

**SOME MUSLIM APPROACHES TO SCIENCE-FAITH ISSUES**

**AND THEIR APOLOGETIC IMPLICATIONS**

by Jim Saypah

[The following is an abridgment of a 50 page paper that was too long to reproduce here. To obtain the unabridged paper at cost of photocopying plus postage write the Editor.]

The popularity in Muslim circles of the book "The Bible, the Quran, and Science" by French surgeon Maurice Bucaille has spotlighted a need for apologetic material aimed at Muslims dealing with issues of science and faith. In a larger context, however, the book is only one of many works by Muslims considering Islam in the light of 20th century realities, the implications of Islam for modern life, and the propagation of Islam to the modern world (including the West). As modern technology has become a major factor contributing to rapid social changes throughout the world, Muslims are naturally thinking a lot about what science and technology are or should be, and how science fits with traditional Muslim understanding of the world.

It is illuminating to compare these Muslim approaches to science-faith questions with those which have been tried in the West. Both Islam and Christendom have an authoritative divine Word which (according to orthodox views anyway) is normative for the believer's understanding of the world and the human condition. Both must deal with situations where teachings of modern science seem to conflict with traditional understandings or interpretations of Scripture.

A Typology of Approaches:

Whatever the specific point of tension, there are only a limited number of types of approach to solving the conflict. These approaches each have their strengths and weaknesses and will in general each have their circle of adherents. The approaches to science-faith issues Christians have taken fall into four general categories (though some overlap is possible). These are the conflict, concordist, compartment, and complementarist approaches (Blocher 1979:ch. 1, Bube 1983:240).

The conflict approach takes seriously the fact that science and religion (or Scripture, depending on the details of one's position) appear to conflict. The solution lies in denying the validity of one of the two systems, either science or religion. The atheist or agnostic adopting this approach will dismiss the religious perspective as false, unverifiable, or whatever; the believer adopting this approach will challenge the validity of science and often ends up by constructing a sort of "anti-science", an alternative "science" harmonizing with his religious beliefs.

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The conflict approach is perhaps most appealing in its ability to identify basic ideological differences between the religious and scientific perspectives. On the other hand, an anti-science approach is not ultimately satisfying if one believes that the scientific method leads on the whole to true knowledge; and such alternative sciences have been used by too many quacks and cults to be very respectable, for basically sound reasons.

The concordist approach goes to the other extreme by minimizing the discrepancies between science and religion and seeks to harmonize them as much as possible. That is, it seeks concord. A weakness to this approach is that there is a strong tendency to read into Scripture the science of the day in order to make the two mesh; this can do injustice both to the Scriptural text and to the science. The text is not approached according to sound hermeneutical principles, while the science is often bent out of shape.

The compartment approach is in a sense a reaction to the above two approaches; it recognizes that religious and scientific perspectives do not generally have the same referent and generally are dealing with different types of questions. Hence the perspectives are considered as having little or nothing to do with each other; one can simply consider the two independently. The disadvantage here is that one ultimately does not want to be schizophrenic in one's approach to reality; most people would ultimately like a worldview that is integrated and comprehensive. Furthermore, the Scriptural record has a lot to say which would seem to overlap with scientific perspectives. One cannot keep the two in complete isolation.

The complementarist approach is an attempt to combine the strengths of the above approaches. In this view, scientific and religious perspectives are recognized as operating at different logical levels; they have different categories and are basically dealing with different questions. However, to a large degree they are still concerned with the same subject matter (e.g., man), so a compartmentalization must be avoided. Complementarism identifies many of the "problems" between science and religion as being due to a confusion of categories--scientific categories being used on religious questions, and vice versa. On the other hand, getting one's categories right is generally only a first step toward resolving specific points of conflict. Complementarism is not a magic wand and must not be used as a slogan in an attempt to avoid engaging in critical thinking.

#### Some Muslim Approaches to Science-Faith Issues

Classical Islam tended to take the conflict or compartment approaches to science-faith issues; it attempted to classify all of knowledge into the various "sciences" with the "non-religious" or "foreign" sciences subservient to religion, but the former were often under suspicion of unbelief. Among modern writers, Sayyed Hussein Nasr reflects the classical Muslim concern to keep science in its place,

but affirms the place of science as a path to spiritual knowledge (Nasr 1968).

Some (al-'Azm 1982, Sir Sayed Ahmad Khan) have taken a conflict approach that rejects the supernatural, while recent writers, critical of Western science, argue that Islam must create a new "Islamic science". Still others (Bennabi n.d., Torki 1979) follow concordist approaches. Maurice Bucaille, already mentioned, treats the Quran from a basically concordist approach but treats the Bible from a conflict approach, although he purports to use the same criteria for both (Bucaille 1979, 1981).

The debate within Islam has become even more reminiscent of the debate within Christendom because of the adoption by many Muslims of some themes which have not been traditionally stressed by Islam, but which are common Western notions. One example of this is the adoption of a linear view of history -- the old values of timelessness and "crystallization", still advocated by such modern Muslims as Nasr (1968) are often being replaced with those of progress and evolution (Munir 1983:64-65). Another example is the new emphasis on freedom and rationality within Islam, as opposed to the rigid limitations imposed by taqlid (literally, "imitation"-- the traditional exegetical approach which consists primarily of repeating the opinions of the ancient commentators).

The resulting new currents of thought are characterized by one commentator as being future-oriented, reason-centered rather than tradition-centered, and concerned with Islam as primarily a code of values and principles (Abdul Magd 1984:39-41). Due to these perspectives, the debate within the Muslim world is to a large degree an echo of the debate in the West about the same issues.

#### Some Conclusions relating to Apologetics

From the evident popularity among Muslims of the concordist approach of Bucaille and others it is clear that his views must be explicitly discussed and refuted. The only other ideas that seem equally in fashion at the moment are those of the advocates of "Islamic science". These however do not represent so much an attack on the Christian position as on the decadent and culturally imperialist West. Therefore, it would appear possible to agree with many of their views and to make selective use of their attacks on the concordists' excesses.

Any treatment of science and Scripture aimed at Muslims, must start on the fundamental level of presuppositions. Otherwise one's defense of Bible difficulties would be like trying to plug leaks in a dike with one's fingers. Furthermore, any presentation of Christian positions would be quickly misunderstood. We must sharpen the issues by distinguishing both between Christian and "post-Christian" Western ideologies and presuppositions, and between Christian and Muslim ideologies.

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The golden cow of the autonomy of reason, often trumpeted by Muslims in their rejection of the Bible (particularly evident in Bucaille), ought to be exposed for what it is, a rebellion against God. We need to submit ourselves to the teaching of God's word rather than to sit as judge over it.

How we as Christians interpret the Qur'an is all important. Schlorff has pointed out that a "Christian hermeneutic" of the Qur'an is sectarian, i.e. that is really reading one's own ideas into the text (Schlorff 1980:146). Therefore, especially if we are expecting sound hermeneutics regarding the Bible from Muslims, it would seem counterproductive to try to prove Biblical integrity or authority from the Qur'an.

On the other hand, Bucaille and others consistently read modern science into the Qur'an and twist the plain meaning of the words to do so; this kind of "eisegesis" must also be vigorously rejected. It is equally sectarian. The protests of some Muslim thinkers (such as the integrist "Islamic science" advocates, or modernists like Sadiq al-'Azm) could be marshalled against this kind of hermeneutic. The different (and often contradictory) harmonizations of Qur'anic passages with science made by the various concordists need to be brought to light to underline the arbitrariness of this approach.

It is possible to deflate nearly all the so-called predictions of science Muslims claim to find in the Qur'an by appealing to the state of knowledge at the time of Muhammad. It is a common misconception of our era to assume that the ancients were less intelligent than we are. The assumption that the traditional Muslim exegetes, who were steeped in Arabic grammar and culture, were somehow less able to understand the Qur'an correctly than moderns needs to be exposed as arrogant and specious. Bucaille simply assumes that seventh century Arabs could not have known about human reproduction or that fresh water that empties into the sea from large rivers does not mix with salt water until well out to sea. Moreover, the hypotheses of the spherical earth and the atom were advanced by the Greeks; hence the Qur'an can lay no claim to originality here even if it be acknowledged that it teaches these ideas.

In the light of the attacks made by Bucaille against the Bible, it may be that a modernist "antagonistic" approach to the Qur'an could be useful in the context of a reply. The Christian apologist may be aggressive, but he must be fair with Muslims and expect them to reciprocate. We should demand that the same criteria be applied to both books. The anti-supernatural criteria of "higher criticism" are a two-edged sword; if they are applied to the Bible they must also be applied to the Qur'an. If our harmonizations of Biblical passages are rejected, we have a right to point out the problem passages of the Qur'an. A defense of the Qur'an is more difficult here than that of the Bible since the human element is not supposed to enter into it, according to standard Muslim doctrine. It must be borne in mind however that Muslims have their harmonizations of their problem passages too.

The key issues in answering Muslim attacks on the Bible are hermeneutic, not scientific. We must insist upon, and show the logic of, an approach to interpretation based on the Bible's own standards rather than those that are anti-supernaturalist. Because of the Muslim's peculiar misunderstandings, special attention must be given to demonstrating the textual reliability of the Bible and explaining the Christian doctrine of inspiration.

The Christian community needs to think through the question of whether or not the Bible predicts science (in the manner Muslims hold the Qur'an to predict science). My own conviction is that it does not (cf. Ramm 1954:65-136). While many passages have scientific implications, the prescientific language of much of the Old Testament must not be forced into twentieth century categories. To do so is to absolutize science and the intellectual preoccupations of our era, and at the same time to miss the real teaching of the passages concerned. The Bible's inspiration must be demonstrated on other than scientific grounds.

Genesis chapters 1 to 3 is so full of foundational Christian teaching about God, man, sin and grace than it can by no means be avoided. Rather, it should be forcefully expounded to make the most of the evangelistic and pre-evangelistic opportunities it presents. This could be one of the more natural ways to lead from the science topic into more general evangelistic matters.

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#### THE GREAT AMNESTY

#### A 'REDEPTIVE ANALOGY' FOR PRESENTING THE GOSPEL

by I. L. (North Africa)

[The author would like feedback from any who use this  
analogy or suggestions about similar analogies you have  
used with some success. The editor will forward to him your  
letters.]

The idea of an amnesty is very prevalent in today's world, especially  
in the Arab world. It is in fact a modern equivalent to the ransom  
imagery of the Scriptures. There follows a simple framework of ideas  
based on this image which can be used in witnessing. Though  
developed while working over a few years with Muslims in England,