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Islam and Science; Compatible or Contradictory?

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Abstract



The relationship between science and religion has long been a subject of extensive scholarly debate, giving rise to a wide range of theoretical frameworks and interpretive models. Prominent contributions by scholars such as Ian Barbour, John Haught, Freeman Dyson, Stephen Jay Gould, and Staver have sought to conceptualize this relationship in diverse ways. While some scientists, including Jacques Monod, Carl Sagan, and E. O. Wilson, advocate a conflict-based perspective, arguing that science and religion are fundamentally irreconcilable, others—such as John Haught and Michael Ruse—emphasize their metaphysical interconnectedness and propose models of integration and harmony.

Broadly, the science–religion interface has been categorized into several paradigms, including conflict, integration, complementarity, independence, and dialogue. This article focuses specifically on three principal models—conflict, integration, and independence—in order to critically analyze existing literature and identify conceptual gaps.

Furthermore, the study argues that, although these models may offer partial insights within certain religious traditions, they fail to adequately capture the distinctive nature of the relationship between science and Islam. Accordingly, this research confines its religious scope to Islam and proposes a new conceptual model aimed at more effectively articulating the interaction between scientific inquiry and Islamic thought.



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1. Introduction

Science and religion are the two systems of understanding the external phenomenon. Although they are quite different in their methods and contents, they provide a framework to develop perception of nature. Science is the understanding of natural and social world and application of this knowledge using a systematic methodology based on evidence.¹

Religion being derived from the term religio was used by scientist scholars in the meaning of piety and worship in the middle centuries. At that time religion was a symbol of orthodoxy. Later on, through the works of anthropologist E.B.Taylor, religion began to be used as a broader concept including qualities that could be studied and compared scientifically.² With the passage of time religion started to be defined on separate scientific grounds. According to some, religion is just based on supernaturalism and has nothing to do with the reality. Some find it as a stage in human cultural development. Bernard Le Bovier explains religion as a concept arising due to lack of understanding.³ Hume said that religion results from human's fear of environment that every entity in environment which man is afraid of, he considers it a god.⁴ To Freud, the concept of religion emerged from pathological dependence of human on a fatherly figure.⁵ Functionalists consider religion as a set of social institutions which serve to strengthen the social relationships among people.

We advocate the concept of religion proposed by E.B.Taylor that scientific study of traits of religion can be possible though this might not be applicable to every aspect of Islam. We define religion as a set of beliefs, commands and social instructions addressing not only the needs of human body but also its soul.

The debate between science and religion has been there for several years. Since 1960, scholars belonging to different fields of science like anthropology, psychology and sociology have been trying to comprehend the relationship between science and religion. In 2000, Ian Barbour worked on this relationship and came up with a paradigm of four models with which almost every scholar interested in this debate is very well- acquainted- Integration, conflict, dialogue and independence.⁶ Some other frameworks were proposed by John Haught, Freeman Dyson, Stephen J.Gould and Staver, but the paradigm of Ian Barbour occupied a significant position. Here

we use the typology of Ian Barbour to analyze the relationship between Islam and science.

Science was introduced to Muslims in nineteenth century and the addition of philosophical domain to science caused it to conflict with Islamic concepts especially the philosophy of Darwinism and naturalism. But the continuous struggle of Muslim scholars has brought about a new meaning of science in which “scientific miracles” of Quran hold a significant position. Scientists now are being more compliant to the facts in Quran, being wondered by finding the proof of their discoveries already mentioned in Quran. Nidhl Guessoum supports a completely compatible relationship between Islam and science based on “no- possible conflict” principle of Ibn-Rushd, which states, “there can be no conflict between God’s word and God’s work”.⁷ Yet there is a group of scientists who hold science and Islam as completely separate entities working independently in their circles, including Dr.Pervaiz Hoodbhoy and Prof. Abdus Salam, Pakistani physicists.

The interface of science and religion has been explained in terms of conflict, integration, complementarity, independence and dialogue up till now. This article mainly focusses on integration, conflict and independence for analysis and addressing the gaps. As the relationship between Islam and science has not been described in clear terms, we propose a model of “eccentric relationship between Islam and science” which can best describe the contact between these two entities.

2. Model of Conflict

Conflict between Islam and science began with the entrance of philosophical currents to science. The conflict thesis between science and religion asserts that both can never reside side by side, they are completely irreconcilable. One cannot be religious and scientific at the same time. The main reason behind this conflict is the classical theory of dualism, i.e., spirit and matter. This conflict thesis was produced by John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White in nineteenth century, who worked to prove religion a hurdle in scientific progress. Although their narrative was a part of Protestant Reformation and they intended to use science as a source to defend liberal Christianity against a conservative and orthodox Christianity, it became a reason for secular and atheist scientists to devalue the religion. Later on, their conflict thesis prevailed and now its promoters mainly belong to two groups; scientific materialists and Biblical Literalists. We are more concerned about the theory of scientific materialism as this is one main reason of conflict between Islam and science.

The theory of scientific materialism or methodological naturalism, states that matter or nature is the only reality of this universe, and there is no inner dimension or spiritual basis for anything. These scientific materialists propose that every phenomenon is the result of some kind of action involving material components or natural approach and the understanding of these actions is based on science only, because religion lacks understanding. Science is rational, based on logics, tests and experiments while religion is irrational, emotional and theoretical. The variety of religions is due to cultural differences among regions and religion is actually a combination of these cultural values. Some of these scientific materialists try to preserve religious beliefs along with science by saying that both of these entities work in separate spheres and each one of these needs to respect the boundaries of other. However, there are some scientists who consider science a sole concept explaining nature of universe and human body and they suggest that religion is not needed at all. Carl Sagan, an astronomer, being one of the main supporters of this concept, gives his philosophy about universe, “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be”⁸, disproving the concept of God and suggesting Nature as a replacement of God. He argues that any kind of authoritarian power may hinder the ultimacy of scientific method which he considers “universally applicable”. Another example is of Jacques Monod, noble prize-winning molecular biologist who asserts that things came into existence only by chance and chance is the only source behind all the creation.⁹

We disagree with scientific materialism on the basis of two reasons, one is that Islam does not disprove the concept of testing and experimentation. Second is that matter solely cannot explain the reality of universe. One cannot negate the inner dimension of this universe.

Islam suggests experimentation and pondering over the signs hidden in universe
“Behold in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for men of understanding” (3:190)

Scientific materialism though may be perceived as an enemy to religion, can be manipulated as that science no doubt deals with the material objects to perform experiments and give results, Islam provides a way to this experimentation. Moreover, matter alone cannot elucidate the wholeness of cosmos. Although science negates the existence of spirit, but this cannot be excluded from reality. As Dr.Hameroff, British physician, states, “ consciousness plays an intrinsic role in the universe...our views of reality, of the universe, of ourselves depend on consciousness. Consciousness defines our existence.”¹⁰

Darwin's theory of evolution is another discord between Islam and science. The main concept of Darwinism lies in natural selection that organisms in an environment with fixed amount of food and necessities compete with each other and those organisms with best traits are able to survive in the end, i.e., the nature selects those organisms to enter the cycle of reproduction which possess the best qualities.¹¹ This principle is also named as survival of the fittest. Furthermore, he suggests the simple organisms after surviving the hard circumstances of nature, evolved and developed into complex forms.

Islam rejects this Darwinism by mentioning special creation of Adam.

“And we have certainly created you, [O Mankind], and given you [human] form.”
(7:11)

Quran mentions the whole process of human development with discussion of each stage separately. If one is to believe in the evolution of humans from other organisms, how can he justify the development of embryo in mother's womb which begins from only a single drop. Moreover, scientific facts are based on testing, observation and experiments. Evolution has not been proved by testing. Similarities between humans and vertebrates is not evidence for evolution of humans from vertebrates. The complexity of human body functioning, coordination and the network of commands in the form of nervous system could never have happened by chance.

There are a number of other examples of conflict between Islam and science based on the facts explained in Quran but not yet proved by science. But we say that if science, being in its initial stages of development, is unable to prove certain facts of Islam this does not provide rejection of the facts. As science flourishes, there might be a time when it would be able to prove these truths.

3. Model of Integration

The model of integration between religion and science suggests that both are completely interlinked to each other. Many eminent scientists support the relationship of integration between religion and science. For example, Albert Einstein believes “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”¹² An Astrophysicist Jennifer Wiseman, who is a director of Dialogue, Ethics and Religion, a program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, says that Science is a useful tool to cognize the physical world yet some philosophical queries in life need to be addressed by religious and spiritual beliefs. She further states, “We are physically connected to the universe and I think we have a deeper connection as well.”¹³

The integration relationship between religion and science has been existing in two forms; Theology of Nature and Natural Theology. Natural theology tends to use intelligent design of the nature as an argument for existence of God. However, Theology of nature suggests that doctrines can be reformed according to the emerging theories of science. It demands reformulations of religious principles along with new advancements in the field of science if we were to correspond science with religion. This idea is not compatible with Islam because Islam does not accept changes in religious beliefs. Religion is not shaped by humans, rather it is revealed by the God in its complete and perfect form. One can reformulate theories of science but no one is authorized to make changes to the policies of God as evident from the Quran that it was revealed 1400 years back and is still preserved in its initial form. No one has ever been able to change any of its message. It is mentioned in Quran referring to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ that he, despite being the messenger of God, is not authorized to change God's message with his will only "Nor does he speak from [his own] inclination. It is not but a revelation revealed." (53:3)

As far as the idea of Natural theology is concerned, founders of science like Newton, Boyle have appreciated the harmonious working of nature while making their inventions and they find it evidence for existence of God. William Paley in his famous book "Natural theology" mentions watchmaker argument for intelligent design that if anyone comes across a watch in a pitch, he starts to believe in a watch maker, similarly, if anyone finds design in nature, he gets a reason to believe in Designer.¹⁴ He further explains several examples of coordinated functioning of bodies of living beings and concludes that these examples are sufficient to make someone believe in Intelligent Designer.

Richard Swinburne, a British philosopher defends Natural theology by mentioning Confirmation theory. He says that every theory in science has plausibility and probability. The probability of truth of the theory increases or decreases as evidences are added in its support. For example, the theory of existence of God is plausible as it requires simple understanding of the nature. The evidence of harmonious network of the universe makes this theory more probable. He concludes his argument by saying "On our total evidence, theism is more probable than not."¹⁵ The concept of modern science was brought about by efforts of Ibn- al-Haytham and al-Biruni who introduced the domain of experimentation in science. Al-Biruni used to take inspiration from Quranic verses.

Human development and big bang are the examples of integration between science and Islam.

Big bang theory explains the phenomenon for the birth of universe 13.7 billion years before. Astrophysicists believe that the whole universe was initially present in the form of single mass (primary nebula) with its denseness and heat reaching infinity, then there happened a big explosion (big bang) and it resulted in the separation of the mass into stars and galaxies. This theory is supported by Islam in the words, “Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of Creation), before We clove them as under?”

[Al-Qu’ran 21:30]

This fact regarding creation of universe was revealed in Quran 1440 years back but science explored and hypothesized it 1300 years later.

Similarly, the process of development of human embryo was completely described in Quran one and half century ago but science kept on trying to discover the reality of creation of human being. In 1982, Professor Keith L. Moore, a world- renowned embryologist, stated that when he came across Quranic verses referring to human development, he says “I was amazed at the scientific accuracy of these statements which were made in the 7th century AD.”¹⁶ For instance, it is mentioned in Quran “Allah creates you in the womb of your mother creation after creation within the three veils of darkness”

(39:6)

Embryologists now interpret these three veils of darkness as three coverings around human embryo

The mother’s abdominal wall

Uterine wall

Amnio chorionic membrane composed of fused amnion and chorion

These layers are meant to provide protection to embryo from external damage. Moreover, Moore surprised the audience by reciting another astonishing statement of Quran at Seventh Saudi Medical Meeting in 1982¹⁶

“We have created man from the essence of clay, then We placed him as a drop of fluid in a safe place, then We made that drop into a clinging form, and made the form into a lump of flesh, and We made the lump into bones, and We clothed these bones with flesh, and We made him into other forms...”

(23:12-14)

Another example of integration between Islam and science is the rotation of Sun. Sun had been considered to be stationary for a long time. In 1512, Copernicus proposed his Heliocentric theory of Planetary motion asserting Sun to be motionless as a center of solar system with other planets rotating around it. In 1609, Yohannus

Kepler, a German scientist published in his book a new finding that planets not only revolve around sun but also around their own axis. However, Quran states “It is not permitted to the Sun to catch up the Moon, nor can the Night outstrip the Day: Each (just) swims along in (its own) orbit (according to Law).” [Al-Qur’an 36:40]

Later on, the rotation of sun was discovered using sunspots and it came out that sun rotates on its own axis and completes its rotation in 24-30 days. Sun not only rotates on its own axis but also around the center of Milky Way Galaxy with a speed of about 240 kilometers per second, completing its revolution in 200 million years. One can understand from these examples that the facts explained 1400 years ago are now being proved by scientists, this points towards existence of a Creator of universe who knows every aspect of this universe in detail. This helps to build a person’s belief in God (natural theology).

There are several more examples pertaining to integration between Islam and science. As Nidhl Guessoum mentions in his book “Islam’s quantum questions” that in 2006, ‘Eighth Conference on Scientific I’jaz (Miraculous Aspects) in the Qur’an and the Sunna’ was organized by World Authority in which scholars presented around 86 papers regarding miraculous facts of Quran and Sunnah explained on scientific basis. This I’jaz movement (scientific miracles) is a new introduction to modern science revealing miracles of Quran through scientific encounters.

‘Integration’ cannot fully explicate the relationship between two entities as theories of conflict still persist. The problem that supernaturalism cannot be explained by science still remains unaddressed. This integration relationship can exist between Islam and science only as far as Natural theology is concerned. The concept of theology of Nature contradicts with “never changing doctrine” concept of Islam.

4. Independence Model

The relationship between religion and science can also be demonstrated in terms of independence to avoid conflict between the two. This model suggests that science and religion work in parallel spheres totally independent of each other. They cannot interfere with each other as both are completely different entities. Science works in public domain while religion is more personal. Science deals with nature and experiments while religion is totally divine and deals with supernaturalism. Religion cannot be experimented and science cannot prove theology so they occupy non-overlapping magisteria in which science responds to questions of empirical universe while the net of religion extends to moral questions. This relationship of independence no doubt eliminates the state of warfare between science and religion

and each one of them can extend its network of functioning respecting the boundaries of other, yet it has some shortcomings.

If we say Islam does not comply with experimentation, how can one be able to justify its ethics and values. Moreover, Islam has elucidated a large number of facts related to nature, if one avoids testing, how can he be benefited from the use of these facts. Therefore, Islam and science cannot be totally independent.

“Eccentric Model of Islam and Science”

We say that religion cannot be free of material, nor science can be free of unseen happenings or supernaturalism. Yet this does not explain a relationship of complete integration between the two because religion (mainly Islam) has made the statements of facts while science is still in process of development. We quote here the words of St. John’s Gospel, Fr. Georges C. Anawati, an Egyptian scholar of Islamic thought, he used while trying to explain the status of Quran “in the beginning was the Quran”.⁹ Science is ever changing and expanding its circle to make new discoveries and it takes several years to convert a theory into fact, for example big bang was discovered 1300 years after its revelation. When we analyze above explained three models of integration, independence and conflict, we realize that the nature of relationship between Islam and science is more inclined towards integration, and conflict arises when someone tries to compare immature stages of science with Islam. We formulate this finding as science is compatible with Islam when science is fully mature and has developed a statement after complete research, and science and Islam are at conflict when scientific theories are compared with Islam during the journey of its research, i.e., where science is immature and developing. This principle is based on the probabilistic nature of science and absolute certainty of Islamic rules and Quran.

Nidhl Guessoum, professor of Astrophysics at American University of Sharjah, says “Almost everything from relativity, quantum physics, black holes and pulsars, big bang, genetics, embryology, modern geology, thermodynamics even laser and hydrogen fuel cells have been found in Quran.”

In the light of our proposed model, we see that all these scientific findings which correlate with Islamic truths including Big Bang, human development, rotation of sun and many others are those areas which have been studied thoroughly by scientists. However, propositions of conflict including Darwinism, scientific materialism are the areas which need further research. Thus, our model proposes that if Islam and science were to be considered in the form of two circles, science is a smaller circle residing within a larger circle of Islam which represents the domain of science covered by Islam with both circles having different centers, i.e., nature for

science and belief for Islam. It is also obvious from the model that science is covered by Islam but the whole theology of Islam cannot be described by science. Islam ensures a broader concept involving both natural and supernatural phenomenon of this universe, while science deals with natural phenomenon. The circle of science is continuously growing with time as it continues making new discoveries now and then but almost all these encounters are associated with natural phenomenon. Whether or not science will be able to give sufficient evidences for supernatural happenings still remains a question. John the Evangelist, asserts “what Religion knows by intuition Science will one day prove in the laboratory.”¹⁰ Even if the circle of science expands enough to explore supernatural phenomenon, how much time will it take is still the point to wonder.

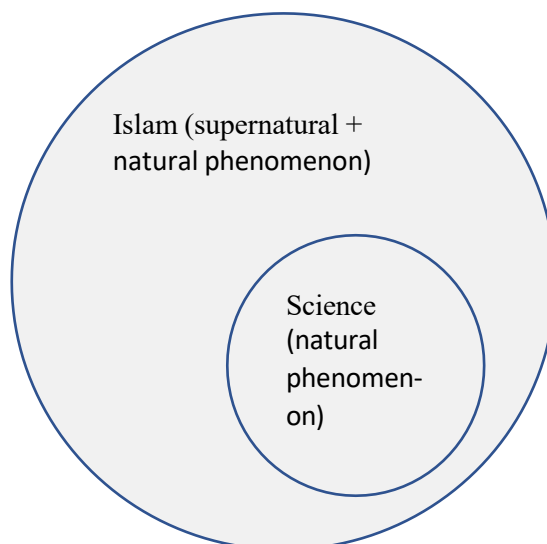


Fig.1.1- Eccentric Model of Islam and Science

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the relationship between Islam and science cannot be explained in terms of integration, conflict or independence. As Francis Collins, project director of Human Genome at National Institute of Health, asserts that a person can be rigorous scientist and have belief in God at same time, yet there are some points of conflict between Islam and science. Therefore, we propose a model with partial integration and partial conflict in this way that science corresponds to Islam in its fully developed domains but is yet immature to provide complete understanding of

religion. Our model opens new vista to the researchers to come forward and explore science in the light of Quran and reveal the working nature of this model.

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