most merciful, the most beneficent. In the next section, I shall demonstrate how the open conception of Islam can help us to solve some difficult philosophical and theological problems.

4 Some Philosophical Reflections in Favor of Open Conception of Divinity

There are two philosophical problems that are always interwoven with the classical conception of theism: the problem of evil and the problem of libertarian free will.

4.1 The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil concerns questions like these: If God has always known all the destination of humankind and their suffering from an eternal point of view before their creation and has predetermined the actual world according to His perfect design plan, why has He allowed this amount of suffering which almost all human beings have endured during their lives in this world? Why has He created a man which He has eternally known that he will go to hell? Why has He actualized this world in which I suffer so horrific, among so many different possible worlds in which I do not suffer so much?

These types of questions are familiar to all the adherences of theistic religions. It seems that the problem of evil and suffering which underlies these questions cannot be separated from the transcendent conception of theism. Since according to this theology God foreknows from an eternal point of view, timelessly, all the facts

²⁹ Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 79.

³⁰ Ruzgar, "Islam and Process Theology," 605.

and events of the actual world and also, He is so perfect with enough power to actualize another possible world free from horrendous and gratuitous evils.

The main classical and canonical response to the problem of evil is to deny the real existence of evil in the world which has been created by the perfect God. Almost all main pictures in the Islamic and Christian world of theology and philosophy in the pre-modern era accept this type of answer to the problem albeit with some minor qualifications. Avicenna, Augustine, Aquinas, and Mulla Sadra are among the theologians and philosophers who accept the nothingness of evil thesis.

Open view confirms the famous Hadith that says that “God has created the world and through which manifests Himself in order to be known.”³¹ God wants to be involved in and related to the creatures to the extent that they freely come to know Him and worship Him. According to this view, God is omnipotent, and the sovereign is the lover and the freedom bestower. God is immanent in the world and is near us and sees His face through our consciousness of the world. We redemptively answer God’s love toward us and Himself. This crucial role for humanity in this world cannot be well understood until the modern era in which human rights and interests become the central concern of our attention. There were some mystics in a pre-modern era in Sufi tradition such as Mawlana Rumi or Faridudin Araqi who alluded to this conception of God and the essential redemptive role of humanity; however, nowadays, after challenging the sociopolitical paternalistic hierarchy of the world, we become more ready to understand the immanence, nearness and love of God instead of seeing Him as the greatest king and ruler. Because of this dramatic change in our social/political/theological point of view, I think our understanding of our position in the world and our relation to God nowadays have aroused much controversy surrounding the typical and traditionally accepted answers to philosophical questions.

Iqbal also pays attention to the importance of this dramatic change in our view toward the role and importance of human beings in the manifestation of God in the world. In his poems and his seminal book, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thoughts in Islam*, he introduces a form of open theist conception of God. Of course, he declared himself not as a theologian but rather as a reformist Islamic intellectual, nevertheless, one can gather from his different writings a coherent reformist theological account very near to the idea that I am defending in this article.³² Iqbal thinks that God risks by making free creatures as human beings and the world is the realm in which God demonstrates His mercy by making us free to choose our way of life.

Thus we see that the Quranic legend of the Fall has nothing to do with the first appearance of man on this planet. Its purpose is rather to indicate man’s rise from a primitive state of instinctive appetite to the conscious possession of a free self, capable of doubt and disobedience. The Fall does not mean any moral depravity; it is man’s transition from simple consciousness to the first flash of self-consciousness, a kind of waking from the dream of nature with a throb of personal causality in one’s own being. Nor does the Qur’an regard the earth as a torture-hall where an elementally wicked humanity is imprisoned for an original act of sin. Man’s first act of disobedience was also his first act of free choice; and that is why, according to the Qur’anic narration, Adam’s first transgression was forgiven. Now goodness is not a matter of compulsion; it is the self’s free surrender to the moral ideal and arises out of a willing co-operation of free egos. A being whose movements are wholly determined like a machine cannot produce goodness. Freedom is thus a condition of goodness. But to permit the emergence of a finite ego who has the power to choose, after considering the relative values of several courses of action open to him, is really to take a great risk; for the freedom to choose good involves also the freedom to choose what is the opposite of good. That God has taken this risk shows His immense faith in man; it is for man now to justify this faith.³³

Iqbal thinks that it is our duty to respond rightly to God’s trust in us. Through our suffering which is the result of our individuality in the natural world God manifests His marvelous face in different beauties in different forms: “to live is to possess a definite outline, a concrete individuality. It is in the concrete individuality, manifested in the countless varieties of living forms that the Ultimate Ego reveals the infinite wealth of His Being.”³⁴

³¹ The Hadith is called “the Hidden Treasure” Hadith Qudsi, in which God introduces Himself as “I was a Treasure unknown then I desired to be known so I created a creation to which I made Myself known; then they knew Me.” William Chittick, *Sufism*, Chap. 6.

³² See Mir Sadri, *Farasooye shar Fararoye ranj* (transcending of the evil and outreaching of the suffering), Qum: Taha Publishing, 2022 (written in Persian). She investigates the thoughts of Iqbal and tries to deduce a coherent theology from his writings.

³³ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 68.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

My reading of Iqbal in accordance with the open conception of theology regards the evils and sufferings as real entities of the world and instead of denying their existence try to ascribe them to God's love in a form of freedom bestowment. Moral evils have been actualized by human beings and perhaps other beings who have the capability to act freely. They freely choose to act immorally and disturb other persons as the immediate or mediate consequence of their actions. God is not responsible for this sort of evil when His knowledge is open to the future of the world in which free agents have been created by Himself.³⁵ Natural evils and the non-intended consequences of free agents' actions also are not the points one can use against God's goodness in any trial.³⁶ The world has been designed so that free agents can be actualized in this world and the logical consequence of this is that the world has to be governed by constant and predictable rules and laws. If the world was fully chaotic then there would be no freedom possible since one cannot decide what to choose and to actualize her decision. There is no rule according to it she can choose to act or to acquire knowledge. The whole human attempt toward grasping scientific empirical knowledge of the material world depends on the presumption that the world is governed by graspable, testable and constant natural laws.³⁷ If the rules govern the world, then evils are inevitable consequences of the natural world. When you put your hand in fire it will be burnt. In addition to that double effect of good actions also may be a bad consequence. For example, you may want to save the children who are playing in front of the train and choose to change the way of the train but the mediate consequence of your good action is a bad one that a repair man in the beside way is killed. Bad consequences of some actions or double-effect problems like the famous trolley case are inevitable consequences of the world governed by rules. So, in the case of natural evils as well as the bad consequences of good, actions again God is not responsible.

However, it is noteworthy that God is not so insensitive that could not sense our pains and sufferings; rather, God is omniscient, He knows every truth, and what is more real and near to truth than our pains and suffering in this world. But to know a pain is nothing other than being in pain. Thus, God suffers with us since He knows our pains. Since He is omniscient, He suffers as we suffer. The insistence of religion on prayer reaches its full meaning only when we see God as not insensitive, and as one who responds to our broken hearts. As Pinnock says, "God risked suffering when he opened himself up to the world, when he made it possible for the creature to have an impact on him. God risked suffering when he decided to love and be loved by the creature. A lover's existence is inescapably affected by the other, especially when the loved one acts in ways that grieve and disappoint. ...Obviously God feels the pain of broken relationships."³⁸ His response to suffering is His great and merciful sympathy and compassionate empathy. Evils are the points in which and through which God manifests His merciful sympathy with us, and with other sentient beings who suffer including animals. This view can provide a basis for human rights and also animal rights. To deserve their rights is to deserve the right of God upon us. We as Muslims ought to care about the pains and suffering of other human beings since these pains are not an easy and ignorable part of an unreal world. They are the realities that extend through God to infinity. The suffering of human beings then is infinitely important.

35 It is noteworthy that open theists affirm what is called in analytic philosophy of religion the "freewill Defense." Freewill defense has been developed mainly by Alvin Plantinga and then Peter van Inwagen in response to the logical argument from evil. For complete explanation of the free will defense, van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*.

36 Hasker is one of the prominent philosophers of religion who rigorously defend open theism. Regarding his idea about the problem of evil, see his *The Triumph of God Over Evil*. See also his Hasker, "The Problem of Evil in Process Theism and Classical Free Will Theism," 194–208.

37 For elaboration of this point, refer to Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, Chapter on the problem of evil.

38 Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in Pinnock et al. (eds.) *The Openness of God*, 119.

4.2 The Problem of Libertarian Freewill

The problem of libertarian free will is another interwoven philosophical question with the transcendent conception of theism. The problem concerns questions like these: Does God foreknow our free actions? Is His foreknowledge compatible with our freedom to choose otherwise? Despite His foreknowledge are we *able* to act otherwise or we just are *capable* of doing otherwise? Or perhaps we have neither ability nor capability to act otherwise? Is fatalism true? If there would be no freedom, then what is our role in this world other than being the puppet of God's plan?

To understand our special role in the world we first ought to illustrate our conception of humanity. But our conception of ourselves as rational and responsible beings is based on ascription to ourselves the libertarian free will, in a sense that we can decide to do an action totally free from any predetermining external or internal cause or character or command.³⁹ We are free in a libertarian sense so we are autonomous agents who can understand the universal rules of morality and put ourselves under such laws which each of us ought to legislate for ourselves through free and rational reasoning. The source of moral responsibility then is libertarian free will. Perhaps for Avicenna, and his followers, there is no problem in the denial of the libertarian free will of human persons in favor of saving the divine sovereignty. For me, however, libertarian free will is an essential prerequisite of the love relationship expressed by the I–Thou and I–God relation, and this is what makes our world meaningful, beautiful, and alive.

The question concerning human free will in a predetermined predestined world designed by God deserves a book-like space to be discussed and elaborated on as it is one the most debated questions in the history of philosophy in Western religions world. Nonetheless, I briefly demonstrate the open theology position regarding this concern here in order to demarcate its viewpoint from the mainstream traditions supported by transcendent theological viewpoints. Briefly speaking, according to open theology, God freely chooses to open Himself through His creatures' free decisions in the future of the world. So, He risks by creating the free agents and creatures, since they can choose to act not according to God's commands and to act awry and sinfully. We believe that this world in which God is open to the future of the world to the extent that the world depends on free agents' free actions, and so risks about His plan, is a better world than the predetermined world which God eternally knows every event happened and actions done in the future. The traditional view takes God's openness to the future of the world as a sign of His imperfection in knowledge and sovereignty. So according to that view, God has full foreknowledge of any event and action and controls the world nuancedly. But which conception of God is more perfect: The One who foreknows everything, and the One who risks and open Himself about the decision of free creatures. I think the latter conception denotes a more perfect being since God in this conception is more powerful in the sense of freedom-bestowing and can have knowledge of real suffering and senses of the world not from a lofty point of eternity out of time but from the here-and-now point of view near us. So, I think God in open conception is more perfect than the traditional view. In addition to that if knowing in advance the future decisions of free agents is impossible, then there would be no problem if God does not actualize the impossibility in the possible world in which we live.

In addition to this support from God's perfectness, libertarian free will is a prerequisite for a love relationship. If God as Love creates the world to become His lover the world ought to reach self-consciousness and freedom to choose love relationship with God. So, God risks by creation of a freedom-seeking and love-tracking world. To be wit, He risks for love, and this risk deserves risking.

³⁹ Please note that only some human actions are free in this sense. Of course, it is not the case that every human action is done with libertarian freedom. Many of our actions are done out of desires of inclinations. But, the point is that we have the capacity to be free and to act freely in a libertarian sense of free will.

5 Conclusion

In a teleological process from a billion years ago (or even from eternity), our world has reached the point in which now and here we are reflecting on the human–God relationship. It seems that our world is developing toward increasing self-consciousness through a freely chosen way of opening itself: the process of becoming. This process of becoming can be seen as God’s manifestation of Himself as the Free Being through the creation to manifest His freedom and His mercy toward His creatures. The process of manifestation of freedom, or in a better word the manifestation of self-love has been traditionally misunderstood as a single moment of existential relation between an eternal subject who creates, sustains and controls the world. We instead of seeing the world as the manifestation of God that endures in history, see it separate from God as a material entity which cannot be in touch with the divine realm. This separation and demarcation between mundane and spiritual, between material and abstract, between immutable and mutable world, between sacred and secular... are the source of misunderstanding the relation between human and God and especially our misunderstanding of the nature of God. Human being in the modern era, in contrast with many interpretations that accuse her as secular and free from divinity or demystified subject, is as I understand her, the nearest form of humanity to God since she experiences freedom and seeks for her special role in the world. This freedom-seeking and life-seeking process which is mainly announced by women in their motto “woman, life, freedom,” I think is a Love-seeking or in a better world God-seeking process since humanity by experiencing freedom can choose to respond to God’s announcement for love. This social movement may make us ready to put aside any paternalistic theology which sees God’s attributes from the point of view of His sovereignty. Instead, we are now ready to read the Qur’an: In the name of Allah Most Gracious Most Merciful.

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