

B. Papers

Revisiting “Turkish Fatalism”; Or, Why Ottoman Theology Matters

ETHAN L. MENCHINGER (Manchester)¹

There are certain dirty words in Ottoman history, words that make a specialist raise an eyebrow or purse the lips. Fatalism is one such word. For most of us, the term evokes outdated tropes of a piece with Ottoman “decline,” “despotism,” or “sensuality.” Few would use the word at all, save in discussing Orientalism or early modern travel literature, and even then we might add appropriate scare quotes to disavow it.² While this impulse is an understandable reaction against invidious stereotypes, as is otherwise avoiding the idea or implications of “Turkish fatalism,” I feel it is misguided. Both to provoke and make a point about

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 - 2 E.g., E. Said, *Orientalism* (London 1995), 102, 345. Nükhet Varlık italicizes the phrase “Turkish fatalism” in her excellent study of plague so as to isolate it as an Orientalist trope: N. Varlık, *Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman Experience, 1347–1600* (Cambridge 2015), esp. 72–88.

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our field, namely its neglect of all things theological, I use the word in what follows—and I use it often.³

This article revisits fatalism in the early modern Ottoman Empire. It takes fatalism seriously as a theological issue and for what it can reveal about our subjects: Muslim inhabitants of the empire, and how they saw their place as worldly creatures, spiritual beings, and moral agents in a larger divine order. After outlining the issue, a dilemma over God's foreknowledge and will and human action, I explore how fatalism shaped views of disease and warfare, respectively, in the 16th to 18th centuries. How far was fatalism an Orientalist trope? Were early modern Ottoman Muslims fatalists in any meaningful sense? The answer to these questions will depend on how we define our terms, but they lead to some perhaps uncomfortable conclusions. Fatalism was by no means purely a trope, I argue. And in a basic theological sense, yes, Ottoman Muslims were fatalist—though the full reality proved quite complex. Last, I will close with reflections on why such insights matter, and what scholars miss by ignoring them.

The Ottoman Empire and Theological Fatalism

We should first establish what we mean by fatalism. If we take the term in a strict sense, as a belief as a point of faith in fate or predestination, then we stand on firm footing in applying it to our subjects. Let us call this “theological fatalism.” Ottoman Muslims, of course, did not believe in “fate” as an abstract causal force, like the pre-Islamic Arab notion of *dahr*, but in a specific doctrine upholding God's divine decree and preordination of all things subsumed in the phrase *al-qaḍā wa'l-qadar* (Trk. *kaza vü kader*).⁴ Nor was this doctrine novel. The ideas one finds in the early modern empire were the fruit of centuries of earlier debate over God's will, knowledge, and creative power, and how these could be balanced with our own actions and moral responsibility as created beings.

3 Some years ago I treated freewill and predestination in early modern Ottoman politics, showing how the theology was mobilized both to support and oppose reform. I recall that, while preparing the article, a colleague pointedly advised me to avoid the word fatalism: E. L. Menchinger, “Free Will, Predestination, and the Fate of the Ottoman Empire”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 77 (2016), 445–66.

4 See *EI*², s.v. “Dahr” (W. M. Watt); *ibid.*, s.v. “al-Ḳaḍā' Wa'l-Ḳadar” (L. Gardet). See also *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, ed. John Esposito (Oxford 2003), s.v. “Fatalism”.

We can neatly outline the debate here. Scholars in Sunni Islam took an early interest in the issue of predestination because it touched directly on two of God's attributes—power and justice. If God is almighty, an entity who wills and creates all things, do we have any control over our own deeds? If God is omniscient, moreover, knowing everything that will ever occur in creation, does it not follow that He has decreed all aspects of our lives from preeternity? Scripture itself is equivocal. While affirming that God has inscribed each person's fate in the so-called "Preserved Tablet" (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*) in heaven—"the archetype of all things, past, present, and future"—the Quran and hadith at times assert absolute predestination but at others insist humans can direct our behavior to good or ill.⁵ This dilemma is not easily resolved. While Islamic scholars agreed that God is an all-powerful creator, they also accepted that He will judge humans, rewarding good and punishing evil. Yet reward and punishment are arbitrary, even unjust, if we lack the power to choose. The debate thus fixes upon a point of tension between preserving divine power, on the one hand, and ensuring that God remains all-just on the other.

The first centuries of Islam set the contours of debate. Choosing to err on the side of divine power, some thinkers held humans to be entirely constrained (*jabr*; Trk. *cebr*) in their acts and subject to God's will and decree. Opponents called this group *jabriyya* or *mujbira*—fatalist or predestinarian. At the other extreme, and often associated with Mu'tazilī theological circles, were those who placed justice at the fore and argued that humans must have freewill to choose good and evil, and even to "create" their own acts. These were called *qadariyya*. Neither view proved durable in the long run and, by the 10th century AD, Sunni theologians began to forge a middle way. If complete *jabr* made humans little better than marionettes, moved by the strings of God's decree, their freewill to choose and "create" actions also went too far—for creative power is limited to God alone.⁶

5 Quote from *EI*², s.v. "Lawḥ" (A. J. Wensinck and C. E. Bosworth). The tablet is also considered to be the uncreated "original" of the Quran, sent down in revelation: e.g., "Nay, but it is a glorious Koran, in a guarded tablet (85: 22)" and "Behold, we sent it [the Quran] down on the Night of Power (97: 1)" [(trans. A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London 1955)]. For scripture's equivocal statements on fate, see M. Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London 1948), 12–31.

6 See M. De Cillis, *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought: Theoretical Compromises in the Works of Avicenna, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn 'Arabī* (London 2014), 10–16; D. Gimaret,

A synthesis formed in time from the work of Ash‘arī and Māturīdī thinkers. This emerging orthodoxy, first, upheld God’s omnipotence and uniqueness as a creator by adopting an occasionalist, atomistic worldview. It maintained that God acts continually to create and recreate the universe, joining, separating, destroying, and recreating every atom at every instant in time. God is thus the only true cause in the world, pervading all things. Second, while humans are subject to divine will and have no real causal power, theologians conceded that they still take moral responsibility for their actions by “acquiring” (*kasb*; Trk. *kesb*) them from God.⁷ The famed al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) put the final touches on these ideas by aligning them superficially with Aristotelian causality. Al-Ghazālī sought to explain why, if God is the only true cause who wills and creates all things, the world as we observe it seems to work through independent cause and effect. His solution was to argue that this is “God’s custom” (*‘ādat Allah*; Trk. *adetullah*). That is, God chooses to create through the semblance of visible or secondary causes. God is the prime mover, “the One who makes causes function as causes” (*musabbib al-asbāb*) in most worldly affairs, the connections between which are only apparent rather than necessary, yet He can just as equally intervene directly to disrupt the regular course of events. God decrees, wills, and creates all things according to His preeternal knowledge, then, and what small agency remains to humans is non-creative and subject to the divine.⁸

Early modern Ottomans inherited this framework with minor modifications. Most notably, they cast human will in new terms. By the 16th century AD, intellectuals in the empire had coined a novel concept—“particular will” (*irade-i cūziyye / ihtiyar-ı cūzi*)—to elaborate how our volition relates to God’s will. The idea was that people have volition in limited areas of life (“particular events” or *umur-ı cūziyye*) by which they can choose to act or not, and thereby

Théories de l'acte humaine en théologie Musulmane (Paris 1980); and Watt, *Free Will and Predestination*. See also Menchinger, “Free Will”, 446–47.

7 On Islamic occasionalism, see D. Perler and U. Rudolph, *Occasionalism: Theorien der Kausalität im arabisch-islamischen und im europäischen Denken* (Göttingen 2000), 23–124; and S. Pines, *Studies in Islamic Atomism*, trans. M. Schwarz (Jerusalem 1997). See also Watt, *Free Will and Predestination*, 147–52; and F. Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford 2009), 123–33.

8 See Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s*, 216–22, 276–78; and Menchinger, “Free Will”, 447–48. On miracles as the “breaking of [God’s] custom,” see J. Brown, “Faithful Dissenters: Sunni Skepticism about the Miracles of Saints”, *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 1 (2012), 123–68.

exert influence on the world. While this concept grew during a harmonization of Ash‘arī and Māturīdī thought in Ottoman lands, much was left to debate, like what exactly the will is and how it operates.⁹ Yet the innovation did not change the basics: human will and deeds remained subject to divine preordination. Strictly speaking, “particular will” is not freewill. God knows and wills from time immemorial what each person will do in every situation, thinkers held. We merely direct our particular will toward this end and—since we have no creative power of our own—God creates the result.¹⁰

We can note other ideas of fate that seem to have held popular currency in the empire, many of which also feature in European sources in relation to plague and war. Apart from *al-qaḍā wa’l-qadar*, God’s inescapable decree and preordination of all things, and the related verbal noun *taqḍīr* (Trk. *takdir*), we find references to individual fate. Terms like *naṣīb* (*nasib*), *rizq* (*rızık*), and

9 On the “particular will” and its scholarly milieu, see P. Bruckmayr, “The Particular Will (*al-irādat al-juziyya*): Excavations Regarding a Latecomer in *Kalām* Terminology on Human Agency and its Position in Naqshbandi Discourse”, *European Journal of Turkish Studies* [online], 13 (2011); Idem, “The Spread and Persistence of Māturīdī *Kalām* and Underlying Dynamics”, *Iran and the Caucasus*, 13 (2009), 59–92; and P. Doroll, “Māturīdī Theology in the Ottoman Empire: Debating Human Choice and Divine Power”, in O. Demir et al (eds), *Osmanlı’da İlm-i Kelām: Âlimler, Eserler, Meseleler* (Istanbul 2016), 219–38. Questions persisted over the nature of will (*irāde*), intention (*qaṣd*), and resolution (*‘azm*), for instance. Are these “things” with external existence, and so must be created? İspirli Kadızade (d. ca. 1717) called the will “a conceptual matter (*amr i’tibārī*)” in the sense that is not. ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulūsī (d. 1731) also weighed if the will is an accident (*‘araḍ*), a state (*ḥāl*), or merely arises from a state. What also is a state—does it have external existence or is it a “quality” given to something that exists, without itself having existence or non-existence? See their respective treatises: İspirli Kadızade, *Risāla mumayyiza madhhab al-Māturīdiyya ‘an al-madhāhib al-ghayriyya* and ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulūsī, *Tabḥīq al-intişār fi ittifāq al-Ash‘arī wa’l-Māturīdī ‘alā khalq al-ikhtiyār*, ed. E. Badeen, in *Sunnitische Theologie in osmanischer Zeit* (Würzburg 2008), at 67 ff., and 82 ff.

10 While not a strict rendering of *irade-i cüziyye*, “freewill” is more idiomatic and an established translation. See Franciscus Meninski, *Thesaurus Linguarum Orientalium Turcicae-Arabicae-Persicae* (Vienna 1680), 1: 95, for *ihitiyār-ı cüzi*: “Liberum arbitrium. Ein freier Will. Il libero arbitrio. Le franc arbitre. Wolność wolej.” Frank Griffel (private communication, May 2018) suggests that “particular” is a misleading translation and we should read *cüzi* as “individual”: “*Irada juz’iyya* is hence the individual (act of) volition’ of a human to perform one single act.” İspirli (*Risāla mumayyiza*, 70) wrote that our actions are attributable to us in a limited and locative sense and to God in an “operative sense (*min ḥaythu huwa ḥaraka*).”

qisma (*kismet*) do not all derive from scripture and theological discourse but stem from roots meaning one's being allotted or apportioned something—in our case, they came to mean a fortune or destiny allotted by God.¹¹ The term *ajal* (*ecel*) referred more narrowly to the appointed term of a person's life and the hour of his or her death, a time nothing could change: “No one has his life prolonged or no one has his life cut short except (as it is written) in a book (of God's decrees) (35:12).”¹² The belief that our fates are “written” appears to have been widespread, as we shall see. Not only did God record all that was, is, and ever shall be in the “Preserved Tablet,” but it was said that He also inscribed each individual's personal fate (or at least *ajal*) in invisible writing on their forehead. Fate in this guise was inevitable, irrevocable, and literally inscrutable.¹³ Last, in considering people's responses to dangers like plague, we should address the role of trust in God (*tawakkul*, Trk. *tevekkül*). Scripture instructs believers to trust entirely in God and submit to providence with acceptance and pious resignation. Some earlier thinkers held trust in God to be a pillar of faith,

11 *EI*², s.v. “Takḍīr” (A. Levin); *ibid.*, s.v. “Rizk” (C. E. Bosworth and J. D. McAuliffe); *ibid.*, s.v. “Kisma” (C. E. Bosworth). Also Meninski, who represents 17th-century Ottoman usage: (s.v. Takdir) “Destinatio, praedestinatio, Divinae potentiae decretum, & inevitable fatum ...*taktīrī rebbānīde mukadder imiṣ*. Praedestinatum à Deo erat, sic erat in fatis ...*taktīrātī ilāhīje*. Praeordinationes divinae”; (s.v. Kaza) “*Kazā wu kader*. Praeordinatio Divina, fatum ...*kazāi mūbrem ...görrünmez kazā*. An. inevitable fatum ...*Kazā geldükte dādeī dāniṣ kör olur ...kazāi wetr*. Inevitable fatum aut infortunium ...*Çiün tīrī kazā kemānī kaderden atylür siperī hazer ile def olunmaz ...Kazā üllah üzeline gelsün ...Kazā wājib olur keḫāret wājib olmaz ...Kazāje ryzā göstermek, wirmek*. Se submittere voluntati Dei ...*kazāje ryzāden ghajrī ne çīāre*”; (s.v. Kismet) “Fati partitio, fatum, fortuna, decretum Dei ...*görelüm allah ne kysmet wirür*.” See also Mustafa b. Şemseddin Ahteri, *Ahteri-i Kebir* (1876), s.v. “Kaza” and “Kader”; and Vankulu Mehmed, *Lugat-ı Vankulu* (Istanbul 1802/3), s.v. “Kaza” and “Kader”.

12 *EI*², s.v. “Adjal” (I. Goldziher and W. M. Watt); and Meninski, s.v. “Egel”: “Fatalis meta, vel hora mortis, mors, fatum, vitae extremum, & mora concessa, seu certi temporis terminus.”

13 Meninski: (s.v. Fatum) “*Taktīrī rebbānīde mukadder imiṣ ...nasybī ejle imiṣ ...baṣīne jazylmys idy ...egel bulmak*”; (s.v. Praedestinatus) “*Mukadder ...sernüviṣt ...munkadir ...mevud ...baṣīna jazylmys ...nasyjelerinde mestur*.” See also Jakab Harsányi Nagy, representing 17th-century Ottoman dialogue in *Colloquia familiaria Turcico Latina, seu status Turcicus loquens* (Berlin 1672), 4 f.: “*Her sej Allah elinden gielür, andan oturi kabul itmek gierek*. Omnia ex manu Dei veniunt, ideò boni consulenda ...*Emma, kim Tanrgie karsi kor? (gielür)*. At, *Quis ausit Deo reluctari? ...Mukader olan zuhure gielür*. Stat Fatum ratum inevitabile. *Quod præstatutum est, fiec*. Aliter sic: *jazılan gielür basina*. *Quod capici unius cujusque inscriptum est (quod Decretum est) illud futurū est*.”

even to the extent of abandoning one's own volition, while others debated the practical limits of *tawakkul*.¹⁴

According to most Ottoman thought, then, our deeds inhabit a middle ground (*amr bayn al-amrayn*) between compulsion and freewill. One theologian likened the situation to a rider on a horse, with God as the horse and the human the rider. Particular will is like the reins in the rider's hands, he wrote, whereas God's will is the underlying horsepower. If the horse so willed, it could carry the rider wherever it pleased but instead it chooses to follow the rider's direction and propel him on his way, for good or ill.¹⁵ In a similar manner, belief in *al-qadā wa'l-qadar* remained an article of faith for Ottoman Muslims, treated in detail in catechisms. The much-read gloss of Sa' d al-Dīn al-Taftazānī (d. 1390) on Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī's creed (d. 1142) devotes a section to the topic.¹⁶ Birgivi Mehmed Efendi (d. 1573), whose writings on faith circulated widely in Turkish and Arabic, also enjoined readers to attest that God is all-willing. God decrees, wills, and creates all things, he said, both good and evil, from the believer's piety to the infidel's unbelief and sinner's misdeeds. Everything occurs by God's preordination, so that "from all eternity has He decreed both what is and what is to come and writ it on the Preserved Tablet, and nothing shall defy it."¹⁷

Fatalism as a theological doctrine was uncontroversial for Ottoman believers, the general tenets of which they were called to embrace. Yet one might object at this point: is it not better call these beliefs predestination rather than fatalism? Apart from the latter's pejorative connotations, for example, contemporary European sources often prefer to call Ottoman subjects "predestinar-

14 *EI*², s.v. "Tawakkul" (L. Lewisohn). Al-Ghazālī said that in the perfect degree, one trusts in God "like a corpse in the hands of the corpse-washer."

15 Anonymous, *Risāla fī al-ikhtiyār al-juzi'*, Princeton Garrett nr. 788Y, fol. 5b. İspirli said (in Badeen, *Sunnitische Theologie*, 68) that "the true position is between compulsion and freewill (*fā'l-ḥaqq huwa al-tawassuṭ bayn al-jabr wa'l-qadr*) and that the act is neither forced nor delegated, but an intermediate thing (also Nābulusī in *ibid.*, 99).

16 Taftazānī, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, trans. Earl Edgar Elder (New York 1950), 80 ff. On catechisms in general in Ottoman lands, see T. Krstić, "You Must Know Your Faith in Detail: Redefinition of the Role of Knowledge and Boundaries of Belief in Ottoman Catechisms (*İlm-i ḥāls*)", in T. Krstić and D. Terzioğlu (eds), *Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450-c. 1750* (Leiden 2020), 155–95.

17 Birgivî, *Risale-yi Birgivî [Vasiyetname]* (s.n., 1876), 18–19. The topic is also treated in his Arabic *al-Ṭarīqat al-Muḥammadiyya* (Istanbul 1844).

ians” in drawing parallels with broadly similar Christian doctrines.¹⁸ There is good reason for us to distinguish, however. For one, predestination in Christian sects like Calvinism typically deals with soteriology, or doctrines of salvation and who will ultimately be saved or damned—a point some early modern travelers noted.¹⁹ As we have seen, Sunni theology to the contrary joined a belief in *al-qadā wa'l-qadar* with an occasionalist worldview in which God not only decreed final states but was, quite literally, responsible for all events in time down the motion of the smallest atom. Modern philosophers also apply the term “theological fatalism” to a specific dilemma: namely, that infallible foreknowledge makes human acts unfree. If God knows the whole future infallibly, as in our case, then it seems to follow that those acts must necessarily take place whether we will it or not.²⁰

Yet while theological fatalism was present in the empire, it only takes us so far. Creeds and doctrine tell us what religious scholars felt people should believe, but they do not tell us much about how those people really thought or acted. Theology can be recondite and give rise to misunderstandings; believers will also act and think contrary to teaching. And if we take fatalism in a sense beyond doctrine—as one of mentality, signaling resignation or indifference in

18 E.g., Jean du Mont, *A New Voyage to the Levant, Containing an Account of the Most Remarkable Curiosities in Germany, France, Italy, Malta, and Turkey* (London 1696), 251; John Covell, *Early Voyages and Travels in the Levant, Hakluyt Society no. lxxxvi* (London 1892), 246; Paul Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire: containing the Maxims of the Turkish Politie, the Most Material Points of the Mahometan Religion, their Sects and Heresies, their Convents and Religious Votaries, their Military Discipline* (London 1668), 115 ff.; Cornelis de Bruyn, *Reizen van Cornelis de Bruyn door de vermaardste Deelen van Klein Asia* (Delft 1697), 69; and Edward Browne, *The Travels and Adventures of Edward Browne, formerly a Merchant of London* (London 1739), 361.

19 See, for instance, *Encyclopedia of Theology: the Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York 1975), s.v. “Predestination” (H. Rondet and K. Rahner); and *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia* (Washington D.C. 2003), s.v. “Fate and Fatalism”. I note some examples below.

20 E.g., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford, CA, 1997—), s.v. “Foreknowledge and Free Will” (L. Zagzebski): “Fatalism is the thesis that human acts occur by necessity and hence are unfree. Theological fatalism is the thesis that infallible foreknowledge of a human act makes the act necessary and hence unfree. If there is a being who knows the entire future infallibly, then no human act is free.” See also *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane (Oxford 2005), s.v. “Fatalism” (M. Bernstein) and its subsection on “Theological Fatalism.”

the face of events or danger—the picture becomes still more complex. Were Ottoman Muslims fatalists in this broader sense, one scholars often dismiss as an Orientalist trope? As we turn our focus to popular views of plague and warfare, both contested “particular events,” we find conflicting evidence but, yes, at least some attitudes we can fairly describe as fatalist.

Plague and Providence

Fatalism has long been treated alongside plague and features in recent revisionist work on Ottoman experiences of the disease. The debate centers on claims that Muslims in the empire did not take precautions against infection, and eschewed flight, due to their belief in God’s unalterable decrees. Much-quoted traditions of the Prophet taught that God sends down plague as a form of martyrdom or punishment, so that it is not contagious and believers ought not flee an outbreak.²¹ Some Ottoman sources in this sense even call the disease “blessed” (*taun-ı mübarek*).²² Early modern European travelers often recorded such behavior or related sentiments, too, noting that many people showed little fear over contact with the dead and dying or claimed that each person’s fate was “written on his forehead,” not to be changed. Scholars like Nühket Varlık, Yaron Ayalon, and Sam White tend to discount these fatalistic accounts. Such sources deal in stereotypes, they say. They convey Orientalist tropes, describe behavior better explained by psychology, or indeed, if read carefully, overturn the idea that Ottomans acted largely out of “religious scruples.”²³ While they

21 E.g., from *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, nr. 5728: “The Prophet said: if you hear of an outbreak of the plague in a land, do not enter it; but if the plague breaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place.” Also nr. 2830 and 5732, calling death from the plague a form of martyrdom; and nr. 5734, saying God uses plague both as a punishment and as a blessing for the pious. See also A. Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: an Environmental History* (Cambridge 2011), 214 n. 43.

22 E.g. Selanikî Mustafa, *Tarih-i Selânikî*, ed. M. İpşirli (Istanbul 1989), 1: 283.

23 Varlık tends to present fatalism as a trope, e.g. Varlık, *Plague and Empire*, 72–88. Ayalon argues that “psychological” factors were more important than “religious” ones, though I am not sure how the two can be neatly separated: Y. Ayalon, “Plague, Psychology, and Religious Boundaries in Ottoman Anatolia”, *THR*, 9 (2018), 1–17. Sam White acknowledges fatalism as a contested “scruple” yet does not go deeper into the theology, arguing that Ottoman Muslims were largely similar to Byzantine or Western Christians: S. White, “Rethinking Disease in Ottoman History”, *IJMES*, 42 (2010), 553 ff. While Alan Mikhail calls plague “a necessary and vital part of Egyptian culture” that was feared but did not cause

grant that some Ottomans do appear to have met the plague stoically, these specialists seek above all to show that Ottoman Muslims took active precautions. While this is welcome, as is their critical handling of sources, one senses an aversion on their part to dig deeper, either to minimize fatalism as a triviality of “religion” or because it is potentially embarrassing, making our subjects seem like Orientalist caricatures—passive, illogical, unthinking. We in this way miss out on rich complexities.²⁴

How might early modern Ottomans have engaged with such ideas when it came to plague? Let us consider what some European sources say. According to the English traveler Sir Henry Blount (d. 1682), an often-sympathetic observer, Muslims in the empire saw predestination not only as a “matter of Salvation, but of fortune, and success in this life, [and] they peremptory permit to Destiny fixt, and not avoydable by any act of ours.”²⁵ Blount noted seeing this attitude twice. Once, when one of his ship’s crew died of plague at Rhodes, Blount expressed shock at how others failed to keep away and even used the dead man’s effects. Instead, “they pointed upon their foreheads, telling me it was written there at their birth when they should dye.”²⁶ A second episode occurred on Blount’s way to Edirne, during a plague outbreak. “Wee passed by a man of good qualitie,” he wrote, “and a Souldier, who lying along, and his Horse by, could hardly speake so much, as to entreat us to take him into the Coach.”

[Our] Ianizary made our companion ride his Horse, taking the man in: whose brest being open, and full of plague tokens, I would not have had him received; but he in like manner pointing to his owne forehead, and mine, told me wee could not be hurt, unlesse it were written there, and that then we could not avoyd it.²⁷

flight, citing also scriptural injunctions, he does not explore fatalism further: Mikhail, *Nature and Empire*, 201 ff. Miri Shefer-Mossensohn is the most sensitive to theological concerns in *Ottoman Medicine: Healing and Institutions, 1500–1700* (Albany 2010), 173 ff. Unfortunately, while preparing this article I could not access B. Bulmuş, *Plague, Quarantines, and Geopolitics in the Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh 2012).

24 Cf. Daniel Pipes’ blunt article, “Are Muslims Fatalists?,” *Middle East Quarterly* (2015), 1–18. This topic is likely one of few in which Pipes and I share much common ground—and I perhaps go further than him here in finding analytical value in fatalism as a term.

25 Henry Blount, *A Voyage into the Levant: a Briefe Relation of a Journey...* (London 1636), 85.

26 *Ibid.*, 85–86.

27 *Ibid.*, 86.

The man died the next day, said Blount. He also admitted that this attitude had some redeeming merits. "I thought this opinion of fate, had usually taken men off from all industrious care of their owne safety; but in dangers at Sea, and other cases where diligence may evidently import, I have still found the contrary," he wrote. "And in such occurrence as these, where industry is not of manifest avayle; this assurance does not so much hurt in leaving vayne care, as good in strengthening the spirits whose decay yeelds a man up to all bad impressions."²⁸

Thomas Smith (d. 1710), a fellow Englishman who served as embassy chaplain in Istanbul, agreed that this "absurd principle of fate" allowed Ottomans to boldly meet dangers like plague. Yet Smith was hostile where Blount showed grudging admiration. Most in the empire take no care in tending the ill or dead, he wrote,

Their confidence being grounded upon this foolish belief, that every man's destiny is written in his forehead, and not to be prevented or kept off by care or Medicine, that the term of life is fatal and peremptory, and that it is in vain to go about to extend it beyond the set Period.²⁹

Smith said this view was especially rife among the uneducated. Such folk "think it a kind of Sin as well as weakness to relinquish their houses, and retire to more wholsom air," he wrote, and liken the disease to an arrow none can escape.³⁰ Smith added that this argument served on the whole as a source of comfort in distress, or in the face of death: "that it is the decree and pleasure of *God*, which they are to submit to, and that all humane counsels and remedies are ineffectual against his will (which is a great truth in itself, but very much misapplied by them)." Such people claim they are allotted so long to live and no more, saying, "*Egel ghelmedi* ...the hour of his death has not yet come."³¹

The French traveler and later Baron of Carlsroon, Jean du Mont (d. 1727), relayed similar views. Like Blount, Du Mont pointed out that predestination for Ottoman Muslims did not just affect salvation: "they extend it even to the

28 Ibid., 86–87.

29 Thomas Smith, *Remarks upon the Manners, Religion and Government of the Turks together with a Survey of the Seven Churches of Asia, as they now lye in their Ruines, and a Brief Description of Constantinople* (London 1678), 108–09.

30 Ibid., 109.

31 Ibid., 112–13.

most Indifferent Actions, yet with some Limitations and Circumstances which 'twou'd be very difficult to explain, and which they themselves do not well understand."³² Du Mont claimed that the empire's inhabitants took no precautions against plague, or even took offense at those who did. He recounted how a man he knew was accosted on the street while trying to avoid two "Turks" who were carrying away the body of a plague victim. "One of the Company ran after him, and clasp'd him in his Arms, rubbing his Body upon him several times; after which opening his Vest, and showing him a large Plague-Sore under his right Pap, *Learn*, said he, *not to forsake dead and dying Men*."³³ Du Mont wrote that Ottomans denied plague arises from airborne contagion or human physiology. Instead, they believed it proceeded from a divine cause, as a punishment for sin. Du Mont explained, accordingly, that when God means to punish immorality, he sends an army of "black angels."

Every Angel receives of Bow and two sorts of Arrows, to inflict either *Death* or *Sickness*, with orders to shoot their mortal Arrows at those whom they find under the Power of *Sin*, and to direct the others at such who are only tainted with some *Pollution*. 'Tis then that Men stand most in need of the Protection of their *White Angels*, who intercede for 'em, and do what they can toward the Blows that are aim'd against 'em, sometimes covering a Man entirely, when they perceive a great number of Enemies ready to attack him. Yet notwithstanding all their Care, their Assistance proves oftentimes ineffectual; and therefore 'tis the Interest of every Man that regards his own Safety, to secure himself against the Vengeance of those destroying Spirits, by leading a sinless Life.³⁴

Blount, Smith, and Du Mont overgeneralize, to be sure, and at times are dismissive—traits they share with many European writers regarding the Ottoman realm. Nor were they very familiar with local customs and tongues. But if we delve deeper, we can extract some useful insights. All grant that fatalism went beyond Christianity's soteriological concerns and was a contested issue, for one. We can also allow that, if some Ottomans argued for natural theories of contagion and took precautions—and they notably did³⁵—others considered God either to be plague's direct or ultimate cause, acting to His preordained ends.

32 Du Mont, *A New Voyage to the Levant*, 251.

33 *Ibid.*, 258–59.

34 *Ibid.*, 259–60.

35 See, for instance, Shefer-Mossensohn, *Ottoman Medicine*, 173 ff.

How one reacted could thus be morally charged. Du Mont's friend evidently angered his assailants through his lack of charity for the dying and, perhaps as they saw it, proper acceptance of God's agency. His response also contrasts with the risky, if kind, gesture of Blount's Janissary guard, who seems to have taken pity on the plague victim and trusted the outcome to God. While Ayalon disregards Du Mont's angels as "fantastic,"³⁶ moreover, the fact that Evliya Çelebi (d. 1684?) tells a nearly identical story about an "army of the plague (*taun askeri*)" suggests a popular circulation for such explanations. Like Du Mont, Evliya linked plague outbreaks to such invisible forces. Their ranks feature good spirits clad in white and wicked ones in black, he said, though in his telling they are jinn rather than angels and do not battle each other. Instead, whoever the white spirits strike is spared the plague, and whoever the black spirits strike will die.³⁷ Strikingly similar stories of spirit armies circulated in relation to warfare, as well, as we will see.

We can find keener observations from people who lived in the empire for years, spoke its languages, and, in some cases, were born there. Alexander Russell (d. 1768), a naturalist and doctor for the Levant Company who lived in Aleppo for more than a decade and learned Arabic, acknowledged fatalism's complexity. The empire's Muslims resign themselves to calamities and political reverses, he said, "but it is not to be imputed to natural insensibility, nor is it always, though it may be sometimes, merely affected."³⁸ Russell admitted that belief in fate can be useful and fortifying. While the notion is "universally received" in the abstract, however, he maintained that it had little real influence

36 Ayalon, "Plague, Psychology, and Religious Boundaries", 5–6.

37 Evliya Çelebi, *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnâmesi*, eds. R. Dankoff et al (Istanbul, 2017), 1: 184, 4: 333, on a dervish's interaction with these spirits near Istanbul, who provided him a register with names of all who would die in a coming plague. The dervish gave it to the sultan, who refused to believe its contents. Plague then raged for forty days, proving the register true. See also M. Sariyannis, "The Dead, the Spirits, and the Living: on Ottoman Ghost Stories", *JTS*, 44 (2015), 380–81; and Idem, "Of Ottoman Ghosts, Vampires, and Sorcerers: an Old Discussion Disinterred", *ArchOtt*, 30 (2013), 189. Varlık relates this story in full (*Plague and Empire*, 237–38) but ties it to shifting mentalities about who might predict or heal plague, rather than to the more obvious way it reflects beliefs about predestination. She also tells (*ibid.*, 224) of one Abdal Musa, who had "the soldiers of plague [*ta'un askeri*] under his control," but refers to the phrase as only a "metaphor."

38 Alexander Russell, *The Natural History of Aleppo: Containing a Description of the City, and the Principal Natural Productions of its Neighbourhood*, revised with notes by P. Russell (London 1794 [2nd ed.]), 1: 233.

on people's decision-making. God's preordination was "an article of faith seldom contested," but it is "practically called in as an auxiliary," after the fact, as well as a topic hotly contested by religious scholars.³⁹ Russell granted that heedlessness against plague was a reality, yet suggested this behavior was due less to "orthodox opinion" than doubts about the disease's contagiousness. Many in any case took preventative measures, arguing that, since God wills and creates all things, He has created both diseases and the remedies thereof.⁴⁰

Edward Lane (d. 1876), an Orientalist who also spent years in the empire's Arab lands and wrote the monumental *Arabic-English Lexicon*, agreed that, in Egypt, belief in fatalism was by no means absolute. All Muslims must believe in God's preordination of all things, he said. Yet this doctrine was a point of controversy and, in any case, "conditional."⁴¹ Lane noted a belief that, in mid-Shaban, God fixes each person's fate for the next year and shakes the Lote Tree of Paradise to determine who shall die. Maybe counter-intuitively, some on this night prayed to God to cancel out any ill fate decreed for them on the Preserved Tablet. Others held that the chance to alter one's fate fell on the "Night of Power (or Decree)" (*laylat al-qadr*) at the end of Ramadan, when the gates of heaven opened and prayers were sure to succeed.⁴² Yet while Lane claimed that fatalism on the whole gave an Egyptian patience, fortitude, and serenity in the face of affliction, it did not preclude action. "His belief in predestination does not ...prevent him from taking any step to attain an object he may have in view; not being perfectly absolute, or unconditional," he wrote. Lane added that Muslims followed the Quranic injunction, "Throw yourselves not into perdition," and avoided danger when possible except in certain cases—one of which was plague. Owing to sayings of the Prophet, "the lawfulness of quarantine is contested; but the generality of them condemn it."⁴³

We might regard a final source for examination, Mouradgea D'Ohsson (d. 1807), as much Ottoman as European. Born Muradcan Tosunyan in Istanbul,

39 Ibid., 1: 233–34.

40 Ibid., 1: 234–35, 422–424; 2: 122. Note 50 (p. 235) adds that locals had a proverbial saying: "The physic from the doctor, the cure from God!" (*al-dawa' min al-hakim al-shifa' min Allah*).

41 Edward Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians* (London 1860), 1: 68.

42 Ibid., 1: 471–72. Cf. Smith, *Remarks upon the Manners, Religion and Government*, 79.

43 Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs*, 283–84.

D'Ohsson was an Ottoman Armenian subject who knew Arabic and Turkish, worked as an interpreter for the Swedish embassy, and gallicized his name. His vast *Tableau général de l'Empire othoman* treats fatalism in fair detail. The belief in God's preordination is one of five articles of the faith, D'Ohsson wrote. Drawing on legal works and creeds, however, he limited this belief to soteriology and whether a person would be damned or saved. The doctrine of fate only affects our spiritual state, he wrote, and even then not that of all people. The "free-will (*ikhtiyar-djuz'y*)" thus acts without hindrance in civil, moral, and political actions, to deny which is a sin, and it is only after prayer, deliberation, and action that one can ascribe an event to God's will.⁴⁴ D'Ohsson evidently erred in this opinion. As we have seen, the doctrine of *al-qadā wa'l-qadar* generally embraced all things and events—spiritual and temporal—in a person's life. D'Ohsson also hinted at sharp disagreement over its limits. He decried what he called a "prevailing prejudice" that, despite fine points of doctrine, extended fate to all civil and moral actions. "Nearly everyone cleaves to the principle of an immutable destiny fixed by the decrees of heaven," he said, written on our forehead from birth, while the least complaint against "Takdir" or "Kissmeth" was regarded by high and low as a gross impiety.⁴⁵

Such was also the case in disasters like plague. D'Ohsson blamed outbreaks of pestilence as well as Istanbul's frequent fires on fatalism. Despite the example of early caliphs and Sultan Bayezid II, who avoided plague and even retired to the countryside, he said, and despite the "spirit of the faith" and legal and theological literature, many Ottomans refused to take precautions. D'Ohsson claimed that, while some tried to protect themselves or flee, "they are outdone by the prejudices of the masses."⁴⁶ The latter held reasonable precautions to be not only a sin but an insult against them and God, he said. Yet D'Ohsson pointed to contradictions. The same man who took no action in the face of plague or fire, considering them God's decree, would still use all the means at his disposal

44 Mouradgea D'Ohsson, *Tableau général de l'Empire othoman* (Paris 1788–1824), 1: 167–68. D'Ohsson drew on al-Nasafi's creed, the legal work of Ibrāhīm al-Ḥalabī (d. 1549), and the *fatwas* of Yenişehirli Abdullah Efendi (d. 1743) for his discussions of faith and law, respectively. On D'Ohsson and his work, see C. V. Findley, *Enlightening Europe on Islam and the Ottomans: Mouradgea D'Ohsson and his Masterpiece* (Leiden 2019).

45 D'Ohsson, *Tableau général*, 1: 168–70. I have used the translation in Menchinger, "Free Will", 451.

46 D'Ohsson, *Tableau général*, 1: 170–73; and 4a: 391–93, 395.

to repel the effects of the disaster, just as someone with a serious illness consults a doctor.⁴⁷

What are we to make of these accounts? If we take the sources seriously, I think, we can first admit that *al-qaḍā wa'l-qadar* had wide purchase in the abstract. Yet we can also see that the doctrine fed all manner of debate. As Lane and others indicated, for instance, Ottoman religious scholars addressed the general problem of human will as well as the specific issue of flight from plague in treatises and legal opinions (*fetva*). Flight was indeed a fraught topic, running against clear scriptural injunctions. Yet scholars tried to offer nuance. Taşköprüzade (d. 1561), known for his learning in the sciences and author of a treatise on predestination, argued that believers did no wrong to leave a pest-ridden city, provided they were only seeking purer air and not fleeing the disease itself (and hence God's will). The prolific şeyhülislam and historian Kemal Paşazade (d. 1534) along with the scribe İdris Bidlisi (d. 1520) had likewise urged readers to flee from pestilential sites in works on the topic.⁴⁸ The empire's most famous jurisconsult, meanwhile, Ebüssuud Efendi (d. 1574), conceded in a series of rulings that both flight and staying put could be justified. While he lamented the panicked flight of officials, ordering the dismissal of those who abandoned their charges at a time of need, he also granted room for agency. In one ruling, he allowed believers to exit “a plague-stricken city in search of a safer place and ...precautions against the plague.”⁴⁹

The survival of legal opinions on flight indicates that it was a real point of debate, one jurists had to adjudicate and clarify. Ebüssuud also issued a ruling on the more general problem: if God decrees and preordains everything, can we blame our actions or inaction on divine will? Or are we morally responsible? As the *fetva* poses the question (which may reflect an actual legal dispute), can a man carouse and indulge in sin but claim that his behavior is fated—that God compels him to act so?⁵⁰ Ebüssuud followed the consensus theology to reject

47 Ibid., 4a: 396–97.

48 Shefer-Mossensohn, *Ottoman Medicine*, 174; and Varlık, *Plague and Empire*, 243–44.

49 Shefer-Mohsensson, *Ottoman Medicine*, 173–74; and Varlık, *Plague and Empire*, 244. See also E. Düzdağ, *Şeyhülislam Ebusuud Efendi Fetvaları Işığında 16. Asır Türk Hayatı* (İstanbul 1983), nrs. 395, 754, 888, 912, and 913.

50 Ebüssuud Mehmed, *Fetva-yı Kaza vü Kader*, in Princeton Firestone Library, Islamic MSS Garrett nr. 225Y, fol. 5b: “[Zeyd] diyse kim meyhaneye gideceğüm ve anda fisk ideceğüm ilm-i Allah'da mukadder ve levh-i mahfuz'da mesturdur lacerem benden bu fiskin sudurı bir emr-i zaruridir...”

this argument. If we accept that our deeds are wholly compelled, he argued, humans cannot be morally responsible. We cannot be held to account for good and evil, for God is just and does not place unbearable obligations (*teklif-i mala yutak*) on us. Rather, while God knows from all eternity how each person will act in life, we still choose to "acquire" our actions or not. The fact that God knows what we will choose in all things, and then wills and creates our acts, does not mean that God compels us. Ebüssuud likened the situation to a sculptor: "A sculptor makes a statue of a horse in a particular way because that is what a horse is like in its essence," he wrote. "How should it be that the horse is by essence that way because the sculptor made such a representation?"⁵¹

Ebüssuud's *fetva* suggests that at least some Ottomans used fatalism opportunistically, finding in it excuses for inaction or the shirking of responsibility. These arguments, while self-interested, had power. They drew on the theology in a way that was hard to refute, or easy to turn into an attack on a naysayer's piety. For who can doubt God's might and the wisdom of what He wills? European sources at times noted such a tendency. The French diplomat and merchant Laurent d'Arvieux (d. 1702) observed that, in Arab lands, people offered fatalistic expressions to condole others on the loss of loved ones: "Providence wou'd have it thus; Such was the Destiny which the Almighty had writ upon his Head, and his Hour was Come."⁵² John Antes (d. 1811), an American missionary who spent more than ten years in Egypt, complained that similar phrases could justify indolence or still more serious matters—in his case, a beating that left him badly injured.⁵³ D'Ohsson agreed that rulers especially invoked fate *ex post facto* to excuse bad policy or behavior.⁵⁴ Early modern Ottomans voiced irritation at such devices, too. The anonymous author of *Kitab-ı Müstetab*, for instance, a 17th century reform tract, criticized the fatalism of some of his peers as cynical, indeed blasphemous. "The person who says, 'It was fated for us. The

51 Ibid., fols. 6b–7a.

52 Laurent D'Arvieux, *The chevalier D'Arvieux's travels in Arabia the desert; written by himself, and Publish'd by Mr. De la Roque: Giving a very accurate and entertaining Account of the Religion, Rights, Customs, Diversions, &c.* (London 1718), 270.

53 John Antes, *Observations on the Manners and Customs of Egyptians* (London 1800), 63, where his guides invoked fate when proceeding more slowly than he wished ("Min Allah! Mukadder!"), and 124–125, when he was bastinadoed and told by interlocutors that his treatment had been "Min Allah, Maktub, Mukadder! that is, it is from God: it is so written in the book of fate, which cannot be altered."

54 D'Ohsson, *Tableau général*, 1: 174–75.

Lord God ordained it thus for us—what can we do?’ is no Muslim.”⁵⁵ Canikli Ali Paşa (d. 1785), an officer who wrote a popular reform treatise in the late 18th century, had a similar view. Those who invoked fate were excuse-makers, he said: “People blame fate whenever there is a flaw in human strategy.”⁵⁶ Clearly, for some Ottomans fatalism could be a rhetorical tool.

Many sources also note a distinction between the behavior of the more and less educated, or between socio-economic groups. D’Ohsson complained that in his day a “prejudice” led many across the empire to apply fatalism indiscriminately in their everyday lives. Earlier writers like Thomas Smith, Paul Rycaut (d. 1700), and John Covel (d. 1722) alleged that the “prejudice” was rooted especially among commoners—the wealthy or educated, including judges, jurists, and rulers, fled the plague either because they could or because they grasped the doctrine’s subtler points, they said. We read that it was in fact the lower classes who most resisted precautions and, indeed, put public pressure on others to conform, with the threat of being labeled impious or an infidel.⁵⁷

Some Ottomans likely stayed put for economic reasons, lacking the means to flee. Could others have simply misinterpreted what they had heard? Did unlettered believers fail to grasp what authorities told them, in other words, distorting it into more extreme forms? We should consider this possibility, too. The formal theological debate over *al-qaḍā wa’l-qadar* mainly took place in Arabic among scholars; the literature was erudite and made fine distinctions. Even those who had prior knowledge could find it befuddling. The Moldavian prince Dimitrie Cantemir (d. 1723), for instance, who spent his youth in Istanbul as a hostage and had a wide education, including in Arabic and Turkish, evidently asked scholarly acquaintances about human agency. Can a person ever speak or

55 Y. Yücel (ed.), *Osmanlı Devlet Düzenine Ait Metinler I.: Kitâb-ı Müstetâb* (Ankara 1974), 28: “bu bize mukadder imiş, Hakk Tê‘âlâ hazretleri bize böyle mukadder itmiş, bizim elimizde ne vardır dimeğe kişi İslamdan çıkar...”

56 Canikli Ali, *Tedbir-i Cedid-i Nadir*, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, H.O. nr. 104b, 1b: “Tedbirde noksan oldu takdire bühtan ittiler ...”

57 See, respectively, Smith, *Remarks upon the Manners, Religion and Government*, 109–10; Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, 116–17; and Covel, *Early Voyages and Travels*, 243–44. See also Antes, *Observations on the Manners and Customs*, 46–47. Antes acknowledges the same but blames it, condescendingly, on the lower classes “being more stupid and superstitious”. Some scholars have pointed to a divergence along socio-economic lines, e.g. Ayalon, “Plague, Psychology, and Religious Boundaries”, 7.

act contrary to the divine will, and are we saved or damned from all eternity? “I could never obtain a direct answer from them,” he wrote.

If again they are asked, how their Opinion of free-will is reconciled with this Reason, they beg the Question, by saying, that all may be saved who will, but no man is saved whom God has not destin’d to Salvation. They conclude with this Axoim, *Tacdir Tedbiri bozár*, i.e. *Divine Providence destroys Human Appointments or Purposes*. From this Contrariety of Sentiments it is that free-will is highly valued by some, and as little esteem’d by others.⁵⁸

To be sure, fatalism and its rhetoric could be used post factum to serve ulterior ends—consoling the bereaved, justifying politics, excusing inaction, or veiling poverty. In many cases, however, we may also be dealing with a different strain of piety. If scholars like Ebüssuud upheld a pragmatic, intellectual approach to the faith, there were others who preached simpler values like belief, trust in God, and humility. Such values were widely accessible. The texts that an average Ottoman Muslim might hear or read focused largely on proper piety and belief, not esoteric theological distinctions. Mehmed Birgivi warned readers of his popular *Ṭarīqat* against fatalistic inaction. “If God is the cause of all things,” we are tempted to think, “then who can change that which is destined to happen?”

What if your efforts are against that which God has predestined for you? Is it not a great sin? If He wills you to do good, it will happen regardless of your will. If anything you want to happen does not meet His will, it will not happen. There is no need to judge, for all good and bad is from Him...⁵⁹

Birgivi regarded this thinking as a satanic temptation, to be rejected. Yet he also urged readers to believe in *al-qaḍā wa’l-qadar* as irrevocable, God’s will, down to the minute operations of our bodies. “Can you change the way your heart and lungs are built? In the same way your life is also predestined, whether you

58 Dimitrie Cantemir, *History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire*, trans. N. Tindal (London 1757), 122 n. 18.

59 Birgivi, in *The Path of Muhammad: a Book on Islamic Morals and Ethics*, trans. S. T. B. al-Jerahi al-Halveti (Bloomington 2005), 142. Cf. the Arabic in *al-Ṭarīqat al-Muḥammadiyya*, 70–71. There is no such warning in his Turkish creed, *Risale-yi Birgivi [Vasiyetname]*.

believe it or not,” he wrote.⁶⁰ So too did Birgivi caution against ambition (*tul-ı emel*) and prideful faith in our own abilities. Ambition, he said, “rests on a false belief in our ability to deal with things unknown, and to tamper with destiny.” Self-love, too, blinds us to the fact that we owe everything to God and that all of our actions “are [our] destiny decided by God.” We must instead see what happens as God’s will and that everything belongs to Him.⁶¹ Birgivi’s teachings warn against fatalistic behavior, to be sure, but they also stress our weakness before God and the need to submit in pious resignation to divine will. It is easy to see how some readers might imbibe more of the latter than the former.

The preacher Fazlızade Mehmed (fl. ca. 1740) serves as a good example of this kind of piety. We know little about Fazlızade, who appears to have been an isolated, embittered figure in his day. Still, while they may have been unusual, his views hint at the circulation of extreme strains of fatalistic thought, if not behavior. Fazlızade’s views appear anti-rational, for one. He resented the intellectual bent of contemporaries, considering it arrogant pride in their own abilities. For him, being “reasonable” (*akıllu*) did not mean using unfettered human reason. It was rather an index of piety. Fazlızade held that a “reasonable” person would recall at all times his own frailty and so submit wholly to God’s decrees, “following His orders without hesitation and being content with whatever fate He had assigned for His creature.”⁶² In the same way, those who used intellect for any reason other than to acknowledge God’s omnipotence were vain and sinful; worse, those who tried to meddle in God’s affairs verged on blasphemy.⁶³

Fazlızade’s brand of pious quietism also stressed creaturely weakness and absolute trust in God. He rejected all causal systems and efforts to find patterns in the world, taking the occasionalism of Ottoman theology to extremes, and even went so far as to deny the idea of ‘ādat Allah, as he thought it limited God’s omnipotence.⁶⁴ Fazlızade felt that people who presumed to act through causes blasphemed, by implying they could compel God: “It is blasphemy to think that the being or not being of a thing is both from God and another,” he wrote.

60 Ibid., 346.

61 Ibid., 136, 165. Cf. *al-Tarīqat al-Muḥammadiyya*, 64, 80.

62 M. Kurz, *Ways to Heaven, Gates to Hell: Fazlızade ‘Ali’s Struggle with the Diversity of Ottoman Islam* (Berlin 2011), 183–84.

63 Ibid., 186–87.

64 Ibid., 193–94.

For the only absolute creator and really independent agent is God. There is by no means participation by the servant in creation. There is no relation with that which is called "cause." That is: that which will be, comes about even without any cause; that which will not be, does not come about even if there is a cause. But if God wishes that there should be a cause, the thing comes about through a cause. That which He wants without a cause, comes about without a cause... In short, that something comes about or does not come about is only from God.⁶⁵

For Fazlızade, a person who sought out causes not only tried to manipulate the Creator but also failed to place his trust where it belongs, in God, and thus negated *tawakkul*. The true believer knows his limits and acknowledges God's power, he held. He does not try to understand why things happen or not, but submits piously to God's decrees.⁶⁶

Fate and War

As with plague, war held an unclear status as a "particular event" and provoked debate over fate. Warfare in the early modern empire was not only a human affair, decided by our judgment and decision-making. God directs and decrees all things, it was held, including battles. According to the Quran, God led early Muslims to victory at the 624 Battle of Badr, reinforcing them with "a thousand of the angels, rank on rank (8:9)." When the Prophet blinded the enemy with a handful of dust as he advanced, scripture gives God agency: "Ye (Muslims) slew them not, but God sleweth them. And thou (Muhammad) threwest not when thou didst throw; but God threw, that He might test the believers by a fair test (8:17)." Victory and defeat rely on God. As the Quran says, "Victory cometh only from God (3:126, 8:10)" and "Lo! We have given thee (O Muhammad) a signal victory (48:1)."⁶⁷ The extent to which humans might contribute to the outcome, however, remained a point of debate. Did material factors such as tactics and discipline matter? Or must one only be pure of heart and trust in God (*mutawakkilan 'alā Allah*)?

Ottomans clearly felt that God could and did intervene in war. Gazi tradi-

65 Quoted in *Ibid.*, 193.

66 *Ibid.*, 192.

67 D. Thomas, "Miracles in Islam", in G. Twelftree (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles* (Cambridge 2011). Quranic passages are from the Pickthall translation, lightly emended.

tion in the empire held that Muslim armies typically went to battle with unseen reinforcements, with stories of various invisible entities. Some sources cite the active presence of angels, spirits, or long-dead martyrs from the early days of Islam, with the Prophet himself at times in the vanguard. Other sources credit comfort and aid to so-called “men of God” (*ricâlullah*) or “hidden ones” (*ricâlül-gayb*), a company of human saints, hidden in the liminal space between this world and the next, whom God chooses to enact His will and who control the world.⁶⁸ Sinan Paşa (d. 1486), a prominent scholar and vizier of the 15th century, described such beings in these terms:

They are the army of souls from the unseen world (*bâtından ervâh çerisi olur*), and one of them is highest. They wear their (special) costume of a peaked cap; they are clad at times in white, at times in black, and they ride horses at times bay and at times wild... They stand against the enemy, and those who have vision for the unseen may see them. It is the spirits who first beat the enemy; bodily battle begins afterwards. When you have beaten your enemy, know that in fact they beat him; and if you cannot see how they did this, it is because you lack the [proper] vision.⁶⁹

Many early Ottoman chronicles reflect this worldview and tell of miraculous events in battle. God might break “divine custom,” for example, by empowering a dervish-warrior to slay his foes with a wooden sword or allowing a slain soldier to pursue his killer and retake his severed head.⁷⁰ But so too might He send “unseen aid” (*nusret-i gaybiyye*). Early modern Ottomans often imputed victories to God’s invisible hand, at times to enhance the sacral aura of particular rulers. For instance, a courtier named Levhî (fl. 1526) claimed that “hidden ones” constantly attended Süleyman I and that the sultan had aid from the Prophet and all the saints in his 1526 victory at Mohaç. Süleyman’s own chancellor Celalzade Mustafa equally argued that, at Mohaç, the Prophet aided

68 Paul Wittek, for instance, claims it was commonly held in gazi circles that the Prophet led Muslim warriors into battle: P. Wittek, “The Taking of Aydos Castle: a Ghazi Legend and its Transformation”, in G. Makdisi (ed.), *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A.R. Gibb* (Leiden 1965), 669. See also *TDVİA*, s.v. “Ahyâr” (T. Yazıcı); s.v. “Ricâlullah” (S. Uludağ); s.v. “Ricâlül-gayb” (S. Uludağ).

69 Quoted in Sariyannis, “The Dead, the Spirits, and the Living”, 379.

70 See, respectively, F. Giese (ed.), *Die altosmanischen anonymen Chroniken* (Breslau 1922), 1: 11; and Claire Norton on Deli Hasan’s decapitation around the 1566 capture of Szigetvár, in “Sacred Sites, Severed Heads, and Prophetic Visions”, *Anthropology of the Contemporary Middle East and Central Eurasia*, 2 (2014), 81–96.

the empire’s forces with “secret soldiers and sacred souls” (*cunûd-ı gaybiyye ve ervâh-ı mukaddese*).⁷¹ Eyewitnesses and later authors also attributed Mehmed III’s stunning 1596 victory at Haçova (Mezőkeresztes) to spirits, angels, “hidden ones,” or a miracle induced by the sultan’s veneration of the Prophet’s relics.⁷² These authors had political motives, undoubtedly. But we should not lose sight of the fact that their arguments and motives—associating rulers with God’s blessings and entities acting as instruments of His will—drew power from ideas with wide currency.

Ideas of “unseen aid” and “hidden ones” also persisted through the early modern era, feeding a view that God actively aided the empire’s arms. From the mid-16th century, many elites espoused a general conviction in the realm’s uniqueness and divine blessing, the proof of which manifested itself in battle. As Lutfi Paşa (d. 1563), Grand Vizier to Süleyman, wrote, the Ottomans would prevail no matter how few men they took to the field. The prominent scribe and reformist Koçi Beg (fl. 1630s) insisted at a later date on the empire’s recuperative ability and that even defeat posed no real long-term danger:

If the armies of Islam, taking refuge in God, were defeated ten times in battle, by God’s grace neither the Sublime State nor the faith would suffer any harm whatsoever.⁷³

European observers also noted such attitudes. The Englishman Paul Rycaut wrote that Ottomans took victory as a sign of God’s favor. Because God decrees all things good and ill, they held, “whatsoever prospers hath God for the Author.” Rycaut added that they not only applied this logic to the outcome of civil strife, but “from the same rule they conclude much of Divine approbation

71 See C. Fleischer, “The Lawgiver as Messiah: the Making of the Imperial Image in the Reign of Süleymân”, in G. Veinstein (ed.), *Soliman le Magnifique et son temps* (Paris 1992), 168–170; on Celalzade, see Sariyannis, “The Dead, the Spirits, and the Living”, 379.

72 There are many such accounts, e.g. in the work of Mustafa Ali (d. 1600), Hasan Beyzade (d. 1636), İbrahim Peçevi (d. 1649?), and others. I am now preparing an article on this battle and its miraculous interpretations.

73 See Lutfi Paşa, *Tevârih-i Âl-i Osmân* (Istanbul 1922/23), 4–7; and Koçi Bey, *Koçi Bey Risalesi*, ed. A. K. Aksüt (Istanbul 1939), 66. On “Ottoman exceptionalism” in general, see E. Menchinger, “Dreams of Destiny and Omens of Greatness: Exceptionalism in Ottoman Political and Historical Thought”, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 31 (2020), 1–30.

and the truth of their Religion, from their Conquests and present Prosperity.”⁷⁴ Mouradgea D’Ohsson said that such beliefs continued to animate Ottomans to the late 1700s, “the effect of a true piety, and the conviction they share with nearly all Muslims, that God alone, according to his eternal decrees, decides the fate of battles and destiny of nations.” While common opinion credited victory to God and the support of unseen “legions” of angels or spirits, led by the Prophet himself, it framed defeat as an effect of God’s wrath—punishment for “those iniquities committed against religion and the law.”⁷⁵

At the individual level, moreover, many in the rank-and-file seem to have expressed faith in divine providence, or in the rewards of martyrdom. Dimitrie Cantemir wrote that, in the early 18th century, Ottoman soldiers wore no armor “in the belief that, tho’ a Man were made of Adamant, he could not evade nor escape the law of Fate.” Each man’s destiny was fixed, following common phrases such as:

*Bashde yazilmish olan Gelmek Vadzibdur, what is written on the forehead must necessarily come to pass. Acajak can damarda durmaz, the blood that is to flow out, remains not in the artery (that is, what God has preordain’d must be done in its time), Tacdîr tedbiri bozar, Providence overrules all human purposes.*⁷⁶

Many contemporary Europeans also felt that this faith bolstered Ottoman forces. Thomas Smith numbered fatalism as a cause for their tenacity, in addition to discipline, education, and, in some cases, sincere piety. “The doctrine of *Predestination* and Fate contributes not a little to their fury,” he said,

Upon confidence of which principle they expose themselves to certain dangers, believing themselves safe in the midst of them, if *God* has so decreed it; which they do

74 Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, 115–16.

75 D’Ohsson, *Tableau général*, 2: 263–64. According to Evliya Çelebi (d. 1684?) (in Sariyanis, “The Dead, the Spirits, and the Living”, 379), the souls of martyrs killed at Nihawand (642) joined the 1586 Ottoman siege of Hamadan. Mustafa Naima in the early 1700s credited a number of victories to God’s aid rather than material factors, including Haçova and Kanije: Naimâ Mustafa Efendi, *Târih-i Nâimâ*, ed. M. İpşirli (Ankara 2007), 1: 115–120, 172, 2: 399.

76 Cantemir, *History of the Growth and Decay*, 42 n. 23.

not know, whether he has or no, but by the event; and if so, all their wariness and endeavours to escape signifie nothing in the end.⁷⁷

Others like Rycaut, D’Ohsson, and the soldier and scholar Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli (d. 1730) concurred. All argued that popular belief in fatalism gave Ottoman forces valor in the face of danger, or the ability to meet reverses with equanimity.⁷⁸

If Ottomans held that God decreed the outcome of war, however, they debated how this decree unfolded and how far humans could shape the result. These debates rose in intensity through the 18th century as part of controversy over military and political reform, with arguments delimiting the scope of creaturely action. Again, while we can acknowledge that these debates served political ends, whether support for or opposition to reform, they drew force from the theology and stayed within its parameters. Older views clearly still resonated with some groups. Battle for them required absolute trust in God, who, if He willed, would grant believers aid. One late 18th-century author outlined this logic. Victory and defeat depend on God’s will and not material factors, he wrote. While some Christians argue that war is a “particular event” in which God has no effect—Heaven forefend!—and so credit victory to whatever side musters the superior means (*esbab*) of warfare, they err, ignorant of what scripture says: “Not the least atom is hidden from Him” and “There is no aid but

77 Smith, *Remarks upon the Manners, Religion and Government*, 140.

78 Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, 116: “it causes the Souldiery brutishly to throw away their lives in the most desperate attempts, and to esteem no more of their bodies, then as dirt or rubbish to fill up the trenches of the Enemy: And to speak the truth, this received assertion hath turned the Turk as much to account, as any other of their best and subtlest Maxims.” D’Ohsson, *Tableau général*, 2: 264–65: “We can perceive here both the advantages and inconveniences of this opinion in the conduct of public affairs, since it serves, on the one hand, to direct the people and the army according to circumstances, and, on the other, to cover with the veil of fatalism whatever is vicious and reprehensible in the projects of ministers as well as operations of generals.” L. F. Marsigli, *Stato militare dell’imperio Ottomano, incremento e decremento del medesimo* (Amsterdam 1732), 41: “Their courage, each to his own, in bearing reverses of fortune has no parallel among any other nation. If one who yesterday was vizier finds himself stripped of his office and authority today—reduced, I say, to having but two or three servants—he regards his disgrace with an extraordinary indifference, and blames his woes only on God’s will and his own ill-fate. And if he returns to his old post, which very often happens, he resumes his former pomp forthwith as if he had never suffered any disgrace.”

from God the Almighty.”⁷⁹ The same author offered an apt counter-example in the battle of Haçova, when trust in God overcame numbers and disorder and led to victory. With such cases, “how can anyone impute victory to refinement of the means of war (*tekmil-i esbâb-ı ceng*) and defeat to inadequate arms?”⁸⁰ According to some Ottomans, God would unfailingly send aid—unseen armies of angels, spirits, or “men of God”—so long as the empire showed itself worthy. The lesson of Haçova, another source stated, was that one must not trust in numbers or things of this world but only, and utterly, in God.⁸¹ Concern for worldly causes was unnecessary, at best a distraction and at worst an impiety.

We can see by the 17th century an alternative perspective that underlined battle as an event in which humans could exert “particular will,” nonetheless. It is important to note that this viewpoint did not deny fate or the miraculous, and it still upheld fatalism in strict theological terms. God’s preordination remained the ultimate cause of all things, battle and human deeds included. Figures like the polymath Katip Çelebi (d. 1657) now stressed the theology of human will more firmly, however. God gave us volition and enjoined us to act in this world through causes that we will and He creates, he argued. The failure to do so is a sin.⁸² Would-be reformers adopted a similar tack in their calls to action. İbrahim Müteferrika (d. 1745), a printer and scholar of Christian background whose interests ranged widely, encapsulated such arguments in a 1731 treatise in which he argued that a well-organized, disciplined army will most often defeat a chaotic and untrained one. “It is secret wisdom that victory, success, and triumph over the enemy depend always and utterly on the Lord God’s infinite aid to believers,” he wrote.

79 Ahmed Vasıf, *Mehasinü'l-Asar ve Hakaikü'l-Ahbar*, ed. M. İlgürel (Istanbul 1978), 151. Vasıf paid lip service to this view but was in fact arguing in a roundabout way for military reform. On his ideas on warfare and reform, see E. L. Menchinger, *The First of the Modern Ottomans: the Intellectual History of Ahmed Vâsıf* (Cambridge 2017), esp. 96 ff.

80 Vasıf, *Mehasinü'l-Asar*, 151. Vasıf used the same battle to make a similar point in another tract: Y. Çelik, “Siyaset-Nasihât Literatürümüzde Nadir bir Tür: Mısır’ın İşgali üzerine III. Selim’e Sunulan Tesliyet-nâme”, *Türk Kültürü İncelemeleri Dergisi*, 22 (2010), 121–22.

81 İbrahim Peçevi, *Tarih-i Peçevî* (Istanbul 1864), 2: 201–203.

82 See G. Hagen and E. Menchinger, “Ottoman Historical Thought”, in P. Duara et al (eds), *A Companion to Global Historical Thought* (London 2014), 101–102; and Menchinger, “Free Will”, 448–49. For the original text, see Kâtib Çelebi, *Tuhfetü'l-Kibar fî Esfari'l-Bihar* (Istanbul 1911), 163–164.

That rule rests upon His exalted will; and that victory and defeat lie within His pre-ordination. However, God has consigned the outward realization of every matter to initiative through causes ...Man must operate thus.⁸³

The point, then, was not that humans control their fate, though many reformers obviously hoped to imply as much. We can and must still hope for God's aid. As the late 18th-century historian and reformer Ahmed Vasıf said, the empire was "succored by God until the end of time (*damen-i kıyamete dek müeyyed min-İndillab*). If we might at times suffer defeat, there is ample proof that we shall with God's help immediately recover."⁸⁴ For Vasıf and like-minds, rather, the point was that humans must not expect divine intervention passively or presumptuously. Believers should have faith as well as take action. The proper course, said Vasıf, was "to immediately put trust and forgiveness with God and, begging the Prophet's intercession, to purify our intent, strive with all effort, and spend might and main to perfect secondary causes (*esbab-ı zahire*) before any time is lost."⁸⁵

The empire's unsuccessful wars of the late 1700s, especially against Russia, brought these arguments into stark conflict. Some in the Ottoman hierarchy continued to insist that they could rely on divine favor and aid in battle. Material factors, preparation, numbers—these did not matter, or at least they did not matter as much, for God always favors Muslim armies and will punish the wicked. According to one Müftizade Ahmed (d. 1791), a high-ranking religious scholar and şeyhülislam who favored an aggressive stance toward Russia, "the zephyr of victory shall blow to our armies and the dynasty's ill-wishers shall be confounded, following the verse, 'How many a small company has overcome a large company by God's will.'"⁸⁶ Yet this view now faced vocal criticism. One scribe in the service of the reformist Grand Vizier Halil Hamid Paşa (d. 1785) supplied a rebuttal. As he put it, times had changed. "While I have no doubt that God is almighty and powerful and will help the weak and oppressed," he argued, "it is undeniable that the divine custom is always to create everything through causes."

83 Quoted in Menchinger, "Free Will", 455.

84 Çelik, "Siyaset-Nasihât Literatürümüzde", 122.

85 Ibid., 123.

86 Vasıf, *Mehasinü'l-Asar*, 39–40. See also Menchinger, "Free Will", 463.

God alone has knowledge of the outcome of future events; therefore, to open the gates of war with such potent enemies while secondary causes [*esbab-ı zahire*] are entirely lacking, relying on unseen aid [*nusret-i gaybiyye*], is like taking mortal poison and trusting overconfidently in the antidote's unknown efficacy ...⁸⁷

In this view, the empire could no longer simply trust in God's intervention, in avenging angels, or in legions of unseen soldiers. They must work through visible, worldly means.



Conclusions—and Why Ottoman Theology Matters

By revisiting “Turkish fatalism,” I have tried to make a case in this article for serious study of theology in the early modern empire. What does that mean? Thinking theologically forces us to ask basic questions about reality and the human condition, for one, such as: How does the world work? How do we relate to that world and its Creator? What attitude ought we to take before the divine? What values should we properly cultivate in life? The answers that early modern Ottoman Muslims gave to these questions differed from our own, of course, at times markedly. We can also say that, as a set of beliefs or attitudes, fatalism supplied an interlinking, coherent framework for understanding the place of humans in the cosmos and our relationship to God.

Fatalism was not merely an Orientalist trope, then. Ottoman Muslims were indeed fatalists in a strict sense: by belief in God's preordination of all things in an occasionalistic universe. There are also grounds to think that at least some believers took these ideas further, despite vigorous debate, into more broadly fatalistic and quietist attitudes. Of course, I do not wish to overstate the case. There is a difference between worldview and actual practice, and our subjects often did flee pestilence, consult doctors, use talismans, or devise tactics for battle or proposals for reform. Yet we have also seen how the theology of fatalism shaped responses to plague and war in the 16th to 18th centuries, and how it could equally extend into political jockeying, gestures of consolation, and excuse-making. Nor does affirming such strains of thought make our subjects Orientalist caricatures, illogical or unthinking. Indeed, dismissing fatalism only

⁸⁷ Vasif, *Mehasinü'l-Asar*, 85. I have lightly emended the translation in Menchinger, “Free Will”, 464.

leads us to a less crude form of Orientalism, by presuming that the only "proper" response to adversity is human initiative and the application of reason. It is a value judgment informed, ultimately, by secular traditions of Enlightenment thought, and diminishes the rich theological and pietistic impulses of a theocentric society. Historians overlook complexities, or even actively distort our subject matter, by ignoring these alternatives.

What, then, do we miss by ignoring Ottoman theology, and why does it matter? I would argue that Ottoman theology matters precisely for what it tells us about these alternative impulses—and a conceptualization of the cosmos that differs from our own. It can reveal to us a worldview pervaded by transcendent divine power, for instance, one in which God acted and intervened constantly and, as Almighty Creator, could break in at any moment. A theological concern might also bring to our attention people or groups for whom serving God, resignation to God's decrees, or maintaining a creaturely posture before the divine was potentially of higher value than action, or self-realization, or even self-preservation. Third, Ottoman theology might lay bare attitudes in our subjects that focused less on the worldly, material, and concrete, and were more attuned to the numinous. And last, it can limn for us a world that was thought to bear traces everywhere of its Creator, traces that showed that same Creator's power and generosity and demanded our awe in return.

Ottoman theology can tell us about such things, revealing an empire in which the divine could saturate all aspects of life. It reminds us that "religion" was not and is not an isolatable category we can wall off from other spheres. For our subjects, faith helped to answer basic questions of self, of reality, of polity and politics, and much else. We would do well as historians to pay them more mind.

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