

The Epistemic Status of Divine ‘Non-Intervention’: A Theological Analysis of Passive Decree (al-Qaḍā’ al-Sākin) and Its Implications for Human Moral Responsibility in Sunni Kalām

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Abstract

This study investigates the epistemic and theological dimensions of divine non-intervention (al-qaḍā’ al-sākin) within the Sunni kalām tradition, focusing on its implications for human moral responsibility. It explores how the notion of a “passive decree” articulates a form of divine volition that refrains from direct intervention while preserving God’s omnipotence, justice, and wisdom. By examining Ash‘arī, Māturīdī, and Atharī frameworks, the research analyzes the conceptual distinctions between active divine will, permissive allowance, and tacit approval, and how these distinctions shape understandings of human agency, accountability, and ethical obligation. The study also addresses the epistemic challenges inherent in discerning divine non-intervention: the limits of human reason (naẓar), the role of revealed knowledge, and the interpretive frameworks used to distinguish divine silence from explicit intervention. It further examines the interplay between passive decree and theodicy, considering natural disasters, systemic injustice, and morally consequential human actions. Through a comparative analytical approach, the paper demonstrates that Sunni kalām traditions conceptualize non-intervention as both a metaphysical and ethical category. Ash‘arī occasionalism emphasizes continuous divine creation of all acts, preserving moral responsibility through kasb (acquisition), while Māturīdī frameworks highlight stable divine customs (‘ādāt Allāh) that allow for genuine human agency. Atharī perspectives prioritize scriptural affirmation of divine will without constructing intermediate categories of passive decree. The findings reveal that passive decree operates at the intersection of divine omnipotence, human moral responsibility, and epistemic limitation, offering a coherent theological account of how God’s non-intervention shapes ethical deliberation and human accountability in a contingent world.

Keywords: Divine Non-Intervention, Passive Decree, al-Qaḍā’ al-Sākin, Human Moral Responsibility, Sunni Kalām, Ash‘arī, Māturīdī, Atharī, Theodicy, Epistemology

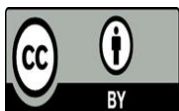
Introduction

It explores how the notion of a “passive decree” articulates a form of divine volition that refrains from direct intervention while preserving God’s omnipotence, justice, and wisdom. By examining Ash‘arī, Māturīdī, and Atharī frameworks, the research analyzes the conceptual distinctions between active divine will, permissive allowance, and tacit approval, and how these distinctions shape understandings of human agency, accountability, and ethical obligation. The study also addresses the epistemic challenges inherent in discerning divine

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non-intervention: the limits of human reason (*naẓar*), the role of revealed knowledge, and the interpretive frameworks used to distinguish divine silence from explicit intervention. It further examines the interplay between passive decree and theodicy, considering natural disasters, systemic injustice, and morally consequential human actions. Through a comparative analytical approach, the paper demonstrates that Sunni kalām traditions conceptualize non-intervention as both a metaphysical and ethical category. Ash‘arī occasionalism emphasizes continuous divine creation of all acts, preserving moral responsibility through *kasb* (acquisition), while Māturīdī frameworks highlight stable divine customs (*‘ādāt Allāh*) that allow for genuine human agency. Atharī perspectives prioritize scriptural affirmation of divine will without constructing intermediate categories of passive decree. The findings reveal that passive decree operates at the intersection of divine omnipotence, human moral responsibility, and epistemic limitation, offering a coherent theological account of how God’s non-intervention shapes ethical deliberation and human accountability in a contingent world.

Section I: Ontological Grounding of Passive Decree (al-Qaḍā’ al-Sākin) within the Divine Attribute System

The question of whether divine volition manifests exclusively through direct action or also through a form of non-active determination occupies a subtle place in Sunni metaphysics. Discussions of *al-qaḍā’ al-sākin*—the “still” or “silent” decree—require a conceptual differentiation between explicit divine willing and the non-interfering will that refrains from effecting change despite possessing the power to do so. Classical kalām literature frequently approaches this issue by distinguishing between volition that produces an occurrence and volition that merely permits the persistence or unfolding of created states. This distinction is neither reducible to passivity nor equivalent to a suspension of divine will; rather, it reflects a layered ontology in which the modes of divine ta‘alluqāt interact with the created order in ways more intricate than a simple active/passive binary.

Imām al-Ghazālī articulates a formulation of will that accommodates this complexity:

«فالإرادة واحدة في ذاتها، لكنّ تعلقها يختلف باختلاف المقدور¹»

“The divine will is singular in essence, yet its attachments vary according to the objects of power.”

This nuanced understanding allows for a mode of volition in which God wills the continuation of something by not altering it, even though alteration remains within His omnipotence. The metaphysical “silence” that results is not an absence of divine attention but an ontological permission embedded within the timeless structure of divine knowledge.

Fakhr al-Rāzī deepens this metaphysical framework by exploring the gradations of divine knowledge and their relevance to decree. In his commentary he writes:

«إنّ العلم الأزليّ محيطٌ بكلّ ممكنٍ على ما هو عليه من الوجود والعدم²»

“The eternal knowledge encompasses every possible thing in its states of existence and non-existence.”

The interaction of *al-qaḍā’ al-sākin* with eternal knowledge thus signifies that divine non-intervention is already inscribed within the eternal modalities of knowing. The world’s continuity at any given moment is intelligible as part of the divine will through non-alteration, not through a lapse in volition.

Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī offers another angle by framing passive decree as a form of *tark al-man‘*, a permitted allowance that differs from active divine production. His formulation highlights the ontological dependence of all states—produced or merely continued—upon divine self-sufficiency.³

This perspective avoids attributing a quasi-autonomous persistence to creation while still affirming that not every moment of existence entails a newly produced divine act in the Ash‘arī occasionalist sense.

In contrast, Ibn Taymiyyah critiques over-systematized ta‘alluq frameworks, yet he preserves the theological coherence of divine non-intervention by affirming that God may will an event through non-prevention while maintaining full sovereignty over causation.⁴

His analysis opens space for acknowledging causal patterns within creation that operate consistently, not independently, but through the divine custom (*sunnat Allāh*) that reflects sustained volition.

Contemporary scholarship, such as that of Richard Frank, frames these issues within the broader discourse of Ash‘arī metaphysics, arguing that divine non-intervention constitutes a deliberate ontological stance that supports the coherence of causation without compromising divine omnipotence.⁵

By situating passive decree within the hierarchy of divine attributes and their ta‘alluqāt, the created order is preserved as a realm whose continuity is neither random nor self-sustaining but grounded in a mode of divine will that operates through intentional non-alteration.

Section II: Epistemic Visibility and Human Knowledge of Non-Intervention

The problem of discerning divine non-intervention (*al-qaḍā’ al-sākin*) raises complex questions concerning the limits of human epistemic access to divine intent. Whereas direct divine action may be signaled through revelation, extraordinary events, or explicit theological indicators, non-intervention remains inherently ambiguous because it describes not an event but the absence of one. This absence, however, cannot be equated with indifference or approval, for in Sunni kalām God’s will is comprehensive and unfailing. The subtle distinction between a lack of intervention and a tacit, approving will (*riḍā sukūṭī*) is therefore not accessible through mere observation of the world; it requires an interpretive engagement with the revealed texts and the metaphysical principles governing divine attributes.

Imām al-Juwaynī touches upon this epistemic difficulty when he notes:

«وليس كل ما تُرك إحداثه يُعدُّ مرادًا بالرضا، فإنَّ التَّركَ قد يكونُ لغيرِ معنى الرضا»

“Not everything whose origination is withheld is thereby willed as an object of approval, for withholding may arise from a meaning other than approval.”

His formulation identifies a conceptual gap between divine abstention and divine satisfaction, leaving human intellect without a definitive criterion for distinguishing the two solely by empirical means.

This gap is reinforced by the broader epistemological distance between observable phenomena and divine intent. Ibn al-‘Arabī remarks:

«إنَّ ظاهرَ الكونِ لا يدلُّ على مرادِ الحقِّ على وجهِ القطع»⁷

“The outward form of the cosmos does not indicate the intention of the Real with definitive certainty.”

The implication is that divine silence cannot be interpreted through natural events without the mediation of revealed guidance. This leads to the pivotal role of scripture. Certain Qur’anic narratives attribute divine action explicitly, while others narrate human or natural events without reference to divine intervention, yet even this silence does not license theological certainty concerning non-intervention.

Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī emphasizes this interpretive restraint:

*“Revelation delineates the boundaries of what may be ascribed to divine judgment and what ought to remain within the realm of possibility rather than assertion.”*⁸

Thus, scriptural indicators serve as markers that prevent unwarranted inference, but they do not exhaustively map all instances of divine action or divine restraint.

The limits of *nazar* (rational inference) are similarly acknowledged by Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Āmidī, who argues that metaphysical matters related to divine intent lie beyond the decisive reach of rational deduction unless supported by transmitted evidence.⁹

Here, rational inquiry functions primarily to avoid theological error rather than to establish definitive knowledge of specific divine acts.

Modern scholarship confirms the difficulty of framing divine non-intervention as a positively knowable category. Frank Griffel notes that classical kalām traditions “treat divine silence as epistemically indeterminate rather than as a discrete theological verdict.”¹⁰

Consequently, *al-qaḍā’ al-sākin* occupies a space where metaphysical reality exceeds epistemic reach; it remains theologically coherent yet experientially opaque, identifiable only within the broader structure of divine omniscience, scriptural guidance, and the disciplined restraint of rational inquiry.

Section III: Sunni Kalām Positions on Divine Inaction and Causal Continuity

In Sunni kalām, the question of divine inaction intersects directly with each school’s theology of causation. The structure of agency—divine and human alike—cannot be examined apart from the metaphysical assumptions that govern how acts come into existence. What appears as non-intervention on the empirical plane must be interpreted through doctrinal commitments regarding *al-kasb*, *‘ādāt Allāh*, or the Atharī affirmation of unqualified divine will. The divergences among these schools arise not from disagreement over divine power but from differing assessments of how divine volition relates to the continuity of the created order.

Ash‘arī theologians frame divine inaction through the lens of continuous creation. Since every act is brought into being directly by God at each moment, “non-intervention” cannot signify an autonomous causal process; instead, it refers to God creating events in accordance with His habitual mode of action. Imām al-Ash‘arī states:

«إنه لا خالق إلا الله، و أفعال العباد مخلوقة له»¹¹

“There is no creator but God, and the acts of human beings are created by Him.”

Within this framework, divine inaction is only apparent: God continues to create states as they are, and the human contribution consists merely in *acquisition* (*kasb*), not causation. Thus, Ash‘arīs interpret continuity in the world not as a result of natural inertia but as an unbroken series of divine acts.

Māturīdīs, while affirming God as the creator of all acts, articulate a more stable causal order rooted in divine custom (*‘ādāt Allāh*). Abū Maṣū‘ al-Māturīdī characterizes this stability as a deliberate divine policy underlying the predictability of worldly events:

«جرت عادة الله في خلقه على ترتيب معلوم»¹²

“God’s custom in His creation proceeds according to a known order.”

For the Māturīdī tradition, non-intervention accords with this established divine pattern rather than signaling a separate metaphysical category. The persistence of causal regularity thus reflects divine wisdom rather than a suspension of volition.

Atharī discourse, by contrast, avoids constructing detailed metaphysical taxonomies of decree. Ibn Qudāmah illustrates this tendency:

“Affirming the divine will is obligatory, and inquiry into its modalities is innovation.”¹³

Here, divine inaction is acknowledged but not systematized. The Atharī priority is doctrinal fidelity to transmitted texts without positing intermediate categories such as *passive decree*. As a result, non-intervention remains a matter of divine choice known only through revelation or clear textual indicators.

These differing metaphysical commitments yield distinct implications for causal ontology. Ash‘arī occasionalism leaves no room for causal autonomy in creation, making non-

intervention virtually indistinguishable from continuous divine creation. The Māturīdī model permits the recognition of stable secondary causes as expressions of divine custom, allowing a more naturalized understanding of worldly continuity. The Atharī stance emphasizes divine sovereignty without probing the metaphysical structures that might distinguish intervention from non-intervention.

The debate over whether divine non-intervention amounts to tacit approval (*riḍā sukūṭī*) also appears differently across these traditions. Fakhr al-Rāzī insists that withholding action does not necessitate approval, grounding his argument in the inscrutability of divine reasons.¹⁴

Contemporary analyses, such as Daniel Gimaret’s study of Ash‘arī theology, further underscore that divine inaction should be interpreted as a decreed allowance rather than an evaluative endorsement.¹⁵

Thus, Sunni kalām presents not a single doctrine of divine non-intervention but a constellation of positions shaped by deeper commitments to causation, volition, and the nature of divine governance.

Section IV: Moral Responsibility under Passive Decree

The question of moral responsibility in contexts where God refrains from direct intervention (al-qaḍā’ al-sākin) presses at the heart of Sunni juridical and ethical thought. If divine non-intervention is a genuine mode of will, one must determine how agency, intention, and accountability are to be understood without collapsing human moral responsibility into either autonomous voluntarism or theological fatalism. The following analysis treats each sub-issue in turn, weaving classical positions with later commentarial and contemporary readings.

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُكَلِّفُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا¹⁶

“God does not burden any soul beyond its capacity.”

This canonical maxim functions as a normative horizon for taklīf: whatever epistemic status we assign to passive decree must remain compatible with the Qur’ānic constraint that obligation presupposes capacity. The juridical implication is that non-intervention cannot be construed as an arbitrary removal of capacity; rather, theological accounts must safeguard that human agents retain normative thresholds necessary for culpability.

The interplay between non-intervention and the expansion or contraction of human agency is contested. Within Ash‘arī occasionalist frameworks, where every volitional act is continuously created by God, apparent non-intervention does not increase human causal efficacy; it reconfigures responsibility in the language of *taklīf* and *kasb* (acquisition). The human agent’s moral agency is not causal self-sufficiency but the locus of accountability: one “acquires” actions whose existential footing is divine. Al-Ghazālī articulates this balance by emphasizing that moral obligation requires an attaching of intention and choice even if ontological origination remains divine.¹⁷

By contrast, the Māturīdī schema—invoking God’s *‘ādāt* (customs)—affords a stronger sense of secondary causality. Non-intervention here is intelligible as the regular operation of divinely instituted customs that render humans genuine agents within a lawful cosmos. Thus, if God ordinarily permits certain causal chains to run, human agency may be conceptually enlarged (in practical terms) because human choices operate within stable causal patterns that God wills to persist. The Māturīdī emphasis thereby gives non-intervention the pragmatic effect of widening moral space without undermining divine sovereignty.¹⁸

The problem of preventable evil (*al-sharr al-mumkin al-mafrūd*) sharpens these debates. When harm could have been averted by divine intervention but was not, theologians must explain how accountability remains just. Ibn al-Qayyim argues that divine wisdom governs the allotment of trials and their pedagogical ends; human responsibility attaches to intentions and choices within the parameters set by divine wisdom. This view locates moral blame on

choices that could have avoided harm within the agent’s competence, preserving both divine justice and human culpability.¹⁹

The status of *niyyah* (intention) retains centrality. The Prophetic dictum «إِنَّمَا الْأَعْمَالُ بِالنِّيَّاتِ» “*Actions are judged by intentions*” functions as the hermeneutic key for assigning moral weight even when causal origination is divine. Intention remains the subjective axis of *taklīf*; whether God actively intervenes or allows a sequence to continue, moral evaluation turns on the orientation of the agent’s will. Al-Ash‘arī and later commentators routinely anchor culpability in intentionality, thereby preserving ethical accountability in the face of metaphysical doctrines that minimize secondary causation.

The notion of *ibtīlā’* (trial) suggests a positive function for divine non-intervention: preserving human moral testing. When God withholds intervention, He may thereby create a moral arena wherein agents’ dispositions and choices are revealed. Ibn Taymiyya, while critical of abstruse theoretical categories, concedes that divine permission can have soteriological and pedagogic intent—thus strengthening *taklīf* by making moral choices meaningful and consequential. In this reading, non-intervention does not dilute responsibility but concretizes it as the condition for moral growth and examination.²⁰

Finally, reconciling passive decree with divine justice (*‘adl*) and wisdom (*ḥikmah*) requires an integrative hermeneutic. Classical reconcilers appeal to several resources: (1) the ascription of knowledge of circumstances and capacities to God, (2) the distinction between moral blameworthiness and ontological causality, and (3) the teleological reading of trials as instruments of moral purification. Contemporary scholars underline that any adequate account must preserve both normative responsibility and divine attributes—omnipotence, justice, and wisdom—without reducing human agents to mere spectators. Frank Griffel’s contemporary study of Ash‘arī thought, for instance, reads occasionalism as a theological posture that secures God’s sovereignty while construing moral responsibility through acquired intention and volition.²¹

Taken together, these positions show that passive decree does not straightforwardly neutralize human agency in Sunni kalām; rather, the schools map a spectrum—from ontological dependence with preserved moral accountability, to a widened practical agency rooted in divine custom—each seeking to reconcile the reality of non-intervention with the imperatives of *taklīf*, justice, and ethical meaning.

Section V: Ethical and Theological Implications for Contemporary Problems

The contemporary landscape of ethical and theological inquiry presents a field in which human vulnerability, technological expansion, and global crises intersect with the perennial question of God’s decree (*al-qaḍā’ wa’l-qadar*). Muslim theologians have long distinguished between various modes of divine will—active, passive, decretive, legislative—yet today these distinctions serve not merely abstract speculation but interpretive tools for navigating natural disasters, structural injustices, and the moral exhaustion that accompanies modernity. The inherited discourse becomes a lens through which suffering is placed in a metaphysical frame while still safeguarding human accountability. Classical scholars, from the *mutakallimūn* to the spiritual ethicists, provided nuanced views that resisted collapsing divine transcendence into human causation or dissolving human agency into fatalism; this legacy remains indispensable for assessing contemporary dilemmas.

Among the early theologians, the recognition that some events belong to God’s passive decree—those unfolded not through divine command but through divine allowance—offered a conceptual grid for reflecting on natural catastrophes and collective trials.

«وَاللَّهُ يَفْعَلُ مَا يَشَاءُ»²²

“And God does what He wills.”

Classical exegetes understood this not as a declaration of arbitrary power but as a description of the boundless horizon of divine wisdom. Al-Rāzī argued that the divine will encompasses both what God actively brings forth and what He allows to occur through secondary causes, and that conflating these generates moral confusion.²³ Within this frame, natural disasters are neither random nor necessarily punitive; they form part of a cosmos in which human beings inhabit a moral theatre shaped by both blessing and tribulation.

Modern theologians draw from this to interpret systemic injustices—racialized structures, predatory economies, ecological exploitation—as phenomena that, while permitted within divine decree, unfold through human choices shaped by greed, neglect, or collective apathy. The ethical implication is that divine permission does not equate to divine endorsement. It opens a space of responsibility: suffering is situated within divine omniscience, yet the human task remains intervention, reform, and moral rectification.

A second frontier concerns the ethics of non-intervention in fields such as biotechnology, medical decisions, algorithmic governance, and political conflicts. Questions arise whether refraining from action constitutes trust (tawakkul) or negligence.

Al-Ghazālī noted:

«لَا يَتْرُكُ السَّعْيُ اتِّكَالًا عَلَى الْقَدَرِ»²⁴

“Striving must not be abandoned in reliance upon decree.”

This insight illuminates contemporary debates over medical intervention—whether to prolong life artificially, to utilize genetic therapy, or to rely on technological mediation. The passive decree does not sanction passivity; rather, it designates events that unfold outside human control, while moral agency requires engagement wherever intervention is possible. In political contexts, non-intervention in the face of ethnic cleansing or mass displacement raises further theological tensions, as failure to act cannot be theologically insulated by invoking divine will.

A central distinction emerging from uṣūl al-fiqh and kalām literature is between harm that God permits as part of the natural order and harm God intends as moral censure or recompense. Ibn Taymiyya articulated that divine intention (irādah) must be differentiated from divine permission (idhn), the latter being compatible with human wrongdoing and the former with divine wisdom guiding cosmic order²⁵.

This distinction has substantial implications for modern legal and ethical deliberations: a harmful technological outcome—such as AI-induced unemployment or ecological damage—cannot be construed as an intended divine act; it belongs to what is permitted through human agency, error, or misuse. Legal rulings, therefore, remain grounded in moral causation, not metaphysical fatalism.

Contemporary philosophical theology frequently engages with the problem of “moral luck”—outcomes that shape a person’s moral record despite being beyond their control. The Muslim theological tradition, particularly the Ash‘arī account of kasb (acquisition), parallels some of these discussions.

As al-Juwaynī stated:

«إِنَّ الْعَبْدَ مُكَلَّفٌ بِمَا يَقَعُ فِي وَسْعِهِ، لَا بِمَا يُخَالِفُهُ»²⁶

“The servant is morally responsible for what lies within his capacity, not beyond it.”

The passive decree thus becomes a metaphysical backdrop for understanding moral luck: events outside one’s control belong to the domain of divine allowance, while responsibility attaches only to human volition. This provides a framework that avoids both hard determinism and naïve libertarianism, allowing moral judgment to acknowledge structural contingencies without negating accountability.

Modern Sunni theologians, exegetes, and ethicists have grappled with the phenomenon of divine “silence” in the face of wars, genocides, or humanitarian failures. Khaled Abou El Fadl remarks in *Reasoning with God*:

“The absence of immediate divine intervention is not evidence of divine indifference but of a moral universe entrusted to human stewardship.”²⁷

This perspective resonates with classical positions affirming that divine decree does not erase human responsibility to confront oppression. Divine silence, in this view, is not metaphysical withdrawal but the very condition under which human beings exercise moral agency, cultivate virtue, and bear witness to justice.

Summary

this study explores the concept of divine non-intervention (al-qaḍā’ al-sākin) in Sunni kalām, analyzing its theological and epistemic dimensions and its implications for human moral responsibility. It examines how passive decree represents a form of divine volition that allows events to unfold without direct intervention while preserving God’s omnipotence, justice, and wisdom. The research compares Ash‘arī, Māturīdī, and Atharī perspectives, highlighting differences in understanding human agency and accountability. Ash‘arī occasionalism frames human actions as divinely created yet morally acquired, Māturīdī thought emphasizes stable divine customs that enable genuine agency, and Atharī approaches focus on scriptural affirmation of divine will without positing separate categories of passive decree. The study also addresses epistemic challenges, including the limits of human reason, the interpretive role of scripture, and distinguishing divine silence from explicit intervention. By situating passive decree within theodicy, ethical theory, and metaphysical discourse, the research shows how Sunni kalām provides a coherent framework for understanding human responsibility amid contingent events, natural disasters, and moral dilemmas. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that passive decree is not theological indifference but a structured mode of divine will that preserves both God’s transcendence and meaningful human ethical engagement.



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