

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Does Science tell the Truth?

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The physical sciences make three fundamental assumptions: (1) The Principle of Objectivation, (2) The Principle of Cause and Effect and (3) The Autonomy of Man and Nature. All three assumptions were inherited from the ancient Greeks so that modern science is truly a child of Greek civilization.

The first assumption, the Principle of Objectivation, separates man from nature. It states that the world is an object which exists separate from and independent of the subject, which is the soul of man. This assumption frees man from his obligation and responsibility to care for nature and provides a justification for its exploitation. It also ensures that human feelings, emotions and attributes are absent from the physical world.

Consider an example. The chant of a *muezzin* calls the faithful to prayer five times a day. His melodious voice floats in the air: God is greater...God is greater... I bear witness that none is worthy of worship except God. The voice of the *muezzin* resonates with the soul of the faithful and moves his innermost self. He harkens to the call and proceeds to stand before God, shoulder to shoulder with fellow believers, forgetting his worldly pursuits, to reaffirm his pristine relationship with the Creator.

Now, ask a 'scientist' what he hears in the voice of the *muezzin*. His answer will be along the following lines:

Sound waves (p-waves) are created by the call to prayer. These waves travel towards you at about 250 meters per second. When the waves hit your ear, they set up mechanical disturbances in the eardrum, which are then converted into electric signals, and travel up through the auditory nerves to the brain.

Ask yourself, where in this physical description is the call to prayer. The sound waves, compression and expansion of the air, vibrations of the ear drum, nerve endings and brain cells are there but where is that vibration that resonates with the believer's soul? Where is the call towards the Divine? Quite simply, it is not there. It is not there because the consciousness of the Oneness of God, of prayer and your well-being is in the soul. It is not in the sound waves and auditory canals as described in modern physics.

Consider a second example. You meet a loved one after a long time. Emotions swell within you. You want to say much but words do not come to your lips.

Ask a chemist to describe what is happening within your body. He will suggest that some of the glands in your body are secreting extra fluids. These fluids have changed the chemical disposition of the cells in your brain and are activating the tear glands in your eyes. It is all quite 'logical'.

Now ask yourself where in this physical description are your feelings, your emotions, your boundless joy in seeing the loved one? They are nowhere in the "scientific" description. This is because the seat of all feelings, namely, the *Nafs* (the Soul), is absent from the picture. It was taken out at the outset by the Principle of Objectivation. Feelings, joy and happiness are attributes of the soul, not of the physical world.

Consider a third example. Look at the innocent smile of an infant and try to describe the allure of that smile in the language of science. Look inside the body of that infant and see where that smile is. You will come back and report that certain glands in his body are secreting more fluids. These secretions, operating on his nerve cells, excite a certain part of his brain which commands the muscles of his lips to relax and stretch out. Now ask yourself, where in this "scientific" picture is the smile of the baby? Where is that soul-captivating enticement of his innocence?

As a last example, consider the rainbow. Who is not enchanted by the majestic display of colors in a rainbow as it vaults the sky from horizon to horizon? A physicist's description of the rainbow would be along the following lines. The rays of the sun get dispersed in their passage through air laden with moisture. This dispersion breaks up light into its component parts. Each component has a different wavelength and when it hits the eye it excites the optic nerve and is registered in the brain.

Again, examine this picture of the sun, of light and its components, of dispersion and nerve endings. Where in this picture are the dazzling "colors" of the rainbow? Where is the majesty of its display? The answer is: "nowhere".

Such is the world of "science". In this world, there is no color, no happiness, no joy, no suffering. It is a cold world, totally devoid of all human qualities. In it the rainbow does not exist, only the dispersion of light. Love does not exist, only changes in body chemistry. Tears do not exist, only droplets falling from the eye. This is so because the seat of love and hate, of color and feeling, namely the *Nafs* (the Soul), was taken out in the very beginning through the Principle of Objectivation.

The fact that sensual qualities, love and hate, passion and sorrow, beauty and melody are absent from the complex picture built up by "science" does not convince us one bit that they are not there. The rainbow exists because we see it. The *muezzin's* call moves the faithful because his voice resonates with their souls. Men and women love because they feel and they cry because they suffer. *There is a deep mystical quality to our sense of sight, touch, sound and taste, a quality that cannot be described using the methods of empirical science.* The moment of experience is an intuitive moment. It is a gift bestowed upon the soul by the Creator. In the Words of the Qur'an:

*"Have We not given you a pair of eyes,  
a tongue, and a pair of lips?"  
(The Qur'an, 110:8-9)*

The second consequence of the Principle of Objectivation is even more disastrous. If the soul is expunged from the physical world, then how does the body interact with the soul? Is the soul responsible for actions of the body? Can the soul command the body to do anything? In other words, when we do something with our hands, isn't our soul responsible for that action? Are we or are we not responsible beings? In the "scientific" framework, since the soul is taken out of the physical picture, the soul is not

responsible for the actions of the body. It is like a soccer game in which the center forward is sent home before the game begins. Later, during the game, when another player scores a goal, can you give credit to the center forward that was not even there?

In the modern 'scientific view', since the soul is absent from the physical world by assumption, it cannot be held responsible for what the body does. Questions of right and wrong cease to have meaning. All ethical considerations are taken away from the world picture. The world becomes fair game for self-interest and exploitation. Actions are no longer based on right or wrong, justice or injustice. This is the beginning of amorality.

Another consequence of this worldview is that man has no free will. *Since the soul is absent from the world picture, all of the attributes of the soul are also absent.* One such attribute is man's free will. Man then becomes a helpless creature, subject to the forces of nature, cowering before the whims of unknown gods. Gone is the nobility of man; destroyed is his regency. He becomes yet another animal, no longer responsible for his actions, no longer the owner of his own free will.

The second assumption, namely, the Principle of Before and After, is also fundamental to the scientific endeavor. It states that physical events flow in one direction like a stream, from the past through the present to the future. The human sense of time is asymmetrical, meaning that we remember the past but we do not know the future. Events appear to us to flow continuously from the past to the future. But as a basis for understanding the nature of the cosmos, this assumption has serious limitations. For instance, what came before, consciousness or the cosmos? Does it make sense to say that the cosmos existed before its consciousness dawned on man? If it did, how does consciousness know it? Or, does it make more sense to say that the cosmos exists in the consciousness and is merely reflected in it like a tree reflecting in a pool of water? These are questions of deep philosophical importance and in their answers lie the direction a civilization takes. The philosophers, starting with the ancient Greeks, followed by Muslim scientists in the Middle Ages and Western scientists in the modern age, assumed that the cosmos preceded consciousness and accepted the premise of before and after. The Eastern religions and the Sufis in the Islamic tradition rejected the notion of before and after and asserted that the cosmos is reflected in the soul.

Time is a mystery. It is shrouded by a veil which no human has been able to lift. The greatest minds have grappled with this issue and have come to the conclusion that events as they are perceived by the mind are only apparent. Reality is hidden. The Prophet said: "God declares: O son of Adam! Do not abuse time! I am Time."

Time is an enigma. There is a difference between time as we feel it and time as a clock measures it. If we sit in an uncomfortable room, time seems to stretch out. A boring lecture produces the same result. Time seems to drag on when we are hungry. When we are faced with an emergency, time stretches out. When we face an impending accident, every second seems like a year. The last moments before death, when our life flashes up before us are like moments of eternity.

The flow of time as perceived by us does not necessarily correspond to reality. For example, the night sky brings out a brilliant panorama of stars. How far are those stars? Some are billions of light years away. What we see today is a star as it existed billions of years ago. We are, in fact, staring into our own past. Now, let us assume that one of these stars has exploded and disintegrated in the last million years. We do not know that this star has disintegrated because light takes a billion years to travel from that star to the earth. *This means we are looking at a star that does not even exist today!* Does it make sense to say: "I see a star that does not exist?" Yet, the notions of before and after are so entrenched in our thought processes that we insist on defining time in relation to before and after.

Things get more complex when we contemplate the relationship of time and space. Our current understanding of relativity shows that time and space are related. The concepts that time may stand still or “flow backwards” in a time machine are common themes in science fiction movies and are accepted even by those who have no training in physics. If one travels at the speed of light, “time stands still” and if we break the “light barrier” time may “flow backward”. The concepts of before and after are relative. They depend on one’s frame of reference. What is “before” in an earth-based frame of reference, may be “after” in a frame of reference based on another planet.

The third assumption, namely, the Principle of Autonomy of Man and Nature, is so obvious that it is generally not recognized. Simply stated, this means that man is capable of understanding nature using his own wits and that nature makes decisions on its own. The autonomy of man and nature are inherent assumptions in logic, rational thought and philosophical inquiry. But when faced with the fundamental nature of values and emotions these assumptions become elliptical. For instance, how do we know what is right and what is wrong? What *criterion* do we apply to justice? What is the *basis* and the *source* of the law? The discussions soon get mired in arguments about what came before and what came after, the chicken or the egg?

*The endless arguments of before and after, of axiom and proof, of subject and object, break down when issues of cognition, consciousness, justice and ethics come up.* Man is not self-sufficient and cannot separate right from wrong through his own wits without Divine Guidance. Similarly, nature cannot create something out of nothing. The act of creation is a Divine Act. Neither humans, nor nature, are autonomous.

Secular science is helpless in explaining feelings, emotions, color or sound. “Science”, as we know it, merely deals with the world of shadows. *The true nature of things is beyond the descriptive abilities of science.* This is so because science made certain assumptions about its approach *before* it set out to discover the world. The soul, that mirror of the invisible world and the seat of all knowledge, emotions and feelings was left behind. The result is that the world of science is full of protons, electromagnetic waves, dust and atoms but is devoid of all *human* qualities that make life worth living. And modern man walks in a cold universe, lonely and lost, without an anchor to his own soul or a tether to the Creator who bestowed that soul on humankind.

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