

'How well does Islam respond to the challenges of scientific theories of the origins of the universe?'

One line of argument is that Muslims often comment that these theories are not proven as scientists cannot be certain. Therefore, some Muslims have responded to the challenge of science by rejecting it. These Muslims may believe that the Qur'an is literally true and that scientists who do not accept God are a threat because they are challenging the word of God. Muslims may argue that in reading their holy book they ignore any scientific questions that may challenge their beliefs because they are spiritually damaging. But is this really being effective in challenging scientific theory or can it be accused of evading the issue?

An alternative line of reasoning is to suggest that the notion of creation is equally valid to a scientific theory. The Qur'an 21:30 states: 'Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of creation), before we clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?' This idea of joining together and splitting apart is very similar to the theories of the Big Bang and oscillating universe. Indeed, Harun Yahya, the popular rhetorical Muslim who gives dawah about Islam, claims that the Qur'an predicted the 'Big Bang' all along. This would suggest that the 'truth' of creation has inherent within it the concepts of modern science and also suggest that there may not be a 'challenge' at all.

There are some Muslims who wish to retain their beliefs but still wish to debate the different ways in which creation could be understood, whether as in line with science or with philosophical ideas such as the first cause. Indeed, the Kalam argument for the existence of God is such an example. Therefore, although not necessarily 'compatible' one could argue that there is some form of positive dialogue happening and hence an effective response to the challenge of scientific theory.

However, it should be remembered that the challenges of science are not just about creation. There is a strong argument that creation extends to a responsibility of humanity to care for the planet. Here there is strong compatibility, one could argue, because just as Muslims are expected to care for the world and protect it from the dangers of global warming and overpopulation, so too scientific arguments are presented that it is the duty of humanity to act, otherwise the consequences according to natural forces will be devastating. Therefore, there is some common ground in approach between science and Islam if not always in the reasoning behind the approach.

Overall, the idea of compatibility between science and Islam is not one of total agreement in terms of the details; however, the underlying principles, although expressed and explained differently and which can be seen at first glance as incompatible, could be argued to have some common ground.

The establishment of such compatibility must suggest an effective response to the initial challenges made to the Islamic teachings about the origins of the universe.

Islam compatible with science

It appears that how the world was made is seen differently both within Islam and between Islam and science and this determines the extent of compatibility between Islam and science. Science suggests a Big Bang or similar theory, but Islam requires belief in Allah as the first cause; however, it is also possible that Allah was behind the Big Bang, and existed before it according to some Muslims. Other Muslims take the creation story from the Qur'an literally, which is incompatible with science. Then again there are those Muslims who attempt to identify only small differences between scientific theory and Islamic teaching.

Evolution is rejected by many Muslims however some Muslims think that God could have worked through evolution, like the scientist Dr Usama Hasan. This is a point of disagreement within Islam although the majority would favour a literal interpretation of the Qur'an. There is therefore no clear point of agreement within Islam for the 'how' it was done but a unity of belief that it was done by Allah.

The Muslim Harun Yahya suggest that there are simple answers for everything in the Qur'an and any scientific discovery is predicted in the Qur'an or is in agreement with the revealed text. Therefore, there is no real incompatibility between science and Islam, only an apparent one. If there is incompatibility at present, as science advances it will fall more in line with what can be discovered in the Qur'an. The Qur'an is eternal truth and cannot be changed whereas scientific discoveries change science!

However, there have been similar attitudes in the past that have proved to hinder both theological and scientific progress. Muslim scientists have often halted enquiries because the results appeared contrary to set beliefs, philosophies or widely held principles. This unsteady relationship between Islam and science suggests that their compatibility can be questioned.

Some Muslims would disagree and say that Islam developed scientific thinking further during the Islamic Golden Age: Muslim philosophers encouraged people to question, observe and be sceptical; Muslim civilisations built hospitals employing surgeons to develop and perform eye cataract operations; there is evidence of advanced herbal medicine; and in the sixteenth century there existed a laboratory to experiment with new inventions creating, amongst other things, a simple steam engine. Muslims argue their heritage contains so much science that it is naturally complementary.

In conclusion, Muslims can get along with science, even if their starting point is different. Some embrace science and are proud of the contribution of Muslims to science. Others feel that science has departed from the revelations of the Qur'an, and Muslims should therefore withdraw and not become too involved.