Approved for publication in *Temporality and Eternity: Ten Perspectives on God and Time*, ed. Marcus Schmücker, Michael Thomas Williams and Florian Fischer (Berlin: de Gruyter).

The Muslim Theologian Ibn Taymiyyah on God, Creation, and Time[1]

Jon Hoover, University of Nottingham

"[God] created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His throne was on the water."

(Qurʾān 11:7)

The Islamic tradition, along with the Jewish and Christian traditions, confesses one eternal God who originates a world characterized by time. Like their Jewish and Christian counterparts, Muslim theologians face the question of how this eternal God interacts and intersects with the temporality of the world, which leads them into debate over whether the world is eternal or had a beginning, as well as reflection on the nature of God's eternity. After briefly surveying classical and medieval Islamic approaches to the question of God, creation, and time, I will give primary attention to the Damascene theologian Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) who takes the unusual step of bridging God's eternity and the world's temporality by locating time in the essence of God. This study is an exercise in the history of theology and philosophy that seeks to explore how ideas developed and how they fit together.

The *kalām* theologians

The three major streams of *kalām* theology formulated and nurtured the dominant Muslim understanding of God's relation to the world and time. The Muʿtazilī stream extended from the eighth century to the thirteenth before dying out as a movement in its own right. Twelver and Zaydī Šīʿīs adopted many Muʿtazilī doctrines and have continued the tradition into the present. The ʾAšʿarī *kalām* theologians take their name from ʾAbū Ḥasan al-ʾAšʿarī (d. 935), who broke away from the Muʿtazilīs to defend divine predestination and other doctrines. The Māturīdī *kalām* theologians derive from the central Asian theologian al-Māturīdī (d. 944). ʾAšʿarī and Māturīdī theologies dominated Sunni Islam through the early twentieth century and remain vibrant to the present day. Muʿtazilī, ʾAšʿarī, and Māturīdī theologians differ over key issues such as human freedom and the origin of evil. However,

they share a common foundation in the *kalām* cosmological proof for the existence of God.[2] This proof is now reasonably well known among Christian philosophers of religion thanks to the work of William Lane Craig,[3] and it contains within it fundamental *kalām* assumptions about God, creation, and time. I will outline the basics of the proof as developed in ʾAšʿarī theological handbooks like the *Iqtiṣād* by the famous al-Ġazālī (d. 1111).[4] The proof may be set out in the form of a categorical syllogism.

> Major premise: Everything temporally originated (*ḥādiṯ*) has a cause.
> Minor premise: <u>The world is temporally originated.</u>
> Conclusion: The world has a cause, which is God

The Arabic term *ḥādiṯ*, which I translate "temporally originated," carries the sense of existing after not having existed. For most *kalām* theologians, the major premise of the above proof is necessary knowledge, that is, it is undeniable that everything that originates and comes into existence has a cause. This applies to both the seen and the unseen. All things seen within the world require a cause to come into existence. The need of originating events for causes applies to the unseen by analogy. No one saw the beginning of the world as a whole, but if the world in fact originated, it too required a cause to bring it into existence. Most medieval Muslim theologians and philosophers do not cast the principle of causality into serious doubt. They may disagree over the causes of specific things and events, but they agree that everything that originates requires a cause, whether that cause be God or an intermediary.

---

[2] For more extensive discussion of what follows in this and the next section, see Herbert A. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987); for briefer surveys, see Ayman Shihadeh, "The Existence of God," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 197-217; and Taneli Kukkonen, "Eternity", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_26238, last accessed 24 October 2018). For general information on *kalām* theology and other Islamic theological streams, see Sabine Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[3] William Lane Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

[4] For the version of the argument in al-Ġazālī, see *Al-Ghazālī's Moderation in Belief*, trans. Aladdin M. Yaqub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 27-41.

The minor premise of the *kalām* cosmological argument states that the world as a whole was temporally originated. *Kalām* theologians prove this using the following disjunction:

The world must be either temporally originated or eternal.

<u>The world is not timelessly eternal.</u>

Therefore, the world must be temporally originated.

Kalām theologians deploy two main methods to prove that the world is not eternal. One method argues that an eternal world would lead to an infinite regress of events in the world. Following in the train of the sixth century Christian theologian John Philoponus (d. ca. 570) and the Muslim philosopher al-Kindī (d. ca. 870), the *kalām* theologians argue that an infinite regress is impossible. They assert that it is not possible to traverse an infinite number of past events, nor is it possible to add more events to an infinite number of past events because an infinite by definition cannot be increased. Likewise, one infinite cannot be a multiple of another, as would be the case with different planets revolving eternally at different speeds. All this being impossible, past events and time cannot be infinite, and the world must therefore have had a beginning.

The second way of arguing for the temporal origination of the world is from the origination of accidents. This was the approach of especially the early *kalām* theologians. In the atomistic cosmology of early *kalām*, the entire world is made up of atoms and accidents. Accidents, like color and motion, inhere in atoms and temporally originate. Atoms combine in turn to form bodies. It is then asserted that any atom or body in which accidents subsist must itself be temporally originated. Therefore, the world as a whole, which is a body, is temporally originated as well.

Looking back at the *kalām* cosmological proof for the existence of God, once it has been proved that the world is temporally originated, it then follows that the world has a cause. Moreover, this cause or originator of the world must be timelessly eternal, always existing without a cause, because, as many theologians further explained, an infinite series of causes is impossible. The cause of the world is of course God.

The *kalām* proof for the existence of God is criticized by philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition. The Aristotelian-Neoplatonist Avicenna (d. 1037, Ibn Sīnā in Arabic) and the more purely Aristotelian Averroes (d. 1198, Ibn Rušd in Arabic) agree with the *kalām* tradition that an infinite regress of causes was not possible. However, they see no objection to

an infinite regress of effects and events, that is, a world extending infinitely into the past, because those past events in fact no longer exist. Only an actual infinite, a bodily existent of infinite size, is impossible, but not an infinite number of past events that has passed out of existence.

Al-Ġazālī counters that an infinite past would still entail the accumulation of an infinite number of immortal souls that all exist together in the present. Therefore, an actual infinite being impossible, the world must have had a beginning. With such argumentation, the *kalām* tradition is able to hold on to the doctrine of the origination of the world. However, Averroes, as well as later *kalām* theologians themselves, reject the proof for the temporal origination of the world from accidents. The fact that temporally originated accidents subsist in an atom or a body does not necessitate that the atom or body be temporally originated as well.

The philosophers Avicenna and Averroes

Philosophers like Avicenna and Averroes encounter the same problems as the *kalām* theologians relating time and God. Both need to bridge between a God who is timelessly eternal and a world of temporality. Avicenna in his Neoplatonism addresses this with a theory of eternal emanation.[5] God is the First or the One who is necessarily existent in itself and pure unchanging and timeless simplicity. The First is also perfect generosity, and out of this generosity emanates the First Intellect in timeless eternity. The First does not precede the First Intellect in time but in essence. To preserve the simplicity of the One from plurality, only one thing—the First Intellect—emanates from the One.

Avicenna then introduces plurality into the contingent world through a sequence of eternal intellects and souls extending from the First Intellect downward to the tenth intellect or Active Intellect and the sphere of the moon. The Active Intellect then generates the forms and matter of the temporal sublunary world of generation and corruption. The intermediary chain of eternal intellects and souls mediate between the utter simplicity of the unchanging eternal One and the temporal plurality of the region below the moon.

As already noted, Avicenna rejects the *kalām* notion that God originated the world temporally. If the world had had a beginning, he argues, some prior cause would have had to emerge to prompt God to begin creating. A beginning to creation would have required God to

---

[5] For further exposition of Avicenna's metaphysics, see Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 149-208.

change from not creating to creating, which would have entailed imperfection in God before God began creating.

Despite this, Avicenna can still speak of God's willing and choosing to create the world. However, God wills and chooses only in the sense that God knows what emanates from Him. God does not choose among options, and God's choice does not proceed from the potential to the actual. God is pure actuality, and emanation is accidental. Emanation is not essential to God's essence, but it is nonetheless a necessary concomitant of God's essence. In fact, God in His perfection emanates the world in the best possible way. The First is the cause of the best possible order.

Avicenna does not escape criticism. Al-Ġazālī is famous for attacking Avicenna's emanation metaphysics and for condemning adherence to the world's eternity as unbelief in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*).[6] Al-Ġazali himself bridges between the eternal God and the temporal world by asserting that it is in the very nature of God's eternal will to choose when the world began, without any kind of real or temporal cause. In no way does the exercise of God's eternal will introduce change or temporality in God, nor does it compromise God's perfection. Indeed, a world that is eternal would have no cause because for al-Ġazālī the eternal is by definition causeless.

Averroes is well known for having written a refutation of al-Ġazālī's *Incoherence of the Philosophers*.[7] Averroes agrees with al-Ġazali in rejecting Avicenna's emanation scheme, but he opposes al-Ġazali by insisting that the perfection of God entails a process of continuous creation. The world in itself is not eternal. If the world were eternal in its essence, it would have no agent. Instead, God perpetually originates created things from pre-existing matter, and God has been creating this matter from eternity.

Averroes also provides an analysis of the debate between *kalām* theology and Avicennan philosophy in his *Decisive Treatise* (*Faṣl al-maqāl*).[8] According to Averroes, both sides agree that some things originate in time by virtue of an efficient cause. They also agree that there is an eternal existent that did not come into existence in time, nor from something else. In other words, both sides agree on the existence of things in the world that are temporal

---

[6] Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1997).

[7] Averroës, *Averroes' Tahafut al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, trans. Simon van den Bergh (London: Luzac & Co., 1954).

[8] Averroës, *Decisive Treatise & Epistle Dedicatory*, ed. and trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), 14-17 for what follows.

and on the existence of a timelessly eternal God. They also agree that the world as a whole has a cause. They only thing they differ over is what to call the world. The philosophers call the world eternal, and the *kalām* theologians call it temporally originated.

Averroes goes on to observe that neither Avicennan philosophers nor *kalām* theologians follow the plain sense (*ẓāhir*) of the revealed texts. The Qurʾan says that God "is the one Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His throne was on the water" (Q. 11:7). The plain sense of this text points to the existence of water and God's throne before the creation of this world in six days. Another Qurʾanic text on God's creation of the heavens is similar: "[God] rose over the heaven when it was smoke, and He said to it and to the earth, 'Come willingly or unwillingly'. They both said, 'We come, willingly'" (Q. 41:11). This verse indicates that God created the heavens from smoke that existed beforehand. For Averroes, these texts do not support the *kalām* view of creation. They instead support Averroes' own view of continuous creation.

Faḫr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī

The ʾAšʿarī theologian Faḫr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 1210) lived about the same time as Averroes, but the two were not aware of each other. Ar-Rāzī lived in the eastern Islamic world, mainly in what is today Iran and Afghanistan, while Averroes lived in Andalusia and North Africa. Ar-Rāzī usually defends traditional ʾAšʿarī positions, but his analysis of the debate over the origin of the world in his late work *Sublime Issues* (*al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya*) bears some similarities to that of Averroes. Ar-Rāzī carefully examines both scriptural and rational arguments for and against the eternity of the world. He concludes that the Qurʾān does not support the arguments of either the philosophers or the *kalām* theologians conclusively. The rational arguments for each side are likewise inconclusive. The only thing certain is that the world depends on God for its existence.[9]

Throughout the main part of his career, ar-Rāzī affirms the ʾAšʿarī view that God is timeless and not subject to temporal origination in His essence. However, again in his late work *Sublime Issues*, he asserts that the ʾAšʿarīs, the Muʿtazilīs, and the philosophers cannot evade the logical conclusion that temporally originating events subsist in the essence of God. Ar-Rāzī argues for example that this follows from God's knowledge of particulars in the

---

[9] See Muammer İskenderoğlu, *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Thomas Aquinas on the Question of the Eternity of the World* (Leiden, MA: Brill, 2002), which analyses the relevant material in Faḫr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī, *Al-Maṭālib al-ʿālīyah min al-ʿilm al-ʾilāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥiǧāzī as-Saqqā, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-ʿarabī, 1407).

world. Change in the things that God knows entails change in God's knowledge, which implies temporality in God. Similarly, God's acts of intention and will to originate involve temporal origination in God's essence. Additionally, God's hearing of speech and seeing of a picture before the speech and picture exist would be impossible. So, God's hearing and seeing must involve temporal origination in God.[10]

Such arguments had been made earlier by the Karrāmī religious movement to link God's creative activity to the temporality of the world and to oppose the timeless and static God of Māturīdī *kalām* theology. The Karrāmīs emerged in the ninth century, thrived in present-day Afghanistan and Iran, and died out in the thirteenth century.[11] Also, the philosopher ʾAbū Barakāt al-Baġdādī (d. ca. 1165) posited temporally originating willings in God's essence to will events in the world, alongside an eternal divine will to will eternal existents.[12] However, neither the Karrāmīs nor ar-Rāzī and ʾAbū Barakāt al-Baġdādī appear to have worked through the implications of temporality in the essence of God as comprehensively as Ibn Taymiyyah does.

Ibn Taymiyyah on continuous creation in the perfection of God

Ibn Taymiyyah is best known in recent decades as the main medieval inspiration for radical ǧihadism. This reputation, however, is built on historical anachronism insofar as ǧihadis appropriate his views to their modern-day ends by decontextualizing him.[13] That aside, Ibn Taymiyyah wrote more on theology than any other subject. His main competitor was ʾAšʿarī *kalām* theology, especially the thought of Faḫr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī. He also wrote a long refutation of the Twelver Šīʿī theologian ʿAllāmah al-Ḥillī (d. 1325) who adopted largely Muʿtazilī views that contains some of his most sophisticated discussion of God's

---

[10] Ar-Rāzī, *Al-Maṭālib al-ʿālīya*, 2:106-111.

[11] On Karrāmī theology, see Aron Zysow, "Karramiyya," in *Oxford Handbook*, ed. Schmidtke, 252-262.

[12] ʾAbū al-Barakāt Hibat Allāh ibn ʿAlī ibn Malkā al-Baġdādī, *Kitāb al-muʿtabar fī al-ḥikma*, 3 vols. (Hyderabad: Ǧamʿiyyat dāʾirat al-maʿārif al-ʿutmāniyya, 1357-8/1938-9), 3:157-158, 164, 167, cf. 3:45; see also Roxanne D. Marcotte, "Abū l-Barakāt al-Baġdādī," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund, 2 vols., (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 10-12.

[13] See further Yahya M. Michot, trans. *Ibn Taymiyya: Against Extremisms* (Beirut: Albouraq, 2012); Yahya Michot, *Ibn Taymiyya: Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule* (Oxford, UK: Interface Publications, 2006); and Jon Hoover, "Ibn Taymiyya between Moderation and Radicalism," in *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage*, ed. Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 177–203.

creation of the world.[14] Additionally, Ibn Taymiyyah interacted with the philosophies of both Avicenna and Averroes.[15]

Ar-Rāzī had concluded in his *Sublime Issues* that both scriptural and rational arguments for and against the eternity of the world were inconclusive. Ibn Taymiyyah is unsympathetic to ar-Rāzī's analysis. He responds that ar-Rāzī got confused between the two major positions because he was not aware of the correct view on creation in the middle, the view supported by both revelation and reason.[16] Rather than leave the issue unresolved, Ibn Taymiyyah seeks to reason out a mediating position.

Ibn Taymiyyah agrees with al-Ġazālī and the *kalām* theologians that eternal objects do not have an agent cause and that created objects come into existence after not having existed. If the world were eternal, it would have no creator. Only God is eternal and unoriginated. This leads Ibn Taymiyyah to reject Avicenna's scheme of eternal emanation. There is no chain of eternal intellects and souls emanating down from God to the region of generation and decay below the moon. Everything other than God comes into existence after it did not exist.

Yet, Ibn Taymiyyah affirms with the philosophers that the perfection of God necessarily entails that God create from eternity to eternity. Against al-Ġazālī and the *kalām* tradition, God could not have started creating at some arbitrary point in the past without some prior cause emerging to precipitate the change. As Ibn Taymiyyah puts it, "It is impossible that what is impossible, as far as [God] is concerned, should become possible without a cause

---

[14] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Minhāǧ as-sunnah an-nabawiyyah fī naqḍ kalām aš-Šīʿah al-Qadariyya*, ed. Muḥammad Rašād Sālim. 9 vols. (Riyadh: Ǧamiʿat al-Imām Muḥammad ibn Suʿūd al-ʾIslāmiyya, 1986); God's creation of the world is treated in the first volume.

[15] For a general overview of Ibn Taymiyyah's theology, see Jon Hoover, "Ḥanbalī Theology," in *Oxford Handbook*, ed. Schmidtke, 625-646 (633-641). The following presentation of Ibn Taymiyyah on God, time, and creation is based on Jon Hoover, "Perpetual Creativity in the Perfection of God: Ibn Taymiyya's Hadith Commentary on God's Creation of This World." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15.3 (2004): 287-329 (open access at https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/15.3.287, last accessed 25 October 2018); Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 70-102 (open access at https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004158474.i-270, last accessed 25 October 2018); and Jon Hoover, "God Acts by His Will and Power: Ibn Taymiyya's Theology of a Personal God in his Treatise on the Voluntary Attributes," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Youssef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55-77.

[16] For Ibn Taymiyyah's assessment of ar-Rāzī, see Hoover, "Perpetual Creativity," 293, 314-318.

originating."[17] The *kalām* theologians make God out to be doing nothing at all prior to creation, and then suddenly God starts creating for no reason. Ibn Taymiyyah also claims that the *kalām* view of God changing from not creating to creating introduces imperfection into God. A perfect God will always be creating, as indicated by the Qurʾanic verse, "Is He who creates like one who does not create?" (Q. 16:17). Otherwise, God would be like one who does not create.

To thread the needle between the *kalām* theologians and the philosophers' views on God's origination of the world, Ibn Taymiyyah distinguishes between God's continuous creativity on the one hand and the concrete created things that come into existence after not existing on the other. God in His perfection has always been creating one thing or another from eternity. God's creativity is perpetual (*dāʾim*). Yet, no one thing that God creates is eternal. Everything comes into existence after not existing. Each created thing has a beginning in time. Putting it differently, as Ibn Taymiyyah himself does, the genus or species of created things is eternal, while no individual created thing is eternal. There has always been one world or another, but no one part of the world is eternal. There is no existent thing eternal alongside God. God is the only eternal existent. Ibn Taymiyyah expresses this as follows:

> As [God] is Creator of everything, everything other than Him is created and preceded by nonexistence. So, with Him there is nothing eternal by virtue of His eternity. When it is said that He has been creating from eternity, its meaning is that He has been creating one created thing after another from eternity just as He will be creating one created thing after another to eternity. That which we deny [i.e. eternity], we deny of originating events and movements, one after another. There is nothing in this except an ascription to Him of perpetuity of acting, not [an ascription] of one among the things [He has] done being with Him [eternally] in its concrete entity.[18]

---

[17] Hoover, "Perpetual Creativity," 321, quoting from the modern collection of Ibn Taymiyyah's works entitled *Maǧmūʿ fatāwā Šayḫ al-ʾIslām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah* (hereafter MF), ed. ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Qāsim and Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad, 37 vols. (Riyadh: Maṭābiʿ ar-Riyāḍ, 1961-1967), 18:233.

[18] Hoover, "Perpetual Creativity," 326, quoting MF 18:239.

Ibn Taymiyyah on God's continuous creation from eternity

Ibn Taymiyyah emphasizes that God's creative activity has no beginning and that there is no beginning to created things in the past. Eternity into the past or pre-eternity (*al-azal*) has no limit that reason could grasp. Any point in the past will always be preceded by the fullness of pre-eternity. Ibn Taymiyyah illustrates this point with the example of a large number of cities filled with tiny mustard seeds:

> Even if one posited the existence of cities many times [the number of] the cities of the earth, each city with as much mustard seed as to fill it, and [then] supposed that with each passing of a million years one grain of mustard seed disappeared, all the mustard seed would disappear and pre-eternity would not [yet] have ended. And if one supposed many, many times that, it would [still] not have ended. There is no time that might be posited that is not such that pre-eternity was before it.[19]

Ibn Taymiyyah argues that his view of God's continuous or perpetual creativity is not only the most rational approach to the question. It also coheres best with the plain sense of revelation. The parallels with Averroes here are striking. Ibn Taymiyyah was familiar with the theological writings of Averroes, but it is not yet clear whether he benefitted from Averroes directly on this particular point.[20] Yet, Ibn Taymiyyah cites the same key Qurʾanic texts that Averroes quoted: "[God] created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His Throne was on the water" (Q. 11:7), and "[God] rose over the heavens when it was smoke, and He said to it and to the earth, 'Come willingly or unwillingly'. They both said, 'We come, willingly'" (Q. 41:11). According to Ibn Taymiyyah, God created the heavens and the earth as we now know them in six days while God's throne was on the water, and God created this present world out of preceding matter and in preceding time. The Qurʾan does not speak of God creating anything out of nothing.

Ibn Taymiyyah clarifies that the six days of creation were of different length from that of our days determined by the rising and setting of the sun. This is because, "Those days were

---

[19] Hoover, "Perpetual Creativity," 325-6, quoting MF 18:238-239.

[20] For a survey of modern research (mostly in Arabic) on Ibn Taymiyyah's relation to Averroes, see Jon Hoover, "Ibn Taymiyya's use of Ibn Rushd to refute the incorporealism of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," in *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th till the 14th Century*, ed. Abdelkader Al Ghouz (Bonn: Bonn University Press by V&R unipress, 2018), 469-491 (473-475).

measured by the movements of the bodies existent before the creation of the heavens and the earth."[21] Ibn Taymiyyah also supports his view of creation from the statements or *ḥadīṯ* of the Prophet Muhammad and even the Hebrew Bible. From the *ḥadīṯ* of the Prophet, he quotes, "God determined the determinations of created things fifty thousand years before He created the heavens and the earth, and His Throne was on the water."[22] With regard to the Bible, Ibn Taymiyyah observes that Genesis 1:1-2 speaks of water covering the earth and the wind blowing over the water at the beginning of the creation of the heavens and the earth.[23]

To make intellectual space for God's creation of the world from eternity, Ibn Taymiyyah must reject the two main *kalām* proofs that the world had a beginning. The first *kalām* proof states that an atom or a body in which temporally originated accidents subsist is itself temporally originated. Following Averroes and later *kalām* theologians, Ibn Taymiyyah denies that this is the case. Something in which temporal origination takes place is not necessarily itself temporally originated. With this, Ibn Taymiyyah opens the door to temporality within the essence of the eternal God.

The second *kalām* argument states that the world must have a beginning because an infinite regress of temporally originating events is impossible. Ibn Taymiyyah refutes two key *kalām* claims against an infinite regress.[24] Against the idea that an infinite magnitude cannot be increased, Ibn Taymiyyah explains that an infinite magnitude is by definition not subject to measurement or comparison with other magnitudes. He compares the notion of infinity to multiplicity. The numbers 10, 100, and 1000 are all multiples of ten even though their values differ. In the same manner, one infinite magnitude may appear longer than another infinite magnitude from one perspective, but both remain infinite magnitudes nonetheless.

The second key objection against an infinite regress of events states that an infinite cannot be traversed. The ʾAšʿarī *kalām* theologian al-Ǧuwaynī (d. 1085) had said trying to traverse an infinite was like saying to someone, "I will not give you a dirham unless I give you a dinar before it, and I will not give you a dinar unless I give you a dirham before it." Al-Ǧuwaynī explains that these conditions can never be met, and no dirham or dinar will ever be

---

[21] Hoover, "Perpetual Creativity," 323, quoting MF 18:235.

[22] Hoover, "Perpetual Creativity," 302. The *ḥadīṯ* is found in the collection of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Al-Qadar, Ḥiǧāǧ Ādam wa-Mūsā; English translation in ʿAbdul Ḥamīd Ṣiddīqī, trans., *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, n.d.), 4.1396–7 (6416).

[23] Hoover, "Perpetual Creativity," 304.

[24] For more detailed discussion of the two arguments that follow, see Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy*, 91-94.

exchanged. It will only work to say something like "I will not give you a dinar unless I give you a dirham after it." Ibn Taymiyyah agrees that al-Ǧuwaynī's latter statement makes sense, but he says that the former statement is irrelevant to an infinite regress because it is framed in the future tense. It would however be possible to say, "I have not given you a dirham unless I have given you a dirham before it," in which case there would no objection to an infinite regress of dirham exchanges. Thus, for Ibn Taymiyyah, there is no argument against traversing an infinite number of events regressing into the past.

Ibn Taymiyyah on God's perpetual activity

Parallel to Ibn Taymiyyah's theology of perpetual creation from eternity is his vision of God's internal dynamism.[25] Ibn Taymiyyah is firmly of the view that nothing can arise without a cause, and he applies this to the activity within God's essence as well. Here he departs from both *kalām* theologians and philosophers like Avicenna and Averroes, all of whom maintain that God is timelessly eternal, and he elaborates the notion of temporally originating events subsisting in the essence of God introduced earlier by the Karrāmīs and ar-Rāzī in his *Sublime Issues*.

Both the ʾAšʿarī and the Muʿtazilī *kalām* theologians maintain that temporally originating events (*ḥawādiṯ*) cannot subsist in the essence of God. To support this, early *kalām* theologians again resort to the idea that something in which temporally originating events subsist must itself be temporally originating. If temporal events subsist in God, God himself would be a temporally originated body, but God is neither temporally originated nor a body. Later *kalām* theologians are not as impressed with this argument, and they find other ways to defend God's timelessness. One argument is that temporally originating events in the essence of God entails an infinite regress, which is deemed impossible. So, God's essence must be timelessly eternal.

Beyond this, the ʾAšʿarīs and the Muʿtazilīs diverge. The Muʿtazilīs say that God's essential attributes of knowledge, power, will, and the like are just names for God's essence or modes of God's being. They have no subsistence in themselves. Otherwise, God would consist of more than one thing, and that would violate God's unity. For the same reason, God's attributes of action like speaking and creating do not subsist in God's essence. God's speech for example is created outside of God in the messenger who transmits it. This protects God from subjection to temporal origination.

---

[25] This section is based on Hoover, "God Acts by His Will and Power."

The ʾAšʿarīs in turn accuse the Muʿtazilīs of stripping God of His attributes. God's attributes of speech, power, will, and the like must be substantives that subsist in God's essence. They must be real. However, the ʾAšʿarīs continue, these attributes cannot be temporal because that would entail temporality and change in God. So, God's essential attributes must be eternal. The ʾAšʿarīs enumerate seven essential and eternal attributes: knowledge, power, will, life, speech, sight, and hearing. These seven subsist in God's essence. However, God's acts do not subsist in God's essence lest they subject God to temporality.

To Ibn Taymiyyah these ʾAšʿarī and Muʿtazilī attempts to free God of temporally originated events are misguided. Ibn Taymiyyah usually speaks of God's "voluntary attributes" and "voluntary acts" instead of "temporally originated events" subsisting in God's essence, but he acknowledges these different terms to be functionally equivalent. By whatever name, he denies that the subsistence of temporal events in the essence of God renders God temporally originated. It also does not introduce change into God, as "change" for God would mean acting out of character, which God does not do.

Additionally, and similar to the ʾAšʿarīs, Ibn Taymiyyah accuses the Muʿtazilīs of disjoining God's attributes from God's essence. To take the example of God's speech, a God who creates speech outside of Himself in a messenger is not doing the speaking. The one in whom the speech subsists is the one speaking. The Muʿtazilīs have thus effectively deprived God of his speech.

Ibn Taymiyyah criticizes the ʾAšʿarīs in turn for severing the link between God's acts on the one hand and God's will and power on the other. For the ʾAšʿarīs, God's speech is eternal, and so there is no way that God's will and power, which are also both eternal, can cause acts of speech. By depriving God of causality in His will and power, the ʾAšʿarīs have also stripped God of his perfection. In appealing to God's perfection, Ibn Taymiyyah invokes a fundamental principle of his theological method: God is all the more worthy of perfections found in creatures than are the creatures themselves. In the case at hand, someone who can act voluntarily, that is, by will and power, is more perfect than someone who cannot. Since God is all the more worthy of perfections found in humans than are humans themselves, it follows that God also acts by will and power. Likewise, a God who speaks by will and power is more perfect than a God who does not.

Ibn Taymiyyah also insists that God does things in temporal sequence. It makes no sense to him for a timelessly eternal will to produce something in the world at a particular point in time. When God tells the Prophet Muhammad to tell his people, "'Perform deeds'.

God will see your deeds" (Q. 9:105), this means that God first issues the command to perform deeds. Then, after that command, people perform those deeds. God sees those deeds after they are completed, and not before. A God locked in timeless eternity could never interact with events in proper order. Again, Ibn Taymiyyah explains, such a God would lack perfection.

Conclusion

God in Ibn Taymiyyah's theology acts by means of His will and power with successive voluntary acts that subsist in His essence. As he puts it in one place, "[God] has been active from eternity when He willed with acts that subsist in His self by His power and His will one after another….He has been speaking from eternity by His will, and He has been acting from eternity by His will one thing after another."[26] With this, Ibn Taymiyyah turns the dominant hierarchy of perfections in medieval Islamic thought on its head. Timeless simplicity no longer stands at the top of the hierarchy, but temporality and voluntary action instead. Ibn Taymiyyah was not without precedents, such as the Karrāmīs and the later ar-Rāzī, but he appears to be the most thorough and consistent in working this position through.

Ibn Taymiyyah's theology of a perpetually dynamic and creative God found a very modest reception in the decades and centuries after him, mostly through its condemnation.[27] The modern Salafi movement has done a great deal to revive the theological heritage of Ibn Taymiyyah, but it remains for further research to determine the extent to which Salafis embrace this feature of their master's theology. Nonetheless, it is certainly the case that today's opponents of Ibn Taymiyyah still see need to condemn this aspect of his thinking.[28]

Ibn Taymiyyah's view of God's essential dynamism also finds parallels in the work of modern Christian theologians and philosophers of religion. In this volume for example Ryan Mullins argues for temporality in God's being and Michael Schulz analyses the character of God's temporality in the prominent Christian theologians Wolfhart Pannenberg and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Ibn Taymiyyah completely rejects the incarnational impulse that often informs

---

[26] Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy*, 81, quoting Ibn Taymiyyah, *Minhāǧ as-sunna*, 1:147.

[27] For a beginning to research on the reception of Ibn Taymiyyah's view of God and creation, see Rodrigo Adem, "Ibn Taymiyya as Avicennan? Fourteenth-Century Cosmological Controversies in Damascus." *The Muslim World* 108.1 (2018): 124–153.

[28] See for example the footnotes opposing Ibn Taymiyyah in Saʿid Foudah, *A Refined Explanation of The Sanusi Creed: The Foundation Proofs*, trans. Suraqah Abdul Aziz (Rotterdam: Sunni Publications, 2013), 79, 94, 115, 134, 139-140, 148.

Christian reflection on temporality in God. God for Ibn Taymiyyah does not enter the world in any kind of ontological sense. However, Ibn Taymiyyah shares with these Christian thinkers the desire to synchronize the temporal process of the created world with the internal life of God and to envision an essential generativity in God that arises out of God's love and perfection.