

Is there Time for God? Transcendence as the highest Form of Temporality

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die verbreitete Annahme innerhalb der islamischen Theologie und Philosophie, dass göttliche Vollkommenheit notwendigerweise Zeitlosigkeit impliziere. Er argumentiert, dass diese Auffassung auf bestimmten Zeitkonzeptionen beruht, die weder Qur'anisch eindeutig vorgegeben noch metaphysisch zwingend sind. Insbesondere wird gezeigt, dass die Zurückweisung göttlicher Temporalität häufig aus der Gleichsetzung von Zeit mit Raum sowie aus der Identifikation von Zeitlichkeit mit Defiziten wie Endlichkeit, Veränderlichkeit oder Abhängigkeit resultiert. Der Aufsatz verteidigt nicht die These, dass göttliche Temporalität der einzig oder vorzugswürdig richtige Ansatz sei, sondern zeigt, dass die Bejahung einer nichtdefizienten Form göttlicher Zeitlichkeit mit zentralen theologischen Intuitionen vereinbar ist. Durch eine begriffliche Klärung von Temporalität sowie die Unterscheidung zwischen physikalischer und metaphysischer Zeit wird argumentiert, dass göttliche Transzendenz nicht notwendig absolute Atemporalität voraussetzt. Ziel des Beitrags ist es, den konzeptuellen Raum dafür zu öffnen, göttliche Temporalität als kohärente Möglichkeit im islamischen Denken zu betrachten.

Schlüsselbegriffe

Göttliche Temporalität/Atemporalität, Ewigkeit, Transzendenz, Zeitmetaphysik, islamische Gotteslehre

Is there Time for God? Transcendence as the highest Form of Temporality

Abstract

This article examines the widespread assumption within Islamic theology and philosophy that divine perfection necessarily implies timelessness. It argues that this view is based on certain conceptions of time that are neither explicitly prescribed in the Qur'an nor metaphysically compelling. In particular, it shows that the rejection of divine temporality often results from a problematic equation of time with space and from the identification of temporality with deficits such as finitude, changeability, or dependence. The essay does not defend the thesis that divine temporality is the only or preferable approach, but rather shows that the affirmation of a non-deficient form of divine temporality is compatible with central Islamic theological intuitions. Through a conceptual clarification of temporality and a distinction between physical and metaphysical time, it is argued that divine transcendence does not necessarily presuppose absolute atemporality. The aim of this article is to open up the conceptual space for considering divine temporality as a serious and coherent possibility within Islamic thought.

Keywords

Divine Temporality/Atemporality, Eternity, Transcendence, Metaphysics of Time, Islamic Theology of God

Sumario

Este artículo examina la creencia generalizada en la teología y la filosofía islámicas de que la perfección divina implica necesariamente la atemporalidad. Se argumenta que esta concepción se basa en determinadas concepciones del tiempo que no están claramente establecidas en el Corán ni son metafísicamente imperativas. En particular, se muestra que el rechazo de la temporalidad divina suele ser el resultado de una equiparación problemática del tiempo con el espacio, así como de la identificación de la temporalidad con deficiencias como la finitud, la mutabilidad o la dependencia. El ensayo no defiende la tesis de que la temporalidad divina sea el único enfoque correcto o preferible, sino que muestra que la afirmación de una forma no deficitaria de temporalidad divina es compatible con las intuiciones teológicas islámicas fundamentales. Mediante una aclaración conceptual de la temporalidad y la distinción entre tiempo físico y metafísico, se argumenta que la trascendencia divina no presupone necesariamente una atemporalidad absoluta. El objetivo del artículo es abrir el espacio conceptual para considerar la temporalidad divina como una posibilidad seria y coherente dentro del pensamiento islámico.

Palabras clave

temporalidad/atemporalidad divina, eternidad, trascendencia, metafísica del tiempo, doctrina islámica sobre Dios

Introduction

In much of the Islamic theological tradition, God's transcendence and perfection have been equated with timelessness. This association is not surprising, for under certain conceptions of time it seems intuitive to deny temporality to God because it is thought that temporality would not enhance the greatness of God and would make Him less perfect than He could be.¹ The reasoning is quite straightforward here; if temporality represents limitation for us, then surely it would do the same for God. Time, as we experience it is a sphere of constraint. Unlike space, which we can in some sense manipulate, traverse, and reorder, time seems to resist our influence. We cannot halt its passage, reverse its flow, or accelerate its pace. Our experience of events is strictly successive because we grasp one moment at a time,² and we are unable to gather past, present, and future into a single act of comprehension. We remember the past but cannot re-enter it, we anticipate the future but cannot access it, and we are confined to the narrow horizon of the »now«. In this sense, we are prisoners of time and if God were temporal in the way we are, He too would be subject to succession, change, and the apparent limitations of »before« and »after.«

In his study of medieval theories of time, Rory Fox showed that scholastic thinkers often articulated precise criteria for determining whether and how something should be considered temporal. A thing counts as temporal if it possesses certain recognizable features: the capacity for change and succession, or subjection to the »ravages of time« such as decay and dissolution. Other indicators of temporality included having a common measure, being measurable by or causally related to the outermost celestial sphere in Aristotelian cosmology, or being spatially extended. Furthermore, temporality could be identified if an entity's

¹ This is the standard methodology of what is called »Perfect Being Theology« because it involves deducing what attributes would enhance the greatness of God, and also determining whether certain property makes God greater or less great. See BRIAN LEFTOW, Why Perfect Being Theology?, in: *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69 (2011) 103-118.

² For more on experience of time, see ROBIN LE POIDEVIN, The Experience and Perception of Time, in: EDWARD N. ZALTA (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/time-experience/> (accessed: 02.12.2025).

duration was divisible into bounded periods, if it was created, or if it had a first instant of existence.³ However, the fundamental basis for ascribing temporality lay in the criterion of change and succession. All the other markers ultimately depended on this primary condition.⁴ Admittedly, some of these criteria would be deeply problematic if applied to God, for they would directly compromise His perfection. The most obvious to deny are creation and decay. To claim that God was created would undermine His necessity and self-sufficiency, making Him dependent upon something beyond Himself for existence. Likewise, to ascribe to Him decline, corruption, or other forms of deterioration over time would also make God less than He could possibly be, etc.

Some of the reasons for denying God's temporality in Islamic tradition stemmed from a particular conception of the nature of time. Many thinkers treated time as a kind of container or a »thing,« analogous to space. Just as bodies are said to be in space, so events were said to be in time. On this understanding, time belongs to the created order; it is finite, contingent, and dependent on God for its existence. If one were to argue that God is temporal in this sense, it would imply that He is enclosed within something external to Himself and thus limited by a contingent reality. For this reason, formulations such as that of Quṣayrī in his exegesis became common: God is the Creator and Lord of both space and time, and He transcends them as their origin and sovereign.⁵

In the two predominant Sunnī schools of creed, the Aṣ'arites and Māturīdīs, the notion of divine timelessness occupies a central place in theological discourse. Among the Māturīdīs, for example, Abū Ṣakūr al-Sālīmī mentions five key attributes that distinguish God from creation, and places particular emphasis on the divine transcendence over both space and time.⁶ Similarly, the Aṣ'arī scholar Ibn 'Abd al-Karīm al-Šahristānī also affirmed divine timelessness, linking it to his doctrine of God's priority over the world. For Šahristānī, God's precedence is not to be understood in temporal terms, as if God existed »before« the world in time, but rather in an existential sense as God's being necessary and self-subsistent, whereas the world is contingent and dependent upon Him.⁷ According to Šahristānī, it is inadmissible to claim that God existed before the world or that God and the world coexist in any temporal sense. For example, in his refutation of the Dahriyya, Šahristānī asserts, »... we have demonstrated that the words before, after, and contemporary with cannot be used of God,«⁸ and although the world was created *ex nihilo*, it did not produce any new worldly qualities to God. Among other places, this is evident in his arguments that the finitude of space and time does not imply the finitude of God.⁹ Hence, neither space nor time can be predicated of God,

³ RORY FOX, *Time and Eternity in Mid-Thirteenth-Century Thought*, Oxford 2006, 226.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵ ABŪ AL-QĀSIM AL-QUṢAYRĪ, *Laṭā'if al-Iṣārāt*, Beirut 2007, III, 145.

⁶ ABŪ ṢAKŪR AL-SĀLIMĪ, *al-Tamhīd fī Bayān al-Tawhīd*, ed. by ÖMÜR TÜRKMEN, Istanbul 2017, 100. This line of thought builds on the teachings of the school's founder, Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī, who maintained that the Creator must necessarily exist beyond temporal limitations because the very nature of the created world, with its constant flux and temporality, requires a God who is essentially distinct from it, both in essence and in operation. See RAMON HARVEY, *Transcendent God Rational World: A Māturīdī Theology*, Edinburgh 2021, 126.

⁷ Here, Šahristānī drifts away from Aristotle by rejecting his distinctions of temporal, spatial, essential, priority by nobility, and priority by nature as inadequate for God and employs his own notion of priority by existence. See ANDREAS LAMMER, *Two Sixth/Twelfth-Century Hardliners on Creation and Divine Eternity: al-Sahrastani and Abū l-Barakāt al-Bağdādī on God's Priority over the World*, in: ABDELKADER AL GHOUSZ (ed.), *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th Century*, Bonn 2018, 238.

⁸ MUḤAMMAD IBN 'ABD AL-KARĪM AL-ŠAHRISTĀNĪ, *The Summa philosophiae of al-Shahrastani. Kitab Nihayatu 'l-iqdam fī 'ilmi 'l-kalam*, ed. and trans. by ALFRED GUILLAUME, London 1934, 13.

⁹ »Why do you say that if time were finite the Creator's existence would be finite? The finitude of time is like the finitude of the world in place, and that is assuming the point at issue. The fact that the world is finite does not require that the Creator's essence should be finite, because place has no relation to Him. So also with time. Why, too, do you say that if time were not finite in our thought (infinite) objects might actually exist therein?« *Ibid.*, 14.

as both are analogously finite in nature¹⁰ and serve as clear markers of the boundaries beyond which God's transcendence is most evident.¹¹

In addition to the theologians, the Islamic philosophers (*falāsifa*) also denied temporality of God, though often for reasons rooted in their metaphysical systems. One example can be found in al-Fārābī's *Fuṣūl al-Madanī*. There, al-Fārābī reasons that if God is truly perfect and fully sufficient, with nothing external limiting His capacity to act, then His creative activity cannot be delayed. Were there to be a delay between God's existence and the effects of His action, this would imply the presence of some obstacle, deficiency, or cause of failure that prevented the act from occurring earlier. But since God, by definition, cannot be subject to any external hindrance or internal deficiency, there can be no reason for postponement. Consequently, the divine act must coincide immediately with God's eternal capacity to act.¹² This means that God cannot be situated within a temporal framework of »before« and »after,« since any such framework would entail either a delay in God's action or a dependence upon something external to Him. From here, one can conclude that His creative causality is understood as timeless, continuous, and unmediated by temporal succession.¹³

Addressing the Concerns

Of course, the arguments presented above do not exhaust the full range of reasons why the Islamic tradition has so often insisted upon divine timelessness.¹⁴ A comprehensive treatment would require addressing a far wider set of considerations than I am able to cover here. Nevertheless, it is important to register a point of my departure here, because I disagree with the assumption that predicating temporality to God necessarily entails imperfection. If we limit temporality to its core criterions, namely the possibility of change and succession, it is not at all obvious that this compromises divine perfection. On the contrary, I will suggest that certain forms of succession and change may in fact be required for perfection, particularly

¹⁰ LAMMER, *Two Sixth/Twelfth-Century Hardliners* (Anm. X), 248.

¹¹ A notable parallel can be found in the Christian tradition, particularly in St. Anselm's *Monologion*, where time and space are treated as analogous. Anselm argues that »true eternity« cannot be constrained by the limitations of either dimension, since the »law of space and time« applies only to finite entities that occupy a specific place or exist within a bounded moment. Just as spatial objects are circumscribed by boundaries, temporal beings are confined by succession into past, present, and future. By contrast, God transcends both dimensions altogether, such that it would be, in Anselm's words, »shameless folly« to claim that His being bounded by place or time. See ANSELM VON CANTERBURY, *Monologion*, in: THOMAS WILLIAMS (ed. and trans.), *Basic Writings*, Indianapolis 2007, 32. Similarly, in the *City of God*, Augustine dismisses as »silly« the idea of a past time before creation, and argues that »there was no such thing as time before the universe was made.« See AUGUSTINE, *The City of God: Books VIII–XVI* (The Fathers of the Church 14), trans. by GERALD G. WASH / GRACE MONAHAN, Washington 1952, 195.

¹² ABŪ NAṢR AL-FĀRĀBĪ, *The Fusul al-Madani: Aphorisms of the Statesman*, ed. and trans. by DOUGLAS M. DUNLOP, Cambridge 1961, 66.

¹³ We could sketch the argument in the following way: 1. All acts of a fully sufficient being without external limitations occur immediately, without delay; 2. God is fully sufficient and without external limitations; 3. Therefore, all acts of God occur immediately, without delay; 4. If an act occurs immediately without delay, it is not successive in time; 5. Therefore, all acts of God are not successive in time.

¹⁴ In the classical Christian tradition, a variety of justifications were offered for privileging the concept of divine timelessness. As Richard Sorabji notes, Boethius argued that timelessness preserves divine omniscience without undermining human volitional autonomy. Likewise, theologians from Philo to Augustine expressed concern that to affirm divine temporality would be to make God dependent upon the contingent existence of creatures. If God were bound by temporal succession, and if time itself is contingent upon motion, which presupposes the existence of created things, then God's very being would become mixed with the flux of created beings. See RICHARD SORABJI, *Time, Creation and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, London 1983, 254.

when we consider God's responsiveness to petitionary prayer, His acts of forgiveness, and other relational aspects of the divine-human encounter.

Firstly, if thinkers such as Quṣayrī are correct in maintaining that time, like space, is a created entity, then to describe God as temporal would indeed present a significant theological problem because a created time would necessarily impose limitations upon God, and subject Him to something finite and contingent. Yet it is far from clear that time truly belongs to the category of created things. Unlike space, the Qur'ān nowhere explicitly affirms the creation of time. On the contrary, the text consistently depicts God as acting within the framework of time by creating (Qāf, 50:38), commanding (al-Baqara 2:43), talking and responding (al-Baqara, 2:186) forgiving (al-Zumar, 39:53), etc., which strongly suggests that the divine relationship to time is of a different order than the divine relationship to space.

Sticking to tradition, we find theologians such as Ibn Taymiyyah who argues that God's will cannot be detached from temporal progression. Ibn Taymiyyah grounds his view in the Qur'ān, sūrat al-Tawbah (9:105): »And say, ›Do (as you will), for Allah will see your deeds, and (so, will) His Messenger and the believers. And you will be returned to the Knower of the unseen and the witnessed, and He will inform you of what you used to do.«

For him, it is inconceivable that a timeless will could give rise to actions that occur at determinate points in time, and the verse itself portrays a clear sequence: God issues a command, individuals act in response, and only after their deeds are completed does God observe them.¹⁵ Hence, this sequential pattern indicates that God's voluntary action is bound up with temporal order and God's will and knowledge are exercised in relation to the unfolding of creaturely events.

When it comes to arguments that rest on the assumption that if time is not created by God, then God cannot be the Creator of everything and must therefore be limited by an external, uncreated reality, becoming, in some sense, a prisoner of time, it is crucial to point out that this conclusion is far from necessary and, under certain conceptions of time and of God's relation to it, entirely mistaken. Although thinkers like Paul Helm¹⁶ and Hugh McCann¹⁷ maintain that divine temporality ought to be rejected precisely on these grounds, this position loses much of its force if time is not understood as an independent entity, whether created or uncreated, that exists apart from God. As it will be shown later in the paper, divine transcendence may be grounded in supreme temporality as time may be construed as an aspect of God's very nature and a necessary corollary of His being because of who God is; the One Who is merciful, Who has the capability to act, Who forgives and responds to the prayers of His creatures.¹⁸

This move would not be without precedent, as Islamic thinkers such as Abū al-Barakāt al-Baḡdādī and Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī have understood time as an inherent aspect of God's nature and even as one of His attributes.¹⁹ Furthermore, this approach avoids the usual problems for

¹⁵ JON HOOVER, *The Muslim Theologian Ibn Taymiyyah on God, Creation, and Time*, in: MARCUS SCHMÜCKER / MICHAEL T. WILLIAMS / FLORIAN FISCHER (eds.), *Temporality and Eternity: Nine Perspectives on God and Time*, Berlin 2022, 101.

¹⁶ Paul Helm argues that temporal God cannot transcend time and hence His sovereignty would be diminished. See PAUL HELM, *Is God Bound by Time?*, in: DOUGLAS S. HUFFMAN / ERIC L. JOHNSON (eds.), *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*, Grand Rapids 2002, 122.

¹⁷ McCann gives three arguments against temporality and beside the ones based on the premise of God not being Creator of everything and being the slave of time, McCann adds the well-known problem of sufficient reason and argues that God would have no rational justification to choose one specific moment for the creation of the world over another, and this would lead to irrationality in God's decision-making. See HUGH J. MCCANN, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*, Bloomington 2012, 61f.

¹⁸ For various arguments against similar objections see RYAN T. MULLINS, *Doing Hard Time: Is God the Prisoner of the Oldest Dimension?*, in: *Journal of Analytic Theology* 2 (2014) 160-185.

¹⁹ RICHARD TODD, *Physics and Metaphysics in an Early Ottoman Madrasa: Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī on the Nature of Time*, in: *Oriens* 50 (2022) 108-142.

divine temporality because it denies that time is contingent upon motion and the »popular« approach to Aristotelian understanding of time as a measurement of motion.²⁰ According to Baġdādī, time is an inherent aspect of existence and rather than being a consequence of movement and change, it actually measures the duration of the existence itself.²¹

To argue that understanding motion as the primary basis for measuring time is false and incomplete, Baġdādī grounds this proposition in the claim that the rest or the absence of the motion is equally measurable by successive moments and should be included in the original definition.²² Such argumentation is somewhat common in medieval times and it can also be found in Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *al-Maṭālib al-Āliya*:

»For example: if we assume that Allah Almighty destroys the universe and destroys the celestial bodies at Judgment Day, and then He, the highest, leaves (these things) in a state of complete nonexistence until He restores them and restores the creatures at the Day of Resurrection. Then, it is evident that the intermediate period between the beginning of the time of destruction and the beginning of the time of restoration is undoubtedly a specific period, and by reason, we are able to add or take away from that period and assume it is longer or shorter. It is not a priori impossible to assume this but something that is conceivable by reason, and this is why the majority of scholars of religions and sects are aware of it.«²³

Lastly, the arguments of Islamic philosophers, particularly al-Fārābī, are also not convincing mainly because the premise that any delay implies deficiency or external hindrance is question begging, as divine perfection could include voluntary withholding due to His power to do so. Al-Fārābī assumes that God's capacity to act and the exercise of that capacity must coincide necessarily, but this is not self-evident because one could argue that perfection does not require God to exercise His power at every possible moment. God's omnipotence and sufficiency could mean that He can act *whenever* He wills, because He has the freedom to choose the timing of action.

However, al-Fārābī's argument can be granted additional force when viewed through the lens of the principle of sufficient reason. Against the objection that an agent may possess the capacity to act at any moment but chooses to act at a specific time for a particular reason, al-Fārābī could press further and demand: what is the rational justification for God to create the universe at one moment rather than another? Framing the question in this way follows naturally from his earlier reasoning, since, as he observes, »Any maker of anything knows that his making that thing at a particular time is better or best, or it is worse or worst«.²⁴ In

²⁰ Here I say »popular« because it is a widespread claim which is probably false. According to Ursula Coope, Aristotle did not define time as the measurement of motion. See URSULA COOPE, *Time for Aristotle: Physics IV.10–14*, New York 2005, 106.

²¹ MOSHE M. PAVLOV, *Abū'l-Barakāt al-Baġdādī's Metaphysical Philosophy: The Kitāb al-Mu'tabar*, New York 2017, 83-101.

²² LAMMER, *Two Sixth/Twelfth-Century Hardliners* (Ann. X), 270.

²³ FAḤR AL-DĪN AL-RĀZĪ, *al-Maṭālib al-Āliya min al-Īlm al-Ilāhī*, ed. by AḤMAD ḤIĠĀZĪ AL-SAQQĀ, Beirut 1987, 29f. For more on Rāzī's discussion on the existence of time, see PETER ADAMSON, *The Existence of Time in Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's al-Maṭālib al-Āliya*, in: DAG NIKOLAUS HASSE / AMOS BERTOLACCI (eds.), *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Physics and Cosmology*, Berlin-Boston 2018, 65-98. It is also interesting to note that a similar line of reasoning appears in the Christian tradition. Some Christian theologians have argued that time is not necessarily dependent on the movement of celestial bodies, as it is conceivable that God could halt all motion in the world, and time would continue to exist. Ryan Mullins mentions Nicole Oresme and Pierre Gassendi as notable examples of this approach, particularly in their interpretations of the story of Joshua 10, where God stops the sun. In this case also it follows that time exists independently of physical motion, hence the conceptual possibility of temporal measurement without reliance on physical change. See RYAN T. MULLINS, *The End of the Timeless God*, Oxford 2016, 15.

²⁴ AL-FĀRĀBĪ, *The Fusul al-Madani* (Ann. X), 66.

other words, to say that God has a reason to create is not the same as saying He has a reason to create *then* and not later or sooner. If no such justification is available, then the act of creation appears arbitrary, as though God had justification for bringing the world into existence but not for bringing it into existence at that specific moment.²⁵

There is a wide spectrum of possibilities to respond to this objection. One of the least satisfactory responses is simply to appeal to mystery by claiming that God must have had *some* justifiable reasons for creating the universe at a particular time *t* while not articulating what these reasons might be.²⁶ The better approach is to specify at least some of these reasons as this safeguards that God's will is not arbitrary or completely inscrutable. One example is Brian Leftow, who argues that God may have delayed creation in order to savor anticipation itself. Unlike human parents who can only dimly imagine their child before birth, God would have complete foreknowledge of the universe He intended to create, and thus perfect enjoyment of anticipating it. In this way, the moment *t* would mark the culmination of divine anticipation, and once maximal enjoyment was reached, creation was no longer delayed but actualized at the precise moment that was most fitting for His will.²⁷

The way I prefer follows the reasoning of Ghazālī, and it involves the denial that the moment *t* requires a rational advantage over *t'*. In his critique of philosophers, Ghazālī argues that the very assumption that one moment must be »better« than another is mistaken, because some possible properties of the world are simply equivalent in value, yet God is able to freely select which among them will be actualized. For example, the celestial poles or the direction of celestial motion have no intrinsic superiority, yet one arrangement was chosen.²⁸ The same would apply to the timing of creation because if all moments are equal in value, then God's selection of *t* over *t'* is not rationally problematic because it is simply an expression of divine freedom. Following the discussion on perfection, the ability to choose between equally viable options is not a deficiency because actualizing one possibility is better than actualizing none.

Transcendence as Temporality

We have seen from the previous section that it is not self-evident that time is a created »thing,« nor is such a view explicitly supported by the Qur'ān. For this reason, the common analogy between space and time, that is invoked to emphasize their shared finitude, will not necessarily hold. It is entirely possible that time and space are asymmetrical in their relation to God. After all, the way we experience time is completely asymmetrical to space because,

²⁵ Augustine addresses this question in the eleventh book of his *Confessions*. According to him, the question of what God was doing before the creation is meaningless because God is not temporal: »Therefore, there was no time at which you had not made anything, because you made time itself. And no times are coeternal with you, since you persist, whereas they would not be times if they persisted«. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, trans. THOMAS WILLIAMS, Indianapolis 2019, 210.

²⁶ It is the least satisfactory because, although pious, it verges on intellectual resignation. This is how Samuel Clarke responded to the very same objection by Leibniz. See GOTTFRIED W. LEIBNIZ / SAMUEL CLARKE, *Correspondence*, ed. by ROGER ARIEW, Indianapolis 2000, 32. For Leibniz's objection, see *ibid.*, 24.

²⁷ BRIAN LEFTOW, *Why Didn't God Create the World Sooner?*, in: *Religious Studies* 27 (1991) 157-172.

²⁸ In Ghazālī's words: »Why is it, then, that the northern and southern points have been assigned to be the poles and to be stationary? And why does not the ecliptic line [shift], moving with [it] the two points so that the poles would revert to the two opposite points of the ecliptic? If, then, there is wisdom in the extent of the largeness of heaven and its shape, what differentiated the place of the pole from another [place], singling it out to be the pole from the rest of the parts and points, when all the points are similar and all parts of the sphere are equal?« ABŪ HĀMĪD AL-GHAZĀLĪ, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. by MICHAEL E. MARMURA, Provo 2000, 25. Ghazālī applies the same reasoning to the directional movements of the celestial spheres, and argues that an inverse arrangement, where the highest sphere moves to the east instead of the west, would have an equal value. See *ibid.*, 27.

unlike space, which we can to a large degree manipulate, traverse, and reorganize, time resists our influence. We cannot reverse the past, although we can in some measure shape the future, and we cannot directly alter the passage of time itself, as we can reshape or navigate spatial extension.²⁹

However, how could divine transcendence be grounded in temporality? After all, transcendence is usually understood as that which lies beyond ordinary limits, something that resists complete knowledge or experience. A transcendent God is usually described as absolute, eternal, and infinite, and it is difficult to ascribe to Him any predicates that fall within our conceptual grasp, and the concepts that are used for God, like ones above, are themselves elusive and difficult to define. This is why negative theology proceeds by negation, and defines God not by what He is, but by what He is not: not finite, not composite, not temporal, etc.³⁰ As such, it follows that God is radically beyond comprehension, and thus identified with infinity and eternity.

This being said, it is important to recognize that transcendence itself can be understood in more than one way. One could defend a notion of »strong« transcendence, according to which every positive statement about God must be negated. Yet this approach is ultimately unsatisfactory, since it leaves us with not enough meaningful content about God. For us to grasp anything, some positive qualities must be applicable. To say, for instance, that a triangle is »not a four-angled object« does not suffice to explain what a triangle is, for an infinite number of objects meet that same negative description. By contrast, one may affirm something like »qualified« transcendence and attempt to apply positive terms to God while clarifying the sense in which these terms are limited or analogical and the specific sense in which God is beyond these concepts.

For an example of how such distinctions can be drawn, Merold Westphal identifies three modes of divine transcendence. »Cosmological transcendence« means that the world cannot exist without God while God can exist without the world, since creation flows not from necessity but from a free act of will.³¹ »Epistemic transcendence« means that God is mysterious and incomprehensible in two respects: first, His being always exceeds our ability to capture it fully in concepts and language; second, His knowledge of the world, history, and ourselves is qualitatively superior to our limited perspective.³² Finally, »ethical-religious« transcendence means that God's transcendence is not abstract but personal, since He addresses us and calls us into relation in a voice not our own.³³

When it comes to temporality specifically, I do not think that transcendence requires denying that God is temporal altogether, but rather affirming that God's temporality is fundamentally different from the temporality we experience. In other words, it involves the claim that God is perfectly temporal. One reason for this position is the Qur'ānic portrayal of God's time, which makes it difficult both to deny that there is a »time« proper to God and, at the same time, to identify it straightforwardly with the temporal framework of human experience. One of the reasons for my position is the Qur'ānic portrayal of God's time, which makes it difficult both to deny that there is a »time« proper to God and, at the same time, to identify it straightforwardly with the physical time of human experience. The Qur'ān highlights this asymmetry by presenting God's time as radically distinct from the time that we count. For example, in sūrat al-Ḥaḡḡ (22:47) it is said that one day with God equals a thousand years of

²⁹ For different asymmetries of time see PAUL HORWICH, *Asymmetries in Time: Problems in the Philosophy of Science*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1987, 4-11.

³⁰ DAVID BRAINE, Negative theology, in: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/negative-theology/v-1> (accessed: 17.09.2025).

³¹ MEROLD WESTPHAL, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul*, Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2004, 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 10.

³³ *Ibid.*, 11.

our reckoning: »And they urge you to hasten the punishment. But Allah will never fail in His promise. And indeed, a day with your Lord is like a thousand years of those which you count.« Similarly, in *sūrat al-Ma'āriḡ* (70:4), the measure of God's day is given as fifty thousand years: »The angels and the Spirit will ascend to Him during a Day the extent of which is fifty thousand years.« The verses strongly imply that divine temporality exists, but it is of a qualitatively different order, a temporality proportionate to God's nature rather than reducible to creaturely physical time.

In this regard, I find the approaches of Alan Padgett and Garrett DeWeese particularly useful. When it comes to Padgett, he makes a distinction between between »absolute« and »relative« timelessness. Absolute timelessness describes a mode of existence wholly outside duration, sequence, or extension. It is a »timeless void« in which no temporal ordering or succession is possible. Relative timelessness, by contrast, refers not to the absence of temporality altogether but to freedom from any specific system of measured time. Something can have duration and succession yet still be »timeless« relative to standardized or creaturely systems of measurement.³⁴ According to Padgett, God is not absolutely timeless but relatively timeless, meaning divine life unfolds temporally, but it does so according to a mode of time proper to God, which does not adhere to any standardized system of measuring time.³⁵

In a similar vein, Garrett DeWeese distinguishes between physical and metaphysical time, a move that allows for affirming divine temporality without collapsing it into the creaturely order. Physical time, as we experience it, is bound up with the material world, celestial motion, and the measurement of change. Metaphysical time, however, is more fundamental, it consists of succession of moments, grounded not in physical processes but in God's own conscious life. God experiences a real sequence of mental states in a causal order like willing, knowing, responding, and yet this succession is not necessarily contingent on the created universe. It provides the basis upon which physical time itself unfolds. Thus, while God's temporality is genuine, it is not reducible to the time we measure, but instead it is a higher, metaphysical temporality intrinsic to His being.³⁶

I think this approach coheres well with the Qur'ānic emphasis on the radical difference between divine and human time mentioned in the verses above. Therefore, time will not be understood in the Aristotelian-like conception as dependent on motion, nor will it be understood as a created or uncreated thing independent of God. Instead, it would be uncreated but ontologically dependent on God as its existence would arise as a consequence of the very nature of God. There is time because God as a personal agent possesses free agency and consciousness.³⁷

God's capacity to act in the world in accordance with His wisdom and intentionality, and most importantly God's capacity to *react* to the changes in the world, meaning that He is not immutable in the strong sense, ensures that time comes into existence. This does not mean that God must execute these capacities in order for time to exist because this again would be Aristotelian conception dependent on change. Instead, what is essential for the existence of

³⁴ ALAN PADGETT, *God, Eternity, and The Nature of Time*, London 1992, 19.

³⁵ Vgl. ALAN PADGETT, *God and Time: Relative Timelessness Reconsidered*, in: MELVILLE Y. STEWART (ed.), *Science and Religion in Dialogue*, Oxford 2010, 884-892.

³⁶ GARRETT DEWEESE, *Atemporal, Semipiternal, or Omnitemporal*, in: GREGORY E. GANSSELE / DAVID M. WOODRUFF (eds.), *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, New York 2002, 54.

³⁷ This perspective agrees with John Lucas' view. According to Lucas: »Time is not a thing that God might or might not create, but a category, a necessary concomitant of the existence of a personal being, though not of a mathematical entity. This is not to say that time is an independent category, existing independently of God. It exists because of God: not because of some act of will on His part, but because of His nature: if the ultimate reality is personal, then it follows that time must exist. God did not make time, but time stems from God.« JOHN R. LUCAS, *The Future: An Essay on God, Temporality and Truth*, Cambridge 1989, 213.

time is God's *capability* to realize these capacities. This means that time is grounded in the possibility of God's act, and even if God is not actually doing anything, time would still exist. Therefore, one could say that time exists because of God's capacity to forgive in the fullest sense, His mercy, and His responsiveness to the changes that occur within creation. In this way, time is not a constraint imposed on God but something ontologically dependent on Him which derives both its meaning and existence from His nature. From this, it follows that time cannot contain God nor render Him its prisoner. Rather, God's relationship to time is one of sovereignty and transcendence as time itself is grounded in God's being, and while He engages with the world through its framework, He is never bound by it in the limited way we are.

This is what I think supreme temporality is, as divine eternity is not timelessness in the sense of absolute negation of succession, but rather God's perfect possession of time in its fullness. God's transcendence, then, is not secured by removing Him from temporality, but by affirming that His temporality is radically unlike ours, meaning, comprehensive, all-embracing, and sovereign over the succession of events.³⁸ This means that God's temporality is not constrained in the ways ours is. Human temporality is marked by limitation because our past is irretrievably lost to us, our future remains uncertain, and even the present moment slips from our grasp. By contrast, divine temporality suffers none of these defects as God's knowledge spans past, present, and possible futures in their entirety, and no moment is hidden from His awareness. Hence, just as we do not say that God transcends power or knowledge by being powerless or ignorant, but rather that He possesses power and knowledge in their most perfect and unlimited form, so also we should not say that God transcends time by being entirely atemporal. Rather, He possesses temporality in the most exalted sense, which means in the way that is free from finitude, decay, and ignorance, and characterized instead by fullness, sovereignty, and perfection. In this way, I would argue, temporality itself can be a dimension of God's transcendence.

Some Objections and Responses

There are still important objections that this paper did not address but which warrant the attention. For example, one might argue that even if divine temporality does not entail imperfection, it remains preferable to maintain that time, like space, is a created entity. Hence, temporality would not be intrinsic to God's essence but only a contingent feature of the created order that comes into existence »when« God wills it. However, this option is only available to a strict atemporalist. It is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to integrate the claim that time is created with any meaningful account of divine temporality. For if time were created, then prior to its creation there would be no temporal succession whatsoever. In other words, no earlier or later, no deliberation, no interval in which God could enact or withhold His will. A temporal God, however, must already possess a mode of succession intrinsic to His life. To say that God »becomes« temporal only once time is created, as in William Lane Craig's proposal that God is timeless »prior« to creation and temporal thereafter,³⁹ does not solve the problem because such a view presupposes precisely the kind of transition it denies. The act of bringing time into existence would itself require some kind of sequence, a move from a state in which time is not to one in which time is, which already entails temporality.

³⁸ As pointed out by Lucas, while we are bound to a fleeting »now«, God's everlastingness transcends our temporality by encompassing every »now« without loss or limitation. Vgl. JOHN R. LUCAS, *The Temporality of God*, in: ROBERT J. RUSSELL / NANCEY MURPHY / C. J. ISHAM (eds.), *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, Vatican City State 1993, 237.

³⁹ WILLIAM LANE CRAIG, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time*, Wheaton 2001, 87.

Furthermore, this position would also imply that God could annihilate time as He is the one who created it at the first place, but this also requires another transition or a »before« in which God relates to time and an »after« in which He does not. However, such a transition itself requires temporal succession and thus cannot coherently occur in a framework where time itself is the product of creation.

However, one of the most forceful objections to divine temporality is the claim that whatever is temporal must also be spatial. Since God is not a spatial being, the argument goes, He cannot be temporal. As discussed earlier, this objection held considerable weight within the classical Islamic philosophical and theological tradition, where time was typically conceived as dependent upon motion, and motion in turn was thought to require a corporeal substrate. If time arises only from the movement of bodies, then any non-spatial being must be atemporal. Taken on its own terms, this objection has limited force. As seen in the arguments of figures such as al-Bağdādī, once time is understood in an absolute sense, rather than just as the measure of motion, there is no barrier to affirming a temporal but non-spatial being. As shown above, classical Islamic thought offers conceptual resources for imagining the temporal without the spatial. Angels, for example, could be thought of something that is non-corporeal but their actions unfold in a sequence.

However, this objection gains renewed force once it is combined with insights from modern physics. According to dominant interpretations of special relativity, simultaneity or »now« is not an objective feature of reality but depends on the observer's motion relative to the events.⁴⁰ This means that time is no longer conceived of as something external to the universe but as an intrinsic part of the universe itself. Hence, there is no universal »now« applicable equally across all of space,⁴¹ and time depends on the relative motion of an observer with respect to the process being measured. This means what is simultaneous will depend on how quickly one is moving, and if two observers are moving relative to each other, they will not be able to agree on the simultaneity of events. This objection then would ask if it is shown that there is no objective »now« in physics, how can it be intrinsically tied to God's nature? Therefore, such claim would contradict the established understanding of time in the physical universe.

There are several possible responses to this challenge. One approach is to note that the status of time within contemporary physics is far from settled. While the special theory of relativity treats time as inseparable from space within a unified space-time manifold, certain formulations within quantum mechanics appear to resist this identification. A well-known example is the Time-Dependent Schrödinger Equation, in which time functions not as an operator on par with position, momentum, or energy, but as a parameter that flows uniformly and independently of the quantum state.⁴² In this framework, the evolution of a system is described relative to an external temporal variable that does not itself arise from spatial relations or observer motion. This suggests that, at least within some fields of quantum theory, time retains a kind of absoluteness that stands in tension with special relativity's denial of absolute simultaneity. Consequently, one cannot simply appeal to »science« as though it offered a single, unified account of time. The relationship between time and space remains a matter of active debate, and the absence of a fully integrated theory of quantum gravity shows that modern physics does not yet provide a settled metaphysical interpretation of time.

⁴⁰ ALLEN JANIS, Conventuality of Simultaneity, in: EDWARD N. ZALTA (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Fall 2018 Edition) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/spacetime-convensimul/> (accessed: 02.12.2025).

⁴¹ As stated by Jann Ismael: »Strictly speaking there won't be a fact about exactly what was happening to my friend in Milan at the exact moment I snap my fingers in New York, but those asynchronies aren't noticeable at the speeds and scales relevant to our own lived experience. They become important at astronomical scales and speeds close to that of light.« JEANN ISMAEL, *Time: A Very Short Introduction*, New York 2021, 95f.

⁴² Vgl. JOHN R. LUCAS, *The Temporality of God*, 237.

Therefore, the claim that divine temporality is impossible because »time is nothing but a dimension of space-time« rests on an overextension of relativity theory beyond what current scientific consensus supports.

A different response would build on the distinction between metaphysical and physical time already discussed in the section of divine transcendence as supreme temporality in relation to DeWeese and Padgett's distinction between metaphysical and physical time.⁴³ Here, obviously, the temporality proper to God would not be identical with the relativistic time that characterizes the created order. Rather, physical time is a contingent, creaturely mode of temporality shaped by the structure of space-time, while metaphysical time is concomitant with God's own life. If this distinction is granted, then the absence of an absolute simultaneity within physical time need not entail the absence of an ultimate »now« within metaphysical time. Even if scientific consensus were to solidify decisively around the claim that simultaneity is entirely relative within the universe, such relativity would apply only to the space-time framework that God sustains and not to God's own temporal mode of existence. In this way, relativistic constraints need not govern God's temporality but instead they would reflect features of physical time and not of time as such.

At this point, there is a challenge that arises concerning the relation between metaphysical and physical time. If one posits that God's temporality operates at a metaphysical level distinct from the relativistic temporality of the created order, it becomes crucial to explain how this metaphysical time is connected to the temporal framework in which human beings exist.⁴⁴ If God is entirely »outside« physical time, the critic may argue that the view collapses into a position functionally indistinguishable from divine atemporality. On this objection, the introduction of metaphysical time becomes explanatorily idle, because it does no real work in accounting for God's interaction with temporal creatures, and thus offers no advantage over the classical atemporalist model. Indeed, if metaphysical time plays no role in grounding God's responsiveness to human actions, divine freedom, or the meaningfulness of petitionary prayer, then it may appear preferable, on grounds of simplicity, to affirm that God is strictly timeless rather than to posit a temporal mode that remains wholly detached from the temporal order in which human beings live and act.

It is true that divine temporality with metaphysical time is ontologically less simple but, I would argue, it is explanatorily simpler because it provides a straightforward, intuitive, and coherent model for divine action, responsiveness, and the creation of a relativistic universe. The way metaphysical time does not suffer against this objection is by providing a privileged, non-physical reference frame, and it is the absolute »succession« against which God's life is lived, and in relation to which all events in physical space-time are uniquely ordered. In this way, God can have a single objective »present« in His own metaphysical time, from which He can relate to every local »now« in the physical universe in a coherent way. Furthermore, thinking that if metaphysical time lines up perfectly with physical time, then it is unnecessary, is flawed because it assumes a naïve, pre-relativistic view of physical time. There is no single physical time for it to »line up« with at the first place. The role of metaphysical time is not to line up with one specific physical time but to provide an absolute temporal background against which the entire four-dimensional universe of relativity exists. It answers what is real overall state of the physical universe now from God's perspective. Therefore, it is not unnecessary but essential to make sense of temporal God relating to a relativistic creation, and it should not be thought about as a duplicate clock but the master-clock that makes the relationship between all the subsidiary, relative clocks coherent.

⁴³ Vgl. GARRETT DEWEESE, *Atemporal, Semipiternal, or Omnitemporal*, 54; ALAN PADGETT, *God, Eternity, and The Nature of Time*, 128f.

⁴⁴ Vgl. NATALJA DENG, *God and Time*, in: YUJIN NAGASAWA (ed.), *Elements in the Philosophy of Religion*. New York 2019, 40.

To be more specific, God in His metaphysical present can be directly causally active at any and every point in physical space-time. His »now« is the ground for acting at any »now« He chooses. The relationship is one of causal connection from a higher-order temporal frame to a lower-order one, not one of temporal coincidence. So the relationship is the one of ontological grounding, where physical time is created and relative entity with the cosmos, while metaphysical time is uncreated and absolute succession in which God lives and which grounds the possibility of time itself. It is not the case that the meaningful relationship is therefore diminished. Because parents' love for their child is no less meaningful because the parent experiences time at a different psychological rate or is in a different time zone. Instead, the meaningfulness comes from the causal, personal, and intentional connection, which metaphysical time fully supports.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to reconsider the widespread assumption in the Islamic tradition that divine perfection entails timelessness. While this view has deep historical roots in the kalām theologians, in the falāsifa, and in the later synthesis of philosophical and theological currents, it rests upon particular conceptions of time that are neither necessary nor universally applicable. Much of the resistance to divine temporality stems from treating time as though it were analogous to space: a created, finite container in which things exist, and which therefore cannot be predicated of God without compromising His transcendence. Yet, as we have seen, this analogy is neither Qur'ānically affirmed nor philosophically compelling. The Qur'ān depicts God as acting, responding, willing, forgiving, and addressing His creation, all of which presuppose some mode of succession, and nowhere does it explicitly declare time to be a created »thing« in the manner of spatial extension.

A careful re-evaluation of classical arguments reveals that none of the standard criteria used to deny temporality to God, whether drawn from Aristotelian cosmology, Neoplatonic metaphysics, or kalām atomism, demonstrates that temporality as such entails imperfection. To the contrary, once temporality is stripped down to its core feature, succession and the possibility to change, there is no inherent reason why a perfect being cannot possess a perfect mode of succession proportionate to His nature. What would indeed compromise divine perfection are features often mistakenly conflated with temporality, such as spatial extension, decay, finitude, dependency, or ignorance. But these are not logically entailed by temporality and a temporal God can be fully sovereign, changeless in His essence, and yet dynamically responsive in His volitional life.

This distinction becomes particularly significant when we consider objections rooted in modern physics and in the alleged inseparability of time and space. The claim that »whatever is temporal must be spatial« is, upon analysis, a category mistake. It depends upon identifying physical time with time as such, and upon assuming that God's temporality must be of the same kind as the space-time framework described by relativity. Yet this is precisely what the distinction between metaphysical and physical time shows. The temporality proper to God, whether understood in Padgett's terms as relative timelessness, or in DeWeese's terms as metaphysical time, is not a mode of being situated within the created space-time manifold, but a mode of succession grounded in God's own conscious life, volitional agency, and relational engagement with creation. Physical time, with its relativistic structure and dependence on material processes, is thus a derivative expression of a more fundamental metaphysical temporality. On this view, God does not occupy a point in the cosmic metric, He sustains and transcends it.

The deeper issue, raised by other objections, concerns the relationship between divine and creaturely time, and it claims that metaphysical time simply collapses into physical time, and positing it becomes unnecessary. Otherwise, if the two are entirely unrelated, then divine temporality seems to fail the very explanatory task for which it was invoked, and that is grounding real divine-human interaction. The account defended in this paper attempts to offer a middle position. God's metaphysical temporality is not identical with physical time, but it is the ground of physical time, such that the latter is an expression of the former. Because of this grounding relation, God's successive knowledge, will, and action stand in real causal and relational contact with the unfolding succession of events in the world. God does not relate to creation by entering a pre-existing temporal container, but rather creation's temporality flows from the divine life that sustains it.

Finally, grounding transcendence in supreme temporality rather than absolute atemporality allows us to preserve the most important theological intuitions of the tradition without incurring its conceptual difficulties. It is hard to understand how a God who is absolutely timeless can in any meaningful sense respond, forgive, or act after hearing a prayer, or how can He undergo even the softest kind of relational change without collapsing into paradox. But a God who possesses temporality in its most perfect, non-defective form, free from finitude, ignorance, and decay, can be both transcendent and genuinely related to the world. It was argued that this conception aligns with the Qur'ānic vision of a God whose »days« are not our days, whose temporality is of a different order, and whose sovereignty is not diminished but expressed through His continuous and purposeful engagement with creation.