FAITH AND FREEDOM
An Interfaith Perspective

David Burrell
FAITH AND FREEDOM
Challenges in Contemporary Theology

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Challenges in Contemporary Theology is a series aimed at producing clear orientations in, and research on, areas of “challenge” in contemporary theology. These carefully co-ordinated books engage traditional theological concerns with mainstreams in modern thought and culture that challenge those concerns. The “challenges” implied are to be understood in two senses: those presented by society to contemporary theology, and those posed by theology to society.

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FAITH AND FREEDOM
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David Burrell
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I have become increasingly convinced that human freedom is one of the least understood features of our existence, and that largely because it has been (especially in a capitalist culture) unduly limited to choosing. In fact, it seems that the major decisions of our lives have a kind of inevitability about them. A corollary of restricting freedom to choosing is a valuation of choice for its own sake, with little or no attention to its telos. My conviction is that this distortion of our views on human freedom, while congenial to and perhaps contributory to a capitalist culture, has its roots in the imperative of modernity to remove a free creator from the scene, and with that drastic elision, any hope of recovering that metaphysical perspective on freedom associated with ancient philosophy – Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, or Plotinian. It was these frameworks which Augustine and Aquinas employed to characterize human freedom, as did Maimonides and al-Ghazali. What has replaced them is a theory of freedom dubbed “libertarian,” which identifies freedom with autonomy, so defined as to demand that a free agent parallel a creator ex nihilo, thereby making of free action an act initiated totally by the self, and so vulnerable to countless counter-examples of “external influence.”

Alternatively, classical views of freedom see it as a response to the gift of being, whereby persons are drawn to return what they have received; ideally, even returning everything to the One from whom they have received everything. Such a view is inherently teleological, yet includes choosing as an integral part since the means to this inbuilt end cannot be determined antecedently. The fact that the orientation to an end is inbuilt has been offensive to moderns, and hence their concoction of a “libertarian” freedom. I hope, through these chapters taken cumulatively, to replace that theory with a far more robust account of human freedom which, while requiring a heftier metaphysical commitment, remains more phenomenologically accurate than the modernist theory it seeks to supplant.
Jews, Christians, and Muslims can ground the classical view of freedom in the free creation of the universe, buttressing our inbuilt orientation to the good as a return to the one from whom all comes as gift. Distinctively free human initiative then becomes a response to the call of existence, whereby through discrete actions one seeks to return everything to the One from whom they have received everything. Such a view of freedom will require, however, that we say something coherent about this grounding “fact” of free creation, and do so in such a way that the admittedly ineffable relation of creatures to creator does not entail competition. My Abrahamic guides — al-Ghazali, Moses Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas — each developed ways of tracing that interaction, and we shall see how they involve an understanding of the creator adequately distinct from a creation which cannot be separate from it. The Prologue will set the scene for a journey which will make various attempts to articulate this grounding relation.

Decades of inquiry gather sweet debts of gratitude to those who have helped one along. Yet they are so densely interlocking that I shall limit myself to three mentors, then noting coworkers who have brought this edition to its completion. Years in Rome from 1956 to 1960 brought me in contact with Bernard Lonergan, S.J., whose mode of inquiry has shaped my own in subterranean ways. He was wont to divide the world into those who quest after truth and those who need certitude, and that pregnant divider has continued to steer my inquiry into intercultural and interfaith explorations. Later, in Jerusalem and Cairo, Marcel Dubois, O.P. and Georges Anawati, O.P. have guided me into the complementary domains of Jewish and of Islamic philosophical theology. Beyond these three, interlocutors young and old, from Notre Dame to Bangladesh and places in between (like Cambridge and Utrecht), have prodded me to reflect again and again on these recondite issues, often witnessing to a proper way to continue when one felt quite unable to say anything.

Most recently, Lewis Ayres and Rebecca Harkin solicited this endeavor by an offer to publish, while Steven Schweitzer and Kristin Brantman Colberg have contributed mightily to bringing it to completion. The inadequacies remain my own, but that simply allows us all room to continue to quest after the truth of these hidden things.
With the exception of the Prologue, all the essays in this volume have appeared in other settings, and have been included here with minor revisions. Where the copyright lies with the earlier publisher, I am grateful for permission to reproduce the material here. Publication details are:


**A Note on Sources**

The advantage of standard references is that readers can use any edition. Yet those references may need explanation.

For Plato, the standard numerical reference is to the Stephanus edition; for Aristotle, to the Becker edition. These numbers will be found alongside the page in any edition.


For Aquinas, references to the *Summa Theologiae* will be abbreviated ST 1.2.4.5 for part 1, question 2, article 4, response to objection 5 (if the last be relevant). Translations are from the Blackfriars edition (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964). References to *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.2: book 3, chapter 2; *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate* will be noted as de Vér. 3.2.6: question 3, article 2, response to objection 6 (if last be relevant); *Questiones Disputatae de Malo* will be noted as de Malo 2.3: question 2, article 1, response to objection 3 (if relevant). Aquinas’ commentaries on
Aristotle will be referenced as follows: on the *Metaphysics*: *In Metaphysica* 2.3 for chapter [*lectio*] 3 of his commentary on Book 2; on Aristotle’s *On Interpretation*: *In peri hermenias* 2.4 for chapter [*lectio*] 4 of his commentary on Book 2.

References to John Duns Scotus will adopt a format similar to that of Aquinas, with the parts spelled out: *Ordinatio*, 1, d. 2, q. 1, a. 2 ad.2 = part 1, distinction 2, question 1, article 2, response to objection 2. *Ordinatio*, ed. Carl Balic (Vatican City, 1954–) may be abbreviated “*Ord.*”
Understanding, Aristotle reminds us, begins in wonder. Yet were that quest to reach its goal, wonder would cease, much as travelers can stop moving when they reach their destination. For Aristotle, understanding seeks explanation, and the sign that we have one consists in being able to identify the four causes germane to any thing or event. Finding the material, moving, formal and final causes will answer why something is what it is or happens the way it happens. We may not be very successful in finding all these causes; in fact, Aristotle himself often had to concede falling short of a proper explanation, yet the ideal stands. In fact, Aristotle’s account of proper explanation offers a brilliant way of adapting Plato’s central goal of knowledge to the changing world we experience. Plato, however, was less sanguine about achieving knowledge; indeed, his many inconclusive dialogues attest the way in which a seeker’s quest never ends. If what Plato deems to be philosophical inquiry were to come to term, the animating *eros* would dissipate – as Aristotle’s scheme appropriately acknowledges. Plato has a way of finessing the despair attendant upon unending inquiry, however, by having recourse to myth to signal harmony obtaining between inquirers and their objectives. Aristotle would of course profess to be true to Socrates in eschewing myth as unequal to the task of explaining the universe, yet the price he pays for this is to limit explanation to things or events within the universe. Indeed, the order of the universe itself – the objective correlate of our persistent wonder – apparently admits of no explanation. The prime mover accounts for its characteristic activity of change, but nothing accounts for the amazing order among the kinds of things inherently ordered to their proper goals. Where Plato had recourse to myth, Aristotle was mute. In short, he left his successors with a clear view of what explanation could be, yet an impossible dream of reaching it.

It was left to Plotinus (205–70) to attempt an account of the universe with its order, yet by his time a fresh proposal had entered the scene –
not as an explanation, but as a revelation. Philo had taken the book of Genesis to recast it in philosophic terms, thereby preparing the way for others to show how this revelation of a free creator would assure that inquiries which began in wonder would peak in wonder as well. It would require a millennium to effect that transition, as the path wound through thickets of Neoplatonic commentary, including philosophical adaptations made by thinkers presenting both Jewish and Christian reflections on the book of Genesis, soon to be joined by Islamic voices as well. In fact, it could be argued that the Qur’an provided the needed impetus for Jews and Christians to face up to the metaphysical implications of Genesis, since Judaism in its rabbinic phase, as well as Christianity in its Christological struggle, both tended to take creation for granted, as each focused on covenant or incarnation, respectively. For the revelation of the Qur’an eschews a particular covenant as well as the need for humankind’s redemption in a way so dramatic as Jesus’ death and resurrection, to say nothing of its proto-Trinitarian implications. As a result, everything must turn on creation, as the Qur’an will characteristically parry objections to bodily resurrection with references to the One “who says ‘be’ and it is,” while reminding skeptics regarding free creation that this same God promises to reconstitute decayed corpses on “that day.” Never catering to a need for extrinsic proof, the Qur’an encourages seekers to adopt this startling revelation as their salvation. Yet the encounter with Hellenic philosophy, and notably Plotinus, demanded some elucidation of creation, much as that same philosophical tradition had helped Christians to clarify the ontological status of Jesus a few centuries earlier.

Indeed, by the twelfth century, a Jewish thinker of Mosaic stature, Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), immersed in the culture of the Islamicate, adapted the stringent criticisms his Muslim predecessor, al-Ghazali (1058–1111), had made of Islamic “philosophers,” to defend the free creation of the universe by one God, in the face of alternatives inspired by Plotinus. (Indeed, as we shall see, Plotinus at once blocked and inspired the efforts of thinkers of the three Abrahamic faiths to articulate their respective revelations.) Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) adopted the signal philosophical work of the one whom he called “Rabbi Moses,” *The Guide of the Perplexed*, to advance his project of expounding Christian revelation by using the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato which he encountered through the writings of Ibn Sina [Avicenna] (980–1037). Thus, the task of articulating the free creation of the universe, and thereby showing how

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1 Qu’ran 2.111.
2 Qu’ran 50.38–9.