

# *Islam and Science in the Future*

with Majid Daneshgar, "The Future of Islam and Science: Philosophical Grounds"; Biliiana Popova, "Islamic Philosophy and Artificial Intelligence: Epistemological Arguments"; Mohsen Feyzbakhs, "Theorizing Religion and Questioning the Future of Islam and Science"; Ali Hossein Khani, "Islam and Science: The Philosophical Grounds for a Genuine Debate"; and Majid Daneshgar, "Uninterrupted Censored Darwin: from the Middle East to the Malay-Indonesian World."

## THE FUTURE OF ISLAM AND SCIENCE: PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDS

by Majid Daneshgar

*Abstract.* This introduction provides an overview of the significance of this Symposium on Islam and Science in the Future. Compiling this project began in early 2019 and various articles by philosophers, Islamicists and historians tackle the relationship between Islam and science from different angles.

*Keywords:* Darwin; future of Islam and science; history; Islam; philosophy; science

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The question of how nature works is one of the oldest, prompting various inquiring minds to engage with it. This question was raised by religious believers as well, whose attempts to answer it were not limited to the mechanism of the universe, but also included how it is displayed in their scriptures. They made an extra effort to show how nature is, in both real and imaginary worlds, touchable by means of religious-based piety. For them, nature was manifested into three states: (1) Self, which was about soul and body; (2) Environment, which was about their surroundings, and (3) Heaven, which connected physical celestial bodies with scripture-based unseen and metaphysical elements of skies. In the believers' eyes, reaching heaven needs piety as much as knowing self and surrounding need it; the better the understanding of one, the better the comprehension of the other. The desire to reach and behold heaven is obvious in Judeo-Christian literature, particularly 3 Baruch (known as "the Greek Apocalypse of Baruch" ["a pseudepigraphical work"]):

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1 And the angel of the Lord took me and led me to a second heaven. And he showed me there 2 also a door like the first and said, Let us enter through it. And we entered, being borne on wings 3 a distance of about sixty days' journey. And he showed me there also a plain, and it was full of 4 men, whose appearance was like that of dogs, and whose feet were like those of stags. And I asked 5 the angel: I pray thee, Lord, say to me who are these. And he said, These are they who gave counsel to build the tower, for they whom thou seest drove forth multitudes of both men and women, to make bricks; among whom, a woman making bricks was not allowed to be released in the hour of child-birth, but brought forth while she was making bricks, and carried her child in her apron, and 6 continued to make bricks. And the Lord appeared to them and confused their speech, when they 7 had built the tower to the height of four hundred and sixty-three cubits. And they took a gimlet, and sought to pierce the heaven, saying, Let us see (whether) the heaven is made of clay, or of 8 brass, or of iron. When God saw this He did not permit them, but smote them with blindness and confusion of speech, and rendered them as thou seest (3 Baruch 3).

To identify heaven, Christian sources relied on the ideas of Greek polymaths, that “the earth was a spherical globe and that the biblical firmament was one of the celestial spheres. But they could not identify which sphere was the biblical firmament, so they tended to add a few spheres to reconcile the Bible with Greek thinking” (Yunker and Davidson 2015, 36). Philosophical reading of the universe, regardless of its accuracy, was inevitably used by various groups of Christian priests, theologians, and commentators. This is the same for Muslim counterparts, as many of their Islamic and Qur’anic exegetical works (by, for example, al-Ghazālī, al-Rāzī, al-Nīsābūrī) are inspired by Greek as well as Arabo-Persian philosophical interpretations of the universe (see Morrison 2007 and Jaffer 2014). Philosophical and theological reading of the three natures overlapped, confronted, or interacted with each other in the course of history, to the extent that one’s complicated view of nature had a complicated effect on the others’ perspective. And this twist became more and more serious and challenging, particularly in the nineteenth century, a period which witnessed Lamarckian-Darwinian evolutionary theories. By shedding light on the first two seeable natures (the self and the environment) and pushing further back the metaphysical one (heaven), the significance of theological doctrines about God’s will and the divine origin of the human were challenged. Pro-Darwinians (not Darwin, himself) hinted that religion and science are not compatible at all, and challenged creationists’ belief in their scriptures about heaven and biblical (and Islamic) celestial and heavenly bodies:

No one before the 1830s believed that medieval people thought that the earth was flat [...] The reason for promoting both the specific lie about the sphericity of the earth and the general lie that religion and science are in natural and eternal conflict in Western society, is to defend Darwinism. The answer is really only slightly more complicated than that bald statement.

The flat-earth lie was ammunition against the creationists. The argument was simple and powerful, if not elegant: 'look how stupid these Christians are'. (Russell 1997)

Being engaged with the first two natures was then the main priority of most people in the world. For centuries, their dream to touch the third nature remained immature: the observable side (planet and stars) which was far away and untouchable for them was examined in the light of classical philosophical and/or theological arguments; and the unseen side (the scripture-heaven) retained its place in novels, folk stories, as well as apocalyptic, utopian, and futuristic narratives (see Howgego 2013). The particular emphasis on the first two, led scientists to approach the third nature, although again incomplete. They made inroads to the skies and provided detailed information which was later used by theologians and religious figures, who produced scientific interpretations of their scriptures while addressing modern scientific data. Nonetheless, the other side of the third nature which was, according to religious texts, visited by the "pious servant of God" remained obscure...no one was *scientifically* able to demystify the so-called ascension stories and books found in different religions and regions.

Since the early twentieth century and along with anticolonial movements, European science was treated more politically in Asia in general and the Muslim world in particular. Some groups approached it as a vehicle by which Muslims could be united against Western colonial powers (see Jawharī 1951), some as a legacy of their former Islamic tradition which proved their advanced thought (see such traditions in Daneshgar 2018), and some as a foreign product which should be Islamized or indigenized (see Furlow 2016). The more the West focused on discovery of the above natures, the more such political approaches intensified in the Muslim world, where there was less ability to move toward the third nature (viz., skies). When Einstein's theory of relativity was widely accepted, some Muslims rejected his novelty and ascribed it to Qur'anic teachings (see Daneshgar 2018), and while various parts of the universe were discovered, one by one, there were Muslims who ascribed them to Islamic traditions (see Furlow 2020).

Very soon, those [European] sciences, which were silent about religiously defined-heavens, started to raise questions about Muslims' knowledge of the first two natures of self and environment: unsurprisingly, I was taught in high school and in my college in Iran that Sigmund Freud's (d. 1939) ideas contradict Islamic teachings and should not be taken into account. Such approaches focusing on what should be taught in schools and how Muslims should be equipped against Western knowledge particularly mainly emerged in the 1970s and 80s when according to Islamic scholars like Ismail al-Faruqi (d. 1986) and his fellows at the International

Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), “Western human knowledge and education, affected as it is by Darwinism, Freudianism, and Marxism, contradict Islamic values” (see Daneshgar 2020, 61). According to some Muslim leaders,

Much of the dissatisfaction expressed against Islam by modern educated Muslims is a result of the kind of textbooks they have read and so-called scientific thoughts, presented to them in the name of modern knowledge. (Brohi 1988, 11)

*Whether this or that theory of Western scholars is/not compatible with Islam or found in Islamic sources* has been one of the many common questions in the Muslim world, which has usually received a simple and superficial response; for example, the underdiscussion theory (e.g., by Darwin) is placed next to a somewhat similar topic already mentioned in Islamic sources (e.g., by al-Jāhīz). Today, given the recent global digital and scientific movements, other types of question have and will become more popular: *what would happen if this or that discovery contradicts Islam?* Providing an answer for this question is more complicated than the last one; it raises questions about particular digital, medical, and chemical issues that have no background in Islamic sources.

In my earlier work, *Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī and the Qur’ān*, around which this Symposium in *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* has been prepared, I pointed out that such questions would frequently come into Muslims’ minds in the future, when advanced medicine and technology may challenge Islamic philosophical and theological (as well as epistemological) doctrines related to fate and providence, human and world creation and the notion of belief in the future. Although the future discussed in my book was to a large extent imaginary, its components, like the artificial intelligence (AI) and biological revolutions, are more or less perceived by readers. The questions about Islam and science in the future would no longer deal with each nature separately, but collectively. All communities would have access to all sorts of natures and we should expect more serious challenges about the relationship between Islam and science among religious communities, including traditional Muslim ones. Whether the challenges are a threat or an opportunity depends on how people define the notions of Islam and science. In fact, before ascribing to earlier Muslim polymaths whatever is found in the future; rejecting whatever discovered by non-Muslims; and desiring that Muslims across the world should be among the future influential scientists and scholars, a profound understanding of the relationship between Islam and science needs to be comprehended. As such, this Symposium includes four articles dedicated to a debate on the *Future of Islam and Science*. The particular role of these four studies is to provide philosophical grounds by which one may have a better

and transparent picture of the link and mechanism of correlation between religion and science in the future.

The first article by Biliana Popova opens up before us epistemological and ontological arguments dealing with death, (im)mortality, and after-life in Islamic philosophical schools and how they should be positioned in the discourse of AI development in the future. The second work by Mohsen Feyzbakhsh argues that before raising and then answering any sorts of questions about the future of religion and science, the notion of religion should be thoroughly theorized. Why and then how should we define the notion of “Islam” and “being Islamic” before imagining a future for it with science? Ali Hossein Khani invites readers to review and decode the concept of *conversation* that occurred philosophically between phenomena, while specifying whether Islam and science may interact; a conversation that requires the sharing of a common ontology. The last article, by myself, shows how less philosophical and more political treatment of European evolutionary thought by Darwin in the Muslim world has been practiced in various Islamic educational contexts. I argue that the less academic and free of bias the engagement with Darwinism, the more engagement with political and theological interpretations of it, which leads to marginalization of science in the Muslim world not only today but also tomorrow.

This symposium offers a philosophical understanding of the notions of Islam and science which might help remove the tension and provide readers with a chance to analytically read and understand the relation between religion and science.

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