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Divine Will With(out) Philosophy: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives



Bible moralisée, Paris 13th cent.

My research focuses on conceptions of divine will that emerged in antiquity and the medieval period across Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. While the Rabbinic and Christian conceptions of divine will in late antiquity were formed in conversation with Hellenistic categories and concepts, the interconnections were often implicit, and the primary prooftexts were biblical. By the medieval period, such interactions with Greek philosophy became explicit across Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought. It will be productive to focus on diachronic shifts between the late antique and the medieval phases while viewing the different religious groups as working alongside one another, with the goal of seeing how these religions grappled with their understandings of divine will in cultural worlds that either did or did not have access to the texts of Greek philosophy (in translation).

Speaking generally, appeals to divine will are powerful precisely because they access a commanding force without resort to any other source or precedent: if God wills a thing, it must be done. This concept attends religion from its earliest attestations in the ancient Near East, through the Bible, Dead Sea Scrolls, and Talmudic literature, to the core texts of Christianity and Islam, the medieval philosophical engagement with the topic, and many modern and contemporary approaches which give pride of place to divine will.

Appreciating the deployment of divine will conceptions in religious literature—both what God wills and how that will is communicated—can help illustrate key aspects of a theology (i.e., an account of God and God's workings in the universe) and, in the case of the Abrahamic religions, bridge (or reveal gaps) between biblical/traditional and more explicitly philosophically-oriented theologies in different periods. Moreover, the wide application of this term affords the opportunity both to trace a trajectory of the views on this issue and to compare them fruitfully to adjacent theological traditions, from neo-Babylonian and other ancient Near Eastern biblical parallels to the widespread discussion of God's will in the Talmud, to the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament, to the use of inshallah prescribed by the Qur'an (18:23–24), to scholastic discussions of a whole host of issues relating to divine will in the medieval period.

Applying a diachronic reception lens throughout history, as well as a synchronic comparative lens across religions to the study of divine will in late antique and medieval Jewish, Christian, and Islamic writings will shed light on how precisely the encounter with philosophy shaped each of these religions.

I have begun research on two specific subtopics within divine will. One traces the development and usage of the term "God-willing" (deo volente, inshAllah, im yirtzeh Hashem) from antiquity into the modern period. The other considers how conceptions of divine will and word intersect with accounts of Creation from Second Temple texts through the medieval period.

In addition to the issue of divine will, I expect to research co-production in two additional areas over the course of this postdoc: atonement and religious law. With regard to the former, how do new understandings and/or mechanisms of atonement emerge (in parallel production) within early rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, and how do they change in each of those religions and Islam at later points in time? In terms of religious law, how are both Judaism and Christianity formed by opposing attitudes to the question of law, and in what ways do Islam and later developments in Christianity and Judaism (Lutheranism, antinomian Kabbalah, etc.) continue or diverge from those trends?

I am excited to pursue this research at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and am confident that partnering and co-producing with the other researchers on this project will enhance my own findings.

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