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What Does Theology about Science and Religion Accomplish? A Reply to Zacky and Moniruzzaman

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Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky and Md Moniruzzaman (2023) describe three Muslim responses to modern knowledge: “Islamization of Knowledge (IOK), Radical Reform (RR), and Maqasid Methodology (MM).” Their work adds to our understanding of the variety contained in Islam. For those of us curious about the relationship of science and religion, and who want to map out Muslim theological options, they introduce some interesting views.

Particular or Universal?

Nonetheless, I can’t help but ask what significance these three takes on knowledge and Islam have, especially for those of us outside the religious communities where these three approaches seem plausible. I will concentrate on what is most familiar to me: scientific knowledge. Every world religion generates a theological literature to neutralize threats they may perceive from modern science. These efforts usually assert compatibility between science and a religious tradition, often by offering some hopefully plausible reinterpretation of traditional doctrines and providing a metaphysical gloss on uncomfortable aspects of established science. Such intellectual productions are useful for those committed to a particular community of faith. But what about outsiders? What might IOK, RR, or MM offer to Muslims not immediately persuaded by their perspective, or indeed, to non-Muslims? What does all this accomplish?

My question is accompanied a sense of frustration, probably because I am an outsider. Proponents of IOK, RR, or MM do not use the language of the preacher or the televangelist, but that of the scholar. They make arguments in support of universal claims: not just that their view is in some sense a superior representation of Islam, but that their approach captures some truths that are valid for all. Science is especially relevant to such theological projects, since natural science has become our leading example of knowledge that is universally compelling. And yet, the reinterpretations and glosses that characterize theology about science are persuasive only to those with prior sectarian commitments. Feats of creative interpretation appear—to an outsider like me—as akin to adding epicycles to a baroque intellectual construct, and in the sciences, getting lost in epicycles is typically a sign that something has gone wrong.

The Islamic debate over science and religion is a revealing example. Muslim intellectuals have often perceived modernity as a kind of rival universal creed, led by a powerful science and technology. Muslims have had to absorb and accommodate modern science because the commercial and military consequences of applied science have been impossible to deny. But for centuries now, Muslims have also been cautious about Western science. Materialist aspects of science, such as parts of modern physics and evolutionary biology, invite conflict with traditional supernatural beliefs. Therefore Muslim theologians have often tried to set such aspects of science aside. They have occasionally denied part of science, adopting, for example, a Muslim version of creationism. Or they have argued that hints of materialism are unnecessary philosophical impositions upon science, reflecting the inferior religious knowledge of the Christian, and now post-Christian, West (Edis 2023). Whatever the

maneuvers theologians have favored, they have not been able to defend the validity of the Islamic revelation in the same universal terms as modern scientific knowledge. Both science denial and theological evasions have been persuasive only in particular contexts. Sacred truths rest on the moral certainties of the faithful, not on public evidence.

IOK, RR, and MM are also shaped by this tension between a desire to protect a core of faith from criticism based on public evidence, and an ambition to present a version of Islam as a universal truth. They take different approaches. RR appears to be an example of a modernist or liberal view, roughly analogous to liberal Christian theologies that grant science an autonomous sphere of knowledge free of religious constraints. That sphere has limits, but as long as science remains within bounds, RR and similar approaches recognize science as universally compelling and assert compatibility with religious convictions. IOK and MM, in contrast, are more radically conservative. They have differences, but neither grants science autonomy: where science casts doubt on religious convictions, this is a sign that science has to be reconstructed. They treat revelation as the more fundamental, universal truth, rejecting criticism based on public evidence. As a result, revelation becomes persuasive only within a community of faith.

The Liberals

Theological liberals want to make peace with science. They recognize modern science as a universally applicable way of exploring at least material reality, regardless of religious allegiances.

Liberal enthusiasm may dampen when science encroaches on what a theologian would like to protect as a spiritual domain. That can be a problem, because the materialist tendencies of modern science are not confined to physics and biology. Although our knowledge in such areas is far less complete, even religious experiences or the cultural evolution of belief in supernatural agents are subject to active research programs (Turner et al. 2017).

Nonetheless, conflicts that might arise between natural science and liberal theologies can be contained. Liberals do not call for interference with scientific institutions or public science education. Liberal Christians and secularists have well-developed practices of separating the spheres of science and religion. Liberal-minded Muslims usually agree. Even in conservatively Muslim environments, they are often a voice for the autonomy of science and the integrity of science education.

Tariq Ramadan's body of work is a good illustration. He is not a philosopher of science, but is well-known for his advocacy of a version of Islam that would be at home in secular European societies. According to Ramadan's vision of RR, scientific institutions could operate within a typical liberal political framework, enjoying authority in their own domain while staying away from religious and ideological concerns.

Ideas such as RR appeal to educated professionals, both Muslims and non-Muslims, for whom religious individualism is fact of life, and technocratic administration by credentialed

experts seems the best way to run complex technological societies. For such a constituency, science, particularly applied science, is a universally valid cognitive authority in its own domain. But religion also has its own sphere in matters of identity, morality, and culture.

The price to pay for institutional autonomy and a social acknowledgement of separate spheres, however, is a privatization of faith. In polite company, religious commitment acquires immunity from criticism, but in turn, beliefs about supernatural or sacred matters cannot be defended by invoking public evidence.

The convention of not questioning faith can be very useful to defuse religious disagreements over public matters. It is convenient for professionals focused on narrow technical expertise. But liberal theology about science still harbors the tension between universal claims and appeals that only work in particular communities. Liberals of all religious views can appreciate the pragmatism inherent in views such as RR. But Ramadan also wants to argue that RR incorporates important truths: that his theology is in some sense more correct than rivals such as IOK or MM, even that some basic Muslim beliefs such as the divine nature of the Quran are true—otherwise, why bother? But the thrust of liberal theology about science is to cut off appeals to public evidence to defend such alleged truths.

Again, to an outsider, we end up with theology that promises intellectual fireworks but delivers obfuscatory apologetics. This seems clear to me with liberal Christian theology. Neither my personal nor my professional background bring me close to devoutly Christian communities. I appreciate liberal Christians avoiding blatant confrontations with science, but reading theological arguments about the harmony between science and Christianity always leaves me bewildered. My encounters with similar Muslim literature are less frustrating: the religious culture is more familiar, and I have some hope of understanding what the arguments are attempting. Still, it does not work. Any public evidence that might be offered does not stand up, and I don't possess the moral certainty about Muslim beliefs that could compensate. I can see how this sort of theological reflection can be valuable among the devout. But I am left wondering what it is supposed to accomplish otherwise.

Radical Conservatives

I find conservative religious approaches to science more interesting. Academic circles tend to be liberal; the sensible compromises suggested by liberal theologies such as RR are eminently practical. Still, liberal theologies, of all religions, seem like they are not even wrong. To defend anything like a traditional version of Islam as a universal truth requires something more radical. And it's hard to be more ambitious than a proposal to Islamize science. Instead of continually backpedaling in the face of modern knowledge and implausibly reinterpreting traditional beliefs, Islamizers insist that modern science, not religion, should make concessions. If science as currently constituted is unable to acknowledge the deeper truths about creation, proponents of views such as IOK say, that means that science has to be rebuilt to do so.

Similarly, MM follows a compelling religious logic. Revelation should not be just an ordinary truth to be established through its mutual support with other provisional truths that can boast public evidence. Instead, revelation is supposed to be the foundational truth, upon which all accurate knowledge must be constructed. Perhaps even a revival of a classical Islamic conception of knowledge may be viable, with revelation and the religious sciences enjoying the highest degree of certainty. After all, these offer the deepest, most important truths.

I am a partisan of mainstream science, but I have some sympathy with such views. I don't see why the present constitution of science should not be challenged. Indeed, a radically reimagined way of doing science could have worked. If our world was in fact shaped by the sorts of supernatural purposes claimed by conservative Muslims, I would then expect a properly Islamized science would enjoy an advantage over its rivals. Reflecting their revealed insight into the deeper purposes underlying material reality, devoutly Muslim scientists would notice the intelligently designed patterns in the world. Such patterns would be overlooked by secular scientists blinded by their insistence on mindless physical processes and love for theories such as Darwinian evolution. Practitioners of an Islamically reimagined science would provide superior explanations and produce more powerful applications. Public evidence would carry the day.

Nothing like this has happened. Ideas similar to Islamizing science or making revelation foundational to all knowledge have a long pedigree among Muslim intellectuals. They have not generated any scientific success. In terms of producing public evidence, they have been just about worthless.

Therefore, once again, IOK and MM require a source of knowledge beyond the sort of public evidence scientists traffic in. Such approaches appeal to conservative faith communities, including professionals not satisfied with the concessions to modernity liberal theologies have made. As with liberal theologies, varieties of radical conservatism have an apologetic role, protecting vital certainties of faith from external criticism. The items of faith are somewhat different, as are the communities who find such approaches persuasive. And again, such theologies are valuable forms of intellectual reflection within particular faith communities. But I see little prospect of radical conservatism developing a more universal appeal. Non-Muslims will be left cold. IOK and MM are rivals to approaches such as RR. Their dependence on sectarian faith commitments suggests that even their appeal among Muslims will be limited.

For What Purpose?

Zacky and Moniruzzaman (2023) describe just three theological projects. There are other options. Still, these three are representative. No Muslim theological approach has solved the problem of reconciling the convictions of truth arising from religious reflection within particular faith traditions with the more universal, public evidence demanded by modern science. I doubt that any supernatural belief system has a solution. All theological literature

about science will likely be useful for particular communities. They will fall flat with outsiders.

As an object of study, theologies about science can still be interesting for those of us on the outside. I am fascinated by belief systems that invite conflict with science—if we can figure out how they go wrong, that can be a way to address questions in the philosophy of science about how modern science gets it right (Edis 2021). I find a proposal such as IOK interesting mainly because I think it is ambitious but wrong, much like intelligent design creationism.

There is, however, something unsatisfying about treating theologies as illustrations of failure. After all, some very smart people working in some long-standing intellectual traditions find options such as RR, IOK, and MM compelling. Even if I am convinced that they seriously misdescribe our world, it won't do to understand them only as mistakes (Edis and Boudry 2019).

Even those of us who are incorrigible outsiders who demand public evidence can recognize some of the strengths of theologies about science. The aim of science—explanations obtained through poking at the world and producing public evidence—is just one possible intellectual purpose. It would be fanatical to have that as the sole overriding purpose in life. Other goals, such as supporting a sense of morality that can underpin a public order widely perceived as legitimate, also command the efforts of scholars. Historically, producing and tending to ideologies have occupied many intellectuals, maybe more than anything like science.

In matters of science, I don't think theologies such as RR, IOK, or MM have much to offer outsiders. But as efforts bolstering the cultural reproduction of non-scientific commitments, they have much better prospects for success. If we think of RR, IOK, and MM in such a context, we may get a clearer view of what they are all about. And if such theologies answer to non-scientific purposes, they also need not depend on public evidence, and can legitimately restrict their appeal to communities of faith. As an outsider, I am condemned to frustration when encountering theology about science. But theology still may accomplish something useful on its own terms.

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