

SEARCHING FOR SCIENTIFIC FACTS IN THE QUR'ĀN: ISLAMIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE OR A NEW FORM OF SCIENTISM?

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Over the past decades, numerous Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have recognized that scientific knowledge is not necessarily neutral and objective, but instead carries values and concepts that are specific to modern Western civilization. This has led to a concerted effort by Muslim scholars to “Islamize Knowledge” but the focus of this effort has been on social sciences. Concurrently, some Muslim scholars working in biomedical and other natural sciences are attempting to show that the Qur’ān contains “scientific facts”. This article examines these assertions and their implications. It argues that these assertions are often inconsistent with the principles of Islamization of Knowledge and instead may, in fact, even foster a new form of scientism. The paper also discusses approaches to study natural sciences from Islamic perspectives which may be more consistent with the framework of Islamization of Knowledge.

Keywords: Qur’ān and science; scientism; Islam and natural sciences; religion and science; secularism; philosophy of science.

Introduction

Some of the key events in recent Muslim history have been linked to imperialism. The abolition of Western colonialism resulted in varying degrees of political freedom for the Muslim world. In addition to the political freedom gained by the fall of direct imperialism, however, Muslim scholars have also been striving to gain intellectual freedom. This endeavor has produced the recognition that modern knowledge or modern sciences have been strongly influenced by Western ideas and values. In some ways, achieving intellectual independence appears to be even more difficult than political independence. One reason for this

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difficulty may be that, unlike political colonialism, intellectual subjugation is much more difficult to identify. Nevertheless, these efforts to regain intellectual freedom have given rise to a quasi intellectual moment, sometimes called, “Islamization of Knowledge” or “Dewesternization of Knowledge”.¹

Muslim and non-Muslim scientists working in the fields of the natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry or biomedical sciences, frequently operate with the tacit assumption that the methods in the natural sciences have an objective validity that is independent of culture and religion. Therefore, methods in the natural sciences are less likely to be critically evaluated and practitioners of these sciences may be even more susceptible to intellectual colonialism than their colleagues in social sciences. The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), Herndon, VA, USA, was founded to further these intellectual endeavors. It has published numerous books on the topic of “Islamization of Knowledge”, including a summary of its basic principles entitled *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan*.² One of the key points in this monograph is that scientific knowledge as well as scientific methods by which knowledge is obtained should undergo “Islamization” and critical evaluation by Muslim scholars. However, when it comes to discussing how to implement these principles, this and similar publications focus only on the Islamization of the social sciences.

The fact that very few publications exist on how to proceed with the Islamization of natural sciences does not, however, mean that scientists working in various disciplines of natural sciences are not interested in the subject of interface between Islam and modern science. The publication of *The Bible, The Qurʾan and Science* by Maurice Bucaille³ in 1976 may be seen

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1. Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib (1984), *Islam and Secularism*, Hindustan Publications, Delhi, pp 127-60.
 2. AbuSulayman, Abdulhamid (ed. 1995), International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon (VA), wherein is found an introduction to the definition and goals of the Islamization of Knowledge.
 3. Bucaille, Maurice (1976), *La Bible, le Coran et la science: les Écritures saintes examinées à la lumière des connaissances modernes*, Seghers, Paris, translated by Alastair D. Pannell and the author as *The Bible, the Qurʾan and Science*. The English translation was first published in 1978 by North American Trust Publications, Indianapolis, and has since been published in hundreds of pirated local editions all over

as a watershed in the history of publications on the relationship between Islam and modern natural sciences. This, and many other publications on the subject are, however, directed towards the lay Muslim audience, and one common aspect of these publications is their use of verses of the Qurʾān to “prove” that the Qurʾān foretold modern scientific discoveries.⁴ This paper analyzes these attempts to “find” modern scientific facts in the Qurʾān and examines their foundational principles in the context of principles established to Islamize Knowledge.

Science and Scientism

Philosophers of science have debated the exact definition of science for decades.⁵ One of the more popular modern definitions of science or “demarcation of science from non-science” is due to Popper who required that scientific statements be empirically falsifiable.⁶ The exact discussion of this definition is beyond the scope of this article, however even critics of Popper, who feel that his definition puts too high a burden on scientists, have reached a consensus that scientific statements have to be at the minimum empirically verifiable or testable. Statements which cannot be empirically tested are, therefore, relegated to the realm of non-science. This need for empiric testability in the field of modern science has resulted in an exclusively materialist *Weltanschauung*, wherein all natural phenomena have to be explained in materialist-naturalist terms. Popper emphasized that a field of knowledge may be of great value to humankind, even if it is not scientific according to his definition.

the Muslim world.

4. Some examples of popular books discussing scientific facts in the Qurʾān are Soliman, Ahmed (1985), *Scientific Trends in the Qurʾan*, Ta-Ha Publishers, London; Nurbaki, Haluk (1997), *Verses of Qurʾan and Facts of Science*, Bilal Books, Bombay; Abbas, Adel M.A. (1997), *His Throne was on Water*, Amana Publications, Beltsville; Abbas, Adel M.A. (2000), *Science Miracles: No Sticks or Snakes*, Amana Publications, Beltsville; Moore, Keith L. (1993), *Qurʾan and Modern Science: Correlation Studies*, Islamic Academy for Scientific Research, Jeddah.
5. A basic introduction to the philosophy of science can be found in Chalmers, Alan (1999), *What is this thing called Science*, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis.
6. Popper, Karl (1965), *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, Harper & Row, New York.

The ideology of “scientism”, in contrast to Popper’s view, considers modern science to be the most valuable or the only valuable part of human learning.⁷ Scientism has blossomed in the West during the last three centuries. Among the reasons for its popularity are the marked advances in the fields of health, agriculture and other areas where broad-based applications of natural sciences have produced remarkable results. Another important reason for the growth of scientism is the unshakable belief in the universality, objectivity and validity of modern natural sciences.

Secular humanism, as a political and philosophical ideology, propagates scientism. Many prominent secular humanists have clearly identified the modern scientific method as the superior way of seeking knowledge and have emphasized the universal validity of modern science.⁸ They also claim that only materialist-naturalist explanations of phenomena should be accepted as valid.

This faith in the scientific method was shaken by philosophers of science like Feyerabend in the latter half of the twentieth century. Feyerabend showed flaws in the definitions of science and the scientific method that had been proposed by previous philosophers, including Popper.⁹ He suggested that there was no such thing as a universally valid objective scientific method, and that all sciences, including the natural sciences like physics or biology, had to be interpreted in the light of history and culture. In many ways, the Feyerabend view of science is close to that of the Muslim scholars who propagate the “Islamization of Knowledge”. However, Feyerabend goes further by showing that the relativism of scientific knowledge even extends to natural sciences like physics or biology.

Attempts to Identify Scientific Facts in the Qur’ān

A number of recent books directed towards the lay Muslim audience claim to identify “facts” in the Qur’ān that are consistent with the findings of natural sciences.

7. See Sorell, Tom (1991), *Scientism: Philosophy and the Infatuation with Science*, Routledge, London & New York.

8. Kurtz, Paul (2000), *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, Prometheus Books, Amherst; Lamont, Corliss (1997), *The Philosophy of Humanism*, Humanist Press, Amherst, pp. 208-47.

9. Feyerabend, Paul (1993), *Against Method*, Verso Publishing, London.

For example, Abbas quotes the translation of the Qurʾān: *God created (all of) you from a single person and then created a mate of like nature. He sent down for you eight heads of cattle in pairs. He forms you in three veils of darkness, one after the other, while you are in your mother's womb. Such is God, your Lord and Cherisher. To Him belongs (all) dominion, and there is no god but He. Why then, do you turn away?*¹⁰ This passage is interpreted by Abbas as follows:

The fetus creation is said to occur in 'three darkneses'. This may refer to the three fetal membranes covering the fetus during its development (the amnion, the chorion, the decidua) or to the fetal membranes as one chamber, the uterus as the second, and the abdominal cavity as the third. The first explanation is the generally accepted.¹¹

This, or similar, interpretations of this Qurʾānic verse can also be found in numerous other books and papers.¹² This illustrates how the Qurʾānic passages containing the concept of "three veils of darkness", which could signify spiritual darkness or physical darkness, are interpreted exclusively in a manner that attempts to make them compatible with modern science while spiritual explanations are neglected.

Another example of how the Qurʾānic verses are interpreted from a predominantly materialist scientific perspective is to be found in the interpretation of *Two (guardian angels), one sitting on the right and the other on the left, are appointed to view and note down (what one does). He cannot utter a word without the sentinel by him (standing) ready (to record it).*¹³

Abbas' interprets this verse as follows:

In an amazing two-word sentence, God mentions the two receivers (*al-mutalaqqiyān*) who will receive (*yatalaqqā*). He describes them as angels sitting on the right and left. In the light of modern science, we can

10. Q. 39:6.

11. Abbas (1997), p. 84.

12. See, for example, al-Bar, M. A. (1986), "The Three Veils of Darkness" in *The Islamic World Medical Journal*, vol. 2 (1986) no. 2, pp. 54-6 and Syed, Ibrahim B., "Islamization of Attitude and Practice in Embryology" in Lodhi, M. A. K. (ed. 1989), *Islamization of Attitudes and Practices in Science and Technology*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon, pp. 117-29.

13. Q. 50:17-18.

appreciate how easily God could record human thoughts and deeds. If receivers are present on either side of the brain's cerebral hemispheres, they can record thoughts and what has been said or done. This could happen in the subconscious. God could program one part of the brain to act as a memory bank of one's actions and thoughts without his awareness.¹⁴

This interpretation not only ignores any possibility of a spiritual interpretation, it also implies that modern neuroscience may allow us to understand Divine Action. This is taken even further when Abbas discusses the birth of Prophet Jesus and implies that Divine Action follows modern scientific laws:

God's creation of the Prophet Jesus in his mother is reminiscent of the process recognized as parthenogenesis (reproduction without sexual union). Parthenogenesis occurs in some birds, reptiles, insects and plants. ...A report from Scotland shows that the genes of the white cells from a child are almost identical to its mother and not its father (Bonthron D.T. et al. 1995). It should not be difficult for God to create a child from the ovum of its mother without sexual union.¹⁵

The attempts to explain Qur'ānic verses in the light of modern science range from explanations of the flood in Prophet Noah's time as a melting of ice caps to diseases associated with the consumption of pork and alcohol. Many of these authors have the best intentions and often believe that showing correlations between the Qur'ān and modern science produces Islamization of science. However, the manner in which this is done does not conform to the principles of Islamization. One of the most important aspects of the process of Islamization of science is to critically evaluate the methods by which knowledge is obtained and see whether the methods are indeed Islamic. These writers, who are so eager to correlate scientific facts with the Qur'ān, do not make any attempts to evaluate scientific data and the methods by which it is obtained. Instead, modern scientific data, especially from the biomedical sciences, which is based on

14. Abbas (1997), p. 100.

15. Abbas (2000), p. 48.

an exclusively materialist ideology, is used to interpret verses of the Qur'ān. Thus, instead of an “Islamization of science”, these writers may be fostering a “scientification of Islam”. It should be mentioned that some of these writers do state that they are not trying to prove a validity for the Qur'ān through science but, in spite of this disclaimer, the manner in which they use scientific data may foster scientism.

Furthermore, the Qur'ān contains an enormous amount of knowledge that cannot be analyzed with empiric testing and, therefore, it follows that this data is not “scientific” and hence of “lesser” certainty. These attempts to show compatibility of modern science with the Qur'ān not only fail to conform to the principles of Islamization of Knowledge, they may even be incompatible with basic Islamic beliefs. One danger of such attempts to correlate modern science with the Qur'ān is that it makes a linkage between the perennial wisdom and truth of the Qur'ān with the transient ideas of modern science and the man-made ideology of scientism. At some level, all religions are faced with this challenge of scientism.

Alternate Ways of Evaluating the Relationship between Islam and Science

A number of Muslim scholars have identified problems that come with the exclusive materialism of modern science and have made some suggestions for understanding modern scientific knowledge from Islamic perspectives.¹⁶ Their main emphasis is on critically evaluating methods in science, and to extend the process of Islamization to natural sciences. Nasr suggests searching for a form of “Sacred Science” which does not limit itself to a purely materialist interpretation of natural phenomena but takes into consideration metaphysical knowledge bestowed by revelation. One example of the kind of scientific knowledge that flourished in the Muslim world prior to the advent of modern materialist science is that of

16. See, for instance, Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (1993), *The Need for a Sacred Science*, State University of New York Press, Albany; Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib (1981), *The Positive Aspects of Taṣawwuf: Preliminary Thoughts on an Islamic Philosophy of Science*, Islamic Academy of Science, Kuala Lumpur; and Bakar, Osman (1999), *The History and Philosophy of Islamic Science*, Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge.

traditional medicine and alchemy.¹⁷ Evaluation of these disciplines can allow insights into the nature of knowledge that is currently rejected by scientific dogma. Through this investigation, Muslim scholars and biomedical scientists would find a niche for practicing and researching medical sciences from a metaphysical foundation.

17. Burckhardt, Titus (1997), *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, Fons Vitae, Louisville.