

The compatibility of Islam with scientific theories

The key difference between Islam and science is that Muslims believe that Allah created the universe as part of his divine master plan. The Big Bang and other scientific theories of the creation of the universe suggest how matter could come together and split apart without the need to refer to a first cause. However, whether it is the Big Bang or one of the other theories, Muslims believe that God is at work in the creation constantly. The Qur'an seems to agree that change happened gradually; that planets moved apart; that life then came into being but it is the reason behind such changes that Muslims see as Allah as they argue that Allah creates the forces to control the universe, and in that way the events described by modern scientists in their version of creation can be accepted. Many Muslim philosophers such as Al-Biruni saw evidence in the world that pointed to Allah as a creator and the first cause. They also argued that the universe was created within time. Medieval philosophers used reason to analyse what they saw and tried to make sense of creation just like a scientist might do today. This scientific method has been used to show that there is beauty and meaning in the universe and a power behind it all.

However, the creation of humanity brings in one of the most difficult and controversial of scientific theories for a Muslim: evolution. Just as with other religious believers from different religious traditions, many Muslims just reject outright the theory of evolution and accept that if Allah is 'God' then anything is possible. They put forward the view that the Qur'an says that Allah created humans from dust, so humans did not evolve from other species. However, there are some Muslims who accept that Allah, being constantly in control of creation, could have manipulated evolution as part of an overall plan. For example, the ideas of the scholar Ibn Khaldun seem remarkably similar to the theory of evolution. Khaldun proposed that there was a very gradual change from one species to another and that humans, who are at the top of the evolutionary stage due to their rational and cognitive abilities, developed from monkeys.

Today there is still disparity within Islam, although there has been increased support for the anti-evolution lobby. Indeed, some scientists, such as Nidhal Guessoum, sees this resurgence as more reason for teaching Muslims about creation and evolution so they obtained a better understanding of science. Unfortunately there have been occasions when individual Muslims have declared that evolution was not at odds with belief in God's creation, only to be met with hostility from fellow Muslims which only demonstrates the strong belief for many that this was an attack on their beliefs.

Answer:

Throughout Islamic history there have been attempts to reconcile Islamic views of creation with methodology and observations found in scientific theories. Some Muslims are happy to see Allah as behind the Big Bang; others reject it entirely. Evolution is more controversial and whilst there are a minority of Muslims who argue that Allah could have manipulated the development of species, there are a growing majority who reject the theory and see it as an attack on their beliefs.

The Islamic creation story

Muslims look to the Qur'an and hadith to find out information about how the world was made. Allah, the One, is beyond time and beyond form. Allah is not a created thing and cannot be seen. The universe is seen as created by Allah. Nothing happens except for God's will: God says be and it is. Therefore, Allah is the first cause of creation.

The Qur'an states that the heavens and the earth were together as one, then they were split apart. They then took on their present form. The earth was created in stages: mountains, the heavens, the stars. This happened in periods of time which can be translated as eras, days or unspecified long periods. The Qur'an does not necessarily put the events in an order we would recognise, but says that Allah created all living things that could walk, swim in the sea, crawl on the land and fly in the air and that these came from the water. He made the sun, moon and stars, the rain, the vegetables and crops and the fruit trees and grass.

The creation of the first human beings in Islam is described in the Qur'an. This is the story of Adam and Hawa, or Adam and Eve as they are referred to in English. Allah gathered together some clay and moulded it into the shape of the first man, Adam. He breathed life into the clay. Prophet Adam came to life. Hawa was made from the rib of Adam, according to Sunni tradition. Adam and Eve lived in a garden of paradise. Allah ordered all the angels to bow down to Adam. All did so. However, Iblis, referred to by some as an angel or a jinn, was too arrogant to bow down, as he thought he was better.

Adam and Hawa lived in the garden of paradise and Adam was given knowledge of everything, the names of all the creatures. They were allowed to enjoy the fruits and flowers except the one fruit of the forbidden tree. However, Iblis came and tempted Adam and Hawa to eat the forbidden fruit. They both ate the forbidden fruit and in so doing disobeyed Allah. They realised that they had disobeyed and lost their feeling of peace. They covered themselves in shame. As punishment, Allah sent them to live in the world. Allah forgave Adam and Hawa and they lived on earth and gave rise to all human beings. Their family lived on earth, always at risk of temptation by Iblis, the shaytan (Satan).

It is possible to interpret the story of the forbidden fruit as a parable. Good, humble words are what is required of Allah; evil temptations and thoughts of arrogance are temptations from the devil.

The most important part of the Islamic creation story is that the first cause is Allah. The Qur'an repeatedly refers to the universe as a place where there are signs for people who believe and reflect on them. This would seem to support the idea of a Qur'an revealed through nature; of beliefs worked out by observing the world around.

(adapted from Islam by Idris Morar)