

Some Observations on Isra Yazicioglu's Understanding the Qur'anic Miracle Stories in the Modern Age

Stefano Bigliardi, Tec de Monterrey, Campus Santa Fe, Mexico City; CMES, Lund University

In the conclusive sections of his monograph *Islam's Quantum Question* (2011), which stands out in the contemporary debate over Islam and science not only by virtue of the original, specific viewpoints expressed but also for its capacity to depict in detail the landscape of that very debate, Nidhal Guessoum rightly focuses on the issue of *miracles* as one that proves crucial in the discussion over the harmony of Islam and science as well as, more generally, at the interface of science and religion.¹

More modestly, in my own exploration of Islam and science in the collection of conversations *Islam and the Quest for Modern Science* (2014) I have dedicated a substantial part of each discussion with my interlocutors to the very issue of miracles. Since miracles tend to be conceptualized in terms of natural *versus* supernatural, literal *versus* metaphorical, ordinary *versus* extraordinary, asking different authors to specify their thinking about miracles provides an access to their conception of reality and its levels, the knowledge of reality itself and the laws governing it, and the exegetical principles upheld by those very authors when it comes to specific Qur'anic narratives. In other words, I have not decided to discuss the concept of miracle merely to satisfy the naïve curiosity of whether a scientist, as most of my interlocutors were, believed in them or not; rather, I used them as a point of access into each author's approach to scientific and religious belief and their mode of Qur'anic interpretation.

What emerged from those conversations, perfectly in line with Guessoum's observation, was an acutely felt but still fragmented and unsystematic effort to reconcile not only an empathic reading of the concept of a miracle with scientific/rational concepts and a scientific mind-set, but also the urge to listen to philosophical suggestions coming both from Muslim and non-Muslim authors of different epochs, to set up a dialogue about this topic with other religions, and to harmonize the different suggestions regarding miracles contained in the very Qur'an.

Concerning the last point mentioned we should observe that the Qur'an contains narratives denoting supernatural events, some of them shared with the Jewish and Christian scriptures (such as Moses' staff turning into a snake²); we should also remark that such occurrences are described with the term *ayah* (sign), but that very term is also applied to natural phenomena as well as the verses of the Qur'an.

It should also be observed that the Qur'an, paradoxically, *downplays* the value of miracles, Cf. Q 6:7–10:

(7) If we had sent unto thee a written message on parchment, so that they could touch it with their hands, the unbelievers would have been

¹ Guessoum 2011, pp. 329-333.

² See for instance Exodus 7:10 and Qur'an 7:107.

sure to say “This is nothing but obvious magic!” (8) They say “Why is not an angel sent down to him?” If We did send down an angel, the matter would be settled at once, and no respite would be granted them. (9) If We had made it an angel, We should have sent him as a man, and We should certainly have caused them confusion in a matter which they have already covered with confusion. (10) Mocked were many apostles before thee; but their scoffers were hemmed in by the thing they mocked.

This has a precise parallel in the Gospel, where Jesus also refuses to perform miracles on demand; Cf. Matthew 12:38–40:

38 Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from you’. 39 He answered, ‘A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.’

All such demands and tensions seem to have found reconciliation in Isra Yazicioglu’s *Understanding the Qur’anic Miracle Stories in the Modern Age* (2013). This Turkish, US-based scholar writes with solid philosophico-theological knowledge, but also has a background in medicine; she takes the matter of miraculous narratives seriously and tries to develop a comprehensive and nuanced reading by drawing upon five authors: al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Ibn Rushd or Averroes (1126-1198), David Hume (1711-1776), Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1913), and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960). Each position is scrutinized in a distinct chapter on the basis of punctual textual references to identify points of weakness and points of strength of the approach to miraculous narratives that such authors have developed or sketched.

From al-Ghazali Yazicioglu takes encouragement to read miracle stories literally, but at the same time, refusal to take miracles as primary, decisive proofs for faith. From Ibn Rushd she borrows the idea that different audiences can be satisfied or convinced by different levels of interpretation of the Qur’an (including the literal reading of miracles) as well as the warning against the destruction of the basis of our reasoning that belief in miracles (literally interpreted and thus seen as disruptions of the natural order) seem to entail.

David Hume, whose stance Yazicioglu likens to the Averrosian one, similarly warned against the destruction of common sense, and hence from radical scepticism, that belief in miracles apparently implies. Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics, in Yazicioglu’s interpretation, contains an invitation to focus on miracles as *narratives* and not as *occurrences directly witnessed* by the readers of the sacred scriptures, narratives that, rather than having evidentiary value (i.e. rather than being conducive to faith) encourage us to keep open the possibility of indeterminacy in nature. Finally Bediuzzaman Said Nursi described miraculous episodes contained in the Qur’an as pro-scientific in the sense that they mention, in a narrative fashion, feats or results analogous to those which are

attainable through an appropriate development of science and technology (following an example of Yazicioglu's: the miracle of the virgin birth makes us reason about the possibilities of artificial insemination and strive towards its attainment). In this ideal dialogue between the East and the West, or between Muslim and non-Muslim authors, but also between the past and the present, Ibn Rushd and Hume constitute the *pars destruens*, whereas Ghazali, Peirce, and Nursi constitute the *pars construens*.

From this dialectic emerges Yazicioglu's own pragmatic and constructive suggestion. Miraculous narratives are *not* meant to be demonstrative i.e. to provoke an amazement that leads to faith in those who listen to them; they are *not* meant to mark a radical difference between religious beliefs and scientific ones, posing to their audience an epistemic *aut aut* ("Either I believe in miracles, or I do not") or, worse, inducing in that very audience a sort of epistemic schizophrenia ("I believe one thing in the mosque and another one in the lab"); they are *not* to be considered conducive to paralyzing doubt or loss of trust in the regularity of nature.

Miraculous narratives, in Yazicioglu's reading, have rather what we might call a "Socratic," or broadly "philosophical" function, i.e. they are puzzling in an epistemically healthy way, inviting or inducing us *not to slip into a constant feeling of familiarity* or the habit of taking everything for granted. Yazicioglu considers this feeling or habit detrimental both existentially-religiously (because it induces one to forget the Creator as well as not to be thankful towards Him) and scientifically-rationally (because questioning and criticising is essential to the scientific method and to creative reasoning). This reading of miraculous narratives is not only empathic, but it also makes sense of the above-mentioned Qur'anic and Biblical minimization of miracles as well as the fact that the same term is applied in the Qur'an to supernatural miracles proper and to natural phenomena presented as clues to the existence of God.

Since I have myself been engaged in the exploration of the contemporary debate over Islam and science with a philosophical inclination and paying particular attention to the problem of miracles (a topic that I only assumed heuristically in order to better understand my interlocutors i.e. without any ambition to solve the numerous, intertwined puzzles they imply), I have approached Yazicioglu's monograph with great curiosity and I finished reading it with a sense of admiration and fulfilment.

Knowing the mechanisms of academic debate it is my guess that the specialists of the five authors touched upon by Yazicioglu will focus on her respective interpretations of their doctrines, and I am indeed curious to see how her monograph will be judged from such perspectives. However I invite anybody who shall approach this work not to lose the wood for the trees, i.e. not to destroy the *systematic, comprehensive and constructive spirit* expressed by Yazicioglu; she has produced an interpretation of miracles that avoids binary readings, that makes sense of apparent Qur'anic and Biblical tensions, that speaks to philosophers, theologians and scientists alike, and that builds upon a solid historical basis constituted of a yet unseen dialogue of different authorities. This is a clearly set agenda that we should not forget.

I am convinced that thanks to such virtues Yazicioglu's monograph should and will be taken, in the years to come, as a reference point hard to be ignored in the interreligious and intercultural debate over the reconciliation of faith and science. Her proposal, rather than be scrutinized and deconstructed in its specific elements, should now be taken seriously and wholesale, and tested as an overarching model with which to cope with specific, still unresolved philosophico-theological knots; it would be interesting, for instance, to apply it to the philosophical interpretation and critique of the so-called *scientific miracles* of the Qur'an that we recently have brought up on these pages.

Contact details: stefano.bigliardi@cme.lu.se

References

- Bigliardi, Stefano. *Islam and the Quest for Modern Science. Conversations with Adnan Oktar, Mehdi Golshani, Mohammed Basil Altaie, Zaghoul El-Naggar, Bruno Guiderdoni, and Nidhal Guessoum*. Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2014.
- Guessoum, Nidhal. *Islam's Quantum Question. Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011.
- Yazicioglu, Isra. *Understanding the Qur'anic Miracle Stories in the Modern Age*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013.