

### ***Can Science Halt Islamic Extremism?***

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The “bridge course”, initiated by Aligarh Muslim University (India), encourages graduates of Islamic seminaries in the country to join the mainstream secular education system. The course introduces the graduates to the basics of the social sciences and preliminary features of science and technology, its scope, the growing influence and the consequent changes in the world (apart from its basic technical aspects). I joined the faculty as a senior science fellow and was asked to give weekly lectures. I soon realized I had an opportunity to interact closely with students who have potential to be indoctrinated as extremist and intolerant to the extent of sacrificing their precious lives for the cause of attaining supposedly highest possible spiritual targets, *shahadah* (testimony to the truth by sacrificing life), while performing *jihad*.

#### **Reaching Seminary Graduates**

As seminary graduates, my students are well versed in the Arabic language and are in position to consult directly the classics of religious literature giving them confidence to interpret and understand the text directly. Unfortunately, however, the education system prevalent in seminaries discourages independent attempts to understand and interpret the religious texts. The students believe that people closer to the prophet Muhammad historically—and, so, in piety and character—are better qualified to follow and understand the text’s meaning and spirit. Thus in Islamic seminaries the world over, independent thinking being almost forbidden, discussion remains limited to the questions, issues and problems debated by the old masters. An overwhelming similarity in thinking and mindset seems natural.

In my initial lectures, I made it clear to the students that given the Quranic demand to think and ponder about nature and natural phenomena that many scientists take scientific activity as essentially a religious activity. This characterization sounded interesting to the students. I succeeded in winning their attention. However, the most important objection I faced during my interactions came out of the commonly understood view of science on creation and the scientificity of knowledge coming through revelation.

I would emphasize that the Quran does not say anything specific and categorical about creation, Darwin’s theory included, and seems to keep the question open for human creativity by referring to such terms that can be best considered as piecemeal information. And for this reason many views are found in Islam on such issues. The students kept their minds open and were alive to further possibilities. This open mindedness led to more interest when they were told that science echoes the Quran’s recognition of acts of hearing, seeing and reflecting—tools that help humans develop their views in both scientific and religious domains.

These assertions came as surprise to the young graduates. Although their stances did not weaken, the students were convinced to be sympathetic, at least, to scientific ideas. Advocates of Darwin’s theory of evolution, and their attendant atheism, create apathy

toward science in the young graduate of religious seminaries. However, when told that Darwin himself was a staunch theist and declined Karl Marx's request to dedicate the second volume of *Das Kapital* to him given Marx's atheistic tendencies, the students began to question their belief of Darwin's atheism. Their antagonism with evolutionary theory began to erode.

Human evolution is also questioned in the context of Quranic view in that Adam, being the first man, was a grown up person. What is taught about early man addresses Adam's social evolution, but keeps silent on his intellectual health. However, the two views can find meeting point to advance the debate. As rethinking these positions is considered reasonable, and the possibility of the scientific view seems acceptable for consideration, this outcome indicates a great success. The change in mindset is apparent and may open up new vistas. My experience suggests that it does not take much time to accept that several Quranic statements do not offer a final position—this seems particularly so in matters related to the events of distant future or distant past.

When such an environment is created in classroom, it is less difficult to let science intervene in matters thus far considered sacrosanct. It may be interesting to note that the Popperian idea of falsifiability in the philosophy of science has been quite helpful in creating a congenial environment for science. Scientific concepts considered anti-Quranic become worth considering once they are presented as falsifiable. I have seen and witnessed the glow and enthusiasm filled satisfaction on student's faces while discussing such issues.

These debates often ended on the note that, on the one hand, study, reflection, thinking and evaluating things listened to, seen and thought is highly valued in the Quran and, on the other hand, they are the greatest source of scientific research and thinking.

### **Contemplating Natural Phenomena**

My next move was to explain that the Quran is not a book of natural or social science but, as a book concerning man's present and future, it can lend instructions that appear to have value or interest for or other branches of knowledge. I would explain that scientifically inquisitive minds reading the Quran may be tempted to check the scientificity of such statements (as has been done by many). While holding such approach may not be healthy intellectually, I would point out to instructions in the Quran that intend to create scientific culture but have been ignored and overlooked by contemporary scholars.

Such instructions are not one, two or dozens, but approximately seven hundred. These instructions ask readers to think, reflect, ponder, see, and use one's intellect to contemplate natural phenomena in the physical universe, living things and the psychological and social domain of the human self and society. I explained that while the situation has drastically changed today, the science that flourished in Islamic civilization was cultivated by scientists who were equally knowledgably in religious studies. References from history bring science and the Quran closer to each other—the life and

physical sciences, human psychology and social behavior gradually become subjects of religious import.

To this point, my views did not disturb to the students. However, when I observed that these scientific subjects of religious import should be studied in an organized manner, along with the subjects being presently taught in Islamic seminaries and made part of the curriculum, traditional thinking once again overcome the intellectual refinement achieved. The reason is simple. Speaking generally, for Muslims it takes longer to impart religiosity to any act other than traditional rituals. Similarly, *jihad* is understood as a means of avenging and acquiring power rather than a means of establishing justice, eradicating tyranny, and working to do good for human beings. The Quran based assertion on an alternative frame of activities successfully distanced the students from such extremist thinking and, at least as individuals, the students have been able to sense genuine Quranic spirituality in 1) studying and reflecting on Nature, its phenomena, and human behavioral studies, and 2) working in scientific knowledge-based activities for the welfare of human beings.

### **Conclusion**

The above involves pure science in thinking and doing. It involves science for science sake and for the welfare of people. Both ends have a sense of *ibadah* (worship) and *jihad* as the Quran suggests. Students find it difficult to disagree with potential religiosity in scientific activity and also the fact that science is a highly reliable source of empowerment for individuals and communities. The results have been astonishing. Almost fifty percent of the students who joined the “bridge course” have opted for science and scientific disciplines for their future careers. Intra-faith and inter-faith extremism, at the beginning of their admission to the “bridge course”, transforms into enthusiasm for understanding and unfolding the secrets of Nature. And the possibility of using the scientific knowledge for the welfare of common man (which is highly rewarding as suggested by the Quran) has great potential to make the zealous graduates of Islamic seminaries future scientists. Such experiments need be done on a large scale not only in the universities but also in civil society in order to make the world, robbed of its peace by extremist tendencies, a place of tranquility.

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