

VIEWS OF THE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIAN AND PHILOSOPHERS ON OMNISCIENCE AND HUMAN FREEDOM

(PART –II)

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ABSTRACT

It has been commonly understood that Divine knowledge, even though eternal and inclusive of foreknowledge of free human actions, does not restrict human freedom. But the philosophers and theologians both in the Muslim and the Judaeo-Christian tradition have pointed out that apparently the doctrine of Omniscience of God does not cohere with the doctrine of free will of man. The present research is an attempt to examine different formulations of the problem as well as solutions attempted by Christian theologians/philosophers. I have observed that Saint Thomas Aquinas' formulation of the doctrine of omniscience in an absolutist manner (known as Traditional Doctrine of Omniscience) makes it incoherent with the concept of human freedom. History of Christian thought on this problem is basically formulation and reformulation of this doctrine in different ways. The author agrees with Swinburne that there is an essential incompatibility between God's Omniscience and human free will, if the traditional doctrine of Omniscience is accepted. That the basic fault lies in its absolutist approach. Swinburne asserts that it is contrary to Biblical teachings as well. On the basis of his understanding of 'Islamic View of Omniscience and Human Freedom' I believe that the correct formulation of the concept of Omniscience must include an indeterminate aspect concerning free choice of a human action.

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Pike's Analysis

Nelson Pike comprehends two items generating the problem for Boethius *viz.*, i) the claim that God is infallible, and ii) that God knows the outcome of human actions in advance of their performance. Analyzing the problem, he identifies six assumptions or theses, as he calls them, working in Boethius's formulation of the problem. Boethius either approves them or denies any of them.

Assumption 1: God is omniscient is a necessary statement. Here, God appears as a 'title term' and the proposition as a whole is to be read as having hypothetical form [i.e., if God then omniscient.]”

Assumption 2: Being omniscient means that the individual who is omniscient believes all true propositions. “In logical notation: $\forall x (O(x) \supset (\forall p (P(p) \supset B(x,p))))$ (If x is omniscient, then if P, x believes that P) e.g., if two plus two equals four, then if x is omniscient, x believes that two plus two equals four.”

Assumption 3: It is part of the meaning of the predicate 'omniscient' that “if a given individual is omniscient, then that individual believes nothing that is false.”

Assumption 4: “Omniscience is an essential property of any individual possessing it. If a given individual is omniscient, that individual would not be the individual he is if he were not omniscient. [For example] a statement of the form 'if x is Yahweh, then x is omniscient' is a necessary truth, if it is true at all.”

Assumption 5: “Let this be a necessary truth that if a given individual is God, that individual has always existed and will always exist i.e., that individual have duration extending indefinitely both forward and backward in time.” (This is the assumption which, as Pike observes, Boethius will eventually deny as incorrect in formulating his solution).

Assumption 6: “If a given individual exists at a given moment in time, then in order to be counted as omniscient, that individual must hold any belief he

holds at that moment in time. ‘ $\forall(x) (P) (T) (If\ x\ is\ omniscient\ and\ exists\ at\ T,$
then if x believes P, x believes P at T)’. Here ‘T’ takes times...as values.’⁵⁵

Yahweh is the name of God in Hebrew tradition as Allah is the name of God in Muslim tradition. Pike draws the implications of Yahweh’s foreknowledge at a time T_1 in the case of a hypothetical person Jones who ‘mows his lawn at a time T_2 ’, (eighty years later than T_1) in the light of the above assumptions and attempts to reformulate the problem underlying Boethius’s concern. Pike’s reformulation of the problem is as under:

1. Yahweh is omniscient and Yahweh exists at T_1 ’ entails ‘if Jones does A at T_2 , then Yahweh believes at T_1 that Jones does A at T_2 ’ (Assumptions 2 and 6)
2. If Yahweh is (essentially) omniscient, then ‘Yahweh believes P’ entails ‘P’. (The doctrine of divine infallibility from Assumptions 3 and 4.)
3. It is not within one’s power at a given time so to act that both ‘p’ and ‘not-p’ are true.
4. It is not within one’s power at a given time so to act that something believed by an individual at a time prior to the given time was not believed by that individual at the prior time.
5. It is not within one’s power at a given time so to act that an individual existing at a time prior to the given time did not exist at the prior time.
6. If Yahweh believes at T_1 that Jones does A at T_2 , then if it is within Jones’s power at T_2 to refrain from doing A then either: (i) It was within Jones’s power at T_2 so to act that Yahweh believed P at T_1 and ‘P’ is false; or (ii) it was within Jones’s power at T_1 so to act that Yahweh did not believe as He did believe at T_2 ; or (iii) it was within Jones’s power at T_1 so to act that Yahweh did not exist at T_1 .
7. If Yahweh is (essentially) omniscient, then the first alternative in the consequent of line 6 is false (from lines 2 and 3).
8. The second alternative in the consequent of line 6 is false (from line 4).
9. The third alternative in the consequent of line 6 is false (from line 5).

⁵⁵ Pike, *Ibid.*, pp. 54 -56.

10. Therefore if Yahweh is (essentially) omniscient and believes at T_1 that Jones does A at T_2 , then it was within Jones's power at T_2 to refrain from doing A (from lines 6 and 7-9).
11. Therefore if Yahweh is (essentially) omniscient and exist at T_1 , then if Jones does A at T_2 , it was not within Jone's power at T_2 to refrain from doing A (from lines 10 and 1).⁵⁶

We see that the problem as conceived by Boethius, clearly ends at the conclusion that if God exists, no human action is voluntary. (Though Pike does not attempt to formally reconstruct his concept of what a voluntary action is, he recognizes a situation not-representing a voluntary action if it would be wrong to assign a person, say Jones, the ability or power to do other than he did.) Pike examines three attempts to deal with the problem before examining Boethius's solution. The first of these attempts is made by Leibniz.

Leibniz attempts to solve the problem on the basis of a distinction made between *absolute necessity* and *hypothetical necessity*. He observes that to say that an action is necessary or to say that it is not contingent or to say that it is not the effect of free choice, presupposes *absolute necessity*. What is foreseen is not necessary in the first sense, for necessary truth is that 'whereof the contrary is impossible or implies a contradiction.' Leibniz denies that the truth stated in the sentence expressing a contingent human affair (say for example 'Jones does A at time T_2 ') is a necessary truth. Given God's foreknowledge and essential omniscience, all that follows is that the consequent is *true*, not that it is *necessarily true*. Criticizing Leibniz, Pike observes that he uses the term '*necessity*' in contrast to the term '*contingent*' rather than using it in contrast to the term '*voluntary*'.⁵⁷

The second attempt which Pike mentions relates to Cicero. Pike states Cicero's position on the problem of divine foreknowledge as follows:

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 59 - 60.

⁵⁷ Pike presents Augustine's analysis of the concept of 'necessity' in his support. Given God's foreknowledge of human actions, the actions are necessary. But according to Augustine, "the form of this conditional is 'P implies Q', and not 'P implies N(Q)'. 'Q' in the [later] consequent of this conditional is the claim that human actions are not voluntary..." *Ibid.*, p. 62.

If all things have been foreknown and if they come to pass in this order, there is a certain order of things foreknown by God;

And if a certain order of things, then a certain order of causes, for nothing can happen which is not preceded by some efficient cause.

But if there is a certain order of causes according to which everything happens which does happen, then by fate all things happen which happen.

But if this be so then there is nothing in our own power and there is no such thing as freedom of will;

And if we grant this, the economy of human life is subverted.⁵⁸

According to Augustine, Cicero could not face this conclusion. He transposed the order of the argument as under and drew the conclusion that God does not have foreknowledge of human actions:

If there is freewill, all things do not happen according to fate;

If all things do not happen according to fate, there is not a certain order of causes, neither is there a certain order of things foreknown by God – for things cannot come to pass except they are preceded by efficient causes;

But if there is no fixed and certain order of things foreknown by God, all things cannot be said to happen according to this foreknowledge as they would happen.

If it is not true that all things happen just as they have been foreknown to Him, then he does not have the foreknowledge of all future events.⁵⁹

This account of the problem makes the divine foreknowledge dependent on ‘a certain order of causes’. But given ‘a certain order of causes’, no human action is voluntary. Cicero’s solution of the problem consists in denying that

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63. Pike states this argument with reference to Augustine’s the *City of God*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p 63.

future events and actions are the products of ‘a certain order of causes’. Hence, a denial of foreknowledge. The difference in the thinking of Cicero and that of Boethius and Calvin is that Cicero seems to make foreknowledge of what will happen in the future dependent upon God’s knowledge of the present state of the universe and on the conception of certain rigid causal laws governing the temporal events; whereas Calvin and Boethius envisage God’s foreknowledge of things in that ‘He sees them as actually placed before Him’. Criticizing Cicero, Nelson Pike observes that the problem, Cicero addresses is not the one we are discussing. “His ‘solution’ of the problem consists in denying a premise that is not involved in the issue.”⁶⁰ According to Pike’s analysis, the problem as conceived by Boethius does not involve any conception of ‘a certain order of causes’.

The third attempt at solving the same problem, relates to Arthur N. Prior. Prior argues:

If God is omniscient and if God exists at a given time (e.g., T_1), He can know at T_1 only what is true at that time (e.g., at T_1).

If a given proposition is not true at T_1 , then even an omniscient being could not know it to be true at T_1 ...

The claim that a voluntary action will be performed in future (i.e., at T_2) is neither true nor false (i.e., is *indeterminate*) at T_1 ...

Therefore, God does not have foreknowledge of human actions.⁶¹

According to Pike Cicero and Prior’s analyses of, and solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge, not merely parallel to each other in a number of respects to rather he perceives Prior’s understanding of the issue to be precisely the same as Cicero’s. For example, the arguments of Cicero and Prior share that “the doctrine of divine foreknowledge entails determinism.” According to both of these arguments, the doctrine of divine foreknowledge entails determinism by way of an intermediate thesis,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

specifically, “the claim that propositions describing human actions are true at times prior to the times that the actions are performed.”⁶² Concerning the solution, Pike observes, that they both solve the problem by denying the intermediate thesis i.e., line 1 of Boethius problem (as reformulated by Pike) which reads: *Yahweh is omniscient and Yahweh exists at T_1 , entails ‘if Jones does A at T_2 , then Yahweh believes at T_1 , that Jones does A at T_2 ’.* Criticizing and examining Prior’s view, Pike observes that it is not right to think that God’s foreknowledge needs evidence of grounds, for God’s foreknowledge has a special visionary nature and to insist on the above would be to disregard this difference. Referring Rogers Albritten’s ‘Present, Truth and Contingency’ which involves discussions on dating truth-values, Pike observes that “the whole idea of dating the truth-value of a statement in which a date is already assigned to a given event or action, is obscuristic and strange.”⁶³ In support of his criticism Pike examines Prior’s thesis that ‘God’s foreknowledge of human actions presupposes *the prior truth* of propositions describing these actions.’ Examining different interpretations Pike observes that none of them support this thesis and that Prior’s formulation of the problem involves an obscure thesis which is either irrelevant or trivially true and Prior’s solution consists of denying this trivially true or irrelevant thesis.

Let us now examine Boethius’s solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge.

Pike observes that the central point of Boethius’ thinking is his thesis that God has no temporal extension. He further observes that it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that Boethius would also hold that God has no temporal position. Thus he would reject assumption 5 in the list of original assumptions and would conclude that “God’s (infallible) beliefs cannot be

⁶² ‘That human actions are products of certain order of causes’ is the intermediate thesis in Cicero’s case’. *Ibid.*, p. 66. And according to Gale’s interpretation of Prior’s argument in order for God to know at T_1 what Jones does A at T_2 a sufficient evidence or grounds is necessary upon which to base a well-reasoned prediction about what Jones does A at T_2 . *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 71. Reference here, as mentioned by Pike, is to Rogers Albritten, “Present Truth and Future Contingency”, written in reply to Richard Taylor. “The Problem of Future Contingency”, Both then articles appeared in: *The Philosophical Review* (1957).

dated nor can they be located in time relative to human actions.”⁶⁴ Quoting a passage from Augustine’s *City of God*, in which he sketches the picture of God and his cognitions operating in Boethius’ thinking, Pike observes that for Boethius and for Augustine, “God does not look forward to what is future, nor at what is present, nor back to what is past”.⁶⁵ A temporal existence of God requires radical present tense description of God’s knowledge and the verbs ‘knows’, ‘sees’, ‘beholds’ must be used in the present tense and must occur without time qualifiers (such as T_2 or T_1 or time-relative predicates e.g., ‘now’ or ‘before’.) Thus Boethius’ solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge consists of a denial of God’s foreknowledge of events and circumstances making up the temporal matrix. God beholds human actions timelessly; His knowledge is the knowledge of a never fading instant. This is why Boethius prefers to call God’s attribute as Providence rather than Prescience or Foresight.

Quoting a passage from Augustine, Pike brings out two points: first that God’s foreknowledge and man’s foreknowledge of a person’s actions (say for example Jones) are parallel concerning deterministic implications. God’s foreknowledge of a person’s actions, in a similar way, does not entail determinism as man’s foreknowledge of another’s actions does not entail determinism. The second point which Augustine spots is that man’s foreknowledge of a person’s actions (say for example Jones) includes that what a man knows before a person acts is what the person is going to do ‘with his own free will’. Augustine claims God’s foreknowledge to be parallel to man’s foreknowledge in this second respect too. The point which Augustine makes seems to be that ‘God knows in advance that a given person is going *to choose* to perform a certain action at some specific time in future.’ But this claim, on the set of assumptions mentioned earlier, is incoherent. Pike makes an analysis of both the above concepts of foreknowledge to show the incorrectness of Augustine’s thinking. Pike says that divine foreknowledge is not parallel to ordinary human foreknowledge, for whereas the first entails determinism, the second does not. Pike says that Augustine also holds that divine foreknowledge, notwithstanding parallel in relevant respects to ordinary human foreknowledge of human actions, differs

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

concerning the fact that while human foreknowledge needs rest on some evidence, God's beliefs do not rest on evidence. Pike distinguishes two kinds of infallibility: a strong sense, and a weak sense and further observes that Augustine's thesis (i.e., parallelism of divine and human foreknowledge) implicitly contains the denial of the infallibility of God in the strong sense of the word. As we have seen, the problem of divine foreknowledge rests on two premises, i.e., that God is infallible, and that God knows the outcome of human actions in advance of their performance. Boethius tries to solve the problem by denying the second premise on the basis of his denial that God is a temporal being. Whereas Augustine seems to solve the problem by denying the first premise through his claiming a parallelism between divine and ordinary human foreknowledge of human actions.

Pike attempts to investigate the traditional theological doctrine of 'timelessness' from different angles to identify the logical status of the statement 'God is timeless' as it occurs in theological statements and finally reaches the conclusion that the doctrine of 'timelessness' does not lend itself to justification. Pike observes that "it is extremely hard to understand why the doctrine (of timelessness) has had a place in traditional Christian theology."⁶⁶

Linda Zegzebski in *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, discusses the problem in the form of the following dilemma:

Either God knows what we do before we do it, or we do it freely, but not both. For if God's knowledge and his being God are in our past, we cannot alter them, and if God is infallible, we cannot make his past belief turn out to have erred, and so we cannot do other than God foreknows that we will do.⁶⁷

Linda, arguing that older solutions to this dilemma are to varied degrees inadequate, offers new solutions, and suggests finally that philosophers have misconceived the problem Foreknowledge poses. She considers the three

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xii

⁶⁷ Brian Leftow's review of "Zegzebski'", Linda T., "The Dilemma of freedom and foreknowledge". in *Ethics* (October, 1992), p. 163.

chief older solutions, Boethian, Ockhamist, and Molinist and observes that Boethius claim that God is timeless and so the dilemma does not truly arise. If His Knowledge of our future is not in time, it is not in our past.

Ockhamists argue that though God is in time, His Foreknowledge falls into a class of past facts— soft facts which do not constrain the freedom of future actions. Molinists contend that God's Foreknowledge does not restrict human freedom because it is based on His middle Knowledge, a pre-creative grasp of what creatures would freely do if placed in appropriate circumstances.⁶⁸

Her objection to Boethianism is that eternal knowledge is enough like past knowledge to create a dilemma like that of Foreknowledge. Against Molinism, she contends that there are not enough pre-creative truths about creature's free actions for God to base all His Foreknowledge on these.⁶⁹ Linda finds current attempt to distinguish 'hard' from 'soft' facts, sterile. This does not solve the Foreknowledge problem, because no account of hardness and softness on which God's beliefs are soft facts is significantly simpler, more illuminating, or more broadly explanatory than any which makes them hard.⁷⁰ Ockhamism argues that we have "counterfactual power" over God's past beliefs, that is, "that even if we will in fact do S at t , we have power at t to do not- S and had we been going to do not- S , God would have believed so before t ."⁷¹ Linda argues at length that there can be no such power.

Conclusion

It has been commonly understood that Divine Knowledge, even though eternal and inclusive of foreknowledge of free human actions, does not restrict human freedom. But the philosophers and theologians both in the Muslim and the Judaeo-Christian tradition have pointed out that apparently the doctrine of Omniscience of God does not cohere with the doctrine of freewill of man. Examination of the different formulations of the problem as

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*,

⁷¹ *Ibid.*,

well as solutions attempted by Christian theologians/philosophers leads us to the conclusion that Saint Thomas Aquinas' formulation of the doctrine of omniscience in an absolutist manner (i.e., Traditional Doctrine of Omniscience) makes it incoherent with the concept of human freedom. History of Christian thought on this problem is basically formulation and reformulation of this doctrine in different ways. I agree with Swinburne that there is essential incompatibility between God's Omniscience and human free will, if the traditional doctrine of Omniscience is accepted. That the basic fault lies in its absolutist approach. Swinburne asserts that it is contrary to Biblical teachings as well. On the base of my understanding of 'Islamic View of Omniscience and Human Freedom' I believe that the correct formulation of the concept of Omniscience must include an indeterminate aspect concerning free choice of a human action.⁷²

⁷² For my views on Islamic concept of Divine Omniscience and human freedom. For example:

- Abdul Hafeez. Freewill and predestinarian verses of the Qurān”, *Hamdard Islamicus*, (Karachi, Pakistan), 4 (1999): pp. 97-105.
- *Ibid.* “The antinomy of free will and the appointed term (Ajal Mussamma), *Hamdard Islamicus*, 4, (2000): 63-68;
- *Ibid.* “Allah’s Omnipotence and freedom of will for man, *Hamdard Islamicus*, 1,(2002): 31-40.
- *Ibid.*, Abdul Hafeez. “Iqbal’s view of Omniscience and human freedom”, *The Muslim World*, USA,125-45.
- Fazli, Abdul Hafeez, Islamic view of Omniscience and human freedom, sent for publication to *JICMR*, *CMCU*, Georgetown University, USA.