

Faith and Reason: The Re-Emergence of Neo-Mu'tazilite Thought in the Discourse of Modern Muslim Scientists

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Abstracted from a paper submitted to *Zygon, Journal of Science and Religion*, September 2014.

Roger Penrose, in a series of three lectures delivered at Princeton University in October of 2003 under the title “Fashion, Faith and Fantasy in the New Physics of the Universe,” was very likely one of the first scientists to start describing the crisis modern physics has been going through.¹ Criticizing the string theory fashion, suggesting faith in quantum theory, and fantasizing about theoretical modeling, were the themes of Penrose’s lectures, which in many ways constitute the building blocks of a scientific creed; a creed that can no longer be held because the solutions proposed by this very science violate the very essence of this science.

It is firmly believed in scientific circles that modern science is facing a deep crisis, an epistemological as well as an ontological one. Modern ‘western’ science can no longer sustain the claim that it is centered on the discovery of facts, for “facts are theory-laden” as the postmodernists would argue. Over the past century, theories have come to play a central role when it comes to determining what is and what is not recognized as fact. Indeed, in the West, one can trace the role played by ‘theory’ and the definition of ‘fact’ to treatises by René Descartes and Francis Bacon in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

In a recent article published by Paul Wells in Maclean’s Niel Turok, the director of the Perimeter Institute in Canada, and one of the proponents of the ekpyrotic model of the universe, describes in his welcome speech to the 2013 Perimeter Scholars International the crisis in modern physics as follows:^{2, 3}

Theoretical physics is at the crossroads right now ...in a sense we’ve entered a very deep crisis... The extensions of the standard model, like grand unified theories, they were supposed to simplify, but in fact they made it more complicated ... and as you may have heard, string theory seems to predict 10 to the power of 1,000 different possible laws of physics. It’s called the multiverse. It’s the ultimate catastrophe: that theoretical physics has led to this crazy situation where the physicists are utterly confused and seem not to have any predictions at all.

The message is loud and clear: Physics has reached a state of confusion; a crisis has been diagnosed and a remedy is nowhere to be found.

¹ Penrose, Roger. “[Fashion, Faith and Fantasy in the New Physics of the Universe](#).” Princeton Lecture Series, 2003.

² Wells, Paul. “[Perimeter Institute and the Crisis in Modern Physics](#).” Macleans, 5 September 2013.

³ Steinhardt, Paul J. and Neil Turok. *Endless Universe: Beyond the Big Bang*. New York: Doubleday, 2007.

So where do we stand as Muslims in general, and as Muslim scientists in particular, with respect to this modern science that wants to sweep away a traditional heritage that has survived the waves of materialism for more than four centuries.

We have witnessed over the past decade the emergence of a new ‘breed of Muslim neo-modernists’ like N. Guessoum, Z. Sardar, P. Hoodboy, S. Hameed, U. Hassan and E. Abouheif, to name a few, who have challenged the traditional Muslim worldview; modern science is their creed. The members of this group, who have followed in the steps of their forefathers and inundated the net with pseudo-scientific and pseudo-journalistic pieces, which reflect but the lack of erudition and scholarship, propose no reform and reject some of the basic pillars of the Islamic belief system; they do not believe in miracles and claim that the Qur’an is a book of metaphors. These pseudo-modernists of the twenty first century have hijacked and monopolized the electronic pulpit in order to mesmerize a generation that has been pacified by a tap on a tablet or a tweet on the net, a virtual action, a new acquired reflex, which persists and tries to fold the sacred dimension of learning. This emerging modern Sandman phenomenon has been beautifully captured in an essay by Dorothy Bishop, a professor of Developmental Neuropsychology at Oxford University, where she lays down six golden rules to follow in order to become a celebrity scientist: the trade of the day for some, non-Muslims and Muslims alike, indeed.^{4,5}

The neo-modernists are in fact following the steps, and are carrying the moulds of their western Christian colleagues who have been facing the waves of scientism for more than four centuries, and who have had to address a wave of new atheism more recently. In fact, the arguments used by the Muslim neo-modernists in the ‘Science and Islam’ dialogue are homomorphic to those used by the Christians in what they have initiated as the ‘Science and Religion’ debate when it should have clearly been called the ‘Science and Christianity’ dialogue. This is as if Muslims have to rub themselves with the Christian ointment in order to be baptized into the Science and Religion dialogue. Indeed, it is interesting to read in an article published by Guessoum in *Zygon*, where he describes his pseudo-worldview, the cut and paste arguments he put forth, which coincide exactly with the point just made.⁶

However, it is important to remind the Muslim neo-modernists, who worship modern science, that facts alone do not constitute a reality and do not reflect any truth unless interpreted within a philosophical framework. In other words, built into modern science are empirical techniques as well as a hidden philosophy that addresses the fundamental questions of being and knowledge, i.e., ontology and epistemology. We have been brainwashed by a process of quantification with many empirical layers each veiling the one before. And when these layers fail to hold together and slip, empiricism is exposed and the philosophical framework that sustains it crumbles. Yet one is reminded that philosophy is not subject to empiricism. Moreover, modern scientists have not been trained to question empiricism and have had very little exposure to the philosophical

⁴ Bishop, Dorothy. “[How to Become a Celebrity Scientific Expert](#).” 12 September 2011.

⁵ University of Oxford, Department of Experimental Psychology. “[Dorothy Bishop](#).” 2014.

⁶ Nidhal Guessoum. “[Issues and Agendas of Islam and Science](#).” *Zygon* 47, no. 2 (2012): 367-387.

framework through which interpretations are put forward. As John Haught of Georgetown University pointed out, “Some of the most prominent scientists are literally unable to separate science from their materialist metaphysics.”⁷

We show in the paper that the Muslim neo-modernists have been reinventing arguments put forth by Mu’tazilites in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries.⁸

Malek Bennabi writes in *Le phénomène coranique*: “Let it be known that we are not trying to compare two sciences, but rather two faiths: one that venerates matter while the other brings forth God. ... It is only epochs of social trouble and moral disequilibrium that oppose science to religion ...”⁹

The Muslim neo-modernists ought to understand that modern science does not provide the “argument” as suggested by the moral philosopher Bernard Williams, and it is not with veiling science with a theistic mantle that we will become enlightened, as suggested by Guessoum.^{10, 11}

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⁷ Smith, Wolfgang. “The Plague of Scientistic Belief.” In *Science and the Myth of Progress*. Edited by Mehrdad M. Zarandi. Bloomington, IN: Perennial Philosophy Series, 2003: 222.

⁸ Wolfson, Harry Austryn. *The Philosophy of the Kalam*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976.

⁹ Bennabi, Malek. *Le phénomène coranique, essai d’une théorie sur le Coran*. El Borhane, 1976: 21-23.

¹⁰ Bernard Williams [said](#): “There is a holy grail that some people have, to find the “argument that will stop them on their tracks when they come to take you away.”

¹¹ Bancewicz, Ruth. “[Islam and Science](#).” *Science and Belief*. 5 May 2011.