

Science and Religion: The Quranic Position¹

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Whenever the subject of religion and science comes up, it is approached either in terms of certain innocuous platitudes or with certain confusions. Both of these approaches conveniently refuse to see beneath the surface and, instead of clarifying the issue, end up in obfuscating it still further. This brief outline seeks to approach the subject in the light of principles deducible from the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*. We can save ourselves from many pitfalls and confusions if this principled position is borne in mind. From the Islamic point of view science and religion are not contraries but complementaries, both necessary for human life. As far as the material reality – the universe and all that inheres in it and the physical aspect of man's day- to-day life – is concerned, Allah has given man the rational faculty and other ancillary powers to deal with it; this exactly is the domain and jurisdiction of science. But how and with what attitude of mind should we undertake this task and how we should use the gains obtained from this adventure – these questions are beyond the scope of rational faculty and science because they involve certain fundamental metaphysical and spirituo-moral issues for which Revelation alone can provide guidance.

Two examples among so many, one each from the *Qur'an* and its practical illustration, the life of the Prophet (SAW), may be cited to illustrate this position. The *Qur'an* says:

يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْأَهْلِ قُلْ هِيَ مَوَاقِيتُ لِلنَّاسِ وَالْحَجِّ

They ask you (O Muhammad) concerning the waxing and waning of the moon; say they are signs for men to mark periods of time and for pilgrimage.²

Now the question raised in the beginning of the *ayah* has two clear answers both equally valid from their respective perspectives. One of them scientific, which has been left to human reason, and the other religious – that lunar waxing and waning constitutes a natural

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calendar – has been taken up by the *Qur'an*. In other words the *Qur'an* leaves the ‘how’ of the question to the rational faculty of man and points only to the ‘why’ of the question so that men grasp the all-important spirituo-moral truth that the phenomena in the universe of existence are neither accidental nor purposeless but deeply symbolical:

رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَاطِلًا سُجْحًا فَكَفَّيْنَاكَ عَذَابَ النَّارِ

Our lord, You did not create this (universe) purposelessly; glorified are You; save us from the doom of Fire.³

When our Prophet (SAW) migrated to Madinah, he found the *Ansar* (Helpers), whose main profession was agriculture, practising grafting with their date- palm trees. He remarked that the trees could be left alone to their natural growth and fruition. The *Ansar*, ever ready to carry out every Prophetic wish unquestioningly, took it as a prophetic command and gave up the practice of grafting. This led to a big decrease in produce. When the Prophet was asked about it, he said that it is a technical matter and does not fall within the purview of religion. Explaining the principled position of Islam about such matters, he remarked:

أَنْتُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِأُمُورِ دُنْيَاكُمْ

You are more knowledgeable about your worldly affairs. (That is, as far as their technical side is concerned).⁴

Quite in accord with this principled position, the Prophet accepted the advice of Salman al-Farisi (RA) about the craft of war. During the Battle of the Trenches (*Ghazwa al-Ahzab*), he had a trench dug around a part of the city of Madinah as a device of defence on his suggestion.

The beloved Prophet (SAW) had trained his holy companions so meticulously in this regard that on several occasions they would ask him whether he was issuing a command as Prophet or just expressing an opinion to be considered. If the Prophet said that it was just an opinion, they would present their views, otherwise they would acquiesce unquestioningly.

A noteworthy point relating to this discussion is that the guidance of Revelation for which word 'religion' is used in this discourse, is indispensable for all aspects of human endeavour. Every activity of human life and each aspect of scientific adventure has a moral as well as a technical side to it. For moral guidance one has perforce to turn to religion as nature has not equipped him with powers to legislate infallibly in respect of the spirituo-moral domain. Wherever and whenever he dabbles in it, he makes a mess of his affairs.

Because of this basic Quranic position Allah (SWT) remarks that He had raised Prophets at all times and places so that,

لِنَّا يَكُونُ لِلنَّاسِ عَلَى اللَّهِ حُجَّةٌ بَعْدَ الرُّسُلِ

So that people have no excuse with Allah after such Prophets.⁵

The clear implication is that in the absence of this arrangement man will have the valid excuse that it would not have been possible to find the right way without prophetic guidance.

Since religious guidance is required in all aspects of human life and endeavour, scriptures like the Bible and the Quran have been described in the *Qur'an* as *tafseelan likulli shai* and *tibyanan likulli shai* (detailed account of everything). One is likely to misconstrue the sense of these pronouncements if the right context is not kept in mind.

How does genuine scientific research impinge on religion? Once again we come across a spectacle where religion and genuine scientific research work as complementaries at a deeper and much more significant level. This too can be best understood by concrete exemplification. As school children we were made to memorise that the sun is stationary, then, in the light of fresh discoveries, science shifted its ground as it was found that the sun moves along with the whole of its galaxy. This enabled us to grasp the import of the casual Quranic remark,

وَالشَّمْسُ تَجْرِي لِمُسْتَقَرٍّ لَهَا

And the sun moves on its course for a period determined for it.⁶

It is a part of an *ayah* which occurs in a purely religious context. Similarly the Big Bang theory about the creation of the universe became known only in the recent past but the following Quranic verse (again occurring in a purely religious context) was revealed 1400 years ago:

أولم يرَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَنَّ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ كَانَتَا رَتْقًا فَفَتَقْنَاهُمَا
وَجَعَلْنَا مِنَ الْمَاءِ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ حَيٍّ

Do the unbelievers not see that the heavens and the earth were joined together, then We tore them asunder and We created every living thing from water.⁷

Describing the doom of Hell-dwellers, the *Qur'an* says:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِنَا سَوْفَ نُصَلِّيهِمْ نَارًا كَلَّمًا نَضِجَتْ جُلُودُهُمْ
بَدَلْنَاهُمْ جُلُودًا غَيْرَهَا لِيَذُوقُوا الْعَذَابَ

Those who disbelieve Our revelations, We shall cast them into the fire and every time their skins are burnt out we shall exchange them for fresh ones so that they keep on tasting the torment.⁸

The fact that burning causes pain only as long as the skin is intact is a discovery of most recent origin. Similarly the *Qur'an* describes in a purely moral and spiritual context the development of the human embryo which is exactly in accord with the latest discoveries of embryology

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِنْ طِينٍ ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَاهُ نُطْفَةً فِي قَرَارٍ
مَكِينٍ ثُمَّ خَلَقْنَا النُّطْفَةَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْعَلَقَةَ مُضْغَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْمُضْغَةَ
عِظَامًا فَكَسَوْنَا الْعِظَامَ لَحْمًا ثُمَّ أَنشَأْنَاهُ خَلْقًا آخَرَ فَبَارِكْ لِلَّهِ أَحْسَنُ
الْخَالِقِينَ

And indeed We created man from a quintessence of wet earth, then made him a drop (of seed) placed in a safe lodging, then fashioned the drop into a clot, then fashioned the clot into a little lump, then fashioned the little lump bones, then clothed the bones with flesh; And thereafter We raised him up as another creature – then blessed be Allah the best of creators.⁹

These are just a few of the many instances which prove how genuine scientific research complements genuine religion at a deeper level. We must however remember that these hints are dropped incidentally while the *Qur'an* is arguing for *Tawheed* or Allah's omnipotence or the life hereafter. But since the speaker is the Creator (SWT) Himself they are the ultimate statements regardless of the context in which they occur. In this regard a marvellous Quranic verse reads:

Very soon shall we show them our signs in the universe
and their own selves until it becomes manifest to them
that this (Qur'an) is the Truth.¹⁰

This verse apart from making a significant prophecy underscores the importance that Islam attaches to the study of the Universe of existence including the human self as a highly meaningful system of signs. Thus Islam raises to the pedestal all that makes for a robust and dynamic scientific enterprise, be it the use of sense organs or the exercise of the rational faculty. The *Qur'an* places repeated emphasis on the study and contemplation of the universe which naturally leads to the development of natural sciences like Physics, Chemistry, Biology etc. As against 250 verses of legislative nature in the Quran, we have 750 verses which exhort the believers on *tafakkur* (thinking), *ta'aqqul* (ratiocination, exercise of reason) and *mushahadah* (observation) in relation to both nature and history. In this way it not only lights up the path of scientific enterprise but also hallows it and gives to it the status of worship.

The Prophet (SAW) declared the ink of the scholar's pen holier than the martyr's blood and remarked:

الحكمة ضالة المؤمن فحيث وجدها فهو أحق بها

Wisdom is the lost property of a believer, wherever he comes by it, he has a prime right over it.¹¹

He also remarked that the most superior form of worship is the acquisition of knowledge" and that "a moment's thinking is superior to seventy years of worship."

How much importance did the Prophet attach to the acquisition of knowledge of all sorts is obvious from what was done to the prisoners of war after the Battle of *Badr*. They were freed in

exchange for ransom but those among them who could not pay the ransom were asked each to teach reading and writing to ten Muslim children. Obviously these non-Muslim prisoners of war did not teach *fiqh* to these children. These were the teachings which led to the unprecedented scientific upsurge of early Islam which remained unparalleled until the Renaissance. According to the historians of science it still remains the biggest contribution by scientists hailing from a single community.

In Islam then all knowledge and science is sacred including what is regarded as specifically religious instruction. It is sacred because Islam does not maintain the misleading and unscientific divide between the secular and the religious. Life is an organic unity and once we live it in accord with the Divine Guidance, it is converted into a comprehensive form of worship. The only condition that Islam imposes is that the whole process of thinking and contemplation and all forms of knowledge should be made subservient to the control of Divine guidance; *fikr* should always be subordinate to *dhikr*. As the Qur'an says:

إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ
لآيَاتٍ لِّأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ الَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ قِيَامًا وَقُعُودًا
وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ

Verily in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day there are signs for men of reason: those who remember Allah standing, sitting and on their sides and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth.¹²

Knowledge in this way turns into a blessing and not a curse as it does if it is freed from Divine guidance and control.

References and Notes:

- 1 This is basically a note which the author read out at the valedictory function of the three day international seminar on Shah-i-Hamadan organised by S.H. Institute of Islamic Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar from 13th –15th March, 2012. The note addresses a vital issue of the modern times as how religion particularly Islam is related to science which has become an effective source of transformation in the modern society.
- 2 *Al-Qur'an*, 2:189.
- 3 *Ibid*, 3:191.
- 4 Imam Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*.
- 5 *Al-Qur'an*, 4:165.
- 6 *Ibid*: 36:38.
- 7 *Ibid*: 21:30.
- 8 *Ibid*: 4:56.
- 9 *Ibid*: 23:12-14.
- 10 *Ibid*:41:53.
- 11 Imam Tirmizi, *Tirmizi*.
- 12 *Al-Qur'an*,3:190-191.

