

Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter! Replies to Howard and Hamza

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I conflate, in the same piece, my replies to [Damian Howard's](#) and [Abdelhaq M. Hamza's](#) recent contributions first and foremost for reasons of space. However, I think they have a feature in common: both, in their own way, seem to imply the necessity of a preliminary step. A step backwards, in order to proceed further with the discussion. *Reculer pour mieux sauter* goes a known French expression: *to draw back in order to make a greater leap*.

Howard and the Latourian Suggestion

I could not help feeling flattered while reading Damian Howard's comments to my self-critical article ([Bigliardi 2014a](#)). However, what pleased me most were not Howard's compliments but his appreciation of and elaboration upon my earlier reference to Bruno Latour's interpretation of religious language. Such appreciation somewhat compensated a recently received accusation, coming from a prominent author, of having said "virtually nothing" while suggesting to draw upon the French sociologist's ideas.¹ Indeed, I *do* have my own doubts and perplexities about Latour that I was actually expressing in the second reply to Taner Edis (an aspect that seemingly escaped my prominent, twitting critic since most probably the very name "Latour" unleashes in him a horrified reaction), and that increased after reading Latour's *Rejoicing* (perplexities related, if not to deeper philosophical reasons, to the style, intelligibility, and originality of such essay).² What I was trying to propose was to remould the very dialogue between science and religion in the case of Islam while re-reading the very nature of religious language. In so doing, I suggested, some apparent knots might be solved. Howard understood my thoughts because he had already thought them through another, perhaps less convoluted author. His reference to George Lindbeck's *post-liberal paradigm* not only better expresses what I was pointing at, but it also avoids reference to Latour and thus usefully and beautifully bypasses useless disputes on extrinsic points (was I mentioning Latour in order to jump onto his bandwagon?), Latour's detours, and any irate reactions provoked by reading his very name (unless, of course, similar ones are elicited by the name of the Lutheran theologian).

Another Inaccuracy of Mine (and Howard's Charity)

With his theological expertise, Howard thus points out that Christian theology has already absorbed the post-liberal suggestion – in depth. In his evaluation the authors of the Muslim "new generation" are *de facto* cognitive propositionalists. This, I may add, would be indirectly confirmed by my own analysis since I present the Latourian (i.e. post-liberal) turn as a *desideratum*. This also implies a substantial adjustment to be applied to one of the traits that I listed in the analysis and definition of the "new

¹ See <http://inagist.com/all/501328946282381313/> To be fair I must add that a gentlemanly e-mail exchange ensued with the author and we clarified our positions, ending on a pleasant and friendly note.

² I have even expressed perplexities as to Latour's treatment of science in Bigliardi 2014b.

generation”. If it is true that a family resemblance seems to exist between the members of the “new generation” and Christian authors in their acceptance of biological evolution, it would be also true that the former state it quite superficially i.e. as a need or a wish and not on the basis of a deeper, preliminary methodological reflection like the latter do. Howard, in his generosity, somewhat passes over this challenge to my definition in silence.

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That being said, Howard’s discussion points at an important necessity. A post-liberal theological outlook seems to only incorporate the science-religion debate as a subsection; in other words, it embraces our whole conception of religion and the specific core beliefs of a specific creed. The question (left to some courageous theologians, who to the best of my incomplete knowledge have not appeared yet) is how the tenets of Islam can be interpreted through such outlook and what the resulting conception would be. I am first of all thinking about the central belief in the Qur’an being God’s word and not just an inspired text. How can we reconcile this thought with the cultural-linguistic interpretation? Moreover, what would the consequences be for interreligious dialogue (another aspiration of the “new generation”)? Post-liberal Islamic prolegomena to the debate over science and religion are needed.

Hamza’s (Apparently) Unusual Concept of “Neo-modernist”

Some of our readers (and especially the representatives of the “new generation”) are likely to have been as surprised as I was while reading Abdelhaq M. Hamza’s somewhat brusque remarks about neomodernists (or pseudomodernists) that he also labels neomutazilites. Tone apart, Hamza seems to comprehend under the same labels at least one author belonging to the “old generation” (Ziauddin Sardar), at least one author of the “new” one (Nidhal Guessoum)³, an author whose position can be contrasted with both (Pervez Hoodbhoy), and an expert who has a background in Muslim culture but who, as far as I know, is like myself more concerned with an external reconstruction of the debate (Salman Hameed).⁴ After reading this somewhat puzzling, wholesale rejection I felt I had two alternatives: either to think that Hamza had very superficial knowledge of the contemporary debate over Islam and science causing him to lump together the most diverse positions, or to assume he was reasoning from such a strong and different standpoint that the very wholesale rejection as well as the common labelling was justified. I decided to go for the second interpretation.

³ It should be noted that in his recent monograph about the Qur’an (Sardar 2011) with his overtures towards Darwinian evolution and with his criticism of miracles, Sardar has expressed views close to the “new generation.” The similarity of his interpretation of miraculous narratives to Guessoum’s had occurred to me as well (Bigliardi 2014d) yet it did not seem strong enough a similarity to include Sardar in the “new generation”.

⁴ Hameed and Guessoum have been collaborating on the former’s blog on religion and science *Irtiqa* (<http://www.irtiqa-blog.com>). However Hameed has been quite critical of the position assumed by Guessoum (see Hameed 2012).

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What are Hamza's implications then? In this case, *reculer pour mieux sauter* refers to the fact that Hamza actually seems to have already jumped and, upon first reading, if we focus on the polemics we cannot clearly understand where he jumped from. While waiting for him to perform such a jump for us again, we can engage in a conjectural reconstruction of his trajectory.

One latent critical line followed by Hamza seems to be that those whom he calls neo-modernists declare their acceptance of modern science, analogously to Christian thinkers, in a shallow way and in order to please Christian colleagues (together with a larger global audience). Perhaps they do so (and here we have to read between Hamza's lines) to have access to more funding? Now, I remember that at an earlier stage of my research I once jokingly remarked that the "new generation wanted to win the Templeton prize."⁵ Mine was just an innocent *mot d'esprit*, not based on any knowledge and appraisal of the mechanisms of the wealthy foundation, but rather on the empirical observation that one member of the new generation had been awarded the Templeton prize (Mehdi Golshani, 1995) and two more as far as I knew were involved in the foundation's activities (Nidhal Guessoum and Bruno Guiderdoni).

However, Hamza might be pushing this to the less than flattering implication that the construction of a "new generation" accepting modern science and dialoguing with Christians is cynical and interested. Regarding this point (on which Hamza will surely shed light) I can state the following: (i) I personally have no elements at the moment to judge over this "political" problem (i.e. my knowledge of the concrete ties among my interlocutors is not sufficient); (ii) a "political" convergence could still hold among deep and original thinkers; (iii) whereas I admit that some statements made by the "new generation" (first and foremost the overtures to biological evolution) still seem in need of further elaboration, I believe that the authors at stake still have time to clarify their views so that judging them as superficial is hasty at best. This is, after all, a debate in progress and I am studying a conceptual *shift*. Only in ten years may we be able to tell whether the "new generation" (if it existed at all) was, to express it in German, *mehr Schein als Sein*. Finally, (iv) as far as I am concerned my empirical investigation, although it was not exhaustive, involved Templeton as well as non-Templeton involved scholars and authors so that I cannot be criticised for having only offered a showcase to a "faction".

I am not sure how to interpret Hamza's tirade against the new media that mesmerize younger generations: after all we are also debating on a webpage (even if, of course, as an educator I must recognize that younger generations are all too often distracted by a certain use of such media). However this might be a clue that leads us to understand Hamza's deeper implication i.e. the aforementioned "strong standpoint" that allows him to reject all other thinkers and authors as an indistinct whole. His hint to the "sacred dimension of learning" is also lexically enlightening in this respect. Hamza's strong

⁵ It was in an interview with Margaret Coffey for the Australian radio ABC, programme "Encounters": <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/4175086>

rebuttal of (what he defines) empiricism as well as the antipathy towards superficial communication through new media all seem to suggest a standpoint near to that of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the respected perennialist (or traditional) Muslim whose standpoint is thoroughly analysed in Leif Stenberg's monograph as well.

I feel it is now up to Hamza to better specify his position as to its origin or affiliation, as well as the so-far almost unexplained reference to Mutazili. Most importantly Hamza, after such a blunt *pars destruens*, is invited to flesh out a *pars construens* especially concerning the very topics about which, in his opinion, the “new generation” is wrong, such as the method and object of science, the interpretation of miracles, and biological evolution.

Hamza and the Post-Liberal Paradigm?

As I explicitly stated at the beginning, the discussion of Howard's and Hamza's respective interventions has been carried out in the same piece for rather concrete reasons – notwithstanding a structural analogy. However we can take such fortuitous convergence as inspiring a further, intriguing suggestion. Can Hamza forget that the post-liberal suggestion was proposed in a Christian context and by a Christian author and if so, does he envisage any post-liberal Islamic theology?

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