CHAPTER FOUR

GOD'S CREATION OF ACTS IN THE HUMAN AGENT

*Ibn Taymiyya's View of the Human Act in Prior Research*

Ibn Taymiyya's view of the human act has received considerably more scholarly attention than other aspects of his theology. Henri Laoust observes in his *Essai* that the shaykh criticizes the Ash’ari doctrine of acquisition (*kasb*) and sometimes admits secondary causality but that he also maintains God’s full omnipotence. The result is an irresolvable duality of perspective: “Through theological reflection, the human being becomes more and more profoundly conscious of absolute determinism. He must, for the sake of the necessities of the social and moral life, willingly convince himself of his freedom.” Laoust adds in a footnote that the shaykh often contradicts himself by affirming God’s omnipotence and human freedom simultaneously.¹ Laoust’s observations are correct so far as they go, but they do not illumine Ibn Taymiyya’s position fully.

More enthusiastically, Victor Makari finds Ibn Taymiyya’s view of the human act “inescapably convincing” and “lucid and profound.” Makari’s commendation appears to derive from reading Ibn Taymiyya against the backdrop of causal chain theories attributed to the Ash’ari theologian al-Juwaynī and the philosopher Ibn Rushd.² While Ibn Taymiyya does employ the philosophical language of secondary causality, this chapter will show that these causes are not efficacious but only instruments in God’s acts of creation. God creates all existents directly; human acts are not links in a causal chain headed by a First Cause.³

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³ Thomas Michel, *A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity*, 44–55, does not analyze Ibn Taymiyya’s doctrine of the human act in detail, but he does demonstrate a historically significant point. The shaykh’s criticism of the Ash’ari doctrine of divine determination for undercutting human responsibility adds a new dimension to the traditionalist Hanbalī censure of Kalam theology. Earlier Hanbalī polemicists had not condemned the Ash’aris for this.

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Makari unfortunately does not take note of the earlier and far more thorough work of Daniel Gimaret. In a 1977 article on the human act in Hanbalī thought, Gimaret devotes a section to Ibn Taymiyya’s views in Minhāj and Irāda. Among the features of the shaykh’s doctrine that Gimaret highlights are mediation between the Ashʿarīs and the Muʿtazilīs, polemic against the Ashʿarī doctrine of acquisition, assertion that human agency is both real and created by God and affirmation of some kind of secondary causality. Gimaret also briefly mentions the two kinds of divine will—ontological and legislative—which were treated in the previous chapter. Gimaret is impressed with Ibn Taymiyya’s ingenuity and originality and with the degree to which he gives a role to human agency. However, Gimaret is rather less admiring in his 1980 book on the human act in Sunnism as a whole. He justifies his exclusion of the Hanbalīs and Ibn Taymiyya from the book by stating that they did not make an original contribution to this doctrine in the Sunnī tradition. In a short footnote Gimaret explains that when writing his earlier article on Hanbalī views he was not aware of the extent to which Ibn Taymiyya had been inspired by the Ashʿarī theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Unfortunately, Gimaret says no more about this linkage.

The present chapter examines Ibn Taymiyya’s views afresh, going beyond the work of Gimaret by drawing on a wider range of the shaykh’s texts, clarifying how he is similar to al-Rāzī and showing that he is less comfortable than are both al-Rāzī and Ibn ʿArabī with compulsion (jabr) and paradox. First, however, more attention must be given to these and others among Ibn Taymiyya’s predecessors.

### The Theological and Philosophical Context

As is evident from the preceding chapter, the fundamental division in Islamic theological reflection on the human act turns on who creates and determines this act: God or human beings? Out of concern for God’s justice in reward and punishment, the Muʿtazilīs maintain that humans create their own acts

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5 Also, following Gimaret, “Théories de l’acte humain dans l’école Hanbalite,” George Makdisi, “Ethics in Islamic Traditionalist Doctrine,” 51–6, provides a brief exposition from Minhāj, showing that for Ibn Taymiyya God is the Creator while the human is the agent of the human act.