

In another era, it would have been enough to invoke the lack of historical-intellectual precedent to discredit the so-called scientific exegesis (*al-tafsīr al-ʿilmī*) which burst into view toward the end of the nineteenth century—the century of deluge, which witnessed the colonization of nearly the entire Muslim world. Such an argument does not find traction in our progressivist times, but it is well worth considering certain aspects of the colonial predicament for a better understanding of the scientific exegesis of the Qurʾān. This may shed light on the genre by highlighting the context which produced a deep-seated inferiority complex in the Muslim mind toward Islamic intellectual tradition and an awe for modern Western science, both of which are characteristic features of modern scientific exegesis.

Let us note that by the time scientific exegesis appeared as a fully differentiated field, the discourse on the relationship between Islam and science had already witnessed a break with Islamic intellectual tradition and modern Western science had already achieved the stature of an arbitrator in matters which were, by definition, beyond its scope. Thus, anything that could not be explained on the basis of the so-called laws of nature was considered suspect, to say the least: miracles, supra-rational events, and concepts such as the Divine hand directing human and natural events according to the custom of God (*SunnatuʾIlāh*) had all suffered a rationalistic reductionism.

Thus, when the new hermeneuts sought Qurʾānic sanction for Muslim engagement with modern Western science, they posited verses referring to natural phenomena in a manner that made their primary meanings determinedly techno-scientific; this led to an entirely unprecedented relationship between the Divine revelation and human science: instead of understanding scientific data in

Muzaffar Iqbal is Founder-President of the Center for Islam and Science (www.cis-ca.org). Email: Muzaffar@cis-ca.org.

the light of metaphysical realities outlined in the Qurʾān, the Qurʾān was now to be understood in the light of scientific investigation—and whatever did not fit that reductive enterprise had to be allegorized away.

Since that first somewhat hesitant start, modern scientific interpretations of the Qurʾān have run the full circuit from the ingenious to the ridiculous. Claims have been made that it was the Qurʾān which first described the theory of the Big Bang, mentioned atoms, bacteria, trains, airplanes, submarines, elucidated the theory of evolution, and all sorts of other scientific speculations, discoveries, and inventions.

Those who invented scientific exegesis and those who continue to advocate it simply fail to recognize that Qurʾān was revealed at a time when no one had seen ultra-sound scans of fetuses in a woman's womb. Yet, when the Qurʾān declared *And indeed We created man out of an extract of clay; then We made him into a drop of life-germ (nutfā); then We placed it in a safe lodging; then We made this drop into a clot, then We made the clot into a lump, then We made the lump into bones, then We clothed the bones with flesh, and then We caused it to grow into another creation: Thus Most Blessed is Allah, the Best of all who create. Thereafter you are destined to die, and then on the Day of Resurrection you shall certainly be raised up* (Q 23:12-16), its addressees understood without a doubt what was being said. They found in this verse no ambiguity waiting to be discovered by scientific investigation. Those who believed in the Message did so without need of sonographic images; and those who chose not to believe would not have believed even if they were presented with these 'proofs'—just as today, with all the additional information available through imaging techniques, those who choose to believe do so without needing those images while those who do not wish to believe and benefit from this Remembrance (*dhikr*) ignore it even in the presence of such images. While it is true that in certain cases additional information may increase the awe and wonder of believers encountering the marvels of creation, but no additional information constitutes a *sine qua non* for understanding the message of the Qurʾān. The truth is that whatever modern science has discovered since the time of revelation adds nothing to the fundamental message of the Qurʾān—and therefore there is no internal need for projecting the discoveries of modern science onto Qurʾānic verses.

To be sure, the natural world—the subject of modern science—is one ever-present backdrop to the text of the Qurʾān, just as is the vast historical canvas upon which is written the story of human responses to the message of their Creator. The third of the three domains by which the Qurʾān illustrates its message is the soul (*nafs*): *Indeed We shall show them Our Signs on the far horizon and in themselves (anfusihiḥim)* (Q 41:53). Within this schema, powerful images from the natural world are used in the Qurʾān to evoke a uniquely monotheistic panorama of the natural world with mighty mountains holding the Earth firm in its place and all manners of creatures—animals and birds, flora and fauna, pearls and jewels—appearing as a constant reminder of the grandeur and vastness of creation, all of

which submit to the Creator; glorifying and extolling His praise (Q 17:44; 59:1; 61:1). Yet none of the celebrated Muslim scientists who participated in the longest known scientific tradition in human history sought to project their investigations onto the Qurʾān, even though some of them were fully qualified to do so, having been trained in the sciences of the Qurʾān just as they had the sciences of astronomy, physics, and chemistry.

That Muslim scientists historically did not attempt to directly employ scientific data in support of Qurʾānic claims was a consequence of the metaphysical underpinnings of the Islamic scientific tradition. The most important and powerful of these underlying doctrines is *Tawhīd*, the uncompromising Oneness of Allah that shapes and defines all things Islamic. The Qurʾān enabled a natural nexus between faith and science as it forged a seamless link between the transcendental and the historical—that is, between that which exists in the world beyond and that which lies within this realm of spatio-temporal finitude. The Qurʾān does not draw a stark demarcation between such various realms of existence nor does it admit any other divinity or any other order of nature which is not ontologically dependent on the One Creator Who brought all things into existence and Who fashioned all things in an unalienable relationship with each other and in a sublime ontological dependence on Him Who *encompasses all things* (Q 4:126). Because the Islamic scientific tradition was rooted in the Qurʾānic worldview and because it shared a common discursive universe with the Divine revelation, there was no need to read back into the “Word of God” any scientific discovery or explanation of the “Work of God”. In fact, the very differentiation of these two entities as starkly different in the Muslim mind was the result of the modern-colonial severance from the traditional discourse.

It was only when Muslims found themselves overwhelmed by the power of modern science, both literally and figuratively, that they recoiled and, in time, sought refuge in a psychological cul-de-sac through attempts to prove that their Qurʾān had already foretold all that modern science was only beginning to discover—a claim that would often border on the ridiculous. Ironically, those who initially invented the genre of scientific exegesis were neither scientists nor formally trained exegetes. It was only after a number of works had appeared in the genre that the trend caught the attention of scholars of Qurʾānic sciences, who then joined the bandwagon. Protestations that the project is directed at disbelievers, rather than reassuring spiritually colonized believers of the scientific bases of their faith, ignore the fact that disbelievers have no need for such exegeses; the explanatory power of modern scientific discoveries is derived elsewhere. Disbelievers surely do not require the projection of modern Muslim anxieties about science to make sense of recent developments. Nor are they awaiting scientific proof before testifying that the Qurʾān is Divine speech addressed to humanity for guidance, elaborating a path to be traversed in the shade of His sanctified Mercy here and in the Hereafter. Scientific exegesis instead is often used to attempt to

“prove” the Divine origin of the Qurʾān, by those whose very profession of faith requires that they believe in the Book ipso facto, requiring no external proof.

The project of scientific exegesis is also vulnerable on the grounds that science is changeable and it is logically nonsensical to interpret the Qurʾān in light of a knowledge that is always changing. It is a methodologically incoherent enterprise because, despite the voluminous literature so far produced in this genre, there is not a single discovery or theory which cannot be related to supposedly supporting Qurʾānic verses: it is an unfalsifiable project. Further, it is motivated by a desire to demonstrate the compatibility of the Qurʾān with modern Western science, even though the latter is built upon a worldview—in its epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical assumptions—that is diametrically opposed to that of the Qurʾān.

Finally, scientific exegesis is unsound on the grounds that this approach is not consistent with the treatment of the rest of the Qurʾānic data in exegetical tradition. For instance, the Qurʾān makes a very specific prediction in the opening verses of Sūratul-Rūm, claiming that the Romans, who had been defeated by the Persians, would turn the tables on Persia within a few years. This prediction was fulfilled—but no one has ever mobilized this historical event as proof that the Qurʾān contains specific and detailed knowledge of *all* historical events. The methodology of the new scientific exegetes would insist that the Qurʾān, said to contain the knowledge of the ancients and their followers (*ʿilm al-awwalīn wal-ākhirīn*), must contain a detailed narrative of world history! If it cannot be claimed that the Qurʾān is a chronology of all historical events, it cannot be claimed to be a repository of all scientific developments. If we do not see such claims for historiographic exegesis being made alongside those for scientific exegesis, we would do well to inquire into the nature of colonial science in the nineteenth century, and how it came to have the grasp it did on the interpretive faculties of Muslim hermeneuts. And Allah knows best.

WaʾIlāhul-mustaʿān, wa mā tarwīqī illā biʾIlāh



Wuddistān

19 Shawwāl 1431/28 September 2010