

Fiduciary Theology, The Straight Path, And Pre-Destination

October 30, 2020 Category: Religion
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Fiduciary Theology:

From mice to homo sapiens, we are primarily motivated by a strict regime of punishment and reward. As diligently as we all try to be principled, each of us invariably operates within an incentive structure. So it's no wonder that those deigning to control people en masse employ a regimen of carrots and sticks. Such a regimen is, after all, the most straight-forward way to prevent people from getting out of line (that is: to get everyone to submit to the established order).

This is little more than a kind of existential graft; and, insofar as it conditions us, appeals to our baser instincts. That it works so well attests to the Pavlovian machinery that is operative even in the brains of homo sapiens. The carrot-and-stick approach to soteriology maps the crudest method of manipulation onto a grand, cosmic scheme. It's as if humans were only capable of operating at the level of lower primates (and, yes, even canines. Employing this scheme may be effective in coercing people into compliance; but it does absolutely nothing to foster probity, let alone agape.

When assaying such transactional ethics, the questions arises: Is existential blackmail really the optimal catalyst for virtue?

As autumn turns to winter, children throughout Christendom are told that Santa Claus is watching them, making a list, and thus determining who's been naughty and who's been (sufficiently) nice...so as to ascertain who deserves presents come the Winter Solstice. This puerile scheme seems to only work on puerile minds; yet we need only gussy it up with some snazzy narrative accoutrements, and—lo and behold—it works just as well on many adults. Religion, it turns out, is just as much a prosthetic for morality as it is a prosthetic for spirituality.

Santa's shit-list is merely a cartoonish version of a timeless motif—transplanting salvation vs. damnation in an afterlife with treats vs. coal in stockings. As it turns out, the notion of a cosmic ledger goes back to ancient Egypt, where each man's soul was weighed on a scale in order to determine his fate in the hereafter.

The 15th-century parable, “Summoning of the Everyman” (the Frisian variation of which was entitled, “Elckerlyc”) presented a familiar thesis: One's good and bad deeds would be tallied by god—as if in a ledger book.

The monetization of redemption was taken to an extreme by the Vatican in the 15th and early 16th centuries, with the peddling of so-called “indulgences” (whereby votaries were hoodwinked into believing that they could buy their way out of sin). The idea was that one could purchase “brownie points” so as to revamp the ledger. (This gave a new meaning to “cooking the books”.) The scheme is relatively straight-forward: Those who haven't garnered sufficient favor are consigned to perdition; those who've curried sufficient favor are rewarded with eternal paradise.

With life being a test, such a point-system seems to make sense. For ease of comprehension, fiduciary theology takes something qualitative (morality), and makes it quantitative (economics). Probity vs. iniquity is thus understood in terms of profit vs. loss. Motivation is made a function of payoff vs. fine. Hence the godhead as book-keeper leitmotif we encounter in the Abrahamic religions. Here, we are contending with a special kind of bookkeeper: one to whom we are eternally indebted. {2}

We EXIST at god's pleasure. He put us here to glorify and obey him. Period. The point of human life, then, is to worship (and thus please) the Abrahamic deity.

Thus "brownie-point" accumulation is the name of the game. It comes as little surprise that the Catholic Church exploited this motif to sell off "indulgences" in order to raise cash for itself. (The Roman Catholic Church was, after all, entirely about the mobilization of money and power.) The commoditization of absolution was—of course—a swindle...perpetrated by a corrupt institution that had grown accustomed to making things up as it went.

The idea was that one NEEDED the Church, as it provided the only way to get oneself out of "debt"; thereby LITERALLY putting a price-tag on salvation. {3} We should bear in mind this "debt" is not just pecuniary in nature. When Christians tell us that Jesus (as the ultimate martyr) has paid our debts, it means he has atoned for an inborn EXISTENTIAL deficit: "original sin" (see Appendix).

And so it went: In the 15th century, the preposterous notion that one could purchase "time off" from purgatory (ITSELF a concoction of the Vatican) was peddled to the credulous denizens of Christendom—demonstrating that supplicants are willing to believe almost anything. That such a scheme was categorically antithetical to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth was beside the point. It required an iconoclastic friar in Wittenberg, Saxony to finally take a stand and say, "Enough's enough."

The phenomenon was nothing new: A church concocting superstitions to suit its own purposes. That the Vatican's modus operandi was diametrically opposed to the teachings of the figure it purported to follow did not deter its apparatchiks. But even in its earliest form, Jesus' following made use of the compensatory model of salvation. Note, for example, Luke 18:22, where Jesus entreats his followers to sell all that they have; and in return they will have treasure in heaven. In other words, avarice is not discouraged; it is just redirected. The transactional element of soteriology is thereby retained. For there needs to be "something in it for me". (Don't distribute your Earthly goods to the poor because it is a beneficent thing to do; do it because it will give you bounty in the hereafter.)

Deferred gratification does not so much change the incentive structure of acquisitiveness; it simply resets the parameters. It is all about being REDEEMED (in a hereafter) for one's investment (during life). In other words, it's about cashing in one's chips after one has played the game. (The "catch" is that the House calls the shots; and—in the settling of accounts—the House usually wins.)

Depending on one's performance in this trial, one will come out either ahead or behind. {1}

The Arabic term "thawab" is quite revealing, as it means the reward that accrues (over one's lifetime) from pious conduct. The favor curried with the overlord is essentially a kind of EQUITY. The idea is that one "cashes in" (or, as the case may be, "cashes out") on Judgement Day.

Using theology to quantify that which is qualitative is not uncommon. Indeed, such a semiotic scheme goes back to the earliest civilizations—who "paid" for the favor of the gods by offering sacrifices (as gifts). This was effectively a system of theistic bribery. At one point, the Koran's protagonist notifies us that he "ransomed" Abraham with a sacrifice (37:107). The notion of a godhead demanding a human sacrifice

was nothing new; and informed many soteriological musings. Oftentimes, the more fanciful the narrative, the more captivating it ended up being.

In the midst of all this, the eternal question remains: How are we to measure “goodness”? In response to the question: “What is the ultimate barometer for morality?” we want to be able to say “THIS is where you currently stand” in the same way that one might measure progress along a physical distance. The Ancient Egyptians quantified “righteousness” in terms of another palpable measure: WEIGHT. As mentioned above, they posited a LITERAL scale to weigh one’s heart against a feather so as to determine if one was worthy of the (Edenic) Field of Reeds in the hereafter.

The Abrahamic version of fiduciary theology is about ULTIMATE PAYOFF: Just desserts in the hereafter. (After all, the afterlife is primarily about recompense.) Religious obligations, then, are effectively indemnity payments. As with Santa’s “list”, we are not allowed to see “the books”. (We don’t get to audit the accounting because this cosmic CFO is considered unimpeachable.) All we can do is try to remain in god’s good graces; and pray that he decides we’ve done a good enough job to gain admission into a celestial paradise.

Supplication, then, is an INVESTMENT. Piety pays dividends. Invest NOW to secure a magnificent reward LATER. Thus the blandishments of Paradise is thought of a return on investment...deferred until after you die. Paradise is the anticipated emolument. (I explore the peddling of false hope in my essay, “The Island”.)

According to this fiscal cosmology, we are enjoined to live our lives as though we are perpetually in arrears; with an omniscient creditor leering over our every move. The overlord has credited us with a lifetime in which to prove ourselves, and in return we owe him obeisance. If we default on this “loan”, we will fall into delinquency...and be punished accordingly. In this sense, damnation is effectively a forfeiture of salvation. The sentence: eternal debtor’s prison. Salvation and damnation are thereby thought of in pecuniary terms.

Islam takes fiduciary theology to the extreme. For the mindset of the Koran’s protagonist is pecuniary—for even his LOVE is compensatory. In sharp contradistinction to Jesus’ message of universal love (read: god’s love for ALL his children is unconditional, as we are all sinners), the Koran’s protagonist says we must EARN is love, lest he withhold it (nay, revel in the humiliation of those who displease him). His affections are thus given in return for supplication: Love as remuneration. Over and over, the Koran reminds its audience that god ONLY loves certain people; and it frequently emphasizes whom god does NOT love (e.g. 2:190/276, 3:32/57, 4:36, etc.) In fact, he harbors nothing but a seething contempt for those who decline to enter into the terms of exchange that he sets. {4}

And so it goes: According to the Koranic narrative, we find ourselves living a life of indemnity—with our souls as collateral. The overlord maintains a harsh lien on each human life. As debtors, each soul is held in escrow...until, that is, manumission upon death. Receipt of this omni-waiver is contingent on the (superannuated) “equity” one has accrued over the course of one’s life. Ergo the ultimate leverage is exacted. There is no debt where the stakes are higher than when one is held in arrears to the Creator of the Universe.

According to the the Koran’s characterization of its own protagonist, the predicament is especially precarious. A vainglorious master with a penchant for vindictiveness maintains bills of attainder on each and every human—an arrangement that is held over mankind’s collective head—as if a lien on human life itself.

Such fiduciary theology deals with what is effectively karmic equity—accruing bills of attainder along the way. (One might even call this the commodification of karma.) The “catch” is the omnipresent auditor. We effectively find ourselves in a remunerative existence. Such transactional ethics renders morality a fickle prudential affair. By spending our lives doing X, we are LITERALLY SPENDING our lives. Blessings are dispensations (or, perhaps, to be thought of as tax abatements). So we find ourselves incentivized to be “good” in order to secure remuneration in on the Day of Judgement: the final settling of accounts.

Being pious is about earning the godhead’s favor (and thus earning rewards). By abiding the Sunnah, we build credit. It is an accumulation of brownie-points we can “cash in “ on Judgement Day. “Qiyamah” is, after all, the final settling of accounts. This requires thinking of deeds as debits and credits on a ledger: the so-called “illiyun” (a roster of the saved located at the highest level of heaven) and the so-called “sijjin” (a roster of the damned located at the lowest level of hell)...thereby making salvation / damnation the end-result of a TABULATION.

There is no Original Sin in Islam (see Appendix). Each person begins life with an even “balance” in his account. So he is neither in the red nor in the black. This initial state is known as “fitra[h]”. Each of us then proceeds from birth according to merits (via “ihsan”) and demerits (via “dhanb” / “khati’a”) that are accumulated over the course of one’s life.

This arrangement is pecuniary. For it ends up being a system of accumulated “brownie points”, earned in proportion to how well we appease the godhead. As if often the case, supplicants are convinced that we all OWE the deity tribute. The retributive character of said deity means that damnation is a kind of “payback” for defaulting on our obligations (i.e. for rebuffing him). Note that the Koran’s protagonist seems to derive immense gratification from effecting this “payback”; reveling in the fact that he gets to punish those who fail to appease him.

Piety might be thought of as sacred duty; and duty is a kind of metaphorical indebted-ness. We are held in arrears until we pay what we are due (in the form of tribute). That is, during life, our souls are held in escrow. If we don’t fulfill our duties, we forfeit our souls. (We are thus morally solvent at god’s discretion.)

According to this motif, pious deeds (including fasting, propitiations, and and zakat) are conceived as annuities for the ULTIMATE retirement portfolio. One’s life, then, is an investment in which one can build equity (to be liquidates upon death). In other words: Cashing in AFTER one has “cashed out”.

The idea, then, is that those in arrears at the end of the test (a.k.a. life) are condemned to damnation. As we’ll see in the third section of the present essay, according to the doctrine known as “qadar” (pre-destination), the process is “rigged”. {5}

45:22 tells us that the cosmos exists for the primary purpose of ensuring each of us is “recompensed for what has been earned”. This is not “earn” in the idiomatic sense that the term is often used (“I studied hard, so I earned a good grade”); it is “earn” in the sense that one gets a positive or negative return on an investment, depending on how savvily one invests one’s “principle”. In this case, the “principle” is one’s own life; and the r.o.i is one’s fate in the hereafter.

Ergo the cosmic scheme is all about MATERIAL INCENTIVES. (Note, for example, how 76:12 specifies that Muslims’ recompense will include their very own set of “silken garments” and “gold bracelets”. Why believe? You get a prize!) Indeed, “prize” is an accurate description, as those who fail to curry favor with

god are repeatedly dubbed “the losers” throughout the Koran (e.g. 41:23-25).

Piety is consequently based on UTILITY. Such a moral system sullies even the most noble acts. For, effectively, it is all done for self-interested reasons (in order to curry favor with the godhead and thus receive rewards after death). Thus, even the charity that is enjoined by the Koran is undertaken—ultimately—for selfish reasons. It’s not a mitzvah; it’s an INVESTMENT...in which returns are expected down the road. Judgement Day is thus mankind’s arraignment—the day on which the chosen will reap the proceeds from their “investments”. Indeed, 11:111 notifies Muslims that they will be COMPENSATED by god. The Koran effectively offers an existential investment plan.

At several points, fealty to the Abrahamic deity is described as an INVESTMENT (specifically: as giving god a LOAN). Salvation, then, is seen as an r.o.i. The idea is that god will multiply what you loan him (as measured in the currency of one’s “amin”) and give it back multifold. And so it goes: In 2:245, 5:12, 57:11, 57:18, 64:17, and 73:20, we are instructed to give god a loan...so that we might earn equity on our principle investment. (73:20 goes so far as to describe good deeds as “a loan to god”.) 35:29 and 39:50 both notify votaries that they can expect a “profit” in the hereafter. After all, piety is all about garnering spoils for oneself.

In this sense, the Abrahamic deity is a BROKER. Heaven is effectively a return on investment. Worship is an economic transaction from which followers should expect to PROFIT (35:29-30). It’s salvation as investment banking. (!)

Lending credence to the Koran (pun intended) amounts to exalting a deity that—effectively—engages in existential extortion. Rather than a broker of stocks, he is a broker of afterlife prospects. But, like most brokers, he rigs the game...and is really only interested in his own aggrandizement. Over the course of THIS life (“dunya”), votaries expect all the time / energy that they’ve invested in their supplication to pay dividends in a hereafter (“akhira”).

Human existence is thus reduced to a transactional affair. Teleology boils down to return on investment (that is: just deserts). The has appeal, as we all want to believe that everyone will eventually “reap what they sow”. There is a satisfaction derived from the fact that everyone will eventually get what’s coming to them, that what goes around comes around, and that there will be a final reckoning. (I explore how this yearning can be exploited in my essay, “Brink Porn”.) This is literally a SETTLING OF ACCOUNTS.

In Islam, the Day of Judgement is repeatedly referred to the “Day of Recompense” (e.g. 1:4, 15:35, 26:82, 37:20, 38:78, 51:12, 54:46, 56:56, 70:26, 74:46, 79:34, 82:9, 82:17-18, 83:11, 95:7, etc.) 20:15, 36:54, 40:17/40, and 53:41 also speak of the hereafter in terms of “recompense”. This is a way of—effectively—monetizing morality. In fact, the term “recompense” / “wages” to describe the last judgement is used 82 times (in 77 different verses) throughout the Koran. Verses like 3:185, 24:25, 26:145, and 53:31 reiterate that heaven is a matter of COMPENSATION (also translated as “payment”). Either way, it’s ultimately about receiving “wages”. Passages like 4:123 likewise describe damnation as compensation. 46:19 explains that there are degrees of reward and punishment so that god can “fully compensate” each person for what he did during his life on Earth.

Thus Faith is essentially an act of commerce. 3:25 explains that a soul is PAID what it EARNS. In 2:103, 6:157, 7:180, 9:95, 10:52, 16:97, 21:29, 27:90, 28:84, 34:33, 35:36, 37:53, 45:14, 45:22, 46:14, 46:19, 47:36, 52:16, salvation / damnation is described as “recompense” (recompense that is “paid”). One EARNS damnation / salvation (6:120 and 6:160), and will be recompensed accordingly. 34:47 goes so far to say that we can expect “payment” for our services to god. (6:146 even explains that Jews were “REPAID” for not having the appropriate diet.)

In several Koranic passages (e.g. 4:94), god entices us with the promise of “spoils”. In many other passages, he instructs us to “REMIT” evil deeds (e.g. 3:193, 3:195, and 4:31). 2:280 and 4:92 conceptualize charity as a remittance. 2:184 notifies the reader that “for those who can afford [charity], there is a RANSOM”. (57:15 notifies us that no ransom will be accepted for the damned.) The end of 2:102 explains the theology in terms of “profit” and “trafficking”, describing “evil” as “the price for which they will sell their souls”. Thus, one’s dealings with the divine are couched in economic terms. Let’s briefly explore the examples of this throughout Islam’s holy book.

9:28 promises that god will enrich votaries from his bounty. So if you are impoverished, it’s because god has ordained you to be. (As discussed, pre-destination includes designation of one’s wealth and social ranking.)

2:207 even enjoins us to “sell” ourselves in the cause of god (as a means of seeking his approval). “Goodness” is treated as a currency (2:272 tells us that whatever we “spend of good”, it will be “repaid” to us by god). Even mercy is treated as a currency, kept in a “depository” (38:9). We can take all this figuratively, of course. But it is a strange idiom nevertheless.

In 11:15, god says to those who displease him that he will “fully repay” them. 3:177 tells us that we “purchase disbelief as the price of faith”. 3:161 tells us that “every soul will be paid in full what it is owed”. Meanwhile, 39:70 promises votaries will be “paid in full”. 8:60 and 34:39 explain that whatever you SPEND in the name of god will be FULLY REPAYED to you. This makes sense, as the protagonist of the Koran refers to himself as an “accountant” (e.g. 21:47 and 33:39).

God, then, is to be thought of as an ACCOUNTANT. In 27:75 and 34:3, we’re told that he keeps a record of all things (so that he can keep track of who to reward in the end). God the accountant thus has a literal “register” (e.g. 34:3 and 50:4). That is: He keeps a LEDGER. Like a cosmic Santa Claus, the Creator of the Universe keeps a log-book of who’s naughty and who’s nice. And, as discussed earlier, per the doctrine of “qadar” [predestination], like an unscrupulous CFO, he fixes the books.

To recapitulate: The Koran reminds us repeatedly that god is keeping a REGISTER. There are, in fact, TWO registers. The record of the damned is located in “Sijjn” (83:7-9), while the record of the saved is located in “Illiyun” (83:18-20). Presumably, since everyone is already pre-selected for each fate, these records have both already been completed. (You, the reader, have been listed on one of them since the beginning of time. Your destination is a foregone conclusion. Welcome to the cosmic lottery. Good luck.)

Meanwhile, mercy is something that one SPENDS (2:16, 17:100, 34:39, and 34:47). In this way, the Abrahamic deity is rendered a broker of all existential transactions. Our souls are essentially held in escrow until Judgment Day...when the settling of accounts is performed. We can take all of this figuratively; but even then, the theology betrays a glaring anthropomorphization. (Are we to suppose that god wears a monocle as well?) In 4:81, god is even referred to as a “trustee”.

And so it goes: The Creator of the Universe treats his relationship with mankind as a business deal. 9:111 describes the covenant with god as a transaction. The verse specifies that “God has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties [in exchange] for [the assurance] that they will have Paradise.” Ergo, the way one lives one’s life amounts to a kind of business strategy.

God goes so far as to announce that one can buy him off. In 2:271, he offers to give “indulgences” (absolution of sins) in exchange for zakat. Of course, this is a much more noble proposition than what the Catholic Church did eight centuries later (whereby indulgences were purchased by paying off the clergy).

Even so, the scheme proposed in the Koran is rather specious.

Now, of course we should take into account the fact that terms like “owe”, “invest”, “pay (back)”, “spend”, “price”, “earn”, “profit”, and “recompense” can be used **IDIOMATICALLY**. That is to say, we could take this wording figuratively. But taken together, all the passages cited here point to an explicitly economic framework for understanding the damnation-salvation schema.

The choice of employing this explicitly economic idiom makes sense, as MoM was a merchant; and many of his first followers were merchants. Consequently, the authors of the Koran (like MoM himself) were predisposed to cast things in terms that most resonated with the target audience (to wit: those who’s lives were oriented around mercantile activity). The prohibition against usury **ALSO** makes sense, as **GOD** is the only party with which one should engage in such activity. Earning interest is the sole province of the Abrahamic deity; so engaging in such activity with other men is naturally to be considered blasphemous.

It is no surprise, then, that the first Mohammedans adopted the “business deal” idiom when articulating the terms of salvation / damnation. This interpretation is not a matter of taking an idiomatic expression too literally. Nor is it a matter of missing the idiomatic nature of the original phrasing (in CA), which may seem more “economic sounding” after being translated into English. Obviously, these articulations are idiomatic. The point is to note the use of **THIS PARTICULAR** idiom—which comes through after translation because it is, indeed, in the CA—is itself an odd way to frame an ultimate explanation.

Metaphors are useful for making concrete what is abstract. That is, they have **DIDACTIC** utility. Problems arise, though, when we cease recognizing a metaphor **AS** a metaphor; or, on the other hand, pretending that something that was **NOT INTENDED** as a metaphor is “only a metaphor”...whilst others **SEE** that it was not intended as “only a metaphor”.

If the book is to be taken at its word, the case **STILL** needs to be made that the Creator of the Universe would have favored this particular idiom. Considering god was not a merchant (and he presumably foresaw that his target audience would not all be merchants), it is peculiar that he opted to articulate things in this particular way.

Yet the motif has widespread resonance. Note that a transactional treatment of salvation / damnation is even used in Judaism. The Hebrew New Year (Rosh Hashanah) begins on the month of “Tishrei”. Yom Kippur starts nine days later; and involves a day of fasting; as well as abstention from impure acts (no sex, no dancing, no bathing, etc.) Such abstinence is seen as a means of spiritual purification; as it is a matter of penance...just as is the case with Muslims during the lunar month of Ramadan. Meanwhile, Jews expurgate sins by throwing stones into a body of water...just as Muslims do with the “jamarat”.

The notion of absolution via abstention goes back to the Hindu tradition of fasting: “Ekadasi”. Ancient Egyptians also had ritual of fasting as a means of purification. Roman Catholics would later adopt their own form of the routine—instituting “Quadra-gesima”: the forty days of “lenz” / “lentin” (a.k.a. “lent”) leading up to the commemoration of the resurrection (scheduled at springtide, the conventional season for re-birth).

But salvation is about far more than mere penitence. One’s very way of life (“din” in Arabic) must be brought into alignment with the prescribed regime. This is often thought of in terms of a (straight) “path”. It is this timeless idiom to which we now turn.

The Straight Path:

“[Soviet] writers must march in serried ranks, and anyone who steps off the path to pick flowers is like a deserter.”

–Soviet reporter, *Konstantin Simonov*

The notion of a sanctified “straight path” goes back to the Sumerians, the rulers of whom conceived rightness as STRAIGHT-ness (“mesaru” vis a vis “kettu”); and divergence from that seen as a grave mis-step (“hitu”). It is unclear how strict the prescribed regimen was; but the designated way was certainly seen as THE way to be righteous. {6}

The concept of “right living” is found in virtually every religion, and dates back to the Bronze Age. {7} The Sumerians had “Me” / “parsu”. Meanwhile, the Egyptians had “Maat” (conceived as the natural order of things), to which one was obliged to hew. The Persians had “Asha” (effectively: the Path of Righteousness). In Zoroastrianism, the blessed way of the “Vohu Mana” was also known as the “straight path”.

The Ancient Greeks had “arete” [a life lived according to wisdom]. In the early 5th century B.C., Parmenides of Elea claimed to offer the “Way of Truth”, a vital piece of information to which he claimed to have been made privy (via revelation...from a goddess...during a celestial journey...borne by a magical steed). {8}

In the Vedic tradition (the basis for Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism), one’s proper path was understood in terms of “sanatan[a] dharma” [alt. “damma”]. One of the most notable uses of this idiom is that of the Theravada Buddhists: “Visuddhi-magga” [Pali for “Path of Purification”] as articulated in the 5th century by the Sinhalese monk, Buddha-ghosa of Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka). The Vajrayana teachings of the Nyingma “terton”, Chogyam Trungpa, involved the “Sacred Path of the Warrior”. The ancient Chinese had the “tao” [the way], as articulated by Lao Tzu in th 6th century B.C.

Japanese Buddhists have put forth various conceptions of “the path”—as with “Shugendo” (founded by En no Ozunu of Katsuragi in the 7th century). And in the Shinto tradition, “kannagara” means the “Way of the Kami” [way of the gods], and is sometimes translated as the “path”. In practical terms, “kannagara” refers to the right way to live (a way that follows from the natural order of things).

Meanwhile, the “Kaharingan” Faith of the Dayaks in Indonesia called themselves by this name, which means “the way of being alive”.

Later, Christians cast righteousness in terms of becoming part of the body of Christ (thus being imbued with the Holy Spirit). Indeed, the original name for the initial following of Jesus of Nazareth was “The Way”—exhibiting parallels with the Taoist idiom: “The Way”, “The Truth”, and “The Life”.

The motif is universal. Whether it is the death squads in Peru calling themselves the “Shining Path” or some contemporary self-help book touting the “path to success”, the notion of an ideal path is a captivating one. When collectivist, the notion of a (designated) path can be put in the service of a political agenda...which can be pro-democratic (as with the “sonderweg” of post-War German Exceptionalism) or fascistic (as with the delusive treatment of the Mosaic “brith” in Judeo-Supremacy). In the former case, it is designed to keep everyone “in line”. In the latter case, it is done in the spirit of civic-mindedness. The difference is between subjugation and cooperation {9}

The notion of a SPECIFIC path, though, is a quintessentially Abrahamic one. In the Hebrew Bible, the notion of “shurat” involves strict adherence to a STRAIGHT LINE (pertaining to both piety and judgement). In Proverbs 2:20, the “ways of the good” and “paths of the righteous” are equated. (The

exhortation is to “walk in the ways of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous”. The plural is used because it is referring to more than one person, not necessarily to more than one archetype.) The original Gospel (that of “Mark”) begins with a demand of those who conduct themselves “in the way of the Lord” to “make his path straight” (quoting the Judaic prophet, Isaiah).

In each of the three major Abrahamic religions, sticking with THE straight path has usually entailed a decidedly strict regimen: “Know your assigned place. And do as you’re told.” Period. Autonomy is all-but-eliminated when righteousness is all about obeying orders. Thus the “Sirat al-Mustaqim” is more about controlling others than self-control. (It is more about an effort to conform rather than an effort to transform.) There is a certain appeal to: “Follow the rules; and that’s all there is to it.” Everyone likes to think that their path is the one-and-only legitimate path; and feel validated when everyone else abides the same mandates. And what better way to sell a path than to sprinkle it with fairy-dust?

Insofar as the “Sirat al-Mustaqim” is conceptualized as a “WAY”, it is proclaimed to be THE ONLY way (“hal al-wahid”). Some Islamic apologists even go so far as to equate Islam ITSELF with the “Sirat al-Mustaqim”—as with John Esposito in his 1988 book, “Islam: The Straight Path”. This entails that the so-called “path” is predicated on SUBMISSION, since “Islam” means “submission”.

A few of the heterodox treatments of the “path” within the Ummah have yielded more moderate approaches to piety [“taqwa”; i.e. recognition of the Abrahamic deity is the one true god, and thus the ultimate authority] than the usual “al-hal al-wahid” (whereby one is a slave to god, and there are strictly-defined rules). Sufis call it “tariqa” [effectively: “spiritual path”], thereby affixing an entrancing gimcrack of esoterica to the notion. Indeed, conceiving it in this manner lends the idea an aura of mystique. We are all looking to be enchanted in some way; so an special avenue that (purportedly) holds enchantment in store for us has undeniable appeal. Yet it is important to maintain sobriety when indulging in otherwise mesmerizing ideas. Every one of us can be enraptured by mysterious-ness (some more than others); and so sometimes mistake arcane gibberish for philosophical profundity.

For Sufis, someone embarking on this path is seen more as a SEEKER (“salik”) than as a FOLLOWER. In Sufism, the formal term for someone undertaking this spiritual search is “murid”, which means “one who is committed”. (Note that “murid” is based on the Arabic lexeme for will-power / self-control.) We should bear in mind, though, that an emphasis on personal commitment (i.e. a process of SEARCHING) is at variance with the notion of enslavement (“abd”) and subordination (“[ist]aslam[a]”) endemic to the traditional conception of “sirat al-mustaqim”. It would seem that the Sufi treatment of “path” is more in keeping with the Eastern conception of a “way” [tao]. (Note that sometimes “minhaj” is translated as “way”.) In this vein, “Islam” (normally interpreted as “submission to the will of god”) could be thought of more as bringing oneself in sync with the divine (as with, say, Schopenhauer’s idea of the Aesthete). Thus: Instead of a prescription for controlling others, it would be an enjoiner for SELF-control.

Above all, the conception of “path” within a new (Reform) paradigm would be a matter of “rahi aql”, which roughly means “rule of the intellect”—often translated as “path of reason”. Such a path would be based on autonomy (what Kant called maturity). Thus it would NOT be a function of “taqlid” (i.e. adhering to traditional precedent; deferring to the dictates of authority); it would be the result of “ijtihad”. Such a re-conception is not pie in the sky. We might note that “Akbar the Great”, the most celebrated ruler of the Mughal Empire, advocated for “rahi aql”.

The thing with “rahi aql”: it is only as possible as votaries make it. (It is thus untenable so long as votaries insist it is impossible.)

A helpful contrast in the conceptualization of “path” is the “TAO”, which literally means the “WAY”.

This had nothing whatsoever to do with subordination; as it was entirely about EMANCIPATION.

In Hinduism, the term for “way” is “marga”. Theologically, this is often equated with the term for “path”: “yog[a]”. There are three aspects to the Vedic “marga” (which—in the idiom of paths—translates to three paths to enlightenment):

- The way of knowledge (“jnan[a]” / “gyan”; the equivalent of “gnosis” in Greek)
- The way of loving devotion (“bhakti”)
- The way of selfless action (“karma”)

None of this involves the following of specific rules. In fact, it is more about CULTIVATION (“bhavana”) than it is about rule-following. Such cultivation is primarily contemplative (a matter of “samadhi” / “dhyana”) rather than a show of obeisance.

In the Buddhist tradition, the (eightfold) path is seen as a means of liberation, not of subservience. The goal is “prajna” (enlightenment) not “abd” (enslavement). This way of life (“dharma”) is sometimes referred to as “Madhya-maprati-pada” (Sanskrit) [alt. “Majjhi-mapati-pada” in Pali; meaning the middle way]—a moniker that indicates an avoidance of extremes (in ANY direction). This is primarily a matter of temperance, not of zealotry.

In the Sikh tradition, salvation is not equated with god’s approval, but rather with “jivanmukta” (liberation); an idea coopted from the Advait Vedanta (Hindu) tradition. God’s grace (“nadar” / “mehar”) is secured not through service to god, but through non-egoistic service to one’s fellow man (“seva”; comprised of “man”, “tan”, and “dhan”).

The Hebrew word for “Way” (as in the way of god) is “derekh”. The “catch” with Judaic tradition is it encapsulates the “right way of living” [Arabic: “din”] as a set of rules to follow—613 of them, actually: the “taryag mitzvot”. This is to be contrasted with the notion of GOOD living—as when the Ancient Greeks posited “eudaimonia”, a life predicated on “agape” [universal love].

In the Hindu tradition, the notion of an upstanding mode of living is called “dharma” (the analogue of the Islamic “din”). This involves a regimen [“vritta”] of goodness [“Sad”]. A prerequisite for this “sadvritta” is a set of moral principles [“vyava-harika”], which includes mandates to be honest, to refrain from harming others, to maintain self-control, and to refrain from material acquisitiveness. This leaves open the possibility of finding one’s own way. To wit: there is no one specific path for all people. This “find your own path” approach is predicated on Enlightenment (what the Ancient Greeks dubbed “arete”) rather than on obeisance (i.e. rule-following). The notion of an Enlightened Path is found in Zoroastrianism (“Daena”). Vajrayana Buddhism posits the path through “Kalachakra”. {10} Tibetan Buddhism posits the path to liberation (“Dzogchen”).

So what of the “Sirat al-Mustaqeem” in the Koran? “Guide us to the straight path” is in the Koran’s opening surah, and thus part of the “Fatihah”. Invocation of the idiom of “straight path” can be found in 1:6, 2:142/213, 3:51/101, 4:68/175, 5:16, 6:39/87/153/161, 7:16, 10:25, 11:56/123, 16:121, 19:36, 22:54, 23:73, 24:46, 28:22, 36:4/61, 37:118, 42:52, 43:43/61/64, 46:30, 48:2/20, 60:1, 73:19, and 76:29. (Note, sometimes, this “path” is referred to as the “right” path, as in 38:22.)

Islam’s holy book does not say anything specific ABOUT this “straight path” (alternately conceptualized as “din”: the Islamic way of life) other than that one must believe (and obey) everything written in the Koran. The “straight path” (also sometimes translated as the “plain road”) is simply the path of piety / surrender...and thus: the way to heaven. To submit (i.e. obey / comply) is to walk it. That’s all there is to

it. This mandate for OBEISANCE / COMPLIANCE is hardly a recipe for probity.

In terms of “the ideal way to live”, the “the path” or “the way” is a concept in the oldest spiritual traditions. Hindus and Jains have been referring to “dharma” for thousands of years (living one’s life in harmony with the order of the Universe), which is roughly the same idea (as it pertains to the right way to conduct oneself—so as to be in sync with the divine). Consequently, Sikhs use the term “dharm” to refer to “the path of righteousness”. Jesus referred explicitly to “the way” in the Gospel according to John (14:6).

Juxtapose the Koran’s “as-Serat al-Mustaqeem” with “The Way” that was Lao Tzu’s “Tao” (and that was also the name of the initial following of Jesus of Nazareth). This term connotes a “way of living one’s life”. In this sense, the existential “path” is something that one (autonomously) forges for oneself.

The Koranic STRAIGHT PATH, on the other hand, connotes a pre-established, designated passage: a clearly demarcated, direct route that must be FOLLOWED. “Straight” indicates that it is a matter of “staying in line” (i.e. sticking with a path that has been ASSIGNED TO you).

The Tao is about liberation and autonomy; no subservience required. By stark contrast, the “straight path” as presented in the Koran is about control and authority (compliance, submission, and not “getting out of line”). To partake in the Tao is to be in sync with the divine—in one’s own way. To follow the Koranic “path”, meanwhile, is to be a myrmidon.

This is a fundamental difference that is rarely discussed. Once we start talking about paths in the existential sense, we find that how one conceptualizes it says a lot about one’s theory of life. Alas, the Koranic notion of a STRAIGHT PATH prescribes a mode of subservience—as if one cannot be at the same time moral and forge one’s own path. “As Goethe once said, “What is the path? There is no particular path.”

In the end, we all need to find our own way...while not becoming too self-absorbed in so doing. Individualism needn’t involve narcissism. Alas, subordination is often disguised as a kind of liberation. As we’ve seen, this cosmogenic “bait and switch” is indicative of the Abrahamic religions. Felicitously, following a path is not a matter of placating a temperamental overlord; it’s a matter of asserting sovereignty over one’s own life. The distinction here is between taking control and being controlled.

In sum: There is a fundamental difference between forging your own path and having a singular path designated for everyone on the planet. This means establishing purpose / meaning for your own life rather than having purpose / meaning assigned to you. Recognizing this entails recognizing that autonomy does not require hubris.

There doesn’t need to be anything delusive about liberation. Finding one’s own way is an act of existential integrity, not an act of conceit. If there WERE a benevolent entity that served as some sort of cosmic impresario, it would surely honor this.

Extant creeds can be adapted to this re-conceptualization of a “path” for one’s life. For example, Islam’s “sirat al-mustaqim” can be conceived in various ways. Whether we call it “tariqa[h]” (denoting a spiritual path) or “rahi aql” (denoting the path of reason), each of us has our own journey to take. Along the way, we might bear in mind that when this journey is based on illusion, it is not worth taking.

Pre-Destination:

So we all end up following our own path. The question becomes: Is where that path up to us; or is it a foregone conclusion? There is undeniable appeal in both prospects, as we all want to be masters of our own destiny...yet also like to believe that our fate is somehow written in the stars.

Most of us end up adopting a combination of the two teleological outlooks, invoking them as the occasion warrants. This hybrid position is both pragmatic and a reflection of what we discover about the course life seems to take on this mortal coil.

Beliefs about destiny go back to some of the earliest cultures. The earliest Canaanites worshipped the goddess of fate, “Ashima”—who was herself based on the Assyrian concept of fate, “shimti”. (Ashima’s Nabatean counterpart was “Manat”, a goddess that would appear in Arabian theology.) Certain Hindu sects posited “kismet”, most notably, the practitioners of Ajivika (which started in the 5th century B.C.) {11} There was also the notion of “niyati-vada”. Even in Persia, there emerged sects that posited fatalism—as with “Zurvanism”, a divergent sect of Zoroastrianism.

The ancient Anglo-Saxons and Celts posited “wyrd”. The ancient Turks adopted the Vedic notion of “kismet” (though with a more romantic connotation). Pre-destination was emphasized by the Roman Catholic “Jansenists” (named after the Dutch theologian, Cornelius Jansen) in the early 17th century. And on and on.

Fatalism has an undeniable allure, as it permits us to be more resigned to our (purportedly) assigned lot in life. In a sense that is ironic, it emancipates people from anxiety, assuring each of us that “it’s all in god’s hands”, so no need to fuss. Superstitions about a cosmic power that dictates what shall happen in the future are especially tempting to embrace for anyone who is eager to know what the world “holds in store” for ME.

Indeed, it is the urge to think that certain things—or EVERYTHING—may be fore-ordained that keeps fortune-tellers and sooth-sayers in business. It’s hard to pretend to be oracular once we concede that indeterminacy must be factored in.

More to the point: There is an odd appeal to the notion that each of us has a “destiny” waiting to be fulfilled; and that we need only discover what the divinely ordained plan REALLY IS so that we might better make sense of our own existence. Consequently, many would rather have their life’s purpose ASSIGNED TO them rather than forge it for themselves.

There is a “catch” to all this. Said appeal is limited to plans that hold DESIRABLE things in store for us. Rarely is it acknowledged that pre-determined “fate” is a double-edged sword. This is why no fortune-teller ever made much money telling people that they were doomed to failure. A fortune-teller stays in business by giving people a modicum of hope—even if it is false hope. (“None of your wishes will come true” is a way to guarantee no repeat customers.)

The most extreme of version of divine ordinance in Islam could be found in the Ashari sect, wherein it is assumed god wills the position of every particle in the universe at every instant, thus precluding any need to posit causality. One might say that this is inverse determinism: Absolutist in this sense that god alone ordains what happens everywhere at every moment, yet completely indeterminate from a human point of view (as causation is rendered moot). No need for scientific explanation; all is explained by god’s will. {12}

This worldview also leads to a kind of existential resignation—engendering subservience to the designated agenda. As Max Weber put it in his “The Sociology of Religion”: “The belief in pre-destination, although

it might logically be expected to result in fatalism, produced in its most consistent followers the strongest possible motives for acting in accordance with god's designs. Of course this action assumed different forms, depending on the primary content of the religious prophecy. In the case of the Muslim warriors of the first generation of Islam, the belief in predestination [would have] produced a complete obliviousness to self, in the interest of fidelity to—and fulfillment of—the religious commandment of a holy war for the conquest of the world” (p. 203).

Moreover, a belief in pre-destination leads to a suspension of intellectual curiosity. The message is clear: Don't even try to make sense of the natural world. Why bother trying to comprehend it when god's will explains all? And—anyway—everything one REALLY needs to know is in the Koran. The motivation to engage in scientific enterprise was thereby severely attenuated. (To the question: “Why did that happen?” the answer is always “Because that's what god wanted.” End of discussion.)

This theological gimmick has tremendous utility for those in power—as the rabble will be reticent to challenge the established order. Indeed, one is behooved to be resigned to one's lot in life—no matter how grievous. For the message is: “All is as it should be. So don't question it.” Privilege and destitution are thus self-justifying. If god's will dictates all things, then one's lot in life is justified simply by being as it is.

This is a dirty trick; but it works like a charm. Indeed, the logic on which it rests works in various contexts even today—as with, say, free-market fundamentalism. Here, we are enjoined to posit a marvelously pristine meritocracy where none exists. That is: We are asked to suppose that outcomes are indubitably meritocratic...even when it is blatantly obvious that such is not the case. The upshot is to exalt those who command the most socio-economic power as the vanguard of society—as if financial wherewithal were somehow a mark of virtue. It should come as no surprise that it is typically those who enjoy privilege (i.e. good fortune) who are eager to aver that everyone's station is based on sheer merit. It is imperative that they convince EVERYONE ELSE that this is so—if, that is, they wish to maintain the conditions on which their continued status depends. So it must be from EVERYONE'S point of view that—whatever the socio-economic exigencies happen to be—all is just as it should be. So long as the rabble believe this, no petition of grievances from those who have been short-changed will be forthcoming.

In the Abrahamic tradition, the notion of pre-destination has roots in the Judaic theology of the Pharisees, for whom it seemed prudent to simply leave everything IN GOD'S HANDS. (This rhetorical maneuver—little other than an evasion—is rightly considered a theological cop-out.) By the early 9th century, the Saxon theologian, Gottschalk of Orbais was peddling a cosmology of pre-ordained salvation / damnation for each individual. And in the 14th century, the (Jewish) Andalusian theologian, Hasdai ben Abraham Crescas, proposed a similar theological scheme.

The notion of predestination has been a point of contention within Christendom since Martin Luther's polemic, “De Servo Arbitrio” [On Constrained Will] in 1525. Those familiar with John Calvin or Jonathan Edwards may recognize the Christian version of this (cringe-inducing) theological view. Calvin rationalized his position on the matter via such passages as Second Timothy 1:9. To this day, pre-destination counts as one of the more opprobrious features of Calvinist doctrine (class—and even social status—as a gauge for god's grace). Reactionaries (read: those invested in the established order not be disrupted) have been trafficking in this sham ever since; as it enables them to pass their cupidity off as some laudable deference to Providence. Thankfully, the odious superstition has been eschewed by sensible religionists since the Enlightenment.

Alas, there is an eerie strain of pre-destination throughout Islam's holy book. As we shall see forthwith, well over a hundred Koranic passages put forth this deranged schema—a prospect that anyone with any moral sense should find tremendously disturbing.

In the Islamic vernacular, pre-destination is dubbed “qad[a]r” (alt. “ta-qdir”). The idea is that whatever will happen has already been written (in a celestial log known as the “Barzakh”); that is to say: determined by god since the beginning of time. The concept is important enough that the one of the Koran’s Surat (the 97th) was entitled “Al-Qadr”.

Is there a spark of divinity in each one of us? The Koran’s answer to this query is a resounding NO. God does NOT love everyone; he has picked favorites; and despises certain people. To make matters worse, the game is rigged; as god has pre-selected certain people for salvation, and everyone else for damnation. All any one of us can do is pray that we are one of the former. (Groveling helps.) The rest of us are fucked.

This “al-qada wa’l-qadar” (pre-destination based on divine ordinance) is captured in the Islamic concept of “rukn”: a so-called “pillar” of Islam (which roughly translates to “that which is inevitable”). According to this, everyone’s station in life is fore-ordained. The dogma was epitomized by the Umayyad contingent known as the “mujbira”: advocates for hard-line Islamic determinism. The view here is that god has chosen your fate, and there’s nothing you can do about it. You have an appointed destiny (i.e. a lot in life; and a lot in the hereafter); and that’s that. So long as the rabble were convinced that EVERYTHING happened according to god’s will, and that that was a GOOD thing, this worldview gained traction.

We should not be surprised that such a cockamamy idea did, in fact, gain traction in the pre-modern era. After all, there is a certain diffidence—even gratification—in being able to say in retrospect, “Well, that was god’s plan ALL ALONG.” Hence the knee-jerk response to new developments, “mash’Allah”, which is an expression of approbation meaning “so god has ordained”. Such an assertion seems to validate god’s omniscience (and attest to his eternity). So what could the problem possibly be?

For many Muslim thinkers, “qadar” entails the countenancing a tempered version of determinism. The matter of whether or not divine fore-knowledge entails determinacy is an open question. The relationship between omniscience and fatalism is a logistical labyrinth that needn’t be navigated in order to address the matter of “qadar”. Anyone familiar with the reprobate implications of Calvinist theology is already well-aware of this existential mobius strip. During the Middle Ages, the only major sect in Dar al-Islam to depart from the deterministic worldview were the Mu’tazilis, who interpreted “qadar” in an entirely different way.

The Mu’tazila movement was wiped out over a thousand years ago.

In any case, the Koran says what it says on the matter; and it leaves little room for maneuvering. THIRTY passages tell us that there are certain people god does not want to guide / help: 3:86, 4:118-119/143, 5:67, 6:25/122-123, 9:37/80/109, 13:27/33, 14:4, 15:12, 16:107, 17:46, 18:57, 23:44, 27:4, 32:13, 36:7-10, 37:22-23, 38:82-83, 39:23, 40:33, 42:46, 45:23, 46:10, 61:7, 68:44, and 91:7-10. Who? Those who are pre-ordained to be non-Muslims; and who are consequently destined for hellfire. In other words, everyone who will end up in “jahannam” has been pre-selected for damnation.

It gets worse. In 21 passages, we are notified that non-believers are doomed to be non-believers from the beginning, regardless of what one might tell them...even as others are “chosen” for Faith: 2:6, 3:74, 6:39/125, 7:37/155, 11:33-34, 16:9/36-37, 24:40/46, 28:56, 30:56, 37:40/55-57/74/98/128, 48:11/15, and 68:50. In other words: The game is rigged. (For any to whom god does not give light, there is no light—as 24:40 states.)

And so god pre-selects whom he will guide—as a dozen passages inform us—4:49, 6:144, 10:11/25/99-100, 14:21, 16:93, 17:13, 18:17, 35:8, 74:31, and 81:28-29. Such people are even given immunity from going

astray—as specified in 39:37. 15:39-42 and 34:21 even indicate that Muslims are immune to Satan’s diabolical machinations...and so are protected from being misled. Thus FIFTEEN MORE passages tell us that the game is rigged.

Simply put: There are some god chooses to guide and some he chooses to lead astray (as 6:125 states explicitly). The Abrahamic deity, we are also told, selected certain people ahead of time for his “right hand” and others for his “left hand”. 59:23 even calls him the “Bestower of Faith” and the “Compeller”: those who have Faith only have it insofar as god decided to GIVE them Faith...and COMPELLED them. Everyone’s fate is ordained (“kutiba”) from day one. 68:37-38 even mocks those who think that they are free to choose their fate.

One can’t help but wonder: Wouldn’t the beneficent super-being who created all mankind want to help EVERYONE...especially those who are currently misled? Not according to verses like 2:142, 30:37, and 34:23. According to the Koran, the Abrahamic deity is perfectly fine with large portions of mankind going to hell. In fact, according to 30:45, god DOES NOT LIKE non-Muslims, so why help them? This is an interesting rationalization considering god allegedly made ALL of us. (Are we not ALL god’s children?)

There are even some verses that tell us that god intentionally misleads (i.e. sends astray); and thus dooms to perdition. To name a dozen: 2:26, 4:88, 6:137, 7:100-101/178, 11:33-34, 14:27, 17:97, 30:29, 35:8, 40:74, and 47:1. Who does he send astray? Non-Muslims, of course. Why are they non-Muslims? Because he sent them astray. What shall happen to them as a result? They shall be punished.

43:36-37 goes so far as to say god tricks the misled into thinking that they are right. God even allows Satan to mislead certain people that he has not designated for immunity (38:82-83). Again, 39:37 explains that some people are designated to be IMMUNE to going astray.

That a deity would intentionally mislead a significant portion of mankind SO THAT he could punish them is a bizarre notion for those who insist on describing him as “merciful”; for it entails an unapologetically sadistic overlord. Suffice to say: “I yearn to fill hell with people” is not the proclamation of a beneficent being. {13}

Hence the devious and conniving protagonist of the Koran does not guide non-Muslims. But wait. Aren’t they non-Muslims BECAUSE they’re not guided? This begs the question: Insofar as they are wrong-doers, is it not BECAUSE they are not guided? This poses a conundrum. Wouldn’t a beneficent deity want to (try to) HELP such (misguided) people, GUIDING them so that they might become better? Nope. He only guides those who have been pre-selected to be Muslims (27:81, 49:7, and 49:17). What a swell guy.

As if that weren’t odd enough, the Koran tells us its protagonist ensures that the deeds of non-Muslims will be fruitless (47:9). It goes on to say that the Abrahamic deity renders non-Muslims powerless (47:28 and 47:32). (Gadzooks!) 3:54, 7:99, and 8:30-31 tell us that god is, after all, the best of schemers (“makara” / “khayru”; which also means “deceiver”). Abu Bakr is said to have declared that even if he already had one foot in heaven, he would still fear god’s deception.

In fact, god is STILL scheming, according to 10:21 and 86:16.

But if all is pre-ordained, why does the godhead still find the need to scheme? Are there unresolved issues? Is he trying to out-wit mankind? What would he be plotting? Does he fear being found out? Thwarted? And why would a timeless being need to respond to new development?

These passages ALL explain that god actually CHOSE for certain people to be misled. Essentially, the

Koran's protagonist says: "I've left them to go astray; and I'll punish them for it later." This is the very definition of sadism. Moreover, he effectively tells Muslims: "Don't try to help them; they're pre-ordained for damnation. Their situation is hopeless. Even so, they deserve perdition for their poor standing in the cosmic lottery." (Hence the declaration that there need be no compulsion in religion.) Meanwhile, if you are misled, you have nobody to blame but yourself (10:44)...even though god may have SELECTED you to be misled. (!)

24:35 and 24:40 refer to god as LIGHT (a standard Abrahamic metaphor); yet reiterate that he chooses not to guide everyone. In other words, it is a narrow light with a highly-selective beam.

And so it goes: The impresario of the cosmic order pre-selects certain people to intentionally keep in the dark...so that he may then delight in condemning them to hellfire. Splendid.

6:122-123 not only notifies us that there are some god intentionally misleads, it also notifies us that god calculatedly places criminals in the world. (Meanwhile, verses like 30:53 amount to nothing more than a catch-22.) How does such a sadistic set-up make sense? It's simple: The Koran's protagonist PREPARED hellfire; and he very much wants to feed it. He MADE hell, so now he has an urge to fill it. 3:54 and 27:4 notify us that god goes so far as to DECEIVE non-Muslims in order to ensure their damnation. In 17:64, he actually instructs Satan to mislead as many people as possible. 3:154 even notifies us that certain people are "appointed to be slain". What's going on here?

Condemning people to burn in hell for all eternity, then, is gratifying for the deity portrayed in the Koran. He is earnest to damn. There is no remorse (ref. 9:125).

To reiterate, god CAUSES certain people to be misled (i.e. to remain in the dark). Intentionally misleading people so that you can torture them: this is the m.o. of the Koran's protagonist. Why such sadism? Who knows? Surely, god has his reasons. After all, he is "the best of schemers" (8:30). (Note that "schemers" is sometimes translated as "planners"...though the context indicates more a kind of machination.)

So the game-plan is as follows: Pre-select certain people to be misled (read: damned), then blame it on them. As if to add insult to injury, 24:11 explains that he who is damned "took it upon himself" to be punished. (!) This cosmology is deranged even by the standards of Iron Age superstition. Yet the scheme makes perfect sense if we assume a sadistic overlord—such as the Koran's protagonist.

One's lot in life is pre-ordained, but as to WHY, we shall be kept in the dark (4:32 and 8:42-44). (The implication is that we should thus be RESIGNED TO our lot in life, as it is what god has assigned to us.) As 2:269 makes clear, if a person has wisdom, it is only because god wanted to GIVE it to that particular person. Therefore if a person does NOT have wisdom, it is because god decided NOT to give that person wisdom. So the nature of one's Earthly existence basically depends on how one fared in the grand lottery that is god's whim. According to 14:10 and 35:11, god has even already designated our time of death. (Yet—peculiarly—in 3:144, he seemed to be unaware of how his own Last Prophet would die.)

In the Koran, predestination is not limited to salvation / damnation. According to 43:32, each person's social rank is pre-ordained. Thus, we should all be resigned to our lot in life. Whatever it is, it's what god ordained. For those who are impoverished, it's all part of god's grand plan; so who are you to question it? Accept your dire lot in life; and don't complain. It's god's will. Any spoils we do or do not get in life is entirely according to divine ordinance (34:36). All you are obligated to do is distribute a portion of your own disposable wealth (as "zakat") to the less fortunate; and let god sort out the rest.

3:37 explains that god chooses to whom there shall and shall not be given bounty. That is: the allotment of

affluence and poverty is all divinely ordained (10:107). (Wealth and destitution is a result of god's will, doncha know.) That our lot in life is pre-ordained seems to fly in the face of "jihad" (i.e. striving to determine our own fate; or an enterprise to improve one's lot; or a struggle to better oneself)...unless, that is, we suppose that such endeavor is limited to pleasing the deity.

But shall ALL aspiration ultimately be a matter of currying favor with a cosmic overlord...in the hopes that one will secure his good graces? It seems we paint ourselves into a corner with even the most charitable interpretation.

It is important to note that this is not merely a matter of destiny in the modern sense of personal mission ("find your own destiny") or serendipity ("we were destined to meet"). This is pre-destination: something that entails that all outcomes are established ahead of time; that said outcomes are a FOREGONE CONCLUSION. Thus: Certain people are pre-selected for an allotted fate in the hereafter; and there's nothing they can do about it. This is a much stronger claim than suppositions about mere Providence (a romantic notion of, say, fulfilling one's destiny).

It might also be noted that "destiny" is almost always used in a positive light. After all, it is a romantic notion. The purpose of invoking it is to inspire to spur aspiration, not to resign people to dire outcomes. In other words, the point of positing "destiny" is to foster dreams. This treatment of "what's in store for us" accommodates the exercise of free will.

Pre-destination, on the other hand, effectively renders free will moot—even as the ILLUSION THEREOF may be sustained. This goes beyond romantic notions of "destiny". PIA who defend the Koranic theme of predestination by equating it with the innocuous-seeming "destiny" of heart-warming fairy-tales are being disingenuous. "Don't you believe in DESTINY?" they ask rhetorically, knowing full well that the issue has nothing to do with what we commonly encounter in cheesy romantic comedies. Rather pertains to a PRE-DETERMINED OUTCOME—primarily having to do with salvation vs. damnation.

The more idiomatic uses of Providentialism do not entail pre-destination; as they pertain to having god's blessing. Providence GUIDES things. It is about god urging certain outcomes—yet still leaving the course of events to the prerogative of mere mortals. Thus, to speak of "fate" is merely to speak of "how things will eventually turn out"...with the ACTUALIZATION of the outcomes still up in the air. In this sense, destiny is—in part—in a perpetual "to be determined" status: pending, subject to modification given sufficient will-power.

By contrast, pre-destination puts god ENTIRELY in the driver's seat. Destiny, by contrast, is often understood to mean something less final. To hold that certain things were divinely ordained (to come to pass in a foreordained way) does not go quite so far as inevitability. Usually, destiny is something we are charged with FULFILLING. In other words, it is the thing that we strive to realize. Insofar as we are religious, we do so with the help and inspiration that god opts to give us. But we are still PARTLY in the driver's seat.

The supposition that the course of events is decreed FROM THE OUTSET appeals to those who would rather leave everything in the hands of a parental figure—especially if it is a figure of COSMIC PROPORTIONS. If his will is unimpeachable, then WHY NOT defer to his grand scheme? Such existential resignation is also referred to as "fatalism"; which ends up being indistinguishable from nihilism. (Paradoxically, it might be considered nihilism-with-a-purpose.) This often has rather bleak repercussions. After all, being resigned to one's lot in life is advantageous only to those benefiting from the incumbent power structure.

The Koranic scheme of “qadar” engenders a weird combination of neurosis and false hope...which is precisely what the Koran’s demented protagonist seems to want. For further discussion of such convoluted emotional states, see the appropriate Endnotes. This bizarre cocktail of fear and devotion is not uncommon in cult activity. For more on the use of fear to control people, see my essay, “Nemesis”. For more on the use of false hope to control people, see “The Island”.

Insofar as fear instills respect, one will find such a deity eminently worthy of being worshipped. It’s why people have so often revered tyrannical despots...and cheered the (terrifying) ersatz righteousness of the gallows. More to the point, this is why people have viewed the ruler who opts NOT to condemn them as an act of mercy for which they should be eternally grateful. Such an obtuse conception of “mercy” is, of course, a cruel trick. (Refraining from cruelty is only called “mercy” by the diabolical.) The religion called “surrender” outlined in the Koran is no different from such scenarios.

“Qadar”, then, is a highly problematic thing. This single feature of the Koran may be the most fatal indictment against its theology. For this feature ALONE brings the rest of the proposed cosmic scheme into question.

Note that this problem does not stem from just one or two errant passages. OVER A HUNDRED passages (listed here) corroborate this deranged theology...not just a handful of dubiously-worded statements that can be “taken out of context”. This deranged theme PERMEATES the Koran from beginning to end...yet it is rarely talked about openly. That is a serious problem that PIA cannot explain away.

The manner in which Islamic theologians leave room for agency / volition (“irada”) varies; yet they invariably employ some crude form of compatibilism. This affords a place for intentionality (“nia”), thereby justifying one’s need to strive (“jihad” in the spiritual sense).

Thus NOTHING happens unless GOD explicitly wills it so—per his “amruh” (command); or as a “hukm” (edict). Ergo all the utterly pointless suffering and death of innocent people since homo sapiens first walked the Earth is simply “part of god’s plan”. In other words: Everything that happens, no matter how awful, is justified. Children dying of cancer? The way things ought to be.

In Surah 6, verses 107-112 and 125 explain that god WANTS pagans to be pagans. Recall the determinism found in the Koran, as when it says that god not only created US, but created WHAT WE DO. (So much for free will.) For those who don’t believe, it is because god has “sealed up their hearts” (10:74) and “covered their minds” (2:7).

Such uber-determinism is like Calvinism on steroids. The deck is stacked. The dice are loaded. The race is fixed. Your “destiny” pre-determined. The outcome is a foregone conclusion. The salvation / damnation status for each of us has already be ordained—established from the outset. Whatever happens will inevitably happen. God has already decided on our ultimate destination. Our fate is sealed. {12}

And so it goes: Per the Koran, the game is rigged. But this is nothing new. Even in the Hebrew Bible, it is made clear that the Abrahamic deity deliberately CREATES EVIL (e.g. Isaiah 45:7). As mentioned, Paul’s second letter to Timothy (1:9) is explicit about pre-destination.

In the New Testament, we are reminded that Isaiah declared god deliberately blinds some, while hardening their hearts (John 12:37-40). In Romans 9:15-18, it is made clear that god picks and chooses according to his own whim. This should sound familiar to those who have read the Koran. {15}

Most ghastly of all is probably 3:178, in which the book’s protagonist brags that he will deliberately

prolong the amount of time non-Muslims will BE non-Muslim, thereby affording them additional opportunity to augment their sinfulness. He WANTS them to rack up as much sin as possible so that he may revel in punishing them all-the-more. [One needs to read this perfidious passage oneself to believe it's really there.] This is not mere hunger for retribution; this is unabashed sadisim. The mendacity continues, with such malicious passages as 5:14—in which the book's protagonist explains that he planted amongst non-Muslim "People of the Book" enmity and hatred.

In 6:66, 10:99, and 42:48, the Koran is adamant that one should not try to contravene what god has ordained. In other words: Don't try to tamper with each man's assigned fate (i.e. those who are destined to be saved vs. those who are destined to be damned). Thus: What's meant to be is meant to be, and there's nothing you can do about it. So don't bother trying to help anyone. Their fate was sealed before they were even born. Divine ordinance is what dictates how things will go; not human intervention.

This explains the enjoinder of 109:6, "Unto you your religion; unto me my religion" as well as the admonishment of 2:256, "There is no compulsion in religion." All you can do is follow sharia law, and work to ensure it is enforced. Each man's conscience is his own. So leave non-believers alone until they encounter the Day of Judgement, on which they will swoon (52:45-47). Everything will be worked out on the final Day of Reckoning; so don't worry about the fate of others. It's out of your hands, and non-Muslims will get what's coming to them, as the verse following 2:256 stipulates in lurid detail. Funny how PIA rarely quote 2:257 after quoting 2:256. {16}

Passages like 28:14 (about Moses coming of age) indicate that god gives certain people "good judgement and knowledge", and then rewards them for doing good. In other words, for each of us, the game is rigged from the outset. Salvation is a birthright. It might be noted that birthright based on bloodline / race (as with Judeo-Supremacism and Aryan-Supremacism) and birthright based on divine ordinance are equally deranged. Both involve a "chosen people" mentality...predicated on accident of birth.

One's fate ("dahr") is a foregone conclusion, because god already has a set plan. {17} All he has left to do is just carry it out (2:253, 3:47/54, 5:1, 6:107, 7:89/99, 9:55/85, 11:107, 12:100, 13:42, 22:14, 45:24, etc.) The problem here is that it is variously said that god HAS planned, and that he is STILL planning. Which is it?

On this point, the verb tense is inconsistent throughout the Koran. Is the plan already in place (6:111-112), or is it still in the making (e.g. 86:16)? Is it already set (68:45 indicates god already has a plan), or is it still in development (10:21 indicates that god can make plans faster than humans can)? The authors of the Koran seemed not to be able to decide one way or the other. (Of course, this discrepancy makes perfect sense once we recognize different parts of the book came from disparate sources.)

The problem with this SEMANTIC inconsistency is that, either way, there's a theological snafu. If god already knows the outcome, then why does he still need to react to new developments (and thus modify his plan, as indicated in 10:21 and 86:16)? If the plan has been set in stone from the beginning (as stated in 6:111-112 and 68:45), then we must contend with the troubling implications of "qadar". {18}

Throughout the Koran, we hear denouncements of "those who do not know"; yet it seems that "those who don't know" don't know because god didn't designate them as those who would know (or even CAUSED to not know). Meanwhile, the "deniers" (those who were notified, yet declined) seem to have been pre-selected for their wrong-headed-ness. 28:68 explains that god "creates what he wills and chooses; not for them [those who believed] was the choice". Really? So he will elect those who shall "see the light" (and reward them for having been elected) and will misguide others (and punish them for being misguided). So much for striving.

It is a queer thing that a book purports to offer guidance to everyone even as some are being deliberately lead astray by the author. 72:10 explains that evil was INTENDED for certain people, and others were intended to be shown the right course. We're all pawns in this rigged game, and are expected to thank the Dungeon Master for the privilege of getting to play in it. (10:88 adds that EVEN BELIEVERS want disbelievers to remain misled, so that they'll be damned.) {19}

This charade becomes especially inane when we're given a catch-22 in 40:28, in which it is explained that god doesn't guide transgressors. Does this invert cause and effect, or is it a mere tautology? (37:162-163 is also a tautology: The only ones who can be tempted away from the Straight Path ("as-Sirat al-mustaqim") are those designated for damnation...and vice versa.) As though to make this more confounding (if not utterly dismaying), passages like 2:284 and 5:40 notify us that the Koran's protagonist is capricious.

Bear in mind, all that has been decreed by the Abrahamic deity is written in "al-Lawh al-Mahfuz", the eternal "Preserved Tablet". (By the way, this tablet is carried by "the hands" of special messenger angels, per 80:15.) So Koranic verse is UN-CREATED just as the fate of each human is pre-determined.

Put another way: The recitation that is the Koran "always was". It has existed since the beginning of time...and was effectively "on hold" until the cosmic overlord saw fit to finally deliver it to mankind in the early 7th century. (The dated nature of many verses belies this contention.)

The problem gets worse and worse the more we think about it. For god not only pre-ordains the lifetime of people, but of all nations as well. In verses like 7:34, 10:49, 15:5, and 23:43, we're told that the Abrahamic deity selects the beginning and the end of each nation. (A nation, we're told, doesn't come into existence a day earlier, nor to does it endure a day later, than the appointed time.)

How downright bizarre, then, for the protagonist of the Koran to have decided, in 1948, to cause the Nakba and create the Judeo-Supremacist state of Israel. (!) That was a strange way to show appreciation to Muslims in the region. (Allowing generation after generation of Muslims in the Levant to be consigned to such a miserable fate seems at odds with the promise to votaries made in Islam's holy book.)

Yet, according to the Koran, the Nakba was god's plan all along. What did the Palestinians do to be subjected to such a horrific chain of events? *What kind of plan is this?* God only knows; but votaries are forced to honor it.

If the Creator of the Universe is, indeed, picking the winners and the losers (as the Koran says he does), then the Nakba was a peculiar choice. Once we take into account verses like 2:89, 2:250, 2:286, 3:13, 3:126, 5:56, 8:10, 9:14, 13:41, 22:39, 28:35, 30:3, 37:171-173, 40:51, 58:21, and 59:12 (16 verses that promise victory for Muslims over non-Muslims) it becomes impossible to get history to comport with Koranic pronouncements.

Further back in history, we encounter other quizzical applications of this cosmic statute. When god sided with the (pagan) Mongols in the 12th and 13th centuries, what was he thinking? Even though most of the Mongols later adopted elements of Islam (for what seem to be social / political reasons), the initial Mongol invasions led to the deaths of innumerable devout Muslims...AND the demise of the caliphate. This is an odd choice for the Creator of the Universe to make if he was, indeed, the Koran's protagonist.

In fact, the more we think about the bold, sweeping claim (regarding what amounts to manifest destiny) of 7:34, 10:49, 15:5, and 23:43, the more utterly confounding it becomes. Is it not odd that, in 1776, the Koran's protagonist (if we are to believe he is guiding all events) opted to initiate the most powerful and

prosperous nation in the history of the world...YET...make its government categorically secular (even as its population was predominantly Christian)? Is it not also odd that he opted to terminate the Ottoman Empire pursuant to the First World War? What's going on here? He seems to be picking sides at odds with his declared mission.

What about the caliphate? Where is THAT now? And what a strange decision to establish the House of Saud (a draconian monarchy drenched in obscene decadence) to rule over Arabia. Hundreds of millions of people have made an honest effort to appease their fickle deity, and this is the thanks they get?

Per the events of 1948 and thereafter, the modern nation-state of "Israel" would seem to be god's will. It MUST be, if the Koran is correct. What are we to make of this paradox? Was the "Nakba" really a blessing? Such schizophrenic Providence amounts to a *reductio ad absurdum*. It takes a concerted effort to not notice this.

So IS there any room for free will? Yes and no. The reconciliation of pre-destination and free will is a conundrum that theologians have grappled with since Classical Antiquity; and—as with the problem of "evil"—is usually only resolved via a litany of semantic acrobatics. It is no coincidence that one of the more intellectually vibrant sects in Islamic history, the short-lived Mu'tazilites (see my essay on "Islam's Pyrite Age") rejected the Koranic doctrine of pre-destination, insisting that each human had control over his own mind—and life—independently of god's will. {20}

Note that while three Koranic passages (2:256, 18:29, and 109:6) obliquely indicate that there IS freedom to choose one's Faith, passages like 3:28-32, 3:85, 4:144, 5:51, 18:29, 30:45, and 60:1 indicate that each person's Faith is pre-ordained; and that Muslims should kill those who have not been endowed with the appropriate fealty: 4:89 and 9:5.

In 10:100, we are told that god chooses who believes. (Notably, in 28:10, god CAUSED Moses' mother to be a believer.) In light of this, the two oft-quoted verses that intimate "freedom of religion" (2:256 and 109:6) make perfect sense: Be resigned to your—and everyone else's—fate. God has already ordained how things will go. It's not up to us to try to alter destiny.

As for any given person's Faith, whatever will be will be; so it's out of anyone's hands. Let it be. {21} In the end, the impression that we can thwart divine ordinance is illusory; yet we live our daily life as if we were in control of ourselves. As has been sardonically quipped: We have no choice but to believe in free will.

FOOTNOTES:

{1 The concept of redemption is often a double-entendre. For it has a moral connotation and a pecuniary connotation, each of which insinuates the other. }

{2 In other words, the unaccountable accountant is also a rapacious rent-seeker. So how could he NOT be cooking the books? }

{3 As for-profit businesses, operations like Scientology and Landmark charge money for (alleged) Enlightenment—a gimmick employed by most other "self-help" cults, who's members tend to measure "success" by personal financial gain. Call it "salvation as affluence"—an approach epitomized by Calvinists, who deem wealth to be a sign of divine favor; and poverty to be a sign of failing to curry favor with the Abrahamic deity. }

{4 The rational here is that, in treating a Palestinian Jew as a savior-god is that in making his love a matter of remuneration, the Abrahamic deity would be no better than the tax-collectors (who show affection only for those from whom they first receive something). Indeed, the protagonist of the Koran is the ULTIMATE tax-collector. He treats his relationship with humans as a bargain—a DEAL. Consequently, such transactional soteriology is seen as cheapening what is a profound existential issue.}

{5 Such rigging is a problem regardless of whether one approaches it in the Christian or Islamic way. The problem with “original sin”, it might be noted, is that we all start out in arrears; and so have to arrange a bail-out. (See Appendix.) The “catch” is that the bail-out comes for free IF we sign up for the program. Jesus of Nazareth as the “Christ” paid our debt for us; but now we owe HIM, in the form of fealty / worship. Meanwhile, the problem with Koranic theology (at least, with regard to “qadar”) is that it is established from the get-go whether or not we’ll END UP in arrears; so all we can do is pander as much as we can...and hope for the best.}

{6 It is known, for example, that homosexuality was welcome in ancient Mesopotamia; so this “path” certainly did not involve the kind of puritanism found in the Abrahamic traditions.}

{7 This mustn’t be confused with “din” in Hebrew, which means judgement. The equivalent Sanskrit term is “nyaya”.

{8 This is, of course, a precursor to the fabled “Night Journey” of Mohammedan lore. However, this was a very special kind of revelation. In Parmenides’ account, the goddess seems to be saying: Hey, I’m just bringing this to your attention; but don’t take MY word for it. Don’t depend on precedent. Question it. Use your own powers of reasoning and see for yourself. The actual passage: “You must hold back your thought from this way of inquiry. Do not let habit, born of much experience, force you down this way, by making you use an aimless eye or an ear and a tongue full of meaningless sound. Judge by reason the much-disputed refutation spoken by me.” For more on flying horses, see my essays on “Mythemes”.

{9 In Islam, piety is a function of SUBORDINATION, which is done more out of fear than out of love. After all, the Koranic concept, “taqwa” equates piety with fear (as in the imperative: “ittaquallah”). When it comes to Revisionist Zionism, the trope is used as the basis for ethno-centric hyper-nationalism. In either case, following the divinely-ordained path is equated with fulfilling the destiny of the exalted in-group. The “it’s all part of god’s plan” rationalization is an illustration that Providentialism and tribal Exceptionalism go hand in hand.}

{10 Much of this involves esoterica. Indeed, “Vajrayana” is itself considered a mystical practice—as with “tang-mi” / “mi-zong” in Chinese mysticism or “mikkyo” in Japanese mysticism.}

{11 “Kismet” was adopted by the Ottoman Turks, and is now part of the Turkish vernacular. It was rendered “qisma” in Classical Arabic.}

{12 The Asharites ensured that it was clear that there is no causation IN the world (as it is understood scientifically), but that god alone directly causes everything to happen (via his divine will; “innama”). So when billiard-ball A hits billiard-ball B, it is not A that causes B to move; it is GOD that causes B to move. The concern is that attributing the incident movement of B to A would detract from god’s omnipotency (absolute sovereignty): “jabr”. According to this theological view, then, natural causation is an illusion (see footnote 22). The Abrahamic deity is the author of ALL things, including the deeds and thoughts of every human being. The Asharites, it might be noted, was one of the more influential movements in early Islam (see footnote 14). Their view in commonplace Islamic theology to this day; as it

is entirely in keeping with the Koran. }

{ 13 This is in keeping with the Gospel of John 12:37-40, where we are notified that Isaiah declared that god intentionally blinds certain people and hardens their hearts to ensure they disbelieve. }

{ 14 The most notable proponent of Asharism was the doyen of anti-intellectualism, Al-Ghazali—who was eager to embrace the notion that Revelation must always trump Reason. (The only form of Reason he endorsed was INSTRUMENTAL reason.) The rejection of causality comported with Al-Ghazali’s repudiation of critical inquiry (which he saw to be incompatible with religiosity). Moreover, it helped to rationalize the religious zealotry he propounded. His approach had undeniable utility for those in power, so he promptly won the favor of the political elites. After all, a population that is not inclined to question anything—as everything that happens is what god ordained—is a pliant population. (“Everything is as it’s supposed to be; and all we need to know is that’s how god wants it.”) The mainstream adoption of Al-Ghazali’s weltanschauung—replete with the Ashari view of “qadar”—precipitated the dissolution of Islam’s Golden Age, and precluded any Enlightenment from occurring in the Islamic world. This denial of causality forestalled scientific activity indefinitely. }

{ 15 Contrast this threat to harden the hearts of the un-chosen—so as to existentially sabotage them—with Ezekiel 36:26-27. “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” }

{ 16 For PIA, such obfuscation is common practice. Simply find a superficially nice-sounding passage and take it out of context; then pretend it means something that it clearly doesn’t mean. As discussed elsewhere, this is often done with 5:32, which mentions a statement that god made to the Israelites FOR the Israelites (to kill one soul is like killing all mankind; with major exceptions). Rarely do Islamic apologists read on, and quote the following verse. Indeed, 5:33 spells out exactly what the passage—taken in its entirety—is for. What it is NOT is a general statement against taking the lives of fellow human beings, applicable to everyone. }

{ 17 Note that “plan” is sometimes translated as “scheme”. In this sense, “planning” is “scheming”. }

{ 18 And, by the way, if you want to SEE what god’s plan is for you, 22:15 instructs you to commit suicide by hanging yourself...so that you can find out. }

{ 19 For what it’s worth, this deranged theme is corroborated in “Sahih” hadith. For example, “Muslim” no. 6622 and no. 6921 notify us that god WANTS there to be sinful people in the world. Thus: The Creator of the Universe has a vested interest in sinfulness so that he can carry out his plan—an integral part of which is filling up hell. 4:117-122 reminds us that satan is recruited to ensure this happens, yet is instructed to only mislead those whom god has marked for damnation. }

{ 20 The irony was that, once it became a political force, the Mu’tazilite potentates FORCED people to abide by this creed—using draconian means reminiscent of the Roman Catholic Inquisition (the “mihna”). Call it “obligatory recognition of one’s freedom of will”. (The jokes write themselves: You have no choice but to believe in free will. You are REQUIRED to think for yourself; otherwise you will be punished for insubordination. Etc.) It was a reminder that even when religionists attempt to promote autonomy, they have no choice but to subvert it in order to keep the religiosity intact. As it happened, it was Mu’tazilism that was encouraging the “bid’ah” (innovation) that animated this “Golden Age” of intellectual vibrancy; so when the movement fell out of favor, so too did the trend of philosophical inquiry. Alas, the most viable

alternative to Mu'tazili thought at the time was the literalism preached by Ibn Hanbal. And so it went, the Hanbali school rose to prominence. The demise of Islam's Golden Age followed soon thereafter (see my essay on Islam's Pyrite Age). The legacy of Hanbal is still seen in the Salafi / Wahhabi form of Islam...now with THEIR OWN Inquisitions. Irony upon irony.}

{21 The belief is effectively: Whatever happens, happens because it's part of god's plan. Thus the "give your life over to god" is an exhortation to surrender not only one's will, but one's mind. This proposes a kind of empowerment via submission. It also entails a kind of resignation: "It's all in god's hands; so who are we to question anything?" Those in power have leveraged this for their own purposes: Don't challenge the established order; be resigned to your assigned lot in life. For everything is just as god has willed it.}

{22 This Ashari "anti-causality" paradigm mustn't be confused with the "occasionalism" of, say, Malebranche; or with Hume's "constant conjunction of events"—both of which were naturalistic.}

APPENDIX: Original Sin

The Koran reiterates the myth of The Fall in order to re-instantiate the doctrine of "original sin" (O.S.), as attested by 7:16-28 and 20:115-123. Thus: We are born sick, and god will make us better so long as we cater to his demands.

In effect, the Abrahamic deity created us with an ailment so that we could then thank him in the event he opts to cure us (otherwise known as the "create the sickness, then offer the cure" routine.) That such a scheme is predicated on a strangely self-ingratiating deity seems not to occur to most votaries. *

The protagonist of the Koran has a very low vision of mankind. As he states in 14:34, "Mankind is most unjust and ungrateful." According to Islam's holy book, the Creator of the Universe is displeased and disappointed with his Creation...and seeks to do something about it...just as would any perturbed totalitarian dictator. As with most self-absorbed rulers, the protagonist of the Koran is very, very impressed with himself—and demands that everyone else be impressed as well.

The "catch" in Islam is that there is no O.S. We all begin life with an even "balance" in our account—neither in the red nor in the black. This initial state is known as "fitra[h]"; and we proceed from there according to merits (via "ihsan") and demerits (via "dhanb" / "khati'a") that are accumulated over the course of one's life. Thus the treatment of salvation / damnation as transactional.

It is not for nothing that the source of O.S. in the Christian tradition was an abiding fascination with "Man's Fall" in Eden for having had the insolence to hunger for knowledge. (His crime, after all, was eating from the tree of knowledge.) In this scheme, Kant's credo, "Sapere Aude!" [dare to know; i.e. have the courage to use your own mind] is an unforgivable transgression. The supplicant is expected to simply BELIEVE; and to NOT be too interested in eating from the Tree of Knowledge. (As a cheeky New Yorker cartoon once put it, it's as if god forbade seeking to know things while seeming to add: "But feel free to eat of the shrub of delusion.")

This creed, then, is founded on an exaltation of intellectual IN-curiousity—the epitome of anti-intellectualism; which equates with a deference to "received wisdom" (which is, it turns out, rarely ACTUAL wisdom). This deference is what enables a dogmatic system to subsist. For when part of a memplex is to NOT QUESTION the memplex, the memplex immunizes itself from the dangers of critical scrutiny. It is, after all, the memplexes that are the best at self-reinforcement that tend to survive.

The notion of O.S. is effectively a built-in dogma-protection feature. It is not for nothing, then, that Saul of

Tarsus was the first major proponent of O.S. He was obsessed with the inherent stain of humanity; and saw this as the primary excuse for submission to his new cult (which, it turned out, had very little to do with “The Way” founded by the quasi-historical Jesus of Nazareth, as found in the Gnostic and Synoptic Gospels).

This motif is to be contrasted with the Buddhist tradition, in which attainment of Enlightenment [alt. Awakening; “bodhi”] is the sumum bonum of existence. In its foundation myth, the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) is BORN UNDER a tree of knowledge (the so-called “Bodhi” tree). Lo and behold: It is supposed to have been a fig tree, which means it bore fruit which we are ENCOURAGED to eat.

The Mohammedan tradition offers its own twist on the anti-knowledge theme. In effect, the Koran’s protagonist created us with an ailment so that we could thank him for curing us. That such a scheme is predicated on a strangely self-ingratiating deity seems not to occur to most votaries. This entails that we must essentially apologize for being human. Here, humanity is NOT something to which one should aspire. Rather, it is something from which one must be redeemed.

The Koran does not posit O.S. in the Christian sense. Instead, it puts mankind in another kind of theological bind. We are in jeopardy of displeasing a pathologically vindictive cosmic overlord. (Indeed, a predicament of epic proportions!)

And so it goes: Instead of a deity offering to save us from a condition of inherent depravity (in which we must apologize for our humanity), the Koran’s protagonist—temperamental and unyielding—offers to save us from...HIMSELF. That is to say, he’ll rescue us from the terrifying consequences of his own wrath.

Thus we are put in a terrifying imbroglio by X, then expected to be thankful when X offers us a way out. If we refuse this fantastic offer, we’re told, then we have nobody to blame but ourselves. Soteriology, then, is a marketing strategy (insofar as salvation is a consumer product).

Regarding this gimmick, the contrast between Christianity and Islam is interesting. In Christianity, we’re injected with the (alleged) poison before the game even begins; then we are offered the (alleged) antidote...dangling just out of reach. As the lethal toxin of O.S. is coursing through our veins, the clock is ticking, “So make your choice before it’s too late.”

In the Koran, on the other hand, we’re threatened with a vile of lethal poison—which will only be withheld if we obey (and flatter) our master. Meanwhile, our master holds in his other hand a magical pill (that promises to transport us to Never-Never Land). It’s all in HIS hands (and he is extremely temperamental). Therefore, we’d be well advised to placate him.

Of course, in both religions, the “poison” is a hoax. Mankind needs no “cure”. ** There is no existential predicament. We are in no dilemma...other than that of our own making. This intellectually bankrupt—and spiritually debilitating—mindset is based on a sham. That is, it countenances a predicament that is self-imposed. So why all the fuss?

The manufactured need to purge the inherent guilt of humanity is a ruse—using the timeless formula: Create the (purported) disease then offer the (purported) cure. The cure rests on the notion that an innate sinfulness needs to be expunged in the prescribed manner—as if worship could somehow—magically—serve as a kind of atonement for what is held to be a universal crime.

Must we grovel before a (interminably temperamental and pathologically vindictive) despotic overlord (i.e. the protagonist of the Hebrew Bible), and beg to be forgiven for being human? Given all the injustice and pointless suffering in the world, and given the fact that this despotic overlord is as petulant as he is petty, it

seems that the guilt lies elsewhere.

If one were to meet the Abrahamic deity, it's not we—as humans—who are obliged ask for forgiveness from him; it is HE who should be asking for forgiveness from US.

And so it goes: O.S. creates a longing to atone for an ethereal guilt that we carry about all of the wrongs we may have done; all the ways we may have displeased our master. Yet it tells us that the stain is endemic to humanity itself. It is our HUMAN-ness that is tarnished. Show remorse for having been unethical? No. We must show contrition for being human. Humanity is our SHORTCOMING, not our salvation. It is not something to embrace, but something for which we should apologize.

We might ask: Which is worse? Feeling as though one needs to be forgiven for being human or feeling that one needs to beg for mercy from a cosmic overlord inclined to exact vengeance on us if we fail to pay him adequate tribute? Either way, he allegedly made us the way that we are. While O.S. tells us that god made us human and expects us to feel bad about it, the Koran tells us that god made us his slaves and expects us to grovel in submission so as to keep him appeased.

Religion is a sort of business, after all. As with most cult activity, Faith is a commodity to barter and trade. Salvation is effectively rendered a consumer product. When it comes to deliverance supply (i.e. supplication) will tend to meet (the perceived) demand.

If the goal is to sell something, then (persuasively) create the perception of a need for it...and demand for it will ensue. Hence the “create the sickness, then offer the cure” gimmick that is used by all three Abrahamic religions (and, for that matter, Scientology, the military-industrial complex, and the for-profit-sickness-treatment-industry). This ploy is epitomized by 19:71: “Everyone is approaching hell. This is an irrevocable decision of god.” Thus, we are plunged into a dire predicament BY god...SO THAT god can save us from it. All of us are then expected to spend our lives pleading the god to extricate us from this existential pickle...even as he deliberately put us there.

Suffice to say, the Koran's protagonist has a very low vision of “nas” [mankind]; as he fashions the entirety of humanity as his slaves. As he states in 14:34, “Mankind is most unjust and ungrateful.” According to Islam's holy book, the Creator of the Universe is displeased—and disappointed—with his Creation...and seeks to do something about it...just as would any perturbed totalitarian dictator with unruly subjects.

As with most self-absorbed rulers, the protagonist of both the Torah and the Koran is very, very impressed with himself—and demands that everyone else be impressed as well. But, in the end, we must ask: Are we obliged to apologize for being human?

Humanity is not a transgression; it is a progression.

{ * Never mind the cockamamie theme of vicarious atonement, whereby god is said to have tortured HIMSELF (on behalf of mankind) so that he didn't have to punish mankind for its inherent guilt; and that simply recognizing this fact is adequate for absolution (whereas anyone who fails to recognize the fact deserves eternal punishment). Justice knows no surrogates. More to the point, the notion that god sacrificed himself TO himself is rather a rather topsy-turvy theological gimmick. }

{ ** And so it goes: Our humanity is our guilt; our guilt is our humanity. This deranged theme goes back to the earliest days of the Abrahamic tradition. In Judaism, we are expected to believe that mankind is saddled with an INNATE STAIN. We are told we must contend with this; and the only way to do so is via the good graces of a cosmic overlord. Yom Kippur is entirely about atonement. Atonement for what? As with Christianity's conception of O.S., humans must apologize for our humanity. During Yom Kippur,

Jews are exhorted to spend the entire day pleading for forgiveness. Forgiveness for what? For being human. Only other people can forgive us for injustices we've committed against them; so the forgiveness sought during Yom Kippur is of an entirely theological nature. As with Islam, the Abrahamic deity is said to have a log-book [The Book of Life]—a ledger in which he inscribes names so as to keep track of who's naughty and who's nice. Just as it is with the logs kept by the Koran's protagonist, the notion of a cosmic register is every bit as daft as Santa Claus' list. Hence the conception of salvation / damnation as transactional. }