

Latour's Sophistication, Science and the Qur'an as "Mere" Historical Document: A Counter-Reply to Edis

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I read with great interest Taner Edis' reply to my reply and self-criticism. As it often happens between us I agree with some of his observations, and disagree with others, and I think there are some potential misunderstandings to be cleared up.

I was quite surprised to see my attempt at showing how the notion of a "new generation" in the contemporary debate over Islam as science evolved and my invitation to pay attention to its nuances caricaturized as "breast-beating". I meant it as an expression of accuracy as well as of respect towards my interlocutors with whom I might occasionally disagree but who, as Edis rightly points out, often differentiate among themselves by virtue of "details" achieved through an intellectual effort that I deeply admire. Such details can actually be of great significance, for good and bad. As to me, I will keep practicing this kind of "breast-beating" and recommending it to my students.

I have suggested Bruno Latour as an example of a thinker who radically reformulates the definition of both science and religion and thus (apparently) manages to have them co-exist without conflict and without subscribing to the somewhat simplified idea according to which they are two non-overlapping magisteria (to use a popular academic expression). What impresses me most in Latour's teachings is the re-formulation of science and religion in terms of distance and proximity that, seemingly, both eschews literalism in reading sacred texts and an oversimplified picture of science as being all about "facts".

Edis talks of "false sophistication" in Latour. I have expressed my own doubts about the possibility of reconciling his thought with common believers' understanding of faith. Furthermore I must confess that I sometimes find Latour's style maddening. However, I was referring to Latour's move merely as a suggestion, possibly to be improved and directed at a "third" or "newest" generation of theologians or philosophers interested in the debate over Islam and science. Such generation has yet to come (even if Latourian suggestions have already been employed by Ziauddin Sardar and the *Idjimali*). It was not implied, as Edis seems to state, that Latourian notions should be adopted by authors such as Harun Yahya, nor that his approach would be appealing to a large readership. Furthermore, Edis writes that, as long as I am "toying" with such an approach I am "doing theology rather than the modest descriptive work in which [I profess] to engage" (2014, 4). I nurture no hopes as to my value as a theologian, yet I think that my occasional and tentative shift from the neutral approach to the theological one was quite clearly pointed out in my response.

Edis states that the Qur'an should only be taken as "historical document"; this radically undermines my suggestion to read it rather as containing an invitation to science than literal descriptions of scientific facts (as it happens with Bucailleism). "There is no Quranic invitation to science—there are religious people reading their sacred texts this way and making their interpretations stick" writes Edis (2014, 4). Now, I do not read the Qur'an in a confessional way, nor do I think that its divine origin can be demonstrated. I

am rather interested in the question: if one takes the Qur'an as divine how can he or she believe in it and simultaneously entertain a sound, meaningful, and updated conception of science? Such sound, meaningful and updated conception of science need not be present in the Qur'an—that is not what I implied. Of course Edis will be unconvinced independently on the sophistication of any reconciliation, but I am still inclined to see a difference between the alleged identification of accurate scientific notions in a sacred text (a blatant anachronism typical of Bucailleism) and the idea that that very text invites one to the pursuit of knowledge and of what spiritually and materially improves human life including what is currently understood as natural science.

Finally, one does not need to subscribe to a theological or confessional viewpoint (i.e. to believe that some texts are divine and others are not) in order to understand that the very notion of a “historical document”, i.e. of a text that bears a one-to-one correspondence to a “state of things” in the past and that is therefore anchored to one and only one interpretation is simplistic at best. Even if there was no such thing as a divine text but only “people making their interpretations stick” we would witness the blossoming of a hundred schools, some of them more far-fetched and some more convincing. It is in this variety, as well as in the different degrees of sophistication (not derogatorily intended), that I am deeply interested.

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References

Edis, Taner. “An Invitation to Science?” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 8 (2014): 3-4.