

MUSLIMS AND THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF MODERN SCIENCE

Muzaffar Iqbal

For many Muslims, modern science poses enormous challenges: they feel intimidated by the magisterial power granted it in the contemporary world; their self-consciousness about inadequate Muslim contributions to modern science makes them uneasy to such an extent that they feel a psychological need to fall back on vague notions of a glorious past when the most robust enterprise of science in the world was theirs; and they attempt to remedy their situation by numerous non-scientific means, including the now widespread attempts to prove that various scientific theories and facts recently discovered by modern science are already present in the Qurʾān. Millions of Muslims are enthralled by speakers, websites, television anchors, and popular orators who can in some way demonstrate that modern science validates Divine authorship of the Qurʾān. Albeit for the most part unacknowledged, the psychological need to see the proof of modern science corroborating their faith is rooted in the tacit recognition of the authoritative role of modern science—even while most of these Muslims would claim that such scientific validation is sought for its use in calling others to Islam and proving to non-Muslims that the Qurʾān is indeed a Divine Book.

The enormous popularity of these attempts at appeasement notwithstanding, a science deficit continues to remain the burden of the *Umma*, the community of believers whose distinct civilization is rightfully credited by unbiased historians of science to have once been the harbinger of a scientific tradition that existed across the largest geographical area and for longer than any other scientific tradition. Yet, all those achievements now appear only in history books, always as a passing reference in the progress narrative of sci-

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tific rationality and technique, and always in the past tense; the present and, by extension, the future belong to a uniquely Western scientific tradition that has a claim to universality—a claim that attempts to foreclose even the possibility of the emergence of alternate scientific traditions which could reconstruct the entire structure of science through a radical modification based on a different spiritual, philosophical, and intellectual understanding of the natural world, and which could thereby give birth to a new framework redefining the purpose, methods, and applications of science.

This tyranny of modern science is not without reason. Modern science and its applications have radically reshaped our conception of the cosmos, restructured the physical space in which we live, and redefined the frontiers of human intervention in the natural, physiological, physical, and biological realms at a scale that was unthinkable prior to its rise. It is, however, simultaneously true that this expanding realm of modern science has brought the entire human race to a state of catastrophic disaster. The unprecedented devastation caused by the use of deadly weapons in recent wars, the destruction of the environment through aggressive projects of monumental scale, and the genetic changes in the food chain (which have already produced a now uncontrollable chain reaction affecting the health of both humans and animals) are all self-evident proofs of the powers as well as dangers inherent in modern science. Yet, no matter how acutely one is aware of such detrimental under-sides to the enterprise of science, popular belief in its efficacy and beneficence remains unalterably entrenched at the level of the quotidian practices of daily life.

The macro- and micro-level reliance of so many basic aspects of our lives on the new scientific knowledge is evident to everyone. The way we now construct our dwelling places, produce food and other consumable commodities, communicate with each other, travel, and work are all dependent on science and technologies produced by its application. When someone's headache disappears with a little pill as advertized, when a plane takes its passengers from point A to point B within the stipulated time, when surgical instruments successfully remove cancerous tumors, and when a person can actually see and talk to another person living on the other side of the globe through a little device that one can hold in one's hand, he or she needs no further proof to "believe" in the efficacy and power of science.

It is this conscious or unconscious 'surrender' to science (in the sense of giving oneself over to its influence) coupled with the shortcomings of religious institutions and leaders to adequately respond to the challenges of a brave new world that have together eroded the belief of millions of human beings in anything that science cannot prove. Thus when members of a faith community (mostly Muslims and Christians) try to prove the scientific correctness

of their Scriptures, they attempt to reassure themselves and show others that what they believe is *really true* as demonstrated by science. Therein lies the greatest fallacy of this approach, as scriptural content invariably suffers distortions when placed for judgment before the magisterium of science and the scientific method which, by definition, cannot have any say in matters beyond the realm of measurable quantities. For Muslims, subjecting the Qurʾān to this treatment also flattens their complex tradition of hermeneutics, reducing it to a system of translation between Qurʾānic imagery and the language of modern science. One of the most popular subjects of “scientific verification” of the Qurʾān is that of human creation. Countless websites superimpose Qurʾānic account from Q 23:13-14 on graphic images taken from embryology textbooks in order to prove that the Qurʾānic descriptions of the creation of the human child “in three veils of darkness” (Q 39:6) in stages denoted by *nutfā*, *ʿalaqa*, and *mudgha* (Q 23:13-14) are exactly what modern science has proven. Other attempts of this popular exercise have subjected all descriptions of the natural world to similar treatment. Attempts have been made to calculate the velocity of light from the verses of the Qurʾān and enthusiasts have imported and juxtaposed on the Qurʾān almost the entire range of subjects earlier used by creationist Christians.

Since the belief in the Divine authorship of the Qurʾān is a *sine qua non* for Muslims, their attempts to attest this belief through science opens a chasm that cannot be filled with any amount of scientific reassurance, no matter how many one-to-one correspondences are found and proven by the scientific method. The Qurʾān also mentions numerous details from realms which are not even acknowledged by modern science as probable, let alone possible. Thus claiming that this or that fact mentioned in the Qurʾān was recently proved by modern science does nothing to prove to the skeptic the veracity of the Qurʾān, because he or she can always point to the supra-scientific content of the Qurʾān as a rebuttal. Besides, the Qurʾān already provides specific responses to those who question its Divine origin and a wealth of exegetical literature is also available for such responses; hence to leave this material and fall back on modern science is much like showing a candle to the sun. Furthermore, the aspects of the natural and biological world mentioned in the Qurʾān are not presented as facts to be verified by science, but are mentioned in the Book because of a higher reason, and that higher purpose remains beyond the reach of science and its methods. In fact, belief in that much higher purpose does not need any validation—scientific or otherwise, for it is inviolably present in every human being in the form of an innate stamp, in the very makeup of every child who comes into this world. Its denial takes away not an iota of that reality which each and every human being will invariably face.

Realism, however, dictates that one must acknowledge the fact that the

contemporary world, shaped by modern science and technologies developed through its application, is a unique permutation in human history; there has been no time prior to the modern era when so many human beings lived their lives with a conscious decision to exclude the Creator from the equation of existence. This triumph of the secular does not merely rest on the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers—such as Denis Diderot, Voltaire, John Locke, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine—or their latter-day heirs, including all kinds of freethinkers, agnostics, and atheists; rather, it gained its most effective ally in modern science, which has been constructed on the basic premise that the natural world is a self-generated, self-governing, evolutionary cosmos.

The original restrictive nature of Holyoake's term notwithstanding, 'secularism' now stands for a worldview anchored in science—a worldview from which God is excluded not only to separate state and social order from religion, but for the purpose of living a life without consciousness of His presence. Thus, secularism is, in fact, repackaged atheism. For the atheist, God is a proposition which is epistemologically illegitimate, rationally indefensible and experimentally false; the same is true for the secularist. The strongest support for secularism has come from science. Even though a very large portion of the scientific community continues to have faith in God, science as a system does not.

Of all the theories of modern science, it is the theory of evolution which has most rocked the age-old belief of humanity in a Creator; and even though many believing scientists and philosophers have found ways to "harmonize" their faith with the theory of evolution, these attempts can only be said to be successful inasmuch as they have been able to reconstruct religious beliefs to accommodate science, not the other way around. The theory of evolution is now the pillar of modern biology and one hundred and fifty years after Darwin—and numerous reconstructions later—the scientific community is by and large convinced of the veracity of the evolutionary path outlined in evolutionary theories of various kinds. This putatively proven fact has forced many religious institutions to reconstruct their beliefs about the origin of humanity as well as the role of the Creator in numerous aspects of life. Those religious communities which do not have hierarchical religious institutions or where such institutions do not have a commanding role have adjusted their beliefs through a reinterpretation of source texts through the works of modern scholars who subscribe to evolutionary theory and who attempt to conform religious beliefs to evolution. In the case of Islam, this has meant metaphorical and allegorical interpretations of verses of the Qur'ān which deal with realities beyond the realm of modern science: the creation of the first human being; the reality of a physical resurrection and Afterlife; the interactions of the angelic world

with the human world, and the like.

Such attempts emerged in the Muslim world in the nineteenth century, when it first encountered modern science in a direct and effective manner through the penetrating reach of colonizers who implanted caricatures of their own scientific institutions in the colonies, reformed educational systems to produce third-rate science graduates, restructured communication and mass transit networks primarily for their own needs (and secondarily to allow the “natives” to receive some benefits of their Raj, partially in fulfillment of their *mission civilisatrice*), and who brought the need for a scientific validation of the Qur’ān. In time, there emerged modernist “re-formers” who implanted the initial seeds of what later became a new exegetical genre, the so-called *Tafsīr al-‘ilmī*, the scientific exegesis.

Thus, the “Word of God” “Work of God” duality emerged in the Muslim world hand in hand with the mantra of “catching up,” a quasi religious-cum-political motif which urged Muslims to catch up with the West in science and technology and which has remained the rallying cry of all kinds of political, military, and intellectual leaders of the Muslim world for the last 150 years.

This incisive entry of modern science into the traditional universe of the Qur’ānic discourse took place only when that traditional universe had been rent asunder and modernist thinkers interested in justifying an agenda of “re-formation” on a European model of Muslim societies had become the most dominant voice in the Muslim world then just waking up from three centuries of siesta. Since then, this voice has not abated.

As it stands, Muslims continue to be reminded of their backwardness both by their own “re-formed” leaders as well by those who wish to “re-form” them in their own image. There is no dearth of sermons which point to their lack of participation in a global enterprise called science, their inadequate economic, educational and scientific standing (always measured against scales created by Western civilization), and, of course, of their inability to develop democracy. Western-style democracy, science, a certain kind of education, a certain kind of market economy—in short, all “fruits” of modernity—are, in fact, a complete package deeply anchored in the scientific revolution of the sixteenth century and its impact on European thought and civilization. Any other civilization that “buys into this package” cannot do so without committing suicide; for no civilization can retain its spiritual foundation by eating from this fruit. To be enthralled by modern science to such an extent so as to develop a psychological need to verify the Divine authorship of the Qur’ān is, in itself, an outward sign of a deep-rooted malaise—the failure of the Muslim leadership to cope with the pressures generated by three centuries of domination and colonization of their lands and minds. The departure of the colonizers has done little to emancipate minds which have been “re-formed” on the

European model and the road to freedom is further blocked by the “scientific fixation”.

In order to regain some balance, a genuinely Islamic framework of scientific enquiry needs to become an existential reality for Muslims. Such a reality cannot emerge overnight; it requires painstaking work by a generation of scholars and scientists not beholden to modern science. Such a beginning is still to emerge on the horizon.

WaʾIlāhuʾl-mustaʿān, wa mā tawfīqī illā biʾ-Ilāh

Wuddistān
Muḥarrām al-Ḥarām 21, 1431/January 7, 2009